

Stalin's Failed Massacre

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Stalin, no doubt the most powerful man in history, had a secret side to his career that he succeeded in masking almost completely.

Nevertheless, enough evidence escaped destruction to reveal his secret life, which revolved, on the one hand, around his Judeophobia, and, on the other hand, around his need to conceal his activities as a Tsarist secret police spy before the Bolshevik putsch of 1917.

Now Gorbachev's claim that the new Soviet policy of "glasnost" would remove all "blank pages" from Soviet history calls for a reassessment of Stalin's career. Khrushchev's attempt to fill up some of those blank pages in the Soviet archives, kept under "seven locks," as he said in his speech of 1956. Since then Stalin has been treated like a non-person. Yet one of the blank pages crying out to be written is the horror story of the last five years of Stalin's life when the dictator was obsessively plotting a gigantic Jewish pogrom and the mass exile of the entire Jewish population to Siberia and the Arctic. Stalin's life ended at the very moment he was about to unleash a massacre of Jews along the lines of Hitler's mass-murder.

The case of the Kremlin doctors started early in 1949 with the arrest of Dr. Ierusalimsky, an aged and highly respected medical doctor who treated government officials. Ierusalimsky had many friends in the medical community and among Kremlin doctors, many of them Jews. In the privacy of their homes they exchanged opinions on dangerous political subjects — Israel, Soviet leaders, world events, and so on. They did not suspect that their conversations were monitored by listening devices and taped by Secret Police.

One after another they were arrested and accused of "anti-Soviet propaganda" and "Jewish bourgeois nationalism." Ierusalimsky was also accused of giving Levitari's paintings from his personal collection to the Israeli Embassy as a gift to the Jewish state.¹ For a while it seemed that the doctors would be sentenced to what was considered "normal" terms of 10 to 25 years in prison camps (under article 58-10 of the Soviet Criminal Code).

Towards the end of 1951 Stalin, through an agent, induced a radiologist in the Kremlin hospital, Lidia Timashuk, who was a staff Secret Police informer, to write him a letter accusing Kremlin doctors of improper treatment and poisoning of Soviet leaders. Aleksey Scherbakov in 1945 and Andrey Zhdanov in 1948. Stalin gave this letter to Mikhail Ryumin, Chief of the Special Investigative Department, and ordered him to extract confessions from the doctors. Scores of already convicted doctors were brought from prison camps to Moscow for "reinvestigation" of their cases. When Ryumin had several "confessions" ready he went to Viktor Abakumov, the Minister of State Security, with the report on the progress of the "Doctors' Plot." After reading Timashuk's fantastic charges and the doctors' incredible confessions, Abakumov dismissed this "evidence" and ordered Ryumin arrested for fabricating a case that could create a very embarrassing scandal. Abakumov had sought and received support from Lavrenty Beria, Stalin's right-hand man in the Politburo, who was responsible for overseeing the Security Police. When Stalin learned about Ryumin's arrest he ordered Abakumov to report to him in the

Kremlin office, from which Abakumov returned as a prisoner to a Lubyanka cell. Ryumin was released. Stalin ordered him to proceed with the investigation of two "Jewish cases" — the "Kremlin Doctor's" Plot" and the "Crimean case."

The "Crimean case" was built around Stalin's charge that the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were American and Zionist agents and that they had been conspiring to set up a Jewish state in the Crimean peninsula to be used as an "imperialist" springboard for an attack on the Soviet Union.

The origin of this charge is traceable to Stalin's own proposal back in 1923-24 to create a Jewish Autonomous Republic in Crimea. In 1923 Stalin fabricated the case of Suhan Galiev, falsely accusing this prominent Bolshevik of "Tatar Nationalism" and of a scheme to detach Crimea from the Soviet Union. At that time Politburo members Zinoviev and Kamenev, both Jewish, were allied with Stalin in a "triumvirate" against Lenin and Trotsky. Stalin's spokesmen, Mikhail Kalinin and Mikhail Koltsov, published articles and made statements advocating "giving Crimea to the Jews."² Postage stamps depicting Jewish settlement in Crimea were issued to commemorate the idea.³ It seemed that Stalin intended this "Crimean present to the Jews" at the expense of the Crimean Tatars to be a kind of payoff to Zinoviev and Kamenev for supporting him against Lenin and Trotsky.

