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# ‘She Saved Him’: The Unacknowledged Role of Ekaterina Furtseva in Nikita Khrushchev’s Defeat of the ‘Anti-Party Group’ in 1957

ISMENE BROWN

## *Abstract*

Nikita Khrushchev’s survival in the Kremlin coup attempt of June 1957, a watershed in the post-Stalin Soviet era, is generally narrated in Western history as his personal triumph. Early reports, however, identified the crucial agency of the leadership’s only woman, Central Committee (CC) Secretary Ekaterina Furtseva. This essay re-examines the documentation of the crisis and finds substantial evidence that she was indeed foremost in Khrushchev’s rescue, and one of his most powerful aides. Yet her promotion to government heights saw her disappear into a chaotic historiography, characterised by unchecked errors, distortion and fabrication in both popular and academic fields.

THIS ESSAY RE-EXAMINES USSR FIRST SECRETARY NIKITA Khrushchev’s momentous survival in the June 1957 power struggle inside the Central Committee (CC) Presidium, the executive organ of Soviet rule, when seven leaders of the Council of Ministers (SovMin)—Chairman Nikolai Bulganin, four First Deputy Chairmen, Vyacheslav Molotov, Lazar’ Kaganovich, Maksim Saburov and Mikhail Pervukhin, Deputy Chairman Georgii Malenkov, and Supreme Soviet Chairman Kliment Voroshilov—attempted to unseat him and halt his de-Stalinisation and reform programmes. Since the 1960s, Cold War narratives have been sustained by Anglophone accounts framing the defeat of the so-called ‘Anti-Party Group’ (APG) as Khrushchev’s personal triumph, but the hero-narrative offers little detail and, indeed, relies on extensive non-disclosure of the decisive moments at which a supposedly irresistible regime change was deflected, leaving its proponents in disarray. No record was made of the crisis between 18 and 21 June, and its accounting at the CC’s extraordinary Plenum of 22–29 June was kept secret, bowdlerised or overwritten. Consequently, most Khrushchev-era historiography and discourse emerged from fragmentary and inaccurate information which stood uncorrected for three decades,

Much of the original research for this essay was carried out as part of the author’s doctoral thesis on Ekaterina Alekseyevna Furtseva’s historiography, at St Hugh’s College, University of Oxford, between 2016 and 2021, and contributes to current work on her biography.

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and the legend of the 1957 events was not significantly revised, even after post-1991 archival releases.

However, the amount of material now in the public space enables a thorough reassessment of the events, with surprising findings. Reconstructing the crisis afresh exposes the galvanising early role in Khrushchev's historic rescue of Ekaterina Alekseyevna Furtseva, the only woman to have had an enduring position in the USSR ruling executive;<sup>1</sup> and how this fact, and the career of an exceptional politician of the Cold War era, became buried inside rumours, fabrications and repeated mistakes. This essay finds connections between her scant and distorted historical record and her actions during the APG crisis, and her consequent promotion to the top rank of the Soviet leadership.

Furtseva (1910–1974) has a largely unintelligible historiographical record. A Secretary of the Communist Party CC from 1956 to 1960, member of Khrushchev's CC Presidium (Politburo) as candidate from 1956 and full member from 1957 to 1961, and USSR Minister of Culture for 14 years from 1960 to 1974, she was one of the USSR's most durable politicians, with an 18-year career in the heights, yet is portrayed in post-Soviet popular history as a hubristic woman spuriously invading the male rulership club and paying a predictable price in her supposed suicide aged 63. Russian biographical literature about her includes titles such as *Furtseva's Male Games* (Korneyeva 2010), *Columbine in Search of Freedom* (Mirskaya 2006) and *At Night I Weep Into My Pillow* (Furtseva 2016).<sup>2</sup> The often wildly awry factuality of these accounts signals deeper cultural stories about patriarchalist and anti-feminism fears, anti-Soviet and anti-Western prejudices, not to mention witch folklore, that Furtseva unwittingly lent herself to. Western historiography offers further problems. Scholarship, newspapers and memoirs name two Furtsevas, 'Elena' (Chambers 1957; Suny 1998, p. 418; Jones 2013, p. 170; Schattenberg 2017, p. 245) as well as 'Ekaterina', who appear, misleadingly, to be separate individuals, a seemingly ephemeral Kremlin politician in the 1950s and a longstanding one in the 1960s and 1970s (with varying patronymics adding to the confusion). The haphazardness of Furtseva's historical identification is exemplified by the only substantial Anglophone article on her career since her death which introduces her as 'Elena' despite quoting materials addressing her as 'Ekaterina' (Senelick 2010, pp. 16, 18, 21). The prevalence of 'Elena' might be linked to Khrushchev's supposedly addressing her as 'Elena Aleksandrovna' in the much-cited US edition of her Presidium colleague Dmitri Shepilov's memoirs, *The Kremlin's Scholar* (Shepilov & Bittner 2007, p. 335); however, this is a startling translation error, for in the original *Nepriimkuvshii* (Shepilov & Kosyrev 2001, pp. 326–37), Khrushchev used her correct name. Among several other misidentifications, the frequent resort to 'Madame Furtseva' or 'the formidable Madame Furtseva' (still worse, 'the magisterial "Madame" Furtseva' (Cliff

<sup>1</sup>The only other women appointed to the Politburo were Elena Stasova, full member, then candidate member, March–September 1919 (also Party Secretary 1917–1920), Aleksandra Biryukova, candidate member, September 1988–July 1990, and Galina Semenova, full member, July 1990–August 1991. Aleksandra Kollontai was People's Commissar for State Welfare November 1917–February 1918.

<sup>2</sup>The last purports, dubiously, to publish Furtseva's diary.

2016, p. 267)) indicates a depersonalising default attitude towards the world's 'Top Woman Red' (as the *Washington Post* labelled her on her first London visit in 1956).<sup>3</sup>

Equally misleadingly, Furtseva's career dates wander. Her biographical references often ignore her election on 27 February 1956 as a candidate member of the 20th CC Presidium,<sup>4</sup> so that her promotion to full Presidium membership on 29 June 1957 appears impromptu, consistent with the much-cited rumour that Khrushchev must have rewarded his mistress—a story relayed without challenge even by scholars (Tompson 1995, p. 161). More invidious still is the prevalent chronological error whereby her appointment as Culture Minister supposedly followed her last-minute dropping from the Presidium at the 22nd Party Congress, a shock that notoriously drove her to attempt suicide, and for which in turn Khrushchev supposedly punished her by reducing her to the powerless outpost of culture. This solecism ignores the unambiguous official records that Presidium member Furtseva was appointed to the USSR Culture Ministry on 4 May 1960 (Fursenko 2004, pp. 441–42), a year and a half before the Congress elected a new Presidium on 31 October 1961.<sup>5</sup> The fallacy, now endemic in Furtseva's historiography, appears as early as Edward Crankshaw's Khrushchev biography (Crankshaw 1966, p. 269: 'she plummeted from the heights in the winter of 1961—to be restored later on a lower level as Minister of Culture'), a startling wrenching of facts that denies both Furtseva's well-recorded, and unprecedented, status and activities as the only Culture Minister also to be a full Presidium member, and her unusually long ministerial career from 1960 to 1974 (Brown 2024). This double deformation perpetuates both a sexist 'female fall' trope (still widely current in post-Soviet Russian media and historical literature) and a misleading caricature of culture as an impotent, even derisory arena of Soviet policy. In his study of the 1957 Presidium, Andrei Sushkov (2009, p. 4) observes that the account of the APG crisis supplied in the 1963 edition of the official Communist Party History did not list those leading Khrushchev supporters who had been dropped by then, including Furtseva (Ponomarev 1963, p. 661). In sum, Western coverage, disadvantaged in informational sources, relayed basic errors and unchecked tales, while the modern Russian material bypassed the contradictions of her Western documenting and her Soviet political records, and focused on emotional fabrication. Thus, a politician with an intriguing presence in Khrushchev's inner circle has become an object of storytelling rather than a subject of historical interest.

This is puzzling, for the CV of the figure who participated in the June 1957 crisis has been public for more than 30 years: her postwar leadership of Moscow's Frunze District Party (*raikom*), her seven years as Second, then First Secretary of the Moscow City Party (*gorkom*) 1950–1957, and the eye-catching dual promotions to both the eight-strong Secretariat and the Presidium, as candidate member, at the 20th Party Congress on 27 February 1956. Two years later the Associated Press's eminent Moscow specialist

<sup>3</sup>'London Greets Top Woman Red', *Washington Post*, 13 July 1956, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>For instance, in the résumés provided in the 1998 archival anthology, *Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich 1957* (which I discuss below), compare Furtseva (Yakovlev 1998, p. 831) with Leonid Brezhnev and Dmitrii Shepilov, whose candidate promotions are listed (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 771, 836).

<sup>5</sup>'Informatsionnoe soobshchenie o Plenuma Tsentral'nogo Komiteta Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soyuza', *Pravda*, 1 November 1961, p. 2.

