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From Silence to Spiel:

Representing Stalin's Alleged Jewish Deportation Plan

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Comparative Literature

by

Oleg Ivanov

2021

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

From Silence to Spiel:

Representing Stalin's Alleged Jewish Deportation Plan

by

Oleg Ivanov

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Tamara Judith-Marie Levitz, Co-Chair

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This dissertation argues that Stalin's rumored plan to deport the Jews of the Soviet Union to locations in the Soviet Far East in 1953 can be examined as a plot-generating device, irrespective of the question of its historical reality. Seen in this light, the deportation plan fits the narrative model initiated by the Purim story as recounted in the Book of Esther. The Purim story offered a model for comprehending (and even generating) the plan, as well as for placing it into a Jewish narrative tradition and a characteristically Jewish conception of time as a series of recurrences or analogies between past and present. The dissertation examines fictional treatments

of the plan in relation to Stalin's last days and argues that early works drew upon this model for representing the deportation plan, while later works additionally developed a fictional Jewish resistance effort to Stalin and his regime as a form of symbolic revenge for his Jewish victims in keeping with the inherent ideological requirements of Purim. These works incorporate elements of the Purim story, at times indirectly or even unwittingly, and thereby draw analogies between that story and the deportation plan because they are working in a particular narrative tradition whose "genre memory" conditions a comparison between the events in the Book of Esther with the events of 1953. In order to explain this connection, the dissertation draws on several schools and major figures of Russian literary theory: the historical poetics of Alexander Veselovsky, Vladimir Propp's morphological study of the folktale, and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of genre memory. These theoretical tools help explain how the Purim story made it possible for Jewish and non-Jewish writers to make sense of the rumors connecting Stalin's death to his postwar antisemitic campaigns. By comparing fictional treatments of the plan in the USSR and the West during and after the Soviet era, the dissertation examines how varying sociopolitical and cultural conditions engendered different representations of the plan that can nevertheless be subsumed within the "Purim-Stalin" genre as a kind of literary and cinematic special Purim.

The dissertation of Oleg Ivanov is approved.

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2021

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## Introduction

“Models have become co-producers of reality.”

-Olafur Eliasson<sup>1</sup>

On 1 March 1953, at the height of the Doctors’ Plot, when the Soviet government accused several prestigious Soviet Jewish doctors of plotting with Western powers to murder the USSR’s leaders, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin suffered a stroke that led to his death four days later. Occupying several leading roles in the government and Communist Party of the USSR, he had been the empire’s de facto dictator for a quarter of a century. During the last years of his reign following World War II, he launched a series of antisemitic campaigns under various guises that have led historians to call this period “the black years of Soviet Jewry.”<sup>2</sup> 1 March 1953 fell on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar in the Hebrew calendar, a day on which Jews around the world for over two thousand years had celebrated the festival of Purim. The holiday commemorates the victory of the Persian Jews over Haman after he planned on destroying them en masse, as related in the Tanakh. With state-sponsored antisemitism at its peak, rumors circulated that Stalin was planning to deport the empire’s Jews to the Soviet Far East at the time of his death.

The Soviet Jewish film director Mikhail (born Moisei) Kalik, who was arrested during the black years and sent to a gulag, remembers that Stalin’s death on Purim led Jews in his camp to hug and congratulate each other, exclaiming “Haman dropped dead!” For Kalik, this was a “true Purim”, as the dictator’s death led to Kalik (and many other Jewish and non-Jewish victims

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ilya Kliger and Boris Maslov, *Persistent Forms: Explorations in Historical Poetics*, Fordham University Press 2016, p. 429.

<sup>2</sup> Yehoshua Gilboa, *The Black Years of Soviet Jewry* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971).

of Stalin's purges) being freed from the gulag soon after (Gershenson 2013, 91). In his memoir *Hostages* (1976), Grigory Svirsky reminisced that while he witnessed and experienced antisemitism firsthand from his colleagues in the army and his professors and classmates at university, he was nevertheless dumbfounded when someone at the funeral of Solomon Mikhoels, the former artistic director of the Moscow State Jewish Theater and chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) during World War II, told him that the great Soviet Jewish icon had been murdered by the state (109). Only on 4 April 1953, after reading a *Pravda* article saying that the Doctors' Plot had been fabricated by rogue agents within the state security apparatus, did Svirsky understand that Mikhoels and other leaders of the JAC were killed "on Stalin's orders" (110) and that Stalin had been a guiding force in official Soviet antisemitism. In 1956, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Nikita Khrushchev made his famous "Secret Speech," "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences," to the 20th Party Congress denouncing the excesses of Stalin's reign. With the subsequent de-Stalinization of the "Thaw" period and the revelations in the decades that followed about the millions of lives lost and destroyed as a result of his policies, Stalin is now firmly seen by many Soviet Jews and those who fought for their liberation as a modern-day Haman, thwarted before he could wreak even greater havoc on the millions of Jews in his power.

Whether or not Stalin actually had a concrete plan to cleanse Soviet Europe of its Jews, many Soviet Jews now view his death as an event that saved them from another genocide less than a decade after the Holocaust. In examining Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan, historians and other commentators on Soviet Jewry have concentrated on whether or not such a plan truly existed. To answer this question, they have relied on hearsay, rumors, eyewitness testimonies, memoirs, deathbed confessions, circumstantial evidence, and - since the collapse of

the USSR and the subsequent partial opening of previously sealed Soviet archives - government documents and other forms of archival evidence left behind by Stalin, the Politburo, and the various ministries and security services that might have had anything to do with such a plan. The dearth of archival material confirming Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan has prevented a consensus regarding its existence from forming. Nevertheless, this alleged deportation plan has played a significant role in the development of Soviet Jewish consciousness since Stalin's death. The plan has often been depicted in fiction, drama, films, and memoirs by both Jewish and non-Jewish Soviets and non-Soviet and post-Soviet Jews as if it did indeed exist. Its historical indeterminability drove writers and filmmakers to represent and reimagine it in a process that reflected the development of Soviet Jewish identity since Stalin's death.

In this dissertation, I propose that the story of Purim, as told in the Book of Esther and memorialized in Purim celebrations among the Jews, provided a model for endowing Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan with form and meaning for Soviet Jews and served as a blueprint for the plan's subsequent representation by writers and filmmakers. Connecting the plan to Purim became a prerequisite for its representation in fiction, where Purim's generic attributes gave both shape and purpose to the rumors and memories surrounding Stalin's death and his antisemitic persecutions. Conversely, those who did not make that connection, like Thaw-era Soviet novelists, could not represent the deportation plan in their fictional depictions of the Doctors' Plot and Stalin's death. The experiences and legends of Soviet Jews, both in terms of their recent history as Soviets and their ancient history as Jews, caused them to organize the rumors and events surrounding the Doctors' Plot and Stalin's death into what we now know as Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan. Sublimated cultural and religious memories among Soviet Jews from the *longue durée* of Jewish history combined with these recent historical events to give

birth to what I will refer to as “Purim-Stalin,” or the thwarting of Stalin’s plan to commit ethnic cleansing against Soviet Jews as a modern recurrence of the Purim story.

In the decades leading up to those fateful events of 1953, Soviet authorities had tried to destroy Jewish memory and practice by eradicating Hebrew education and Jewish religious leaders and institutions in their effort to turn Soviet Jews into secular communists. After World War II, this process extended to secular Yiddish culture, leaving Soviet Jews a pale semblance of their former Jewish practices, institutions, and culture, aside from a few token synagogues smattered through the USSR that were infiltrated and constantly monitored by the state security apparatus. Deprived by the state of their Jewish religious traditions, Stalin’s Jewish victims accessed their folk memories to make sense of their traumatic experiences during the last years of his reign. As they returned to their Jewish national consciousness in the decades following his death, Soviet Jews gradually regained their place in the story of the Jewish people, which enabled them to see their trials and tribulations under Stalin and his henchmen in the context of both Jewish biblical and secular history. Having been restored to Jewish time and its inherent concept of recurrent historical cycles from the progressive confines of Soviet dialectical materialism, Soviet Jews latched on to Jewish cultural traditions, particularly those surrounding Purim, as models for representing and reimagining Stalin’s death and his alleged Jewish deportation plan.