In 1927, after Stalin defeated the "united opposition" of Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev (he called them "dissatisfied Jewish intellectu-

als"), he dropped the "giving Crimea to the Jews" idea and started to promote a project to create a Jewish autonomous region in Birobidzhan, an area in the Far East that in Tsarist times was considered uninhabitable.

In 1944 Stalin ordered all Crimean Tatars to be exiled to Siberia and Central Asia: he accused them all of collaborating with the Nazis. Probably half the exiles who were herded into cattle cars, perished en route. A rumor that Crimea would be settled by the displaced Jews briefly surfaced then faded.

Almost three decades after Stalin's Crimean invention 24 Jews, all of them public figures — writers, poets, and actors — including the Old Bolshevik S.A. Lozovsky, head of the Sovinformburo during the war, were shot in a Lubianka cellar for supposedly promoting this idea. Only one of the condemned, the famous woman scientist known as the "Einstein in skirts," Lina Shtern, was spared. She was known as the leading expert in the research on longevity, a subject of great interest to Stalin.

Stalin spent the summer of 1952 in his native Georgia. This was the stronghold of Beria, who had sided with Abakumov in dismissing the poison charge in Kremlin "Doctors' Plot." Stalin decided to destroy Beria: as was his usual tactic in such plots, he had first decided to destroy "Beria's men" in the Security Police, the generals from Megrelia, a part of western Georgia. Beria was a Megrelian. Stalin conceived of the notion that Beria and other Megrelians were — actually Jews plotting to create a separate Megrelian state allied with the West.

While in his dacha in Borzhomi, Stalin summoned the Chief of the Georgian Secret Police Rukhadze and ordered him to arrest all Megrelian Generals and to prepare for the mass exile of Megrelians. On receiving these instructions, Rukhadze ordered his driver, Samson Parulava, to drive him to Tbilisi. On the way there Rukhadze chain smoked one cigarette after another without saying a word. "Is anything wrong?" asked Parulava as they entered Tbilisi. "Bad, very bad," said Rukhadze.⁴

On his return to Moscow Stalin took personal charge of the Kremlin "Doctors' Plot," instructing Ryumin and the newly appointed Minister of State Security, S.D. Ignatiev, how to conduct interrogations and apply torture. "If you don't get the doctors' confessions you'll lose your head," he told Ignatiev.⁵ He ordered Ryumin to "beat, beat, and beat" the doctors; he also ordered the arrest of his personal physician, V.N. Vinogradov. Although Vinogradov was not Jewish he was included in the Kremlin "Doctors' Plot." Stalin ordered Ryumin to put shackles and chains on Vinogradov to force his confession. In Stalin's mind Vinogradov became a "Jew" the moment Stalin began to suspect him, just as he transformed Marshal G. K. Zhukov into a "Jew" when he decided to exile him.⁶

Toward the end of 1952 rumors began to spread that Beria himself was a Jew. He was no longer in charge of overseeing the Security Police — Stalin no longer trusted anyone with this key position. The vacuum around Beria widened as his close friends, mostly Megrelian Generals, disappeared behind prison walls. They were all tortured and forced to sign confessions implicating Beria. On the Files of these Megrelian Generals Stalin wrote, "Death to Megrelian bandits."

In October 1952 Stalin called the 19th Party Congress, the first one since 1939. This time he ordered changing the Politburo into a Presidium. As on several previous occasions, he offered to "retire," only to watch the reactions of his puppets, paralyzed by Fear. He never explained his motive for abolishing the name of the original Politburo, secretly formed in May 1917 by Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin to deal with the most dangerous problems of the day — the widespread criminal charges that many leading Bolsheviks were German agents and Tsarist Secret Police provocateurs. Stalin wanted to erase the last trace of these shocking charges in the very name of the Politburo to which these charges gave birth.

On January 13, 1953 Pravda published a report on the "crimes"

committed by the Kremlin doctors. It said they were agents of American and British intelligence and of the Jewish "subversive organization, the Joint; they were guilty of murdering high Soviet officials Shcherbakov and Zhdanov; of plotting to murder a number of Soviet Generals; of belonging to an "imperialist" conspiracy headed by Solomon Mikhoels. Mikhoels was murdered on Stalin's order exactly five years earlier to the day. On January 20 papers announced that Lidia Timashuk received the Order of Lenin for exposing the "murderers in white gowns."