Thomas P. Whitney even listed Furtseva as one of Khrushchev's potential successors (Whitney 1958, p. 24).<sup>6</sup>

Confronting this chimera, I went to the June 1957 crisis records and reports to establish the context of her promotion to full Presidium membership on 29 June 1957. The CC's authorised transcript of the crisis Plenum and the contents of the original stenograms were both published in the 1990s, and I will discuss these sources below. Unsurprisingly, the original stenogram gave details of events that were reinvented, obfuscated or omitted in the official transcript, and I found a sound connection between these and Furtseva's promotion, as I will show. This raises questions about extant research methods; it also invites a reconsideration of the Khrushchev leadership and its interpersonal dynamics. Further, Furtseva's conduct within the crisis and at its accounting afterwards illuminates how representative she was of her generation, as a woman among men, and suggests some explanations for the mangling of her historical record.

### *Hero of the hour*

In broad terms, the crisis narrative delivered by half a century of Khrushchev biography is heroic. It is that on the afternoon of Tuesday, 18 June 1957, Khrushchev was surprised into an impromptu CC Presidium session on a day when some of his allies were absent and his rivals used their majority to oust him as First Secretary. Khrushchev reportedly contrived to postpone the formal vote by a two-step delay; he insisted that the Presidium reconvene with all attendees present, and summoned his CC supporters to Moscow, who raised a petition demanding the Presidium transfer the matter to the CC. An extraordinary CC Plenum duly condemned and punished his opponents. Thus, we find a historiological consensus on the crisis as Khrushchev's subjective drama, the man plucking victory out of a hopeless position through his command of the *apparat's* loyalty and, implicitly, the nation's confidence. But the ground-level human activity within that heroic fable was ignored by Khrushchev in his memoirs and overlooked by his biographers; activity that would betray that the heroics were not, at the critical moment, his.

As regards the critical Tuesday suspension, most Khrushchev biographers offer only generalities. Crankshaw (1966, p. 248) inaugurated the version that Khrushchev, by his own account, had 'confounded the victors by refusing to resign until this verdict had been confirmed by the Central Committee'; Roy Medvedev (1982, p. 116) found that Khrushchev 'refused to submit'; William Tompson that Khrushchev 'stalled for time on procedural grounds' (Tompson 1995, p. 179), as echoed by William Taubman: 'Stalling, Khrushchev and [his sole voting ally, First Deputy SovMin Chairman Anastas] Mikoyan demanded delay. ... They got the meeting adjourned' (Taubman 2003, p. 318). Nikolai Barsukov is still vaguer: 'Khrushchev chose the only plausible tactic: not allowing the Presidium to adopt any decisions' (Barsukov 2000, p. 58). Elsewhere, Khrushchev 'refused to resign' and 'called in all [his] chits at once' (Fursenko & Naftali 2006, pp. 147–48) or 'managed to fend off the demand that he resign immediately' (Roberts

<sup>6</sup>A former intelligence analyst and diplomat, Whitney established Amherst College's Russian studies centre.

2012, p. 278). Khrushchev's own memoirs (Khrushchev & Khrushchev 2006, pp. 238–39) make only passing mentions of 'the attempted revolt by the Molotov–Malenkov group' who had 'wanted a return to the old order under Stalin'. Though it is fair enough that political biographies focus on the large issues at stake rather than debatable detail, the evasiveness of words such as 'fend', 'stall' and 'managed' used to explain so critical a transition point is striking. Taubman and Barsukov, for instance, do not simply tell of a political win. The style of their telling is almost mythic: Khrushchev the man triumphs, not simply the leader. His devoted son, Sergei, the curator of much Khrushchev biography, expanded on his influential 2000 account (Khrushchev 2000, pp. 236–46) ten years later with a compellingly detailed and copiously imagined reconstruction (Khrushchev 2010, pp. 436–76).<sup>7</sup> Once again, however, this is legacy storytelling from the foreground perspective of 'Father', containing important self-contradictions, omissions and questionable assertions.

That the accepted account is essentially Nikita Khrushchev's own is established by the well-informed Yugoslavian ambassador Veljko Mićunović, whom Khrushchev invited to a private audience on 5 July, the day after the Plenum resolutions were published. Mićunović reported to President Josip Tito that although, as Defence Minister and head of the army, General Georgii Zhukov's loyalty had been significant, 'what stands out most in this clash is the dynamic, courageous, and politically gifted personality of Khrushchev himself, whose popularity with the people has been increasing in recent months' (Mićunović & Floyd 1980, p. 264). Versions from Khrushchev's circle offering alternative heroes of the hour did not come to light for many decades. But certain pivotal moments were soon acknowledged. All agree that Zhukov, despite his late arrival at the Tuesday session, was critical in forcing the vote's postponement, and then in authorising the famous airlift of supporters into Moscow. Khrushchev's memoirs briefly credit Zhukov 'and the military' for putting down the revolt (Khrushchev & Khrushchev 2006, p. 239). Zhukov's biographer, Geoffrey Roberts, gives more detail: 'According to Zhukov, Khrushchev was confused and demoralised at the Presidium meeting and it was only his support that saved the day. "Georgy, you have saved the position", Zhukov recalled Khrushchev telling him, "only you could do it. I will never forget that"' (Roberts 2012, p. 278).

But herein lies the first, significant elision. That day Zhukov was on army duties 65 km away, and none of the scholarly accounts satisfactorily describes how his presence was contrived at the sudden Presidium. For what was not clear until the Plenum transcript was openly published in 1993 was that Zhukov's absence had been engineered by Khrushchev's opponents. Who or what got him there after all?

A different interpretation of what or who was decisive came from Mikoyan, Khrushchev's only voting loyalist present. '*Ya ego spas*', he wrote in his memoir:

I saved him at the June 1957 Plenum from being removed from office. ... The Presidium had already effectively dismissed him, and I was the only one to defend him through any pretext I could: 'The

<sup>7</sup>Though titled *Reformer*, this is not a translation of his edition of his father's memoirs, *Reformer*, vol. 2, 2006.

incompleteness of the Presidium etc.’ ... I dragged it out every way possible. [Presidium and Secretariat member Mikhail] Suslov flitted by, and I persuaded him that Khrushchev should win, all being equal. I did the same with Voroshilov, but he hung back. Furtseva supported Khrushchev, but she lacked authority and her role was not significant. Nevertheless, we—or in point of fact I—saw to it that the Plenum took over the question of resolving the Presidium disagreement. (Mikoyan & Mikoyan 1999, p. 646)

He does not mention Zhukov, and this pointing out of the junior Furtseva, only to deny her significance, is intriguing. In the first place he includes her in the combination (*‘my ... dobilis’*, ‘we succeeded’) that forced the Presidium to concede to the CC. But it also suggests that, at the time he was writing, after Khrushchev’s and Furtseva’s deaths, he felt the need to reassert his leading role over hers. While formally a Presidium candidate member certainly lacked authority, Mikoyan was negotiating several layers of difficulty in his legacy telling: he was claiming credit for the rescuing of the leader ousted by the current one, Leonid Brezhnev; Brezhnev himself had both contributed to Khrushchev’s rescue, and—as will be shown—credited Furtseva at the time as the pivotal decision-maker (Yakovlev 1998, p. 242). I will return to Mikoyan’s testimony, but I summarise here that his perception of what ensured the crisis’s resolution was sound enough, if taking the view that the victory that was initiated in the opening bout of Presidium brawling was only clinched in the larger, equally dangerous arena of the Plenum by his legalistic reformulation of a debatably unconstitutional defence and some tactful concession about Khrushchev’s leadership style. Khrushchev had not seen it that way; he told Mičunovič that Mikoyan had been ‘passive and neutral’ (Mičunovič & Floyd 1980, p. 267). Sergei Khrushchev (2010, p. 451) agrees.

Bitter as they might reasonably have been, Zhukov and Mikoyan embody two essential questions: what it was that brought Zhukov back to Moscow, and what exactly Mikoyan and Furtseva did to save Khrushchev. A freshly researched chronology of events places Furtseva’s decisive agency within both the irregular activities of the critical first day and in the subsequent procedural defence strategy. In fact, her name surfaced early in US and British reports of rumours about the secret crisis, with details that would later disappear. In a syndicated article in September 1957, eye-catchingly headlined ‘The Woman in the Kremlin: She Was Khrushchev’s Lifeline’, the *New York Post* Russia specialist Seymour Freidin wrote:

[Furtseva] proved [his lifeline] convincingly in the recent Presidium shake-up. The old-guard Stalinists very nearly ousted Khrushchev when he went after them. But most of the Central Committee members were pro-Khrushchev. At Ekaterina’s summons, they streamed into Moscow. Khrushchev demanded a poll of the central committee and became undisputed party boss. (Freidin 1957, p. M9)

A month later the *Manchester Guardian*’s Moscow correspondent Victor Zorza endorsed the story when discussing Khrushchev’s dismissal of Zhukov:

Miss Furtseva, one of Khrushchev’s closest political collaborators, alerted a number of high Army officers, who were told that the Malenkov–Molotov group was ‘plotting’ against the safety of

Zhukov. The officers—some of them, if not all, being members of the Central Committee—then made their way noisily into the conference room to ‘protect’ Zhukov. (Zorza 1957, p. 7)

Further substantiation came from NATO Secretary-General Paul-Henri Spaak in a 1960 interview with the *New York Times*’s Cyrus Sulzberger:

[Spaak] claims that Furtseva is Khrushchev’s great friend and saved Khrushchev’s scalp when he was almost thrown out by the Politburo. She allegedly got hold of Marshal Zhukov who sent military aircraft all around the USSR to gather up loyal Khrushchev men on the Central Committee and beat down the opposition. (Sulzberger 1972, p. 656)

The CIA’s analysis concurred:

Furtseva is generally credited with having played a major role; apparently she not only got in touch with the central committee members residing in Moscow, but also alerted the provincial Party bosses and summoned them to Moscow immediately. ... As the central committee members arrived in Moscow, they were very likely briefed on the situation by either Furtseva or Mikoyan and given instructions on how to act both then and subsequently at the plenum. (CIA 1962)

Wolfgang Leonhard (1962, p. 243) added another claim, that Furtseva was prominent in the procrastination strategy as well: ‘They even took refuge in filibustering speeches; Madame Furtseva is said to have made a six-hour speech [at the Presidium] to hold up the progress of the session until the arrival of more of Khrushchev’s followers in Moscow’, a claim which Crankshaw (1966, p. 249) repeats.