### **Stalin’s Alleged Jewish Deportation Plan**

#### Postwar Jewish Persecution in the USSR

“...my people, the Jews, we were bad-mouthed for a long time, they blabber about some secretly spilled innocent blood - all lies and slander! But to this day my people still can’t wash it off!”

The years following World War II until Stalin's death were ones of increasing discrimination and persecution for Soviet Jews. Having survived the "Holocaust by bullets" under the occupation of the Germans and their allies, they now faced increasingly nationalistic political and cultural policies emanating from the Kremlin that promoted the achievements of ethnic Russian while downplaying those of Soviet minorities like themselves. From the dissolution of the JAC in 1948 through Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet Jews experienced what can be described as the initial stages of ethnic cleansing. As part of Stalin's increasing turn against the internationalism of the early years of Soviet rule toward Russian chauvinism and Russification, the government started attacking citizens perceived to be "kowtowing to the West" (*низкопоклонстве перед Западом*), particularly Jewish intellectuals, accusing them of being "rootless cosmopolitans" (*безродными космополитами*). They were attacked in official publications as feeling superior to Russians and devaluing Russian culture. By the time of the foundation of Israel in 1948,<sup>4</sup> Stalin had come to view Soviet Jews as a fifth column for Israel and the bourgeois West, making all Soviet Jews potential "bourgeois nationalists."

Though he did not ultimately cleanse Soviet Europe of its surviving Jews, Stalin was largely successful in erasing what remained of official Jewish and Yiddish culture in the USSR. After the dissolution of the JAC, the Writer's Union of the USSR disbanded its Jewish section and shut down the entire Yiddish press in 1949. As part of the repression of the JAC, many prominent Jewish writers and actors were arrested and/or murdered, culminating in 1952 in the

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Stalin initially supported Israel in the hope that it would become a socialist beachhead in the Middle East, but he abandoned such hopes after it became clear that Israel had instead quickly become a Western-style liberal democracy.



Night of the Murdered Poets.<sup>5</sup> It was impossible to speak out against these government murders within the country, and many of these victims were only exonerated in the 1980s under *glasnost*. Even acknowledging the Holocaust became practically forbidden, as exemplified by the 1948 banning of Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman's early documentation of the Holocaust, *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry*. "Soviets feared that memorializing the Holocaust would raise Jewish consciousness" (Gershenson 2013, 3), so any such attempt was condemned as an expression of Jewish "bourgeois nationalism."

The Kremlin's fabricated charges of anti-Soviet espionage and treason against prominent members of the now disbanded (JAC) overlapped with those in the Doctors' Plot, as both conspiracies were linked through certain overlapping members and imaginary connections to foreign, anti-communist, bourgeois, and Zionist elements.<sup>6</sup> These antisemitic purges reached their peak on January 13, 1953, when the Doctors' Plot was "exposed" by Soviet newspapers. This "treasonous plot, a modern-day Dreyfus Affair" (Brandenberger 2005, 187) was revealed to the Soviet public when

TASS and *Pravda* announced the existence of a conspiracy within the Soviet medical elite: Nine doctors—including six with stereotypically Jewish last names—were charged with assassinating [Andrei] Zhdanov and [Aleksandr] Shcherbakov and plotting to kill other key members of the Soviet leadership. These articles touched off an explosion of undisguised antisemitism in the press that labeled Soviet Jews "rootless cosmopolitans,"

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<sup>5</sup> See Joshua Rubenstein and V. P. Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> The Byzantine conspiracy connecting the JAC and the Doctors' Plot fabricated by Soviet security forces is beyond the boundaries of this dissertation, but more information can be found in J. Brent and V.P. Naumov (2004), *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot Against the Jewish Doctors, 1948-1953*, New York: Perennial and Joshua Rubenstein and V. P. Naumov (2005), *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*.

Zionists, and agents of U.S. and British imperialism. The product of a fiercely chauvinistic period in Soviet history, the Doctors' Plot marked the culmination of state-sponsored antisemitism under Stalin that had mounted in the late 1940s with the proclamation of the state of Israel, the murder of Mikhoels, and the subsequent anti-cosmopolitan campaign (Brandenberger 2005, 194).

Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov (2001) argue that the Doctors' Plot was an effort by Stalin to delegitimize the government in order to further concentrate power in his own hands. He could thereby undermine a growing postwar demand within the Soviet bureaucracy for legal legitimacy in its actions. Thus, the accusations against the mostly Jewish doctors were part of a larger "conspiracy of the government, in the person of Stalin, against itself" that also targeted (primarily Jewish) officials in the Ministry for State Security (MGB). The resulting purges of any potential rivals to Stalin's power were meant to repeat those of the 1930's Great Terror, with the "bourgeois," "Zionist" Jews playing the same role of convenient scapegoats as the Trotskyites had two decades earlier (Brent and Naumov 2001, 4). Stalin likely planned for the trial of the accused doctors to take place by the end of March 1953; it was meant to unite all the separate threads of his postwar antisemitic persecutions against both "rootless cosmopolitans" and Jewish "bourgeois nationalists" as well as within the JAC, MGB, Politburo and various other government ministries and bureaucratic factions (Brent and Naumov 2001, 309).

After the Doctors' Plot was announced in the state media, rumors circulated among the Soviet public about Jewish doctors poisoning Russian children and killing newborns in maternity hospitals (Brent and Naumov 2001, 3). These vicious antisemitic lies, an echo of the blood libel, emanating from both the Kremlin and the street gave rise to the earliest suspicions among Soviet Jews of a possible plan by the government to deport them from their urban population centers in

the western USSR to the nation's eastern regions. As memoirs and testimonies from Soviet Jews and others that lived through those months reveal, many believed that “the exiling of the Jews was to be accompanied by a thorough purge of state and party institutions, a murderous act that some say was to combine elements of the Ezhovshchina [Great Purge] with the Final Solution” (Brandenberger 2005, 195).

### Salient Elements of the Alleged Deportation Plan

In this section I will briefly summarize the various rumors surrounding Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan that have been put forth by historians and witnesses that believe in its existence. These “avowers” of the plan’s existence, as I will refer to them here, attest that the inflammatory articles about the Doctors’ Plot published in January of 1953 were written and disseminated as part of a larger strategy to provoke a massive wave of pogroms against Jews by the Soviet public, which would provide Stalin with an excuse to deport Soviet Jews to the eastern USSR “for their own safety” (Brandenberger 2005, 194). The January 13 articles “revealing” the existence of the Doctors’ Plot in *TASS* and *Pravda* were just the beginning of a wave of antisemitic agitation in the press, which avowers think was ultimately meant to culminate in the show trial and public execution of the Jewish “doctor murderers” in the Red Square (and possibly elsewhere) (Brandenberger 2005, 200). Avowers claim that a secret commission within the Central Committee, which operated between the late 1940s and the early 1950s, was charged with planning the deportations that were to ensue immediately following these executions (Sheinis 1992, 122–23). Memoirists writing about the period confirm that Soviet Jews waited for the trial of the “doctor murderers” to begin with bated breath.

Yakov Yakovlevich Etinger,<sup>7</sup> who was sent to a gulag in 1950 during the campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans” on a charge of anti-Soviet activity, claims that Nikolai Bulganin (a member of the Politburo in 1953) revealed in private that the Central Committee Presidium decided during a meeting in early January 1953 “to execute publicly those implicated in the Doctors’ Plot” not only in Moscow, but also in “Leningrad, Kiev, Minsk, and other major cities” (Brandenberger 2005, 200). This, they believed, would trigger the anti-Jewish pogroms that would justify the ensuing mass deportations. Bulganin claimed that Stalin ordered him to “assemble thousands of cattle cars outside major Soviet cities in February 1953 to facilitate this massive bout of ethnic cleansing” and instructed him “to foment riots and pogroms that would hound the trains along their route to Siberia to ensure that only a fraction of the deportees would actually make it to their final destination” (Brandenberger 2005, 200-1).