Stalin called a meeting of the new party Presidium and told it that the Jewish population had to be exiled to "safe places" in order to protect it from the threat of pogrom. No questions were asked. Stalin had earlier given orders to build barracks for the Jews in the Jewish Autonomous region of Birobidzhan in the Far East and on the northern island of Novaya Zemlia.⁷ Any question, let alone objection, would arouse Stalin's suspicion and rage. Afraid to talk to each other, demoralized and sensing an impending "purge" in their ranks, the members of the old Politburo, outnumbered by the new members of what was now called the Presidium, lived in terror for their own lives. Stalin often vilified them as British or American spies.⁸

Early in February 1953 the Ministry of Internal Affairs completed a printing of a million copies of D.I. Chesnokov's booklet, *Why It Was Unavoidable To Exile Jews From Industrial Centers Of The Country*, Stalin invited to his dacha in Kuntsevo, near Moscow, high Government and Party officials and urged them to provoke Jewish pogroms. He told Khrushchev, "The good workers at the factory should be given clubs so they can beat the hell out of those Jews . . ." As they left Kuntsevo Beria asked Khrushchev, "Well, have you received your orders?" Khrushchev replied, "Yes, I have." Khrushchev brought to Stalin's dacha two members of the Presidium: Melnikov, the First Party Secretary of the Ukraine, and Korotchenko, the head of the Ukrainian government, whom Stalin had ordered to organize pogroms in the

Ukraine.10

After the January 13 publication of the charges against the Kremlin doctors, with special emphasis on their Jewish names and the conspiracy with the Zionist "Joint," the daily-barrage of newspaper articles, radio announcements, and speeches about the "murderers in white gowns," the angry and deprived populace sensed blood in the air: a pogrom atmosphere had descended on the country. In bread lines, in street cars, in factories and offices, incidents of violence against Jews multiplied. On February 9, 1953 a bomb exploded in the Soviet Embassy in Tel Aviv. Whether the act was intended as a show of protest against an obviously anti-Semitic campaign in Russia, or was Stalin's provocation designed to instigate a Kristallnacht type of pogrom in Russia, has not been established. Stalin broke off diplomatic relations with Israel.

Early in February 1953 Stalin ordered M.B. Mitin, the Chief of the Party Propaganda Department, to summon prominent Soviet Jews and have them put their signatures under the appeal to Stalin asking him to save the Jewish population from possible violence which could be prompted by the "understandable outrage" of Russian people aroused by the "heinous crimes" of the Kremlin doctors. The appeal asked the Soviet government to "relocate" the Jews to "safe" areas of settlement. When Ilya Ehrenburg came to sign it, Mitin pointed to the name of Lazar Kaganovich, which was crossed out in red pencil, intimating that it was Stalin who had crossed it out to exempt only Kaganovich. Other prominent Jews had to sign this appeal. According to conflicting reports one prominent Jew refused to sign and threw his Party card on the table. He could not have long survived this unheard of insubordination. His death, or rather murder, must pinpoint the exact date when the signing of the appeal had taken place. Indeed, on February 14, 1953 Pravda announced that Lev Mekhlis, "one of the prominent leaders of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union, Member of the Central Committee . . ." died on February 13, at 1:35 a.m. Mekhlis, a Jew, had been at Stalin's side since the early

Twenties. The causes of his death were specified as arteriosclerosis and heart failure."

Around February 13 another prominent Jew, the historian I.L. Mints, was ordered to write an appeal to the Jews asking them to cooperate with the authorities during relocation to safe areas. I.S. Khavinson was ordered to collect signatures of prominent Jews for this appeal. Lazar Kaganovich was delegated by Stalin to supervise the selection of Jews scheduled for transportation to designated areas.¹² There was some eerie logic in Stalin's choice of Kaganovich in his approach to the "final solution." Who could accuse Kaganovich, a Jew, of anti-Semitism? If Kaganovich could cooperate in the murder of his own brother Mikhail, he could also be relied upon to carry out the exile of the Jews. He had proved himself to be a merciless executioner during the great purges. But perhaps most important, Stalin had grown to accept Kaganovich not as a Jew, but as a fellow anti-Semite. "A Jew himself, Kaganovich was against the Jews!" exclaimed Khrushchev, astounded.¹³