So, while the official myth was swiftly woven around Khrushchev’s heroic charisma, we find substantial contemporary witness spotlighting of Furtseva.

#### *The crisis records*

Since no official minutes were taken of the 18–21 June Presidium, the CC Presidium records skip from 15 June to 8 July 1957 (Fursenko 2004, pp. 258–59). For CC files, two ‘top secret’ records of the 22–29 June Plenum were prepared, a summary titled *Protokol No. 4*, dated 30 July, and an officially printed ‘*Stenograficheskii otchet iyun’skogo (1957g.) plenuma TsK KPSS*’, a ‘verbatim report’ of all 60 speeches delivered and 140-odd others submitted in writing. This latter, some 500 pages long, was made public in 1993 and 1994 in six volumes of the journal *Istoricheskii arkhiv* from a copy in the Presidential Archive, under the title ‘*Arkhiv vozhdai: Poslednyaya “antipartiinaya” grupa*’ (Chernobaev 1993, 1994). The archivists noted that although 100 copies were printed in 1957 for internal CC circulation, very few people could access them (Chernobaev 1993, vol. 3, p. 4). For some 45 years, therefore, the APG crisis was understood largely from an accretion of oral accounts and rare participant memoirs that mostly postdated 1991.

The *Istoricheskii arkhiv* publication, despite its dynamic position as the long-awaited inside account, raised some scepticism among Western historiographers and Russian archivists, for which a sound basis became clear in 1998 when an archival compilation of the crisis documentation, *Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich 1957*, republished the Plenum

transcript, footnoting the amendments from the original stenograms (Yakovlev 1998).<sup>8</sup> Here are the original utterances and their personal tweakings and remasterings by speakers and the CC editorial committee (Yakovlev 1998, p. 320), including what the archivists describe as *vkusovaya pravka* ('correction for taste') of vulgar language and stylistic solecisms, as well as censorship and 'falsifications' to inculpate Khrushchev's opponents *post hoc* and emphasise his moral victory (Yakovlev 1998, p. 729). The exposed redactions bring us closer to the raw exchanges and first thoughts, while the authorised version reveals much about Kremlin politics to challenge established narratives (Vladimirov 2004). Specifically, the full documentation substantiates what had been reported 40 years earlier about Furtseva's central role.

V. P. Naumov's introduction to Yakovlev's compilation presents the edits as proof of endemic contamination of Soviet records rather than as legible evidence of an exceptional event and the unexceptional manipulating of its record (Naumov 1998, p. 19). Naumov warns that the revisions rewrote the actions of 'such active participants in the Plenum and the struggle before it as Khrushchev, Shepilov and Zhukov'. He characterises the extensive editing in Khrushchev's favour with a certain archness—'They had no qualms about rigging the facts' (Naumov 1998, p. 20)—and notes that some important editing was directed by Khrushchev's aide Grigory Shuisky with Brezhnev. The editing down of Zhukov's saviour role and the blackening of Khrushchev's turncoat protégé Shepilov are usefully pointed out, but partiality is clear too. For example, Naumov overlooks that the quite spare editing of Shepilov's own testimony-in-chief may clarify, rather than pervert, his nuanced positions (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 137–39). Likewise, Naumov does not mention the substantial revisions pertaining to Khrushchev's first 'active participants in the struggle', Brezhnev and Furtseva. Furthermore, his introduction blurs rather than defines the events of 18 June—for instance, it appears to merge the morning SovMin Presidium, where the plotting group decided their strategy (and which Khrushchev could not attend), and the afternoon's CC Presidium where the ambush was intended (Naumov 1998, p. 14). Naumov also states the majority against Khrushchev as seven to four (Naumov 1998, p. 15), although on the Tuesday the initial balance in the depopulated CC Presidium was a more emphatic six to two. The opposition planned to finalise the vote then, not at a complete Presidium, where the seven–four split required only two votes to change—as indeed would happen.

In terms of the transcript itself, the quality of the stenography is important. In some fascinating work on the indispensability of expert stenographers to Soviet political discourse, Stephen Lovell observes that 'given the potential for politically sensitive error, this was nerve-wracking work' (Lovell 2020, p. 278); and it seems to this trained shorthand-writer that the rawness and tension of the discussions recorded challenges the prevalent interpretation of the Plenum as merely a ritual. The events surface in impassioned accounts coloured with authentic human messiness, with ambition, courageousness and back-peddalling, foul-mouthed tantrums and undignified gaffes, with

<sup>8</sup>The compilers of both the 1993 and the 1998 transcript versions were N. V. Kovaleva, A. V. Korotkov, S. A. Mel'chin, Yu. V. Sigachev and A. S. Stepanov—the *Istoricheskii arkhiv* publication is sometimes cited under Kovaleva's name, though Chernobaev was the journal's chief editor.

glimpses of grief over friendships betrayed and teeth gritted over forced alliances. Evaluating the transcript solely as an objective chronicle misses the point, for some of its most vital evidence is about the performances and emotions that produced the authorised legends and their consequences.

*Furtseva in the crisis*

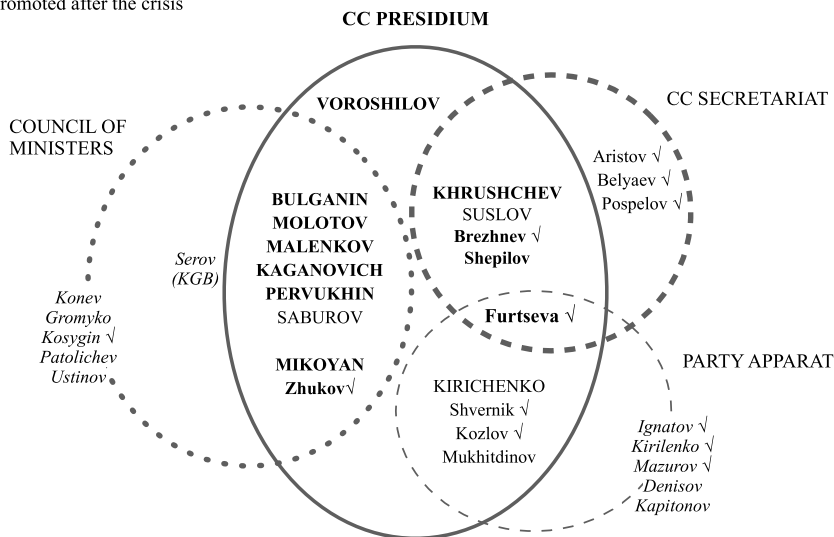
Andrei Sushkov argues cogently for the relevance to events of the 1957 Presidium's individual career trajectories and powerbases (Sushkov 2009, pp. 92–3). Matthew Lenoe identifies the confrontation as having been born in the April 1956 Commission set up by Khrushchev to investigate the show trials and, effectively, to unearth Stalinists' answerability for mass repressions inside the Party (Lenoe 2007, pp. 29–60, 71). Molotov was the Commission's highly compromised chairman, flanked by the similarly implicated Kaganovich and Voroshilov, but they were outnumbered by six Khrushchev nominees, including Furtseva, CC Secretary Averky Aristov and KGB chairman Ivan Serov, on whom Furtseva would call in the APG crisis. Aristov told the Plenum (Yakovlev 1998, p. 191; Lenoe 2007, p. 71) that Serov's efficiency at the Commission in disgorging incriminating documents lay behind the SovMin group's intention to sack him too. Identifying those internal bonds and rivalries, and the fact of Furtseva's having access to the secret Terror evidence alongside senior Presidium colleagues, sheds light on her pivotal positioning in June 1957, with her feet in both the Secretariat and the Presidium and her day-to-day proximity to Khrushchev's office (see Figure 1). Sushkov (2009, p. 30) notes that as Moscow *gorkom* chief she 'was always in the Kremlin loop', able to build her powerbase more easily than colleagues such as Brezhnev, who were based in other ministries or sectors. Furtseva's superior network and inside knowledge of compromised leaders made her actions especially powerful.

