

Doctors' plot

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The **Doctors' plot** (Russian language: **дело врачей** (doctors' affair), **врачи-вредители** (doctors-saboteurs) or **врачи-убийцы** (doctors-killers)) was an alleged conspiracy to eliminate the leadership of the Soviet Union by means of Jewish doctors poisoning top leadership. After the death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953, the new Soviet leaders declared that the case was fabricated.

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January 20, 1953. Soviet Ukaz awarding Lidiya Timashuk with the Order of Lenin for "unmasking doctors-killers". It was revoked after Stalin's death later that year

Background

Due to the beginning of the Cold War, the State of Israel allying with the West and Stalin's suspicions of any form of Jewish nationalism (and indeed nationalism in general), the Soviet regime eliminated the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in 1948 and launched an anti-Semitic campaign against so-called "rootless cosmopolitans." Also, in the course of his career, Stalin became increasingly suspicious towards physicians. In his later years, he refused to be treated by doctors, and would only consult with veterinarians about his health.^[1]

Events of 1952

The death of the Mongolian dictator Marshal Khorloogiin Choibalsan in Moscow early in 1952 concerned the aging and paranoid Stalin, who commented, "They die one after another. Shcherbakov, Zhdanov, Dimitrov, Choibalsan ... die so quickly! We must change the old doctors for new ones."^[2] At the end of 1952, Mikhail Ryumin indicated to his superior, Viktor Semyonovich Abakumov, Minister of State Security, that Professor Yakov Etinger had committed malpractice in treating Zhdanov and Shcherbakov, allegedly with the intention of killing them. When Abakumov refused to believe the story, Ryumin went over his head directly to Stalin who saw the malpractice as part of a wider conspiracy to kill off the Soviet leadership. Under torture, prisoners seized in the Soviet investigation of the alleged Doctors' Plot were compelled to produce 'evidence' to 'prove' that the Kremlin doctors, led by Stalin's own physician, had in fact assassinated those mentioned by Stalin.^[3]

In a December 1, 1952, Politburo session, Stalin announced:

"Every Jewish nationalist is the agent of the American intelligence service. Jewish nationalists think that their nation was saved by the USA (there you can become rich, bourgeois, etc.). They think they're indebted to the Americans. Among doctors, there are many Jewish nationalists."^[4]

One of the agenda items of a December 4 meeting of the Presidium of the CPSU was "The situation in MGB and

sabotage in the ranks of medical workers." It was brought up by Stalin and vice-minister of MGB (Ministry of State Security) S.A. Goglidze. "Without me," Stalin declared, "the country would be destroyed because you are unable to recognize enemies." An outcome of this session was a decision to consolidate all intelligence and counter-intelligence services under the GRU, headed by S.I. Ogoltsov (later accused of organizing the killing of Solomon Mikhoels in 1948).

Prague Trials

In the wake of the Prague Trials, 13 former Communist leaders of Czechoslovakia (11 of whom were Jews) were executed on December 3, 1952. On December 16, at the National Conference of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia President of Czechoslovakia Klement Gottwald announced: "During the investigation and trial of the anti-state conspiratorial center we discovered a new channel by which treachery and espionage penetrate into the Communist Party. It is Zionism."^[5]

One of the charges brought against Rudolf Slánský was "taking active steps to cut short" Gottwald's life with the help of "hand-picked doctors from the enemy camp."

An article in *Pravda*

On January 13, 1953, some of the most prestigious and prominent doctors in the USSR were accused of taking part in a vast plot to poison members of the top Soviet political and military leadership. *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the CPSU, reported the accusations under the headline "*Vicious Spies and Killers under the Mask of Academic Physicians*"

Today the TASS news agency reported the arrest of a group of saboteur-doctors. This terrorist group, uncovered some time ago by organs of state security, had as their goal shortening the lives of leaders of the Soviet Union by means of medical sabotage.

Investigation established that participants in the terrorist group, exploiting their position as doctors and abusing the trust of their patients, deliberately and viciously undermined their patients' health by making incorrect diagnoses, and then killed them with bad and incorrect treatments. Covering themselves with the noble and merciful calling of physicians, men of science, these fiends and killers dishonored the holy banner of science. Having taken the path of monstrous crimes, they defiled the honor of scientists.

Among the victims of this band of inhuman beasts were Comrades A. A. Zhdanov p1 and A. S. Shcherbakov p2. The criminals confessed that, taking advantage of the illness of Comrade Zhdanov, they intentionally concealed a myocardial infarction, prescribed inadvisable treatments for this serious illness and thus killed Comrade Zhdanov. Killer doctors, by incorrect use of very powerful medicines and prescription of harmful regimens, shortened the life of Comrade Shcherbakov, leading to his death.

"The majority of the participants of the terrorist group... were bought by American intelligence. They were recruited by a branch-office of American intelligence — the international Jewish bourgeois-nationalist organization called "Joint." The filthy face of this Zionist spy organization, covering up their vicious actions under the mask of charity, is now completely revealed...