During those final months of Stalin’s life, many Soviet Jews believed that these preplanned, government-organized pogroms, so reminiscent of the pre-revolutionary period, would begin on a day that came to be designated by the letter X. The legend of day ‘X’ “traveled from Jewish household to Jewish household like cholera” (Brent and Naumov 2001, 297). And while this legend has never been verified by archival sources documenting an official plan for such a pogrom, rumors of “the expected deportations have played a large, almost mythological role, in post-Stalinist Jewish life” (Brent and Naumov 2001, 297). Those who deny the existence of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan point to “the absence of an order authorizing deportations” as proof that “nothing was planned” (Brent and Naumov 2001, 297). However, avowers contend that such reasoning is “not persuasive,” given that Stalin’s past ethnic

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<sup>7</sup> He was exonerated and released after Stalin’s death. His adoptive father, Yakov Gilyarievich Etinger, one of the doctors implicated in the Doctors’ Plot, died under torture while being interrogated about his role in the alleged plot.

cleansings like the “order authorizing the deportation of the Chechens in 1944 to Kazakhstan was signed a week after the deportations had occurred” (Brent and Naumov 2001, 297).

As I will elaborate more fully in the following section, most Soviet-era Western scholars of Stalinist antisemitism viewed his alleged Jewish deportation plan as a historical fact. They generally believed that Stalin planned the “mass deportation of two million Soviet Jews from the European part of the country to desolate areas of Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Arctic North” in what amounted to “a Soviet version” of “Nazi-like Judenrein policies” (Winston 2015, 471). Some claimed that prison barracks were constructed in Siberia, the frozen island of Novaya Zemlya, and Birobidzhan for these purposes, while others alternatively argued for Kazakhstan, Irkutsk, and the Komi ASSR as the intended sites of Jewish internment. These early studies of the alleged plan claimed that its existence and such corroborating details “had been confirmed by important testimony” (Gilboa 1971, 332). They dismiss official Soviet documents referring to the detention areas as being designed for “German, Austrian, and other criminals” as a “smoke screen,” arguing “that state and party officials routinely spoke in coded language about the deportation of Soviet Jews even in top-secret memoranda” (Brandenberger 2005, 199). Though official Soviet documents and witnesses/memoirs sometimes differ on the specific locations of these barracks, all agree that they were in Central Asia and the eastern USSR. In contrast to government documents, these camps constructed in February 1953 were widely rumored among the Soviet populace to be intended for Jews. It would make sense for the Kremlin to use such a smoke screen because the deportation of millions of Jews needed to be kept secret from the wider Soviet public “for fear that the sheer, gross inhumanity of it did not destabilize the population” (Brent and Naumov 2001, 295). As we previously saw with the 1944 deportations of Chechens to Kazakhstan, it was common practice under Stalin for official orders like those

concerning the alleged Jewish deportation plan to exist without much (if any) corroborating documentation.

Stalin created a system of “vigilance” among his subordinates that caused them to see enemies, traitors, and saboteurs everywhere. Similarly, citizens’ committees were formed among the general populace “to identify and denounce Jews and other dubious individuals” (Brent and Naumov 2001, 9). Such committees were known to visit residential buildings to determine which of their occupants were Jewish. Jews who lived through this period speak of lists of Jewish residents (along with their addresses) being drawn up by building managers and local authorities in major Soviet cities (Potok 1996, 109). Rumors of Jewish conspiracies and plots multiplied as antisemitic defamations increased Jewish fears, which prompted corresponding whispers of government plans for imminent ethnic cleansing to spread within Jewish communities.

Several accounts claim that on Stalin’s orders, Professor D. I. Chesnokov, a Kremlin propagandist, wrote a pamphlet justifying the alleged upcoming deportation in Marxist-Leninist terms, which was printed and ready to be distributed by the time of Stalin’s death (Brandenberger 2005, 194). However, no copies of such a pamphlet have ever been found, either because it never existed or was thoroughly destroyed by Stalin’s successors in their effort to conceal any connection between the Kremlin and the alleged deportation plan. Some witnesses similarly remember “a Moscow military archive preparing a manuscript for publication that would have celebrated the tsarist government’s deportation of Jewish ‘spies’ from the Eastern Front during World War I in an attempt to justify similar actions in 1953” (Brandenberger 2005, 195). This latter story speaks to two important elements of Purim-Stalin: (1) Stalin’s postwar return to a kind of pre-communist Russian chauvinism; and (2) cyclical Jewish time, where

Soviet Jews begin to see Stalin's antisemitic actions as a recurrence of similar persecutions during the Russian Empire.

Another famous document concerning the alleged deportation plan was a letter to *Pravda* signed by several notable Soviet Jews that either called for justice against the Jewish "doctor-murderers" or for all Soviet Jews to be deported to the eastern USSR, depending on which version of the story one believes. "The only archival copy of this letter to have been declassified so far makes no mention of Siberian exile" (Brandenberger 2005, 195). Historians like Brent and Naumov "contend that there must have been other drafts that did" mention deportation (300–7), while others like Kostyrchenko and Frezinskii claim the letter never included a call for deportation, but only a denunciation and call for punishment of the "doctor-murderers" by the signees. Since the rumors surrounding the letter claim that it went through several drafts before reaching its final state, this sole extant copy can neither verify nor debunk rumors and eyewitness accounts regarding the contents of earlier drafts. Like other aspects of Stalin's alleged deportation plan, the supposed content of these drafts has been revised and elaborated by commentators since Stalin's death.

According to Brent, Naumov, and others, the Kremlin concocted a plan to publish a collective letter signed by dozens of prominent Soviet Jews (e.g. Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman) in *Pravda* that condemned the traitorous Jewish doctors and proposed that the entire Soviet Jewish community be "voluntarily" deported to Siberia to protect them from "the Russian people's righteous wrath" (Brandenberger 2005, 195). In this avower's account of the letter, some, like Grossman (despite serious misgivings and some delay), signed this initial draft of the letter, while others, like Ehrenburg, signed a revised version of it that did not include a call for deportation. Ehrenburg was allegedly unable to recount the story of the letter in his memoirs due

to prevailing Soviet censorship (Rubenstein 1996, 372–76), but his involvement with the episode, including his correspondence with Stalin and the editors of *Pravda*, has been reconstructed elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> According to such reconstructed accounts of his participation in the affair, “Ehrenburg was apparently so unnerved by one ... draft’s explicit call for the deportation of the Jews that he protested directly to Stalin in early February 1953” (Brandenberger 2005, 195). However, other accounts of Ehrenburg’s reaction to the letter claim that the draft “did not explicitly call for mass deportations,” but that it included the phrase “the most merciless punishment,” which Ehrenburg took “to be a call for sanctions against the entire Soviet Jewish population,” not solely the “doctor-murderers” (Brandenberger 2005, 196). The expression “the most merciless punishment” might have confirmed for Ehrenburg “the rumors that had long circulated about the barracks that were being built for a future ghetto in the Far East.”<sup>9</sup> Ehrenburg reportedly told a confidante at the end of his life that while there was no direct mention of exile in the Kremlin draft of the letter, he “understood very well that in the wake of the publication of a letter by a select group of Jews disavowing themselves of their own people, the mass repression of Jews living in the Soviet Union would follow” (Brandenberger 2005, 196).

As a result of his misgivings about this early draft of the letter, Ehrenburg allegedly notified Stalin about the matter and ultimately prepared an alternate, milder version of the letter that only denounced the “doctor-murderers,” while making no reference, either explicit or implicit, to collective Jewish guilt for the Doctors’ Plot or any consequences for the Soviet

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<sup>8</sup> See Z. Sheĭnis, *Provokatsiia Veka: rassreliannyi Narkomindel: kholodnyi Pogrom Na Putinkakh: Novoe o "Dele vrachei"* (Moskva: Nezavisimoe izd-vo PIK, 1992), 107-9.

<sup>9</sup> V. A. Kaverin, *Epilog: Memuary* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1989), 316.