Using the transcript disclosures, vital details can be reconstructed. The *putsch* was planned to be over on Tuesday, a sudden strike by chief ministers against the Communist Party *apparat*, 'anti-Party' government against 'anti-government' Khrushchev (Sushkov 2009, p. 25). It would successfully exploit cross-appointments between the Presidiums of the SovMin and the Party CC—Bulganin, Molotov, Kaganovich, Saburov, Pervukhin and Malenkov were all also CC Presidium members; but Khrushchev, chairman of the CC Presidium, was not a SovMin member—and the absence of two Khrushchev backers in the CC Presidium, Suslov and Ukraine First Secretary Aleksei Kirichenko. A Kremlin reception at 7pm put a time limit on the operation.

In the morning Bulganin and Molotov assembled their group as a SovMin Presidium to lay their plan. They then summoned the unaware Khrushchev—whose day was occupied by press conferences with Japanese and Hungarian journalists (Yakovlev 1998, p. 152)—to lunch with them, where they badgered him to convene an unscheduled CC Presidium meeting. The pretext was the demand to finalise speeches for Leningrad's 250th jubilee at the weekend, given Khrushchev's habitual disregard for Presidium consultation (Khrushchev 2010, p. 440). The SovMin group were intending to move into a CC Presidium directly from lunch but had to adjust around the 3pm press conference, delaying their plan until 4pm. Yet at this point the ambush seemed intact: Khrushchev's vulnerability could hardly be overstated, waylaid with six votes against him and

**PRESIDIUM 18 June 1957**

CAPS: Full voting members  
 Lower case: Candidate members, advisers  
**BOLD:** Present on 18 June  
*ITALICS:* CC delegates to Presidium  
 √ Promoted after the crisis



**PRESIDIUM 29 June 1957**

CAPS: Full voting members  
 Lower case: Candidate members, attendees  
**BOLD:** Promoted at Plenum

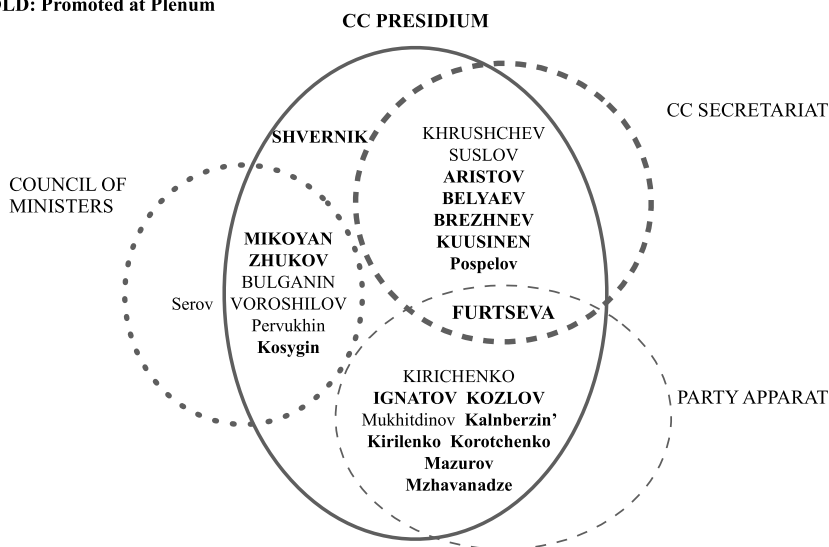


FIGURE 1. FURTSEVA IN THE PRESIDIU

Mikoyan. Not only was Zhukov absent but his speechwriter Shepilov would not be backing him from the candidate bench.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile his allies outside the Kremlin knew nothing.

How then did the miracle rescue happen? We can identify from the unedited Plenum speeches the last window before an inevitable sequence would unroll: just before the 3pm press conference. Brezhnev gave the vital evidence—in this first extract I mark in the text the edits footnoted on each page:

For us 18th June was a normal working day. [DELETED: At around three o'clock] Comrade Furtseva and I... were overseeing the drafting of letters of welcome to Leningrad. ... We knew Khrushchev would be meeting Hungarian journalists. But suddenly we were phoned and told the whole Presidium would be meeting the journalists [DELETED here in this room; REPLACED in the Presidium chamber]. We arrived. We already had a sense of unease. What brought it on? It arose from a conversation with comrade Furtseva who the previous evening told me that as they all left an embassy reception, Kaganovich had overtaken the car that she, Shepilov and Pervukhin were in. He hooted to stop their car, ran up to the door and seized Shepilov by the arm, taking him off to his car, and they drove off somewhere. Furtseva had asked Shepilov what it was about, and he had said they were only going up to the fork in the road together, and then he started getting flustered and giving an evasive answer. (Yakovlev 1998, p. 242)

As Brezhnev continues, there are more edits and it is clearer to compare the versions separately:

ORIGINAL (reconstituted from the edits): Before the [Hungarian] journalists were brought in, we assembled in the small chamber. Comrade Mikoyan said in comrade Furtseva's ear: 'They're covering up something under the Leningrad issue, they're after something else. They've evidently plotted something.' I say, 'What's to be done?' She says, 'We must get Zhukov.' Aristov was at home, unwell. We were sitting in the chamber, I was at the far side, next to Furtseva by the door.

AS PRINTED: Before the journalists came in, we assembled in the small chamber. Comrade Mikoyan said to comrade Furtseva: 'They're covering up something under the Leningrad issue, they're after something else. They've evidently plotted something, that's why they want an immediate Presidium.' We conferred with comrade Furtseva, and we decided to call in comrades Zhukov and Aristov straightaway. (Yakovlev 1998, p. 242)

So, according to Brezhnev's original report, Furtseva had already flagged up Shepilov and Kaganovich's intentions. As lunch ended, Mikoyan was also sensing 'something' but, as they herded into the 3pm press conference, all he could do was whisper his apprehensiveness to Furtseva and hand her the initiative. The official version replaces the furtiveness of Mikoyan's original communication with a calmer implication that he knew the 'immediate Presidium' was a ruse, and the exchange between them is buffed up as collective thinking rather than a woman's insight when two higher-ranking men were stumped. Aristov's illness is edited out, as are the marginal seats occupied by Brezhnev

<sup>9</sup>According to Shepilov, Khrushchev told him, 'You are the greatest loss to me in all this' (Shepilov & Kosyrev 2001, p. 397).

and Furtseva, which suppresses the contrast originally hinted at by Brezhnev between the senior ranks' impotence and the juniors' initiative. Mikoyan himself did not tell the Plenum about his exchange with Furtseva, and he omitted her name when he enumerated Khrushchev's advocates (Yakovlev 1998, p. 155). Her name was later inserted into the edited version. Again, this implies Mikoyan's reluctance to draw attention to her, consistent with the version of events in his memoir.

Sergei Khrushchev picks out the Mikoyan–Furtseva whisper in the hubbub at the end of the lunch but not Brezhnev's participation, and he finds that it was Furtseva who instantly disappeared to contact Zhukov, and then, at the start of the press conference, got Brezhnev to go out to make further calls for help (Khrushchev 2010, p. 440). Yet Sergei also asserts, problematically, that Zhukov had already left the Solnechnogorsk base when Furtseva called, that Malenkov had rung him again, and that it was lunch that he was an hour late for, not the Presidium. The problem is that Zhukov himself, Mikoyan and Shepilov told the Plenum that the general was late for the 4pm Presidium meeting (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 35, 153, 409)—and indeed, three pages earlier, Sergei himself writes: 'At the start of the Presidium session, Zhukov was not in the Kremlin' (Khrushchev 2010, p. 437). There are discrepancies and self-contradictions here, and likely some pro-Khrushchev adjustments to the Brezhnev–Furtseva–Zhukov initiatives, since, after all, all three would turn against Khrushchev and he largely ignored them in his memoirs.

The phone calls are not wholly clarified by Brezhnev's version. He told the Plenum that he seized the chance to leave the room during the press conference's ill-tempered opening, when Bulganin annoyed Khrushchev by ducking the first question (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 242–43):

ORIGINAL as reconstituted: [Brezhnev] didn't listen to [*slushal*] any more, because after the first question I dashed [*vyskochil*] out of the room and ran. Bulganin, knowing there would be a [Presidium] session for this business, and knowing that comrade Zhukov is a firm, principled and upright man, a few hours earlier [had] released Georgii Konstantinovich [Zhukov] to leave the city for training so that he could not take part in the meeting. I telephoned comrade Aristov and said Anastas Ivanovich [Mikoyan] had relayed to me and Furtseva that he was to come over, because we were so few. They chose a good moment. Then I talked to Serov and told him something was up at the meeting. Comrade Zhukov arrived. I told him before entering the room that there was some hidden agenda [*kaverznyi vopros*] that they wanted to discuss. [THREE SENTENCES DELETED] I said to him, whose side are you on, on ours or not? The decision would rest on that. We agreed to fight to the death. [TO HERE]

AS PRINTED: I didn't hear [*slyshal*] any more, because after the first question I went [*vyshal*]<sup>10</sup> out of the room and resolved to make contact with comrade Zhukov. Then I telephoned comrade Aristov and reported to him our conversation with comrade Mikoyan. Comrade Zhukov arrived. I told him before entering the room that a group was demanding the Presidium should convene, that there was some hidden agenda that they wanted to discuss. [TWO SENTENCES ADDED] Comrade Zhukov then told me that during the morning Malenkov had called him over and started a suspicious conversation about it being time for him to be a full Presidium member, that we had to start

<sup>10</sup>Two curiously petty changes.

talking about the Party leadership and so on. In turn, I told comrade Zhukov, Malenkov was sounding you out, to see whose side you are on. [TO HERE]

Brezhnev being one of the editors of the official version, this may explain why the emergency dynamic of his original testimony was reduced for the record, eliding elements exposing Khrushchev's weakness: that Bulganin was against him, that Aristov was ill too, that Furtseva triggered the rescue. Moreover, Brezhnev implies more strongly in the official version that he and Zhukov took action together. He originally said not that he called Zhukov initially but that he met him later to establish the general's position; that latter section, underscoring Khrushchev's dependency on Zhukov, was cut (as were 'more than three dozen of Zhukov's remarks during the Plenum and about one and a half dozen references to him' (Naumov 1998, p. 20)).