Unmasking the gang of poisoner-doctors struck a blow against the international Jewish Zionist organization.... Now all can see what sort of philanthropists and "friends of peace" hid beneath the sign-board of "Joint."

Other participants in the terrorist group (Vinogradov p10, M. Kogan p11, Egorov p12) were discovered, as has been presently determined, to have been long-time agents of English intelligence, serving it for many years, carrying out its most criminal and sordid tasks. The bigwigs of the USA and their English junior partners know that to achieve domination over other nations by peaceful means is impossible. Feverishly preparing for a new world war, they energetically send spies inside the USSR and the people's democratic countries: they attempt to accomplish what the Hitlerites could not do — to create in the USSR their own subversive "fifth column."...

The Soviet people should not for a minute forget about the need to heighten their vigilance in all ways possible, to be alert for all schemes of war-mongers and their agents, to constantly strengthen the Armed Forces and the intelligence organs of our government."

[6]

Among other famous names mentioned were Solomon Mikhoels (actor-director of the Moscow State Jewish Theater and the head of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee assassinated on Béria's orders in January 1948,^[7]) who was called

a "well-known Jewish bourgeois nationalist", Miron Vovsi (Stalin's personal physician and a brother of Mikhoels), Yakov Etinger (a world-famous cardiologist), A. Feldman (otolaryngologist), A. Grinshtein (neuropathologist), Boris Kogan (therapist), Mikhail Kogan, I. Yegorov and V. Vinogradov. All of them but two were Jewish.

The list of alleged victims included high-ranked officials Andrei Zhdanov, Aleksandr Shcherbakov, Army Marshals Aleksandr Vasilevsky, Leonid Govorov and Ivan Konev, General Shtemenko, Admiral Levchenko and others.

Arrests



A caricature from Soviet magazine *Krokodil*, January 1953

Initially, thirty-seven were arrested, but the number quickly grew into hundreds. Scores of Soviet Jews were promptly dismissed from their jobs, arrested, sent to GULAG or executed. This was accompanied by show trials and by anti-Semitic propaganda in state-run mass media. *Pravda* prepared publication of a letter signed by many Soviet notables (including Jews) containing incitive condemnations of the "plot"; however, some notable Jews refused to sign it (general Yakov Kreizer, singer Mark Reizen, writers Veniamin Kaverin and Ilya Erenburg, etc.). The letter was never published because of the termination of the campaign soon after^[8].

On February 9, 1953, there was an explosion in the territory of the Soviet mission in Israel, and on February 11 the USSR broke off diplomatic relations with the Jewish state (restored in July). The next day Maria Weizmann, a Moscow doctor and a sister of the first President of Israel Chaim Weizmann (who had died in 1952), was arrested.

Outside of Moscow, similar accusations quickly appeared. For example, Ukraine discovered a local "doctors' plot" allegedly headed by famous endocrinologist Victor Kogan-Yasny (the first in the USSR who treated diabetes with insulin and saved thousands). Thirty-six "plotters" were arrested there.

Newly opened KGB archives provide evidence that Stalin forwarded the collected interrogation materials to Georgi Malenkov, Nikita Khrushchev and other "potential victims of doctors' plot".^[9]

Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill and other world dignitaries sent condemning telegrams to the Soviet ministry of Foreign Affairs and demanded an investigation.

Stalin's death and the consequences

In 2003, a joint group of Russian and American historians announced their view that Stalin ingested warfarin, a powerful rat poison that inhibits coagulation of the blood and so predisposes the victim to hemorrhagic stroke (cerebral hemorrhage). Since it is flavorless, warfarin is a plausible weapon of murder. The facts surrounding Stalin's death will probably never be known with certainty.^[10]

After Stalin's death on March 5, the new leadership quickly distanced itself from the investigation into the plot. The charges were dismissed and the doctors exonerated in a March 31 decree by the newly appointed Minister of Internal Affairs Lavrenty Beria, and on April 6 this was communicated to the public in *Pravda*.^[11] Chief MGB investigator and Deputy Minister of State Security M. D. Ryumin

was blamed for making up the plot and was arrested and later executed.^[12] The careers of most of the doctors involved were effectively at an end and they were forced to leave the big cities, such as Moscow and Leningrad.

Speculation about a planned deportation of Jews

In his Secret Speech at the Communist Party's Twentieth Congress, Nikita Khrushchev asserted that Stalin intended to use the doctors' trial to launch a massive party purge.



Pre-printed version of the first draft of the "Jewish letter" with the signatures of many Jewish celebrities (January 29, 1953)

Yakov Etinger (son of one of the doctors) said that he spoke with Bulganin, who told him about plans to deport Jews. Etinger's credibility was questioned, however, when he claimed to have published a previously unpublished letter to *Pravda*, signed by many Jewish celebrities and calling for Jewish deportation. The alleged original two versions of the letter have been published in *Istochnik* and other publications.^{[13][14]} Not only did they lack any hint of a plan to deport Jews to Siberia, in fact they called for the creation of a Jewish newspaper. The alleged text of the famous letter serves as an argument against the existence of the deportation plans. Etinger was asked to publish the notes taken during his alleged meetings with Bulganin, but they are still unpublished.

