

# Stalin's Last Crime? Recent Scholarship on Postwar Soviet Antisemitism and the Doctor's Plot.

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David Brandenberger

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**Stalin's Last Crime?**

# Recent Scholarship on Postwar Soviet Antisemitism and the Doctor's Plot

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Debates over the nature of official antisemitism during the last decade of Stalin's life have long occupied a prominent place in scholarship concerning 20th-century Russian history. Particularly controversial have been rumors of a plan for the deportation of Soviet Jews that is said to have been abandoned in early March 1953, on the eve of its implementation, when Stalin suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage. In March 2003, *The New York Times* commemorated the 50th anniversary of the dictator's death with a sensational article heralding the appearance of a new book that reveals "for the first time the incredible full story of the Doctors' Plot" on the basis of new, heretofore unavailable documentation from the former Soviet archives.<sup>1</sup> *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot against the Jewish Doctors*, by Jonathan Brent and Vladimir P. Naumov, details a vast scheme to implicate Jewish medical specialists in a conspiracy against the Soviet leadership.<sup>2</sup> The exposure of this treasonous plot, a modern-day Dreyfus Affair, was apparently designed to trigger outrage and pogroms across the USSR and to justify the exiling of the Soviet Jews to the wastelands of Siberia. According to Brent and Naumov, this campaign ultimately proved to be too extreme even for Stalin's most trusted comrades-in-arms, who poisoned the dictator to prevent the realization of his terrifying scheme.

Based on an array of still-classified archival documents, *Stalin's Last Crime* has much to offer. It provides evidence of factional infighting and renegades **[End Page 187]** within a closed political system long assumed to have been utterly dominated by Stalin. It also reveals high-ranking party officials to have been "true believers," genuinely convinced that the USSR was ridden with domestic fifth columns and foreign agents. That said, *Stalin's Last Crime* provides a rather circumstantial case regarding the Doctors' Plot itself. This essay compares Brent and Naumov's findings to recent work by G. V. Kostyrchenko, B. Ia. Frezinskii, and other authorities in the field, focusing on four major interpretative debates: the 1948 "murder" of A. A. Zhdanov; the collective letter of Jewish elites to *Pravda* in 1953; the plot to exile the Soviet Jews; and the belief that this antisemitic scheme may have ultimately precipitated Stalin's own demise. Such a survey allows not only for a thorough evaluation of *Stalin's Last Crime* but for an overview of other new scholarship on the subject as well.

## The Untimely Death of Comrade Zhdanov

As scholars have begun to reexamine the early postwar period in recent years, a considerable amount of new work has appeared on high politics during Stalin's last decade.<sup>3</sup> These accounts add much to our understanding of these years, particularly in regard to A. A. Zhdanov, one of the most powerful figures in the Soviet Union until his death in 1948. As is well known, Zhdanov returned to Moscow in mid-1944 to resume a leading role within the party hierarchy, having spent the war in besieged Leningrad. Finding G. M. Malenkov and L. P. Beria already firmly ensconced in the state bureaucracy and security services, Zhdanov struggled to rebuild his sphere of influence, which involved supervision over ideological, cultural, and foreign affairs. His efforts met with considerable success, in part because of the embarrassment that a series of early postwar scandals in the Soviet military-industrial complex caused his rivals. Indeed, by December 1945, Beria had been dismissed from his post as minister of state security; by January 1946, Malenkov was also looking quite vulnerable.

Zhdanov capitalized on the ir misfortune in March 1946 by arranging for the appointment of his long-time deputy in Leningrad, A. A. Kuznetsov, to the Central Committee Secretariat. By April, Zhdanov had taken full control of..

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The author is grateful to Terry Martin, Joshua Rubenstein, Peter Blitstein, B. Ia. Freninskii, Kaia Dianina, and participants in Harvard University's Russian and East European History Workshop for their contributions to this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Wines, "New Study Supports Idea Stalin Was Poisoned," *New York Times*, 5 March 2003: A3.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Brent and Vladimir P. Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot against the Jewish Doctors, 1948–1953* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).



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