Four Russian biographers spotlight the Mikoyan–Brezhnev–Furtseva conversation, though they disagree on the calls and their sources vary or are unclear. As we have seen, Sergei Khrushchev records that Furtseva called Zhukov. Leonid Mlechin (2011, pp. 216–17) asserts that Furtseva phoned Serov and urged Brezhnev to get both Zhukov and Aristov, though his paraphrasing of the transcript and Brezhnev's memoirs is often imprecise. Maisuryan (2004, p. 116) finds that Brezhnev left a message for Zhukov, and Furtseva called Aristov.<sup>11</sup> Nami Mikoyan, the wife of Furtseva's loyal deputy Culture Minister, Vasily Kukharsky (who may have been relaying Furtseva's own account), states that Furtseva called Serov and Gorky First Secretary Nikolai Ignatov, an influential *apparat* ally (Mikoyan & Medvedev 2011, p. 45). The more scholarly Susanne Schattenberg (writing in German) concurs with Sergei Khrushchev that 'Jelena' [*sic.*] Furtseva both suggested and made the vital Zhukov call shortly before 3pm (Schattenberg 2017, p. 245).

Whoever made the calls, the results would have seemed discouraging: Zhukov was far away, while Aristov was sick and, as a Secretary, did not have uninvited entry rights to the Presidium. Brezhnev originally said that he and Furtseva were seated by the door, and it is popularly narrated<sup>12</sup> that Furtseva could take longer breaks—there were no women's facilities nearby—without the kind of inquisition that Brezhnev faced if he left the room for an extended period. Sergei Khrushchev (2010, p. 442) enjoys recounting that Brezhnev first pretended to his interrogators that he had had diarrhoea (*medvezh'ya bolezn'*) and then had it for real. At any rate, that history could be altered by a woman's lavatory break seems plausible enough, and the story was evidently endorsed by Kukharsky: 'As it turned out, she was not simply going to the women's room' (quoted in Mikoyan & Medvedev 2011, p. 33).

Brezhnev's health became a significant talking point. He retreated sick from the Presidium early on the second day, Wednesday, after a barrage of abuse from Kaganovich; Sergei Khrushchev (2010, p. 452) quotes Kaganovich's threat: '*My tebya za Mozhai zagonim*' (Brezhnev would be annihilated, his career in ruins, lucky if he survived at all). Taubman (2003, p. 319) portrays Brezhnev's incapacity as a 'fainting fit',

<sup>11</sup> André Kozovoi, reviewing Brezhnev biographies, notes Mlechin's and Maisuryan's failure to cite sources (Kozovoi 2007, p. 772).

<sup>12</sup> *Moi serebryanyi shar 052: Furtseva*, Moscow, Kanal 1, 17 January 1999, 19:54–21:12.

implying a failure of nerve rather than constitution, endorsed by Sergei Khrushchev (2010, pp. 452, 470), who relays his father's initial belief that Brezhnev was faking illness. Yet, on the Friday, Brezhnev sent the CC a note excusing his absence on the basis of heart disease (Schattenberg 2017, p. 246), and on discovering that Brezhnev had visited doctors four days earlier, Khrushchev had been 'touched by such reckless loyalty on his comrade's part' (Maisuryan 2004, p. 118, quoting Khrushchev's son-in-law Aleksei Adzhubei). Perhaps a mere fainting fit is unlikely to have kept Brezhnev away from a power struggle in which he himself had a burgeoning succession interest. More to the point, would Khrushchev have given a waverer such influence in editing the authorised Plenum transcript? Mlechin, biographer of both Furtseva and Brezhnev, adjudicates: 'In this critical situation, Brezhnev panicked and did not know what to do. Furtseva, though, stayed calm. She immediately knew what to do. She spoke, and Brezhnev did what she said' (Mlechin 2011, p. 217).

At any rate, Brezhnev's weakness sheds light on both Furtseva's robustness in the Presidium and her discretion in the Plenum about his collapse (a powerful claim on his future support). In the candidates' perilous manoeuvres on the Tuesday, Furtseva was carrying an ailing or cowardly Brezhnev, and—probably aided by her gender—was the more effective Khrushchev aide, able to operate away from the shouting match at the head of the table and build on the call to the distant Zhukov, which, after all, was a long shot.

Despite the dramatic immediacy of his account, Taubman (2003, pp. 314, 319) makes nothing of Zhukov's lateness, even having highlighted the general's doubts about Khrushchev's leadership. The crucial details are available from Zhukov's and Brezhnev's raw Plenum evidence: the relay race of coded phone messages, Zhukov's 'incredible dash' at '120 kilometres an hour' to prevent irreversible events (Yakovlev 1998, p. 35). The Presidium sitting was far shorter than the SovMin group anticipated. According to Sergei Khrushchev (2010, p. 443), apart from the reception that Khrushchev and Bulganin had to attend, it was when Furtseva declared that she too had an engagement at 6pm that Bulganin reluctantly suspended the session. The popular television historian Vitalii Vul'f stated in a 1999 Channel 1 feature on Furtseva: 'Zhukov saved Khrushchev—Zhukov and Furtseva'.<sup>13</sup>

Aristov told the Plenum that the full Presidium gathering the next day, where the extent of the intended shuffle transpired, was *blitzkrieg* (Yakovlev 1998, p. 183). Through Tuesday night and early Wednesday, Mikoyan said, he and Khrushchev had vainly tried to shift Bulganin, Pervukhin, Saburov and Voroshilov; the only hope was to prevaricate, ensuring no time limits on Wednesday's speeches, when all members and candidates would speak (Yakovlev 1998, p. 154). The session began at 11.30am, but again a 7pm diplomatic reception was diaried. Furtseva's three-to-six-hour speech presumably came into play late Wednesday or Thursday, but there are only tangential references in the historiography to her prominent role. Sergei Khrushchev pays her a brief but striking compliment. After Zhukov had proposed to arrest the plotters at the Wednesday Presidium: 'Furtseva backed Zhukov without a shadow of hesitation, [saying] "That's right, they have to be removed." Father knew her decisive and imperious character and was not surprised by such words

<sup>13</sup>*Moi serebryanyi shar 052: Furtseva*, Moscow, Kanal 1, 17 January 1999, 19:54–21:12.

coming from her' (Khrushchev 2010, p. 455).<sup>14</sup> Several speakers at the Plenum spoke of Furtseva's being specifically targeted on the Wednesday: Shepilov had 'slandered' Furtseva and Khrushchev, said Aristov (Yakovlev 1998, p. 197), Leningrad *obkom* First Secretary Frol Kozlov said Shepilov had 'thrown mud' at her (Yakovlev 1998, p. 208), Shepilov attempted to defend himself by querying Furtseva's true loyalties (Yakovlev 1998, p. 255), and Uzbekistan First Secretary Nuritdin Mukhitdinov said the Molotovites had 'piled in on' (*obrushilis' na*) Furtseva and Zhukov 'with contempt and hatred' (Yakovlev 1998, p. 259).

Since in the uproar not all members had spoken by Wednesday evening, the vote was postponed again, creating time for the 'crash campaign to bring in the harvest', as Khrushchev's assistant Andrei Shevchenko described it (quoted in Taubman 2003, p. 319). Key Khrushchev supporters were arriving from afar, from Kiev, Gorky and Sverdlovsk, from Finland and Kyrgyzstan, in military transports and KGB cars. Furtseva's Moscow constituency was assembling, the grandees and retirees of the government and the military—a sector of the CC that Sergei Khrushchev characterises as inert and less easy to mobilise than the active regional loyalists; Khrushchev had instructed Furtseva to 'steer' them correctly (*pravil'no sorientirovat'*) (Khrushchev 2010, p. 456). She must also have had to prepare her famed marathon speech for her turn in the debate. Aristov told the Plenum that Khrushchev's supporters were working around the clock without sleep (Yakovlev 1998, p. 184). Furtseva's biographer Natal'ya Korneyeva writes (2007, p. 137), 'every day, as she left her house, Ekaterina Alekseyevna told the staff, "I don't know when I'll be back."' During those days she was very withdrawn and looked extremely tired'. By deduction, then, Furtseva provided three days (and nights) of exceptional service, outstanding in operational resourcefulness, organisational clout and performative stamina under fire.

