

STALIN'S SECRET ORDER: BUILD THE BOMB "ON A RUSSIAN SCALE"

Ed. note: Stalin and the Soviet political leadership required some convincing, both from events and from Soviet scientists, before throwing their full weight behind an atomic weapons program. This evolution is illustrated by two previously secret Russian archival documents which have recently become available, and which are excerpted below. The first document is a 29 September 1944 letter from physicist Igor V. Kurchatov, the scientific director of the Soviet nuclear project, to secret police chief Lavrenti Beria, whom Stalin had given principal responsibility for the atomic effort. Prodded by his own scientists and by intelligence reports of the secret Anglo-American atomic enterprise, Stalin had initiated a small-scale Soviet nuclear weapons program in late 1942-early 1943. But the level of support political leaders had given the project failed to satisfy Kurchatov, who pleaded with Beria for additional backing:

In our letters to you, Comrade M.G. Pervukhin [Deputy Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars and a key atomic administrator] and I reported on the status of work on the uranium problem and of the colossal development of this work abroad. ... around this issue there has been created abroad a concentration of scientific and engineering-technical power on a scale never been seen in the history of world science, and which has already achieved the most priceless results.

In our country, despite major improvement in work on uranium in 1943-44, the situation remains completely unsatisfactory....

Though I know that you are extremely busy, in view of the historic meaning of the uranium problem I all the same decided to disturb You and to ask You to order an effort which would correspond to the potential and significance of our Great State in world culture.

[From I.N. Golovin, "Kurchatov - uchenyi, gosudarstvennyi deiatel', chelovek" ["Kurchatov—Scholar, Government official, Man"], in *Materialy iubeleinoi sessii uchenogo soвета s centra 12 ianvaria 1993 g.* [Materials of the Jubilee Session of the Academic Council of the Center, 12 January 1993] (Moscow: Russian Scientific Center "Kurchatov Institute," 1993), pp. 24-25]

The success of the Manhattan Project, so dramatically demonstrated at Hiroshima in August 1945, compelled Stalin to reorganize, accelerate, and expand the USSR's atomic effort. But some difficulties persisted, including complaints by some scientists, most prominently the renowned physicist Pyotr Kapitsa, that the political leaders overseeing the project—especially secret police chief Lavrenti Beria—did not properly understand either the science or the scientists involved. The second document reproduced here shows that by late January 1946, Stalin was ready to move even more decisively to boost the secret atomic effort, and to satisfy the scientists' wants and needs. Printed below are excerpts from Kurchatov's handwritten notes from a conversation with Stalin, accompanied by Beria and Foreign Minister V.M. Molotov, at the Kremlin on the evening of 25 January 1946. The notes, in Kurchatov's archives, were published recently in an article by the physicist Yuri N. Smirnov, a veteran and historian of the Soviet nuclear weapons program. The timing of the conversation is particularly important in a Cold War context, for only a month earlier the Kremlin had agreed to the request of U.S. Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, during a conference of Soviet, British, and American foreign ministers in Moscow, to create a U.N. Atomic Energy Commission with the goal of establishing international control over all atomic energy and weapons. The document suggests that Stalin, like many U.S. leaders, had little faith in the negotiations, which in fact quickly stalemated and ended in failure later that year as both Washington and Moscow continued to work on nuclear weapons programs under national control. (The USSR exploded its first atomic bomb in August 1949, breaking the four-year American monopoly.)

January 25, 1946

The conversation continued for approximately one hour, from 7:30 to 8:30 in the evening. Comrade Stalin, Comrade Molotov, and Comrade Beria attended.

Basic impressions of the conversation. The great love of Comrade Stalin for Russia and for V.I. Lenin, about whom he spoke in terms of his great hope for the development of science in our country. [...]

Viewing the future development of the work Comrade Stalin said that it is not worth spending time and effort on small-scale work, rather, it is necessary to conduct the work broadly, on a Russian scale, and that in this regard the broadest, utmost assistance will be provided.

Comrade Stalin said that it is not necessary to seek out the cheapest paths, ... that it is not necessary to carry out the work quickly and in vulgar fundamental forms.

Regarding the scholars, Comrade Stalin was preoccupied by thoughts of how to, as if, make it easier, help them in their material-living situation. And in prizes for great deeds, for example, on the solution to our problem. He said that our scholars are very modest, and they never notice that they live badly—that is bad in itself, and he said that although our state also had suffered much, we can always make it possible for several thousand persons to live well, and several thousand people better than very well, with their own dachas, so that they can relax, and with their own cars.

In work, Comrade Stalin said, it is necessary to move decisively, with the investment of a decisive quantity of resources, but in the basic directions.

It is also necessary to use Germany to the utmost; there, there are people, and equipment, and experience, and factories. Comrade Stalin asked about the work of German scholars and the benefits which they brought to us.

[...]

A question was asked about [physicists A.F.] Ioffe, [A.I.] Alikhanov, [P.L.] Kapitsa, and [S.I.] Vavilov, and the utility of Kapitsa's work.

Misgivings were expressed regarding who they work for and what their activity is directed toward—for the benefit of the Motherland or not.

It was suggested that measures which would be necessary in order to speed up work, everything that is necessary, should be written down. What other scholars would it make sense to bring into the effort?

[...]

[From Personal notes of I.V. Kurchatov, Archive of the Russian Scientific Center "Kurchatov Institute," Fond 2, Opis 1/c, Document 16/4, printed in Yuri Smirnov, "Stalin and the Atomic Bomb," *Voprosy istorii estestvoznaniia i tekhniki* [Questions on the History of Science and Technology] 2 (1994), pp. 125-130.]