Jewish community that might follow. On 2 February 1953, Stalin “apparently ratified Ehrenburg’s changes to the letter and consigned the copy with the writer’s marginalia to the archives for safekeeping” (Brandenberger 2005, 197). Even deniers like Frezinskii and Kostyrchenko, who do not believe that any version of the letter called for Jewish deportation, concede that after Ehrenburg’s appeal to Stalin, the original draft was revised into something milder sometime in mid-February 1953. This final draft, the declassified version referred to earlier, “called for the punishment of the ‘doctor-murderers,’” but it also drew a clear distinction between the Soviet Jewish community and their “bourgeois,” “Zionist” kin abroad; it concluded by proclaiming that “Soviet Jews wanted nothing more than to live as members of the Soviet working class in harmony with the other peoples of the USSR” (Brandenberger 2005, 197).

It seems that Ehrenburg, the Soviet Union’s most famous Jewish intellectual internationally, successfully petitioned Stalin to stop *Pravda* from printing the letter by convincing the dictator that it would blacken the USSR’s reputation abroad. Furthermore, “Ehrenburg’s note appears to have caused Stalin to think twice about the ultimate direction of the Doctors’ Plot” (Brandenberger 2005, 197). By dissuading Stalin from publishing the original Kremlin version of the letter, Ehrenburg may have delayed the alleged planned deportation and then prevented it completely when Stalin died, if one believes this version of events. Regardless, this episode became an integral part of the deportation legend, joining the other key elements recounted in this section to form the basis of the representation of Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan in fiction and folk memory from his death to the present day.

### Historiography

“Stalin is Godot, absent from an empty landscape. We wait, we guess, we attribute motives, we receive incomprehensible communications, but in the end he will not reveal

himself, and there is no direct way toward understanding him...” (Brent and Naumov 2001, 217)

Since his death, scholars have debated whether or not Stalin was truly planning to ethnically cleanse Jews from Soviet Europe before his sudden passing. Memoirs, testimonies, and circumstantial evidence suggest that Stalin may have planned to use the aftermath of the 1953 Soviet Doctors’ Plot to initiate a carefully constructed plan in which the USSR’s two million Jews were to be transported in cattle cars to either gulags or settlements throughout Soviet Asia. Many scholars maintain that only Stalin's sudden death prevented the enactment of what one writer referred to as the final “Stalin solution to the Jewish question (a variation on the Hitler plan)” (Vaksberg 1994, 203). On the other hand, others maintain that such a plan never existed, given the dearth of concrete evidence that has been found to support it. And some remain agnostic on the question, citing the lack of archival sources verifying the plan to refrain from fully affirming or denying the plan’s existence.

Soviet Jewish memoirists that lived through the period predominantly claim that the “ultimate aim of the Doctors’ Plot” was the “exile of the Jews” to the eastern USSR (Brandenberger 2005, 198). Such memoirs include Antonov-Ovseyenko’s *The Time of Stalin* (1981), Lidiia Shatunovskaia’s *Zhizn’ v Kremle (Life in the Kremlin)* (1982), Yakov Rapoport’s *The Doctors’ Plot of 1953* (1991), and the works of historians that experienced these events firsthand, like Sheinis’s *Provokatsiia veka (Provocation of the Century)* (1992) and Vaksberg’s *Stalin against the Jews* (1994). However, contemporary reactions in 1953 outside of the USSR differed regarding the ultimate goal of the events surrounding the Doctors’ Plot. For example, the Moscow correspondent of *The New York Times* described “the victimized doctors as subjects of a modern resurrection of Salem witch hunts” (Winston 2015, 481), implying that this was a

localized persecution directed solely at a small group of people. On the other hand, some in the Israeli media contemporaneously suggested that the Doctors' Plot was "a Soviet version of Kristallnacht without the broken glass and, as yet, dead Jewish bodies," suggesting that it could be the beginning of a more widespread persecution of Soviet Jews (Winston 2015, 481).

With no access to the Kremlin's archives, Soviet-era scholars writing outside of the USSR based their accounts primarily on the testimonies and memoirs of those who witnessed and survived Stalin's postwar oppression of Soviet Jews. Works from this period on the subject take the existence of Stalin's alleged deportation plan at face value, their authors firmly believing that only Stalin's timely death prevented it from being put into action. The basic facts surrounding the alleged plan were established early on in studies like Jehoshua Gilboa's *The Black Years of Soviet Jewry* (1971), which were largely repeated by subsequent scholars writing on the subject during the Soviet era. They were only seriously augmented after the fall of the USSR to reflect hitherto unavailable material found in Soviet archives.

After the collapse of communism, as the Kremlin and KGB opened portions of their archives, scholars within and beyond the former USSR used this newly available material to paint a more detailed picture of the events surrounding the alleged deportation plan. Since then, historians have mostly "searched in vain for any trace of the paper trail that such a mass operation would have left behind" (Brandenberger 2005, 198). This lack of conclusive archival evidence explicitly verifying the alleged deportation plan has led some historians to push back against the previous scholarly consensus regarding the plan's existence. Recent works by scholars like Victor Winston, reflecting post-Soviet scholarly skepticism on the subject, write that these earlier accounts of the alleged deportation plan "proved reasonably informative but not entirely convincing" (472). Winston argues that the earliest Soviet accounts of Stalin's

antisemitic campaign “from its onset to the hesitant reversal in the immediate aftermath of Stalin’s death,” like Ehrenburg’s novel *The Thaw* (1954) and his memoirs *People, Years, Life* (1967), “generally tend to be in the category of belles lettres, and thus not always unassailably accurate” as historical evidence (473).

While Soviet-era historians broadly accepted the existence of Stalin’s Jewish deportation plan, post-Soviet scholars writing about the alleged plan can be roughly divided into three categories: avowers (those who believe in the plan’s existence), deniers (those who do not), and agnostics (those holding out for more evidence to make a final judgment). By and large, the differences among the “authors who believe that the plan and preparation for the deportation of Soviet Jews had been actively pursued by Stalin ... are not overly substantial” (Winston 2015, 484). On one end of the spectrum are the strongest avowers like Vaksberg, “whose bold strokes” and at times “perhaps less than reasonable” observations reveal absolute faith in the existence of Stalin’s plan (Winston 2015, 484). The other end of the spectrum of avowers consists of historians with a “somewhat more-nuanced approach” like Shimon Redlich<sup>10</sup> (Winston 2015, 484).

Among the deniers are historians like Gennadiy Kostyrchenko, “who altogether eliminates the possibility that plans for the deportation had ever existed” (Winston 2015, 484). Kostyrchenko writes that stories about preparations of any kind for Stalin’s alleged deportation of Jews are a “Cold War legend” (Kostyrchenko 2001, 671) “representing pure fiction” (Winston 2015, 486). Kostyrchenko even “suggests some sort of ambivalence on Stalin’s part regarding

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<sup>10</sup> See Shimon Redlich, K. M. Anderson, and I. Al’tman (1995), *War, Holocaust, and Stalinism: a documented study of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR*, Luxembourg: Harwood Academic.

the prosecution of the Doctors' Plot as a whole during the last weeks of his life" (Brandenberger 2005, 198). The general

absence of documentation has led Kostyrchenko to write off the rumors of the impending deportation as a myth inspired by social hysteria within the Soviet Jewish community.

According to this interpretation, "eyewitness" accounts of barracks construction and the assembly of cattle cars outside Moscow in early 1953 should not be taken literally and reflect the period's atmosphere of fear and distrust more than they do any genuine evidence of official intent (Brandenberger 2005, 198).<sup>11</sup>

Kostyrchenko is supported by Russian historians like Yuri Zhukov and Zhores Medvedev, who "deny the existence of the entire plan and of its physical preparations" (Winston 2015, 485), and others like Gorlizki and Chlevnjuk, who note that, "Amidst the tens of thousands of...documents unearthed to incriminate Stalin in the late 1950s and the communist system as a whole in the 1990s, no instructions or directives sanctioning or preparing for such a deportation have ever been found."<sup>12</sup>

During the Soviet period in works like *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn supported the existence of Stalin's alleged deportation plan. However, in the post-Soviet era in works like *Dveste Let Vmesti (Two Hundred Years Together)* (2002), Solzhenitsyn's account of Jewish life in Russia and the Soviet Union over the last two centuries, he denies any preparations for deportation, "likely in light of his general (and not unknown) dislike of Jews" (Winston 2015, 485). During the Soviet era, Solzhenitsyn was part of a broad

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<sup>11</sup> See G. V. Kostyrchenko, "Deportatsiia—mistifikatsiia (Proshchanie s mifom stalinskoi epokhi)," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, no. 1 (2003): 92–113.