On February 18 Stalin received Krishna Menon, the Indian Ambassador to Moscow. Menon was the last foreigner to see Stalin. While seemingly listening to what Menon had to say, Stalin's thoughts were rumbling around strange subjects. He kept doodling wolves in various postures. When a wolf attacks a Russian peasant, said Stalin at one point, the peasant kills the beast; the wolf knows this and runs scared. Menon thought that Stalin was hinting at some enemies whom he intended to destroy. He was surprised when Stalin suddenly inquired about the languages spoken in India and wondered how pure they were from foreign influence,¹⁴

Menon knew nothing about Stalin's obsession with Jews. At the time Stalin provoked the Korean war in 1950 he had launched a hate campaign in the press against a long-dead half-Georgian linguist, N.J. Marr, who had died at the age of 70 in 1934. Marr had a theory, first published in 1896 that Georgian was one of the Semitic languages. So in 1950, Pravda, disregarding the Ko-

rean war and other international events, devoted page after page to Stalin's polemics with the dead Marr about linguistics, which, like all areas of knowledge, could be expertly discussed by the "Genius of All Times and Peoples." In 1949 Stalin had ordered the confiscation of a 16-volume Jewish Encyclopedia in Russian, published in 1913, which had an account of Marr's theory,¹⁵ and also ordered the name of ; Georgian magazine, Iveria—the ancient name for Georgia — to be changed to Sakartvelo — the modern name {the hidden reason for this was Marr's assertion that Iveria was derived from "Ivri," or Hebrew).

Stalin spent the last days of February in his Kuntsevo dacha, as was his habit for the last several months. He gave oral instructions to Secret Police and government officials on how to carry out the pogrom and exile of the Jewish population.¹⁶ He ordered a large number of cattle-cars to be ready at the major railway centers. The Jews of European Russia as well as the Georgian Jews and Megrelians, were to be exiled under the convoy of Internal Security Forces — special detachment dressed and trained as pre-Revolutionary Cossack troops. At the end of February 1953 tall, mustached Cossacks in long tunics and fur hats, armed with sabers and whips, appeared in the Megrelian center of Ochamchiri. People in the streets were frightened — they hadn't seen such troops since the Civil War. In Tbilisi Police officials made lists and took measurement of apartments and houses occupied by Megrelians who were thrown out of work and openly threatened with exile. A hysterical woman, Nataly Kavtadze, appeared on the street of Tbilisi shouting that the Jews kill Christian children and use their blood in matzoh.¹⁷

High Soviet officials in Moscow knew of the impending exile of the Jews. Stalin's daughter Svetlana stated, "everything grew very still as before a storm." The United States Ambassador George Kennan, was declared persona non grata. "Now is the time to fight and to conquer while your father is alive. At present

we can win!" said a colonel, a friend of Stalin's son Vasily, to Svetlana. In Stalin's last published photograph he is sitting in the middle of a large group of generals and admirals. He had apparently convinced himself that he could intimidate the West with the atom bomb, which the Soviet Union had had since 1949. "Ekh, together with the Germans we could have been invincible!" he kept, saying with regret about his failed alliance with Hitler.¹⁸ He tried to resurrect this alliance with the remaining Nazis.

On March 17, 1952 he ordered Hitler's imprisoned deputy, Rudolf Hess, to be secretly flown from Spandau prison to a meeting with Stalin's emissary at which he was offered "to proclaim publicly that the Socialism of which he had dreamed was being realized in East Germany." Stalin wanted to give Hess power, thinking that large number of Nazis in both Germanics would unite behind Hess. But Hess refused the offer.^{11'}

Stalin was living in a state of intense anticipation of the approaching day when he would finally destroy the "Jewish threat." The pogrom was to start at the time of the Kremlin doctors' execution, which was to be carried out in early March. Stalin wanted the pogrom to coincide with Purim. He, a Tiflis Seminary dropout, was familiar with the biblical story of Esther. Perhaps he saw himself as the modern-day Haman — bur one who would not fail. He planned the doctors' hanging in the Red Square to serve as the signal for "selected cadres" to lead the enraged masses into a Jewish pogrom.²⁰ At some point during the pogrom the Internal Security troops were to be ordered by the "benevolent" government to "save the Jews" by herding them into cattle cars for transportation to Birobidzhan and Novaya Zemlia, where barracks already had been built. Usually calm and patient in stalking his prey, Stalin this time could hardly wait for the moment of triumph over his life-long enemy. The Jews interfered even in his personal life: His son Yakov married a Jewish woman. Svetlana fell in love with a Jew, and than married another Jew. He refused to see his half-Jewish grandson.