Veniamin Kaverin claimed that he had been asked to sign the letter about the deportation.

Ilya Ehrenburg's memoirs hint about his letter to Stalin, which was published along with the "Jewish Letter," but don't talk about the purported plans for deportation.

Sakharov, Yakovlev and Tarle do not specify the sources of their claims and don't claim to be eyewitnesses. Anastas Mikoyan's edited and published version of the memoir contains one sentence about the planned deportation of the Jews from Moscow, but it is not known whether the original text contains this sentence.

One million copies of a pamphlet titled "*Why Jews Must Be Resettled from the Industrial Regions of the Country*" may have been published; no copy has been found.

Based on these and other asserted facts, a researcher of Stalin's anti-Semitism, Gennady Kostyrchenko, concluded^[15] that there is no credible evidence for the alleged deportation plans, and there is much evidence against their existence. Some other researchers disagree, asserting that the question is still open.^{[16][17]}

The prevailing opinion (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9030759/Doctors-Plot>) of many scholars outside the Soviet Union, in agreement with what Khrushchev said, is that Joseph Stalin intended to use the resulting doctors' trial to launch a massive party purge.

Reactions in Israel

Reactions in Israel were mixed, with much of the left and kibbutz movement actually condemning the doctors as "murderers in the service of a Britanno-American spy-network."^[18]

Notes

1. ^ Hachinski 1999.
2. ^ Sebag-Montefiore 2004, p. 634.
3. ^ Sebag-Montefiore 2004, p. 636.
4. ^ From the diary of Vice-Chair of the Sovmin V.A. Malyshev. See G. Kostyrchenko, *Gosudarstvennyj antisemitizm v SSSR*, Moscow, 2005, pp. 461, 462
5. ^ Klement Gottwald: *Selected Speeches and Articles, 1929-1953*. Prague. Orbis, 1954, pp. 230-231
6. ^ "Vicious Spies and Killers under the Mask of Academic Physicians (<http://www.cyberussr.com/rus/vrach-ubijca-e.html>) ", *Pravda* (13 January 1953), pp. page one. Retrieved on 2007-03-01.
7. ^ How They Killed Mikhoels (<http://www.mk.ru/numbers/1806/article60646.htm>) *Moskovsky Komsomolets* September 6, 2005
8. ^ Призрак оперы: Марк РЕЙЗЕН (<http://www.operamusic.ru/lib.php?id=432>)
9. ^ Reported by *Izvestia*, 1989, p.155; also *Istochnik*, 1997, p.140–141
10. ^ Brent & Naumov 2003
11. ^ Brent & Naumov 2003, pp. 324-5
12. ^ Sebag-Montefiore 2004, p. 644n.
13. ^ ПИСЬМО И.Г.ЭРЕНБУРГА К И.В.СТАЛИНУ [КОИ-8] (<http://www.vestnik.com/issues/2000/0314/koi/erenburg.htm>)
14. ^ «Реприза» На Арене Истории (<http://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/142/repriza.htm>)
15. ^ "Deportation - mystification" (<http://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/125/kost.htm>) by Gennady Kostyrchenko, the Russian Jewish magazine *Lechaim*
16. ^ 1953 : la déportation des juifs soviétiques était-elle programmée ? (<http://monderusse.revues.org/document59.html>)
17. ^ Project MUSE (<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/kritika/v006/6.1brandenberger.html>)
18. ^ "Kol Ha'am Daily" Wednesday, January 14th, 1953, quoted in Mordechai Naor's "Sefer Hame'ah"

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- Sebag-Montefiore, Simon (2004). *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*. London: Orion Books Ltd.

See also

- History of the Jews in Russia and Soviet Union
- Prague Trials
- Sergo Goglidze
- Khrustalyov, My Car!

External links

- Translated *Pravda* article of January 13, 1953 (<http://www.cyberussr.com/rus/vrach-ubijca-e.html>)
- *The Soviet “Doctors' Plot”—50 years on* by A Mark Clarfield (<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=139050>)
- Byelorussian Jewry and the Doctors' Plot, 1953 (http://www.jewishgen.org/Belarus/newsletter/doctors_plot.htm) by Dr. Leonid Smilovitsky
- Materials on the case of Maria Weizmann (in Russian) (<http://www.pseudology.org/Veizman/>)
- <http://forum.grani.ru/jews/articles/eak/> Group photo of the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee

Further reading

- Arno Lustiger. *Stalin and the Jews. The Red Book. The Tragedy of the Soviet Jews and the Anti-Fascist Committee*. Enigma Books.2003 ISBN 1-929631-10-3
- Jonathan Brent & Vladimir Naumov. *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot Against the Jewish Doctors, 1948-1953*. ISBN 0-06-093310-0.
- Rapoport, L. *Stalin's war against the Jews: the Doctors' Plot and the Soviet solution*. Toronto: Free Press; 1990.

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