In his study of Moscow civic politics, Timothy Colton gives full credence to Furtseva's exploitation of her powerful place in the tentacular Party network:

Khrushchev, outgunned in a nonconfidence vote by a Presidium bloc he artfully labeled the Anti-Party Group, faced his acid test. He saved himself by appealing to the whole Central Committee. Furtseva threw herself body and soul into the fight. She called in political debts, telephoned Party leaders in the interior, and arranged trips to the climactic CC plenum. (Colton 1998, p. 363)

On the Friday, 20 CC heavyweights, headed by Ignatov, finally gained entry to the Presidium demanding the CC be summoned, and the Molotovites conceded.<sup>15</sup> Mikoyan told the Plenum that two or three hours could have changed history: the Party members had come just in time to prevent a fatal, practically irreversible decision that would have caused *bol'shoi katavasiei* (mayhem) resonating worldwide (Yakovlev 1998, p. 156).

<sup>14</sup>The gossip about Furtseva and Khrushchev may be relevant to Sergei's very rare praise of her.

<sup>15</sup>The 1962 CIA report noted that it was KGB chairman Serov who let the CC delegation through security into the Presidium.

*The fashioning of the Plenum story*

Taubman's account of the Plenum relishes the invective exchanged between the struggle's protagonists, but he is dramatising a debriefing that he considers was effectively merely ritualistic: 'Khrushchev's rivals were vanquished from the start... the assembly was anticlimactic' (Taubman 2003, p. 320). Sergei Khrushchev (2010, pp. 471–76) is similarly brief on the Plenum, by contrast with his expansiveness on the Presidium scenes. The reading suits a hero myth, but the speaking order indicates the contrary, a volatile situation, reflecting not only apprehensiveness about discussing culpability for the Terror but also the irregularity of actions that achieved the victory, and thereby the true precariousness of Khrushchev's position. Brezhnev and Furtseva, agents of the backstage events, were far down the speaking order, on the fifth day, by which time the official version had been delivered by Zhukov and Mikoyan and embellished by others. Naumov's introduction interprets the motion passed for shorter speeches, immediately before Brezhnev took the floor, as evidence of 'stage management', the outcome being by then 'entirely clear'—though that is hardly definitive, since All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions secretary Nina Popova plausibly put the motion in reaction to the rising flood of requests to give speeches.

I have found no detailed scholarly study of the Plenum proceedings, and, since they have so long been buried in narratives and interpretations without a full documentary foundation, a radical strip-down to basic components seemed desirable. In order to understand what Furtseva did and what was perceived of what she did, I decided to systematise the speaking order, charting speakers' age, rank, Party seniority, speech length, theme and contribution to the final official narrative. This granular approach uncovered unpredictability in the Plenum's progress towards its outcome, countering the theory of the Plenum as ritual, and it provided evidential bases for assessing Furtseva's precedence among her peers, and, thus, for interpreting her performance and promotion to the pinnacle of power.

First, the semiotics of precedence offer information about her perception. On the CC Presidium as a candidate member, although already a CC Secretary, she appeared disadvantaged by gender, rank, age (only Mukhitdinov was younger) and leadership service (only Furtseva, Zhukov and Mukhitdinov had first joined the Presidium in 1956). Her fellow CC Secretaries Aristov, Brezhnev and Nikolai Belyaev, and regional First Secretaries Kirichenko and Kozlov, alluded to antagonism in the leadership between the *stariki* (older, senior members) and the so-called *molodezh'* (youth).<sup>16</sup> Kirichenko, having missed the Tuesday action, made up for it with his excited narrative of his dash back to the *mêlée* from Ukraine, exclaiming that Saburov had bullied the Presidium candidate members, calling them 'rabbits' and telling them their job was to put up their hands silently when told to, confirmed by Brezhnev, Belyaev and Furtseva (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 211–12).

<sup>16</sup>Two of the *molodezh'*, Aristov and Belyaev, were in fact a year older than the 'anti-Party' Pervukhin.

Yet the metadata invites more layered findings. Ambassador Mičunovič, as he hunted for clues to events, suggested that Khrushchev's ordering of names was expressively significant:

The arrangements of the names in this order—Malenkov, Kaganovich and finally Molotov—is in my opinion Khrushchev's way of suggesting that Malenkov was the leader of the group and is also a sort of argument against Molotov who allowed himself to be led by Malenkov and a person like Kaganovich. (Mičunovič & Floyd 1980, p. 262)

Plenum chairman Suslov introduced the group and the crisis story in that same order. I looked at the semiotics of name-listing at the Plenum, to see whether status-changing activities were signalled or adjusted in the transcript editing. Suslov's list of the Presidium members who spoke for Khrushchev on day two groups the names conventionally thus: voting Presidium members, non-voting Presidium candidates and (as advisers) the Secretariat and the KGB chairman (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 26–7). Within that hierarchy, alphabetical order was the default, and in both her candidate group and the Secretariat Furtseva's name should appear near the end of the list. In actuality, in his listing of the Khrushchevite candidates, Suslov promoted Furtseva's name to third, following General Zhukov and the veteran Party Control Committee Chairman Nikolai Shvernik, and ahead of Kozlov, Mukhitdinov and—last—Brezhnev. There was also a substantial redaction: a query from the floor about Brezhnev, Suslov's reply that Brezhnev was ill during the crisis, Brezhnev's rejoinder that he had done his share of speaking on day one, and Suslov's disclaimer that he himself had not been there. An implication that Suslov was signalling shifts of status by elevating Furtseva and marginalising Brezhnev seems reinforced by Brezhnev's interjection in Malenkov's grilling later, asserting himself prominently in another list of Khrushchev defenders on that first afternoon: 'Comrades Zhukov, Furtseva, I, Nikita Sergeevich, Mikoyan, fought to have the whole Presidium summoned ... which they refused' (Yakovlev 1998, p. 55). Here he conceded place to Furtseva but promoted himself over Khrushchev, an intervention left unedited. Mikoyan's and Aristov's listings (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 155, 183) suggest competing preferences: Mikoyan, as noted earlier, omitted Furtseva's name, which was edited in; Aristov listed Furtseva ahead of Zhukov, Shvernik and even Suslov, and omitted Brezhnev. Again, that may simply reflect the latter's absence from early on day two. Brezhnev closed his own speech with another list summarising the ranks of the virtuous, which promoted Furtseva ahead of senior Secretaries (such as Aristov) and other Presidium candidates.

Tedious as it is, the name-listing exercise suggests that if anybody was worried about their colleagues' regard it was Brezhnev, being persistently dropped down or off peers' lists, and having to intervene orally (or editorially) to reestablish himself. The data systematisation produces further signs of Furtseva's peer-group ranking: she had Party seniority over Brezhnev (and even over Mikoyan and Khrushchev), and her Plenum speech was longer than those of 11 of her elders. Such analysis may only produce inferential data, but it contests the idea that her gender or youth diminished her precedence in her colleagues' minds. It is telling that she was primarily referenced in the Plenum as one of the eight CC Secretaries, the Party's ruling elite, rather than in her junior Presidium ranking. It would be the Secretariat that, from the Tuesday evening, rallied the CC to defend Khrushchev from his Presidium attackers. However, only those who served on both Secretariat and

Presidium—an elite status enjoyed by Furtseva and Brezhnev—could communicate the power struggle to the Party *apparatus* in the first place. And to that cross-border access, Furtseva's position as Moscow *gorkom* first secretary added a direct command line to the CC powerbase as well as the heavyweight capital membership (see Figure 1). No one else in the crisis Presidium had connections to all three pillars of the power structure, the inner executive, the Party leadership and the *apparatus*—connections that Furtseva would retain, uniquely, in the new Presidium.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the systematisation exposes that the late appearance of Furtseva and Brezhnev in the Plenum was not a mark of disfavour—far from it: 11 of Khrushchev's 14 subsequent promotees to Presidium membership were speakers at the tail end. Their placement implies Khrushchev's cautiousness about signalling a radically partisan new cabinet too early; it is consistent with an initially unsettled CC Plenum whose members had to be wooed. According to his son, Khrushchev feared that Saburov and Pervukhin might yet persuade some Moscow grandees and retired ministers to their side (Khrushchev 2010, p. 460).

The Plenum transcript shows that Suslov, in rebalancing an asymmetric verbal trial of status, combined tight timekeeping with lax chairing to generate emotional advantage to Khrushchev, by preventing breaks, rushing the opposition and allowing the floor much leeway (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 25, 58, 71). Khrushchev had only Zhukov and Mikoyan as heavy artillery against the battery by his seven peers, and was obliged to split them up. Zhukov's warrior-like opening speech on the Saturday afternoon (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 33–42) had to sustain the pro-Khrushchev position for 48 hours, while Suslov permitted a large amount of interruption and anonymous heckling of the heavyweight procession of 'anti-Party' speakers. Zhukov attacked the plotters both for their deception over the purpose of the Presidium the previous week and for their blood-stained careers under Stalin, a demolition job made easier by the defendants' hysteria in the Presidium when the CC delegation had arrived demanding authority over the leadership question. Zhukov reported that they had yelled (*krichali*) that the CC interruption would be followed by tanks and soldiers (Yakovlev 1998, p. 34); they had even shouted that the CC eminences should be arrested, Kosygin and Pospelov told the Plenum (Yakovlev 1998, p. 138). Malenkov's evidence became a pile-up of challenges, led by Zhukov and Khrushchev; Kaganovich was hassled continually by voices from the floor (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 46–57, 57–71). Numerous recorded outbursts of 'stir in the hall', 'stormy reactions', 'liveliness' or laughter, indicate the Plenum's surprise or scepticism at what they were hearing.