<sup>12</sup> Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg V. Chlevnjuk (2008), *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945-1953*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 158–59.

dissident movement that included many refuseniks. In their effort to reform the USSR, these dissidents from different political and religious persuasions largely put up a united front to achieve a common goal. While there were differences of opinion and perspective among individual dissidents, these were largely superseded by a sense of solidarity and mutual support. After the collapse of the USSR, this once united camp splintered into several different groups that were now often at odds with one another over both the past and future of the former Soviet world. Russian nationalists like Solzhenitsyn saw communism as being fundamentally alien to Russian culture and increasingly opposed Jewish scholars that emphasized both the antisemitic and *Russian* nature of Soviet communism, particularly after World War II. It is important to note that in both instances, Solzhenitsyn was relying on the work of others in his judgment regarding Stalin's alleged deportation plan. During the Soviet period, he chose to rely on sources that believed in the plan; later he decided to rely on sources that denied the plan's existence.

Reflecting the opinion of many post-Soviet scholars, Brandenberger asserts that historians "have yet to find conclusive evidence that a decision to deport the Jews had been officially reached—much less ratified or advanced to the planning stage—by the time Stalin died on 5 March 1953" (202). However, Brandenberger does take issue with the deniers' complete dismissal of the possibility of Stalin ever devising or even considering deporting the mass of Soviet Jews to the east. As he sees it, while the linkage by Kostyrchenko and others of the deportation

rumors to social hysteria is quite convincing, it fails to explain why members of the Soviet elite—Riumin, Mikoian, Mikhailov's wife, and others—also seem to have discussed the deportations in early 1953. Perhaps speculative talk about the possibility of deportations circulated informally in certain circles within the Soviet leadership and the

secret police, precipitating panic within the society at large as people caught word of it (202).

Thus, espousing skepticism toward the conclusions of both the avowers and the deniers, Brandenberger belongs to the agnostics among post-Soviet scholars of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan, insisting that "the issue of the deportations must remain unresolved" (202). Joining him in this category are Jonathan Brent, Oleg Naumov and Joshua Rubenstein, who similarly argue that more concrete documentary verification is needed to answer the question one way or the other. However, even the agnostics are divided between those who lean toward belief and those that lean toward denial. Rubenstein, leaning more toward denial, believes that senior officials from the secret police and other government institutions may have themselves initiated rumors or even preliminary plans for a general assault against Soviet Jews in response to implicit signals emanating from Stalin and the Central Committee before the latter themselves formulated such a plan (Rubenstein 2016, 82). Conversely, Brent and Naumov by and large believe that the rumors of the deportation plan must have come from a fire whose ashes have simply yet to be discovered. While the Doctors' Plot "has come down to us as little more than a footnote to Stalin's vicious anti-Semitism, the last crazy, paranoid conspiracy of his murderous regime," Brent and Naumov believe that "it was much more than this, or would have been much more had he lived" (250). Only with his death, they argue, did "Stalin's version of a "final solution" remain unfulfilled" (1).

Given that much of the evidence upon which these claims are made are based on third-hand testimony, private conversations, and deceased witnesses, it appears that something other than the available information drove these scholars' final conclusions. Why were Soviet-era scholars nearly unanimous in their belief in Stalin's alleged deportation plan, while opinion

among post-Soviet scholars is more divided? Among other things, I believe that the official government persecution of Soviet Jews led scholars to give credence to the rumors surrounding the deportation plan. In the post-Soviet era, as Jews in the former USSR no longer face official persecution and existential threats to Jewish life in the region, contemporary scholars in hindsight, separated by over forty years, now look on these earlier claims with more skepticism. If Soviet era scholars were too quick to believe such rumors without foolproof evidence, perhaps post-Soviet scholars may be too quick to dismiss them on the same basis.

### **Purim and Historical Poetics**

“Each genre, rather than being viewed as the reflection of prior reality, is seen as creating the conditions for the production or construction of a consequent reality and of a lived experience of the world. Thus lived experience, no less than literature, emerges as a recursive mimesis, as tropes are enacted and reenacted.”

-Duncan Kennedy<sup>13</sup>

In this section, I will more thoroughly lay out the thesis of this dissertation, which is that the Book of Esther of the Tanakh, along with the traditions and rituals that it generated such as Purim and Purim spiels, provided a framework for the perception and representation of Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan, from the creation of the legend itself to the manner in which it has been portrayed in fiction to this day. In the remainder of this chapter, I will provide a brief introduction to the Book of Esther and its role in shaping both Jewish perceptions *of* and responses *to* averted communal tragedies since the time it was first included as the final book in

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<sup>13</sup> D. Kennedy (2006), “The ‘presence’ of Roman satire: Modern receptions and their interpretative implications,” in K. Freudenburg (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Roman satire* (p. 305), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



the Jewish canon over two millennia ago. This will include the roles that Purim and Purim spiels have played in molding Jewish consciousness, particularly in Eastern Europe. I will argue that these traditions, along with other experiences unique to their history, caused Soviet Jews to organize the events and rumors surrounding the Doctors' Plot into what we know today as Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation. After Stalin's death, these perceptions were codified into a subgenre of literary Purim spiel that I will refer to as Purim-Stalin. This subgenre was the result of the collision of three elements: the experiences of the mostly secular Soviet Jews who lived through the Doctors' Plot and its aftermath; these survivors' atavistic memories as Eastern European Jews; and the more explicitly Jewish cultural lens through which these events were viewed by Western, émigré, and post-Soviet observers.

Before analyzing the primary sources that make up Purim-Stalin, I will support my original theorization of this subgenre by introducing some of the critical tools I have employed to conceptualize its unique structural elements and historical functions. My primary tool in doing so is the concept of "historical poetics" invented by the pioneering nineteenth-century literary theorist Alexander Veselovsky, whom later Russian Formalists credited with laying the foundation for comparative literature in Russia. Though less known in the West than some of his Russian/Soviet successors, his work was critical in the formulation of twentieth century literary theory in his native land. Historical poetics argues for the existence of unbroken transmissions of poetic memory within (and across) cultures over millennia. This is especially relevant to the subject at hand because Stalin's government persecuted so-called "Veselovskiyists" after World War II for the crime of "rootless cosmopolitanism" that was simultaneously leveled against Soviet Jews. As the father of comparative literature in the Russian-speaking world, Veselovsky was partially blamed for the so-called "kowtowing to the West" among Soviet intellectuals that

Stalin attacked as part of his postwar Russian chauvinism, which stemmed from his earlier policy of “socialism in one country,” created in the 1930s to counter his enemy Trotsky’s policy of permanent international revolution. While many of these “Veselovskyists” were hardly followers of Veselovsky’s theories, two actual acolytes, Vladimir Propp and Mikhail Bakhtin, developed offshoot theories from historical poetics that further help explain the development of Purim-Stalin. Propp’s formalist investigation into the morphology of the Russian folktale, according to which a grammar of narrative components conditions what it is possible to do in a particular narrative genre, helps explain the importance of revenge and laughter in the face of death in Purim-Stalin literature. Bakhtin’s examination of the persistence of ancient narratives as traces of genre memory in modern literature is in many ways simply a refinement of historical poetics, one that helps us understand why Purim-Stalin took on its unique generic elements, particularly in relation to its specific satirical mode.

These theoretical tools help clarify the interplay of historical change and generic structure in shaping Purim-Stalin, a wholly unique twentieth-century development of the Purim spiel genre. They lay the foundation for the process of examining the manner in which Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan was given meaning in the works analyzed in this dissertation through its incorporation into an existing narrative tradition. The end result will be to demonstrate the utility of employing literary analysis by way of the Purim spiel as a way of understanding both a particular historical experience of Jews in the Soviet Union, i.e. Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan, and its traumatic legacy that continues to define Soviet Jewish memory to this day.