The night of February 28, 1953 began as usual at the Kuntsevo dacha. Stalin was alone in his sparsely furnished, three-room apartment, separated from the rest of the building by steel-plated automatic doors only he could open with an electric switch from inside. He had changed his entourage several months earlier, dismissing his chief bodyguard, General Vlasik, who had served him since the days of the Civil War. He had fired the chief of his personal secretariat, Poskrebyshev. He had also fired all Mcgrelian bodyguards whom he suspected were Beria's men. His remaining bodyguards were Georgians from his native province of Kartvelia and Russians.

That night Gogi Zautashvili, a tall, strongly built native of Gori in his late thirties, with a balding head and expressionless face, was manning the control board next to Stalin's rooms. Late at night he noticed that a bulb on the board was lighted, which meant that Stalin had opened one of the doors in his apartment. Usually the light would go off when the automatic door closed behind him. This time, however, the light stayed on. Zautashvili waited a few minutes and then became alarmed. He called the head of the bodyguards, Khrustalev, who soon appeared and called Stalin on the phone, but there was no answer. Khrustalev called G.M. Malenkov, whom Stalin had appointed First Secretary in October. Malenkov called Beria and together they rode 32 kilometers from Moscow to Kuntsevo. This was the first time in their lives that they had gone there without Stalin's invitation.

On Malenkov's and Beria's authority the bodyguards, with great difficulty, broke down the steel-plated door. Stalin was not in the room. They opened the door to the second room and there they saw Stalin lying on [he floor. He was unconscious, but alive.

From then on Beria was in full command. He knew that by some miracle he had been handed a chance to abort the impending pogrom and purge of which he himself would have been the first victim. He-

knew that he would survive only if he managed to end Stalin's life without being caught in the act. In the eyes of high officials, as well as the country at large, to kill Stalin was akin to murdering a God. Beria had no illusions about Stalin. A murderer, a lecher, and a cynic himself, Beria did not worship Stalin. He knew that Stalin was a Tsarist Police agent before the Revolution, and that he fabricated charges against Old Bolsheviks in order to destroy them.²¹ Having served Stalin for decades, Beria knew that Stalin was plotting his destruction. He decided to stage Stalin's "natural death." He summoned his personal doctor to diagnose Stalin's condition and to insure his demise by slowly poisoning him. Stalin had had a stroke — the right side of his body was paralyzed. He could not speak.²² For two days - February 28 and March 1 — Kuntsevo was isolated from the rest of the country. Svetlana tried to telephone Stalin, but could not get through. During these two days Beria was taking measures to install his people in key positions to ensure his control of the situation.

On Monday morning, March 2, Svetlana was called from the lecture she was attending at her Institute and told to go to Kuntsevo. Her brother, General Vasily Stalin, and Stalin's close associates — Bulganin, Voroshilov, Khrushchev, and others — were also notified. They arrived in Kuntsevo at the same time as Svetlana. "Let's go in. Beria and Malenkov will tell you everything," they told her. They themselves knew nothing until, like Svetlana, they were invited that morning to witness the death of Stalin. By this time Beria had summoned some doctor; who saw Stalin for the first time in their lives and were scared by the gravity of the moment. Svetlana writes: "There was only one person behaving almost obscenely. That was Beria. He was extremely agitated He was trying so hard, at this moment of crisis, to strike the right balance, to be cunning, yet not too cunning. It was written all over him. Stalin's son Vasily was taken away by Beria's men after he started to shout that his father was being

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poisoned. Khrushchev dropped on his knees in the old peasant tradition and was crying. Except for Beria, "They all felt that something portentous, something almost of majesty, was going on in this room and they conducted themselves accordingly." On March 5 Stalin's last moment arrived. Stalin "from time to time opened his eyes . . . Beria stared fixedly at those clouded eyes." He knew that the poison had to take effect shortly. Stalin's face darkened. It was slow strangulation.