The Monday procession of defendants was cut off in time for Mikoyan to relaunch the prosecuting narrative (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 143–66), which obviated a third night when the CC might be sleeping on the damage dealt to Khrushchev's authority. Mikoyan's long, lawyerly speech focusing on the potential international repercussions was, in his own view, the saving of Khrushchev (*Ya ego spas*), which further suggests that the outcome

<sup>17</sup>Her Leningrad (regional) counterpart, Frol Kozlov, two years older, became a Presidium candidate member a year after her, on 14 February 1957, and though promoted to full membership alongside her in June 1957, only became a CC Secretary on 4 May 1960.

was still unsure. He made a concession that Khrushchev had his faults, and Furtseva jumped in: ‘Get to the point’ (Yakovlev 1998, p. 151). He said nothing about the juniors’ vital activities on the Tuesday; similarly, Zhukov did not refer to his assistance in providing transport for Khrushchev’s supporters.<sup>18</sup>

The speaking scheme shows two arguments made about the resolution of the crisis: that there was a constitutional emergency requiring spontaneous initiatives, and that the Party had authority to justify the means and formalise the outcome. Zhukov, Mikoyan and Brezhnev delivered the emergency story, while Furtseva, despite being at the heart of events and some of the most irregular activities, was allocated to support the second argument, as CC Secretary defending the Party’s moral rightness, but adding three further useful hits on the defendants related to her authority in three areas, as member of the 1956 Show Trials Commission, as Moscow Party chief, and as close colleague to Shepilov, whose defection had so hurt Khrushchev.

#### *Furtseva’s speech*

Furtseva took the floor at about 11am on day four, Wednesday 26 June, announcing: ‘*Tovarishchi, ya khotela by nachat’ svoe vystuplenie ...*’ (Yakovlev 1998, p. 249). ‘I want to start my speech’ does not literally mean ‘I want to say’, and Furtseva, though she might well have wanted to speak of her own hand in the extraordinary turn of events in the Presidium as Brezhnev and most other participants had done, instead gave a performance on behalf of the Khrushchevite Communist Party. Her text was very little edited for the full official version, and was omitted entirely from the 12-page summary *Protokol* of the Plenum produced on 30 July (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 552–63). Given that she had been foregrounded in the CC membership muster as well as the Tuesday ambush, her presentation must have been anticipated by many listeners, not least gossipmongers, eager to know just what the only woman in the ruling circle did for her patron. By contrast with Brezhnev’s personalised perspective, her presentation was, from the record, a half-hour of aggressive rhetoric, giving nothing away about her role, neither confirming nor denying Brezhnev’s story. Its content added little information that had not been nor would be given by others more vividly, not only Zhukov and Brezhnev, but also Kirichenko, Aristov, Ignatov and, of course, Mikoyan. However, it is the combination of its opacity and her fierce delivery on Khrushchev’s behalf that propelled Furtseva to her unique presence, as a woman in the heights of Soviet power.

Her speech covered eight pages, the same as Zhukov’s and Suslov’s, slightly shorter than Brezhnev’s ten pages, and much less edited. With her 1956 Commission authority, she attributed the motives of the ‘conspiring faction’ squarely to their fear of exposure by Khrushchev in ‘monstrous crimes’ against the Party:

They eliminated hundreds of thousands of innocent people who have now been fully rehabilitated. ... They threatened those who requested the facts. ... They were frightened of exposing the details, and that is what led them to such a sad, utterly wrong, anti-Party conclusion and course of action. (Yakovlev 1998, p. 250)

<sup>18</sup>According to Mičunovič, Khrushchev had later said ‘the West deliberately worked up’ Zhukov’s role.

But it is the second, more subtle, moral failure that Furtseva homed in on, the leading conspirators' 'political bankruptcy' and 'sabotage' of everyday life: 'Tell us, please, comrades Molotov, Malenkov and Kaganovich, just what have you done, in concrete terms, for our agricultural economy?' (Yakovlev 1998, p. 252). Her sarcasm on this more tangible territory signalled her strengths, her combination of Party eldership and her access to Muscovite working life and the famed Soviet reality. Instead of planting herself on the battle front-line (and implied succession arena), she stood as the down-to-earth representative of the faithful, sane proletariat, bringing leaders gone mad to account. She talked of bread and potatoes, about the conspirators' cover-up for years of the critical state of agriculture, food shortages and wheat adulteration (Yakovlev 1998, p. 251).

As supervisor of Moscow's building boom, she turned to the capital's rapid development on her watch, finding Molotov, Malenkov and Kaganovich to be the 'specific culprits' of major failures in industrial enterprise, failing as leaders and failing the people. Her argument implicitly endorsed Khrushchev's radical policy statements at the 20th Congress: the trio had gloated as they voted for reforms and then sat on their hands, to 'sabotage' improvements to daily life (Yakovlev 1998, p. 251). The floor endorsed her line, with voices repeating *Pravil'no!*, and her attack, in the same passage, on Malenkov's failure to acknowledge his own previous report of good industrial progress under Khrushchev, drew Zhukov's taunt, '*On prostoi chtets*' ('He is a simple reader'—which was redacted from the official version).

The variation in her tone is striking; after a formal bureaucratic start, she developed a harshly exaggerated, anti-Western theme more redolent of xenophobic Stalinism than the global outreach proposed by the 20th Party Congress:

Who here does not know about the vicious battle and offensives that all our enemies are launching at us on the ideology front? Hundreds of radio stations, hundreds of newspapers, are working away at splitting the unity of the socialist camp so as to undermine our country's credibility. (Yakovlev 1998, p. 253)

She made an arresting, though apparently rhetorical, claim (to 'stir in the hall') that Vladimir Dudintsev's scandalous new novel *Not By Bread Alone* was currently being staged as a play on Broadway and filmed in Hollywood, proof of the wickedness of both book and enemy (Yakovlev 1998, p. 254). She invoked Leninism as the wiser, juster path in contradictorily violent expressions: the veteran leaders had 'slandered' the country's new progress with 'open malice', 'spite and resentment' (Yakovlev 1998, p. 254). 'Even our enemies recognise the Soviet nation's successes', she continued, 'but for these people our achievements only invoke hatred and jealousy'. Zhukov completed her emotive crescendo with a shout of 'Degenerates!' (Yakovlev 1998, p. 255). After her *ad hominem* blackening of the conspirators, Furtseva exculpated the Secretaries' and CC's *ad hoc* intervention in Presidium affairs on ideological grounds. No comparison was credible between the SovMin plot to overthrow Khrushchev and the Secretariat-Party combination to prevent it, because the Party line was a spontaneous eruption among true Communists, not a matter of collusion: 'We did not confer between us, but we all took a firm, united line' (Yakovlev 1998, p. 255; *edinaya* was added in the edited version).

Katya Vladimirov has characterised the Plenum's ideological attack on the plotters as a performative ploy disguising Khrushchev's pragmatic purge of the old guard and replacement with 'his' post-Terror *vydvizhentsy* (promotees) (Vladimirov 2005, p. 180). Furtseva might appear a paragon of this idea, a forceful *vydvizhenka* whose voicing of the righteousness of the Secretaries' actions on behalf of the people looks a clever way to handle the problem of her junior status. But I suggest below that her specific generational outlook involved a more primary ideological conviction among her peer group than Vladimirov proposes, an alternative explanation for Khrushchev's harnessing of the *molodezh'* in his tricky navigation away from the past.

While Furtseva showed striking fearlessness in savaging her elders and superiors, two-thirds of her speech was more style than substance, emphasising points made by others, and very likely recycling rhetoric from her epic Presidium performance a week earlier. Where the transcript shows her becoming spontaneously engaged with her listening peers is when she tackled a particularly hot issue for Khrushchev: Shepilov's ability to fragment the loyalist camp *via* his notorious notebook of private conversations with colleagues, in which, as Secretary Belyaev said, 'you wrote all sorts of stupid things'—'very like provocation, playing the Presidium against itself', added Pospelov (Yakovlev 1998, p. 133).

One might wonder why Brezhnev was not allocated this task. A fellow CC Secretary, he knew Shepilov well and detested him, according to Mlechin (2005, p. 111), who emphasises antipathy between the pair, identically ambitious and attractive to women, but contrasting in taste: Brezhnev liked dominoes and drank with workmates, Shepilov loved music and the Bolshoi Theatre. (At the Plenum the following day, Shepilov's freshly pressed suits drew amused derision from the Krasnodar *Krai* Party chief Dmitry Polyansky who called him a 'fop and a dandy', saying, 'There are plenty of people here who will iron you out' (Yakovlev 1998, p. 354).)