## The Book of Esther, Amalek and Jewish Memory

The Book of Esther, *Megillat Esther* or simply *Megillah* in Hebrew, can be found in both the *Tanakh* and most Christian versions of the *Old Testament*. The history of its creation, inclusion in the *Tanakh*, later additions to the original text, and the various versions of it adopted by different Christian denominations is a long and complicated one and beyond the scope of this dissertation.<sup>14</sup> In brief, it tells the story of a 5<sup>th</sup>- or 4<sup>th</sup>-century BCE Hebrew woman living in the imperial Persian capital of Shushan named Hadassah, who adopts the pseudonym of Esther to disguise her identity. She marries the Persian King Ahasuerus and succeeds, along with her relative Mordechai, in thwarting the efforts of the King's viceroy Haman to commit genocide against the empire's Jewish population. According to Talmudic tradition, it was the last book canonized into the *Tanakh* by the Sages of the Great Assembly a century or two after the events described in the book took place. The text forms the basis of the Jewish holiday of Purim. Most Christian versions of the text are based on the Greek Septuagint and include additional materials interpolated into the original work that are missing from the Jewish version. Among other things, these Christian versions emphasize God's hidden presence in the events described in the book, whereas the Jewish version is notable for being one of only two books in the *Tanakh*, along with the *Songs of Songs*, that does not explicitly mention God.

While being the last text canonized into the *Tanakh*, the *Megillah* explicitly harkens back to the *Tanakh*'s earliest books, specifically the Book of Exodus and the figure of Amalek therein. Amalek is the grandson of Esau, great-grandson of Isaac, and primogenitor of the Amalekites, enemies of the ancient Israelites that came to represent antisemites and would-be destroyers of the Jewish people in general for Jews throughout the world from biblical times to the present. In

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<sup>14</sup> For more information on these questions, see Jo Carruthers, *Esther through the centuries*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008.

the Book of Exodus (17:8-17:16), Amalek and his tribe attack the Israelites on their trek from captivity in Egypt to freedom in Canaan, the land promised to them by God. The Israelites win that battle and God orders Moses to memorialize the victory in the Torah, promising to “utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.” Moses also builds an altar to memorialize that “the Lord has sworn” that He “will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.”<sup>15</sup> Later, during the reign of King Saul (as recounted in the Book of Samuel), the Amalekite King Agag leads a tribal invasion into Judea. Though Saul initially defeats the Amalekites, he spares Agag’s life against God’s wishes, which leads to Saul’s death in a subsequent battle with the Amalekites. As in Exodus, here too the Amalekites are ultimately defeated and, in a foreshadowing of the Megillah, Agag is killed by Samuel in retribution for the Amalekites’ crimes against the Jews. In the later Book of Deuteronomy (25:17-19), Jews are commanded to

Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you were coming out of Egypt, how he met you on the way and attacked your rear ranks, all the stragglers at your rear, when you were tired and weary; and he did not fear God. Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from your enemies all around, in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance, that you will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bible Gateway passage: Exodus 17:8-16 - New International Version. (n.d.). Retrieved June 24, 2020, from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+17%3A8%E2%80%9317%3A16>.

<sup>16</sup> Bible Gateway passage: Deuteronomy 25:17-19 - New International Version. (n.d.). Retrieved June 24, 2020, from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+25%3A17-19>.

Thus, while in the “the book of Exodus the perpetual struggle with Amalek is described as God’s war,” by the time we get to Deuteronomy, it is the Jews themselves who are commanded to “blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven” (Horowitz 2006, 2).

The author of the Megillah, whose identity scholars continue to debate,<sup>17</sup> wrote it with these earlier Jewish texts in mind. The collective Jewish memory of Amalek haunts its pages. As in the Book of Exodus, the Jews in the Megillah are in the diaspora, prey to potentially genocidal tribes. This is particularly evident in the figure of Haman, who is the son of Hammedatha the Agagite and thus a direct descendant of the previously mentioned Amalekite King Agag. While it might be a stretch to therefore view the Persians as the new Amalekites (the ancient enemies of God’s people) in this context, the Megillah does at least explicitly link Haman, the Jews’ chief persecutor in the story, to Amalek. Furthermore, Jewish tradition declares “Mordecai to be a descendant of Saul, neatly tying together the tradition that Haman and Mordecai’s battle is a replaying of the encounter between Saul and the Amalekites” (Carruthers 2008, 98). To emphasize this connection, every year on the Sabbath preceding Purim, the section from Deuteronomy urging Jews to “blot out the remembrance of Amalek” (Deut. 25:17-19) is recited in synagogue. This directly links Purim “with God’s vow, as expressed in Exodus 17.14-16, to destroy Amalek” (Grayzel 1949, 13). When Haman is mentioned during the recitation of the Book of Esther at home and in synagogue during Purim, it is customary for children and adults to “shake noise-makers, stamp their feet and shout” as a way of metaphorically obliterating Haman

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<sup>17</sup> The events recounted in the Megillah lack clear contemporaneous historical evidence. Some scholars have argued that it is a historical novella full of factual errors, rather than an accurate historical account. Others have linked the Purim story and its characters to native religious and cultural traditions of ancient Persia, arguing that the Book of Esther is a reworking of the latter in a Jewish context.

and thus “fulfilling the injunction in 1 Samuel 15 to ‘remember Amalek no more’” (Carruthers 2008, 133).

Jews for centuries identified Haman’s humiliation in the Purim story with the “long-standing feud between the Israelites and their enemies” (Carruthers 2008, 230). In the decades following Stalin’s death, many Soviet Jews (and others) increasingly linked the dictator’s death to the failure of his alleged Jewish deportation plan. At the time of his death, the USSR was allied with much of the Arab world (considered to be the descendants of Esau in Jewish tradition) against Israel. This made Stalin and his government literal enemies of Israel and figurative enemies of the Israelites for Jews viewing Stalin’s actions against Soviet Jews through the lens of Jewish (particularly biblical) history. As the significance of Stalin’s death in the Jewish world was increasingly identified primarily with the fate of Soviet Jews, Stalin was linked more and more to Haman and the long line of Amalekites, both literal and figural, that had tried to destroy the Jewish people through the centuries. Accordingly, Jews began to seek and find their own warriors in the story of Stalin’s alleged deportation plan, Soviet/Jewish Mordecais and Esthers that had stood up to and vanquished their era’s Amalek. We will see that this search for Soviet/Jewish warriors is a defining feature of the Purim-Stalin subgenre and something that explicitly identifies it as a Soviet Jewish variation of the Purim spiel.

### Purim Spiels

The Purim holiday is mentioned within the Megillah, meaning that Persian Jews already celebrated it as a holiday before the text itself was written. Purim can be summed up as “a carnivalesque holiday of reversal that celebrates the triumph of the Jews, during the days of Mordecai and Esther, over the genocidal plot of their archenemy Haman, who was hanged on the gallows that he had planned for Mordecai” (Horowitz 2006, 4). As a commemoration of the

Persian Jews' triumph described in the Megillah, Purim in succeeding ages functioned as a natural vent for Jews' hatred toward their oppressors, especially when no other opportunity for vengeance presented itself. This was increasingly the case after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE and their suppression of the Bar Kokhba rebellion the following century, after which Jews were at times forbidden access to Jerusalem and lived primarily in the diaspora. One form of this vented hatred was the burning of Haman in effigy during Purim. The Haman effigy was often dressed to resemble the oppressor(s) of the local Jewish community. This practice sometimes drew the ire of the local gentile population. In 408, the Emperor Theodosius II issued an edict that prohibited Jews in the Roman Empire from thus burning Haman in effigy "in memory of his past punishment" (Horowitz 2006, 17). Throughout the Middle Ages, Jews commemorated Purim in their synagogues as well as feasts and festivals reenacting Mordecai and Esther's victory over Haman, which, despite various prohibitions like that of Theodosius II, oftentimes continued to include burning Haman in effigy.