He literally choked to death. At what seemed like the very last moment, he suddenly opened his eyes and cast a glance over everybody in the room. It was a horrible glance, insane or perhaps angry and full of fear of death . . . then something incomprehensible happened . . . He suddenly lifted his left hand as (though he was pointing to something above and bringing down a curse on us all . . . The next moment, after a final effort, the spirit wrenched itself free from the flesh.

Stalin lifted his crippled left hand, the hand his father Vissarion had in-

jured when Stalin was ten years old. In the deadly silence Beria's triumphant voice suddenly resounded: "The tyrant is dead! Khrustalev, my car!"

Beria could not hold back his joy. He was at this moment the most powerful man in Russia. He immediately ended the anti-Semitic campaign in the Soviet media. His first official act was to free Kremlin doctors (one of them, Dr. Ettinger, had died under torture) and acknowledge that their alleged "plot" was a hoax. He released from prison the Megrelian generals, Stalin's sisters-in-law, and Jewish wives of Soviet officials. Molotov was reunited with his Jewish wife in Beria's office. Beria proclaimed the first post-Stalin amnesty. The tension of the last months of Stalin's life began to subside.

It is a matter of speculation as to how fast and how far Beria could have gone in his de-Stalinization campaign. Early in July 1953 he was arrested by a group of army generals who were led by Marshal Zhukov and Khrushchev. They were all

united at that time by their revulsion over Beria's role in the murder of Stalin, whom they still worshipped. At the secret trial in December 1953 Beria was accused of poisoning Stalin. He did not deny it. On the contrary, he described his role as the savior of millions of people from deportation and death, and of Politburo members from a bloody purge. Neither the poisoning charge nor Beria's defense was ever made public. After the trial Beria and several of his close associates were shot on December 23, 1953. Only one in this group, Peter Sharia, sentenced to ten years in prison survived to tell what happened at the trial. Documents of the trial are in the archive of the Military Tribunal and kept there "on absolutely special status." •

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Notes

1. Efim Spivakovsky, taped interview.
2. Decree of the Ukrainian SSR of July 29, 1924, *Jerusalem University Collection of Documents on Soviet-Jewish Relations*, edited by Y. Frankel, Jerusalem, 1965 pp. 88, 97, 168.
3. Stamps in author's archive.
4. Interview with Nugzar Sharia.
5. Roy A. Medvedev, *Let History Judge*. New York: Knopf, 1971, p. 494.
6. Milovan Djilas, *Conversations With Stalin*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1962 pp. 160-61.
7. Anton Antonov-Ovseenko, *Chronika*, New York, 1980 pp. 325-26.
8. Nikita Khrushchev, "Secret Speech."
9. Antonov-Ovseenko, p. 326.
10. N. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, Boston, Little Brown and Co., 1974 pp. 258-64.
11. Pravda, February 14, 1953, p. 1.
12. Antonov-Ovseenko, p. 325., Medvedev, p. 496.
13. *Khrushchev Remembers*, p. 243.
14. Krishna P.S. Menon, *The Flying Troika*, London, Oxford University Press. 1903, p. 29.
15. *Evreiskaia Enkhlopedia* (in Russian), 1913, Vol. VI, pp. 808-809.
16. Medvedev, p. 494.
17. Nugzar Sharia, interview.
18. Svetlana Allilueva, *Only One Year*, New York, Harper and Row, 1969, pp. 155.
19. Testimony of Otto Grotewohl *New York I'ost*, September 4, 1987, p. 13.
20. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*. New York: YMCA-Press, 1974, p. 102. Also, Agursky, *Novoe Russkoe Slovo*, April 2, 1974, p. 3, and Medvedev, p. 496.
21. Medvedev, pp. 819-20.
22. S. Allilueva, *Dvadsat Pisem K Drugu*, New York, Macmillan, 1962 pp. 5-10.
23. "Stalin-Man and Symbol," Report from Moscow Public discussion, April 25-30, 1987, *Novoe Russkoe Slovo*, New York June 12, 1987, p. 13.