But Furtseva was, perhaps, both more effective than Brezhnev on the Shepilov task and more disposable. She and Shepilov had bonded on the Soviet leadership's trip to China in 1954 and enjoyed each other's company.<sup>19</sup> Both Khrushchev favourites, from 1956 they had neighbouring Secretariat offices. Pervukhin had suggested at the Plenum, then recanted, that Furtseva and Mikoyan had both criticised Khrushchev's handling of the Presidium (Yakovlev 1998, p. 94); in Shepilov's only account of the crisis, when he was 86, he said that a 'pale, agitated' Furtseva had privately threatened to 'crush [him] into prison dust' if he tried to incriminate her at the Plenum (Shepilov & Kosyrev 2001, pp. 394–95). As mentioned earlier, Aristov and Kozlov both told the Plenum that Shepilov had been vocal in denigrating her at the Presidium, so her threat may have deterred him in the Plenum: in his first appearance on Monday he did not mention her (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 132–43). However, by Wednesday his notebook had been mentioned with hostility by several ('To hell with your little book', said Kozlov—Yakovlev 1998,

<sup>19</sup>In old age, Shepilov gave a relaxed account of the enchanted Soviet leaders' midnight stroll in Shanghai, 'an Asian Venice', which ended at the waterfront luxury home of Chiang Kai-Shek's family, where 'to the huge delight of the young, Furtseva and Shvernik joined the Chinese in a dance' (Shepilov & Kosyrev 2001, p. 358).

p. 208), and in her speech Furtseva characterised Shepilov's offence as the full Party crime, *provokatsiya*:

[Shepilov] tried to set various Presidium members against one another. That was provocation, the same method used by provocateurs in past Party history. But if need arises to examine the Presidium's workings, it should be done honestly. Why use dishonest means, putting about confidential conversations and distorting them so as to set people at odds? (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 255–56)

The next exchange reads as if it veered off the approved script. Shepilov called Furtseva's bluff: 'You tell the Plenum if I ever said anything unworthy about one of the Presidium members'. 'I *will* say', Furtseva retorted. Zhukov snapped: 'He wants provocative conversations to go further, why should we give him that publicity?' Patolichev agreed: 'He wants comrade Furtseva to repeat what he said. This must categorically be stopped'. 'Don't get involved with garbage' (*barakhlo*), shouted a helpful heckler, and Furtseva brought the discussion back on topic: 'As the Plenum wishes, I will say no more'. The exchange ends with Khrushchev making the rather childish remark: 'Look at him, sitting there smirking' (*vse vremya sidit, ulybaetsya*).

Next, Furtseva reminded the Plenum that Shepilov had been delegated by the SovMin group to write up the Presidium resolution on Khrushchev's dismissal:

You remember he insisted: 'Comrades, I did not make any proposal to remove the First Secretary'. ... Tell me, please, comrades, they would hardly entrust the writing of the resolution to someone remote from the group. And you, comrade Shepilov, you did not speak about this, you dodged, you ran away from giving an answer. (Yakovlev 1998, p. 256)

During Shepilov's evasive evidence, the remorseful Pervukhin had interjected, telling him to admit that he had been instructed to do so by Kaganovich the evening before the ambush—the huddle in the car that Furtseva had spotted (Yakovlev 1998, p. 139). Having completed her deposition of the particularly heinous betrayals of friends and Party committed by the plot's associate, and his lies in trying to deny he had written the resolutions for the *putsch*, Furtseva ended with a Stalinist flourish:

Furtseva: We must kick out the factionalists and expel them from the Central Committee.

Anonymous: Cleanse it.

Furtseva: Cleanse it of them. (Yakovlev 1998, p. 257)

Having been unable to describe her leading role the previous week, despite her good support from Brezhnev, Aristov, Zhukov and others, Furtseva could not have been sure of surviving a 'cleansing' herself if Khrushchev did not conquer the Plenum. In the confidential CC arena, she and Brezhnev both behaved as if addressing a public. Brezhnev's was the electorate for his future leadership, the inner circle. Furtseva's was a much wider, conceptual public, the male body of power within which she was always an 'other', but within which, for the past few days, she had played a dominant role as initiator and organiser. She lacked

Shepilov's literate eloquence (Mlechin 2011, p. 200), and in her Plenum delivery she notably avoided the active 'I' that Brezhnev, Zhukov and her male peers unselfconsciously used, favouring passive, gender-concealing constructions (and this is true of her speeches throughout her career). Yet her demagogic command of the floor is signalled by the Plenum's lively response. Her eight pages were punctuated by 29 anonymous *golosa* (for comparison, Brezhnev had 19 *golosa* in ten pages, notwithstanding his vivid narrative content, and the popular Kirichenko, 24 in 11 pages). Another 13 comments during her speech, attributed to Zhukov, Patolichev, Perm First Secretary Aleksandr Struev, Sverdlovsk First Secretary Andrei Kirilenko, Belyaev, Khrushchev's assistant Lebedev and Khrushchev himself, testify that the top people were listening keenly to her. Though predating the late Soviet period whose bureaucratic language Aleksei Yurchak has analysed, Furtseva's language exhibits many of the 'wooden' features and 'generative principles' he exposes in learned mechanical performativity (Yurchak 2003, p. 493), and no doubt some of the Plenum's enthusiastic responses were Pavlovian reactions to routine triggers. Still, E. V. Taranov's study of her early career records a Frunze *raikom* contemporary's remark that while Furtseva's speeches always had a *dezhurnoe nachalo* (dutiful opening) her performance was anything but mechanical:

Passion, conviction, sparkling eyes, clear speech—it was always a pleasure to listen to Furtseva, Party workers of those years recalled. And considering that microphones were a rarity back then ... Ekaterina Alekseevna was indeed a remarkable speaker. ... She learned the text by heart, as a rule. Furtseva had a retentive, sharp memory. (Taranov 1992, p. 60)


Khrushchev liked to take credit for his protégée's ability to speak so assuredly without notes—'Molodets, that's my school!' he applauded her at the 20th Congress (Mikoyan & Medvedev 2011, p. 30). But Khrushchev was a poor speaker, prolix and meandering (Yurchak 2003, p. 490), and Furtseva's propulsive use of rhythm and audience engagement could better be linked to the 'rhetorician-performer' tradition that emerged from the early Bolshevik agitators, compellingly discussed by Lovell (2020, p. 270). Addressing gatherings of often illiterate workers, their own kind, these activists 'show[ed] the skills of organiser and preacher', encouraging spontaneous interactions, and thus drawing on traditions of popular entertainment. This was the generation of Furtseva, who had been illiterate as a child, and 'rhetorician-performer' is an apt description for her at the Plenum, where her speech can be seen as a creative hybrid between ritual performativity of tribal obedience and a presentation of her individuality as an equal with her male peers.

From a small edit to Brezhnev's statement, then, opens up a large vista with many new features to examine. Furtseva was not exceptionalised in the Presidium by her gender; born in 1910, she embodied the first gender intentions of the Soviet project and should be defined by her generation. She was the Leninist *komsomolka* who reached her destination (Tirado 1996), a paragon of the first-phase Soviet-schooled generation (Kelly 2007), the age-group that produced the early *Komsomol*, the Stakhanovites and the 1957 Presidium's *molodezh'*, girls like Furtseva marching with boys like Shepilov and Brezhnev towards a pioneering equality. Although gender must have factored into the theatricality of her Plenum appearance, a solo female voice soaring over a supportive male chorus, the

rhetorical formulae in her speeches invariably express an ungendered universality in which many of her peers were raised. Khrushchev insisted in his closing Plenum speech (Yakovlev 1998, pp. 531–32) that Soviet women were *ravnopravna* (equal in rights), that gender was not an issue, and there is no indication during the Plenum of sexism or condescension towards her from even the veteran men whom she tore down without respect for seniority. Her disorderly historiography speaks of forms of misogyny pre- and post-dating her generation, such as local patriarchalism, the male Western gaze on the Cold War imperial contest apprehending that the world’s highest-ranking female politician was from the socialist enemy, and modern Russian treatment of her as a negative Soviet and gender icon.

A full reassessment of the 1957 crisis documentation clarifies that CC Secretary Ekaterina Furtseva’s promotion to full Presidium rank on 29 June 1957 was reward for outstanding service to Khrushchev when he desperately needed it; and that the justice of her promotion was recognised by her peers. In the following February’s Supreme Soviet elections (the public stamp of the leadership’s relative standings—Mičunovič & Floyd 1980, p. 341), the CC selected her as deputy in 15 districts, below only the far more senior Khrushchev, Voroshilov, Mikoyan, Kirichenko, Suslov and Shvernik, above Brezhnev, Ignatov, Aristov and other big names. However, the Soviet leadership’s systemic secrecy combined negatively with Furtseva’s visibility as its only female member, and multiple uncorrected suppositions and gendered insults flourished in the informational vacuum. In 1960 she moved into a much more public site for genderised mythography, as the USSR’s globally prominent Minister of Culture, facilitating the phenomenal age of Soviet arts tours (Brown 2024), engineered with the same preference for liminal initiatives built on powerful core clientelism that she had displayed in the June 1957 Kremlin crisis.

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