As part of the Purim festivities, Ashkenazi Jewish communities eventually developed something called Purim spiels, which were performed as early as the fifteenth century, with the earliest surviving texts for these performances dating from the seventeenth century (Shatzky 1949, 358). *Spiel* is an ambiguous word, its Yiddish meaning encapsulating the concepts of play, speech, game and performance. Purim spiels generally took one of two forms. The first consisted of Purim spielers, or Purim players, going from home to home enacting the Purim story through song and dramatic performance. The second form was basically the same, except that it was enacted on a stage in front of all or at least a significant part of the Jewish community. Such performances could take place in theaters, synagogues, or yeshivas. While inspired in general by over a millennia of Purim festivities, they took their specific inspiration from two sources. One

was the tradition of Purim parody songs dating back to at least the fourteenth century, which caricatured the wicked characters in the Megillah (Binder 1949, 213). The other was the office of the *Badhan*, or wedding jester, who, as a “carrier of solemnity and frivolity,” became a prototype for Purim spielers (Shatzsky 1949, 357).

Purim spielers of the domestic variety would usually burst into Jewish homes reading from and acting out the Megillah, thereby bringing the Book of Esther to life and transforming its words into action, uniting their performance and Purim holiday ritual into one. This practice encouraged Jews to think of the Purim story not merely as a tale from long-ago, but as a contemporary event in their own lives. In the staged variety of Purim spiels, it “had been customary among the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe to vent their hostility toward the symbols of their powerful adversaries...through the dramatic depiction of Haman on the stage” (Horowitz 2006, 86). While Purim spiels initially seemed to have been representations of the Purim story, they eventually branched out into depicting other stories from the *Tanakh* and Jewish history. For the sake of clarity, I will follow the accepted scholarly practice of using the term *Ahasueruspiel* to differentiate Purim spiels dealing with the Megillah from those representing other Jewish stories and events. Continuing the tradition mentioned earlier, these “raucous” *Ahasueruspiels* often anachronistically depicted Haman as a Christian, as is evident “in the standard printed editions of the *Ahashveroshpiel*” (five of which occurred between 1697 and 1720) and contemporary Yiddish poems based on the Megillah “intended evidently for dramatic recitation on Purim” (Horowitz 2006, 86). In Eastern European Jewish communities, it was common “to hire a Christian to play the role of Haman in the annual *Purimspiel*,” which, as it had done for centuries of Purim celebrations, often drew the ire of local Christian authorities (Horowitz 2006, 86). These anachronistic elements emphasized the Purim story as relevant for



every generation of Jews and not simply a dead relic of the past. As an outgrowth of the *Badhan* tradition, it should also be noted that Purim plays could be frivolous and/or solemn and were interspersed with comic interludes often supplied by a fool (Shatzsky 1949, 363). This is an important caveat, as well shall see that the Purim-Stalin works I will examine later often tend more toward tragedy than comedy, a reminder that carnivals and satires also have their tragic elements.

Purim spiels were performed in Jewish communities throughout the Russian Empire until the Russian Revolution. As the Bolsheviks clamped down on Jewish religious practice and culture, the commemoration of Purim fell out of practice and along with it the performance of Purim spiels. The greatest Soviet scholar of the subject was the musicologist Moses Beregovsky, who recorded private Purim spiel performances in the USSR between 1936-1941 by the last generation of Soviet Jews that remembered them from personal experience, some of whom had themselves performed them in public before they were banned by the government. These recordings, along with a history and analysis of the genre, were published together as one volume in 1942 under the title *Purimshpils*, the last of Beregovsky's 5-volume work on Jewish musical folklore. Like many Jewish intellectuals of the time, Beregovsky became a victim of Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaign. He was arrested in 1950 and sentenced in 1951 to ten years in the gulags for "anti-Soviet" activities. A man whose life's work consisted in trying to save the remnants of Eastern European Jewish culture was imprisoned by his own government for doing just that as part of a broader Soviet campaign under Stalin to destroy Soviet Jewish culture and memory. Beregovsky was released and rehabilitated in 1956 three years after Stalin's death and lived in Kiev until his death in 1961.

Beregovsky's work on Eastern European Jewish musical folklore was rediscovered decades after his death. In 2001, his daughter compiled and published all of his writing on Purim spiels.<sup>18</sup> Along with other scholars of the subject, Beregovsky differentiates in his work between Purim spiels, which were made about various biblical stories, and Esther-themed Purim spiels, which he calls "Ahasuerus-shpils." While calling them *Ahasueruspiels* is now the accepted scholarly practice, this was not the case in Beregovsky's time. It is worth noting that choosing Ahasuerus (the king) as the story's defining character emphasizes the role of the autocrat/state in the Purim story, a possible reflection of the authoritarianism of the Stalin period in which Beregovsky wrote. Calling it an *Ahasueruspiel* also implies that the story's Jewish characters are passive victims at the mercy of the state, a perception shared by the early Purim-Stalin texts that will be challenged and reversed by later ones. Regardless of the nomenclature, the *Ahasueruspiel* is the most prevalent example of the Purim spiel collected by Beregovsky, who found versions of it throughout the western USSR. Analyzing both the texts and their accompanying music, he calculated that these works dated back to the fifteenth century. While Purim spiels disappeared from Jewish public life in the USSR, Beregovsky recorded an *Ahasueruspiel* in Ukraine from the memory of former Purim spielers as late as 1940. By this point, Purim spiels were no longer a part of everyday life for the Jewish masses, and most of the people who could still remember them well enough to perform them for Beregovsky to record were soon after murdered in the Holocaust. While Nazi Germany and its allies exterminated most Soviet Jews that still remembered seeing and performing Purim spiels and Stalin tried to suppress those who worked to keep the genre alive through their scholarship, it is my contention that the history of the Purim

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<sup>18</sup> Moses Beregovsky, *Purimshpils in the Records of Moses Beregovsky*, compiled by E. Beregovskaya, Kiev: Jewish Studies Institute, Dukh I Litera, 2001.

spiel in Soviet Jewish cultural memory helped shape the legend of Stalin's Jewish deportation plan and the way it was remembered and represented after his death.

### Historical Poetics

Alexander Nikolayevich Veselovsky (1838-1906) is considered the most important Russian literary theorist prior to the Russian Formalists.<sup>19</sup> He attended the Imperial Moscow University and studied with the Russian philologist Fyodor Buslaev (a foundational figure in Russian comparative mythology, linguistics and literature) and German philologist and philosopher Heymann Steinthal, who taught mythology at the University of Berlin and helped establish the science of comparative folk psychology. A member of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences and Department Chair of the General History of Literature at St. Petersburg University, Veselovsky lectured there as well as in Moscow on the syncretic roots of poetic genres.<sup>20</sup> He wrote books on Boccaccio, Petrarch, and the Russian poet Vasily Zhukovsky as well as studies on "Italian Renaissance culture, Slavic folklore, comparative epic studies, the Ancient Greek novel, and East-West literary ties"; his unfinished magnum opus *Historical Poetics* "is generally held to be the foundational work of Russian literary criticism."<sup>21</sup>

Regarded as "one of the pioneers of the discipline of comparative literature,"<sup>22</sup> Veselovsky was considered a constitutional figure for the Russian Formalists and thus both an ally and object of polemic in much of their work. Boris Maslov summarizes the essence of

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<sup>19</sup> A. N. Veselovsky, "On the Method and Tasks of Literary History as a Field of Scholarship (1870)," intro. and trans. Boris Maslov, Academia.edu, accessed June 24, 2021, [https://www.academia.edu/447973/A.\\_N.\\_Veselovsky.\\_On\\_the\\_method\\_and\\_tasks\\_of\\_literary\\_history\\_as\\_a\\_field\\_of\\_scholarship\\_1870\\_](https://www.academia.edu/447973/A._N._Veselovsky._On_the_method_and_tasks_of_literary_history_as_a_field_of_scholarship_1870_), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Eleazar M. Meletinsky, *Poetics of Myth* (Routledge, 1998), 139.

<sup>21</sup> Veselovsky, "On the Method and Tasks of Literary History as a Field of Scholarship (1870)," 1-2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

historical poetics, Veselovsky's literary method that was eventually "taken over by the Russian tradition of poetics," in the following terms:

(i) sustained attention to the *longue durée* of literary and cultural history, particularly to the formation and mutation of styles, genres, and paradigms (what Veselovsky calls "literary epochs"); (ii) radical historicism, in that texts of the past are approached not with modern standards (aesthetic or ideological), but as cultural products of the period in question; the idea of an "organic" unity of a work of art, in particular, is dismissed as an aesthetist prejudice; (iii) consideration of literary history (*viz.* literary evolution) as a semi-autonomous domain of social praxis that both involves immanent laws or regularities and must be correlated with the history of culture and the history of consciousness; (iv) preoccupation with those aspects of literary form that escape the attention of the individual author and that therefore defy psychological or narrowly sociopolitical explanation.<sup>23</sup>

His work helped formulate the field of comparative literature, "a discipline that would offer a synthesis of the study of literatures, both Western and non-Western",<sup>24</sup> that was initially congenial to the internationalism of early Soviet literary scholars. Historical poetics was an early "attempt to practice literary criticism in large historical scales, while not forgoing the necessity of a deep familiarity with individual works (and pieces of works) and their immediate contexts (and pieces of contexts)"; Veselovsky combined this with "an awareness of the recursions that mutually modify the act of interpretation and the identification of evidence" (Hayot 2015, viii-ix). This concept had a profound impact on subsequent Russian and Soviet literary theory and

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 4.

analysis. It trained future Russophone scholars and practitioners of the discipline to see literary and cultural output, as well as current events, in light of past artistic production and history from both within and beyond Russia. Furthermore, Veselovsky's theory argued that aesthetics is deeply intertwined with everyday reality, as both influence each other in the creation of artistic works as well as the way we perceive our own existence and even history itself. In other words, historical poetics "uncovers the ways in which the literary interpolates historical experience by perpetuating conceptual, affective, and behavioral schemata across space and time" (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 2). It is an effort to understand "literary works in the context of specific social-practical conditions within which they arise, while at the same time appreciating the expansive life span of genres, motifs, and character-types" (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 9).

Immanent to this theory is the idea of cultural nonsynchrony, which argues for the "nonlinear, nonsynchronous historicity of cultural phenomena" (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 6). That is, cultural phenomena, especially when seen from the perspective of decades and centuries rather than months and years, repeat themselves, sometimes in different forms and shapes, but always with similar underlying characteristics. Veselovsky thereby created a "tradition of searching for a concept of history that would be adequate to the specific historicity of literature" in order to "challenge and supplement contemporary 'historicism' with conceptions of cultural persistence and the historical *longue durée*" (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 2). As Veselovsky himself wrote in *From the Introduction to Historical Poetics* (1894),

Popular memory has preserved sediments of images, plots, and types, which were once alive, evoked by a famous individual's activity, by an event or an anecdote that excited interest and took possession of sentiment and fantasy. These plots and types were generalized, the notion of particular individuals and facts could fade, leaving behind only

common schemas and outlines. These exist in a dark, hidden region of our consciousness, like much that we've undergone and experienced, apparently forgotten, but then they suddenly overwhelm us as an inexplicable revelation, as a novelty that is, at the same time, an outmoded antique, something we cannot fully account for, because we are often unable to define the essence of the psychic act that unpredictably renewed in us these old memories. The same holds true in the life of literature, both popular and self-consciously artistic: old images, echoes of images, suddenly appear when a popular-poetic demand has arisen, in response to an urgent call of the times. In this way popular legends recur; in this way, in literature, we explain the renewal of some plots.<sup>25</sup>

While historical poetics originates as a concept with Veselovsky's work from the 1860s to the 1900s, it continued in the twentieth century as a Russian scholarly tradition through the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, Olga Freidenberg, Mikhail Gasparov, Vladimir Propp, Yuri Lotman and many others, who adopted and tweaked Veselovsky's approach to "literary form as a recursive and mediated response to historical processes" (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 1). These acolytes, consciously and subconsciously, continued to understand human experience in light of literary production and vice-versa. For Bakhtin, whose concept of genre memory I will examine later in its relation to the formulation of Purim-Stalin, literature was "not an autonomous domain but a mode of authoring, of a meaningful organization of experience, an activity without which...experience itself is rendered inconceivable" (Kilger and Maslov 2015, 11-12). Propp, who was forced to disavow his intellectual ties to Veselovsky during the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, was made to apologize for the crime of being a "comparativist" for finding links

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<sup>25</sup> Ilya Kliger and Boris Maslov, eds., *Persistent Forms: Explorations in Historical Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 5.

between Russian and European folk tales. Yuri Lotman's concept of the "behavior-text" expounded on the implication of historical poetics by positing that "any series of acts would become a text (acquire significance) if it could be illuminated by association with a literary plot" (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 13).

An authoritative collection of Veselovsky's work on historical poetics was prepared in the USSR by Viktor Zhirmunsky in 1940. However, after the war, the Soviet government launched a campaign of anti-Western Russophilia that celebrated Russian cultural supremacy while denigrating all things foreign. A kind of apotheosis of Stalin's "socialism in one country" policy, the campaign targeted Soviets perceived as previously or currently supporting the recently abandoned policy of internationalism or any aspect of non-Soviet (and increasingly non-Russian) culture. The crime of "kowtowing to the West" was levelled against those with prior dealings with the non-Soviet world, regardless of their feelings about Western culture or internationalism. One group that came under this net were the so-called "Veselovskysts," real or imagined followers of Veselovsky in Soviet literary studies and related fields. Veselovsky's work became an object of scorn for the regime, who officially condemned his followers in a 1946 resolution adopted by the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Those practicing the discipline of Comparative Literature (or studied foreign literature) after the war could be accused of "Veselovskystism," regardless of their feelings about the supremacy or inferiority of foreign compared to Russian literature. In many ways, this new division in the world of Soviet letters was simply a rehash of the old nineteenth-century debate between the Westernizers and the Russophiles, with the government making the latter official policy and criminalizing the former. But it was more than merely an official policy dictating the new path to be followed within domestic literary studies. The campaign against the Veselovskysts was an attack on Soviet

memory itself, an effort to rewrite and control the Soviet/Russian past by outlawing the literary tools available to Soviet citizens and scholars to connect their historical and cultural heritage(s) to present events. As I will demonstrate, something like this is at work in Purim-Stalin, where Soviet Jews and other observers of Stalin's death eventually came to see it through the lens of Jewish cyclical time (itself analogous to historical poetics) as a recurrence of Purim in order to make sense of the events and rumors that made up Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan.

Veselovsky conceived literary history as a process where stable old forms repeatedly shape "the new content of life" (Kliger 2015, 247). Historical poetics deals with uncovering "the ways in which literary practices constitute historical experience by perpetuating conceptual, emotional, and behavioral schemata across space and time" (Vinitsky 2015, 314). This approach to history was antithetical to Stalin's Russophilic postwar turn away from internationalism toward "socialism in one country," where both domestic and foreign history was rewritten along strict party lines to reflect the new Stalinist dogma that humanity's greatest achievements were Russian in origin, Leninist-Stalinist in theory and communist in practice. And as Jews saw the Soviet government return to the state-sponsored antisemitism of the Russian Empire, with elements of Nazi, Christian and biblical antisemitism as well, many looked to their communal Jewish past and cultural heritage to make sense of these developments. This activation of cultural memory was intuitively undermined by Stalin's attack on "rootless cosmopolitans" and "Veselovskyists" in an effort to prevent precisely such an outcome. However, as historical poetics contends, such cultural memories and genre traces can never be fully erased, and many Soviet Jews sublimated their now officially forbidden cultural heritage into what became the deportation legend, conceptualizing contemporary events through the prism of Jewish history, specifically the ancient tradition of Purim and the recent Nazi deportation of Jews. For



Veselovsky, literature was “a special form of transformative human activity, a response to the world’s insufficiency and an effective means of endowing individual and collective experience with sense” (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 14). My contention is that the Purim story helped Soviet Jews make sense of the trauma they were living through under Stalin, both while it was happening and subsequently. Historical poetics affirms “the non-synchronous quality of cultural memory in which older elements are preserved in a passive state, ready to be reawakened” in response to urgent calls of the times,<sup>26</sup> such as those experienced by Soviet Jews in the early months of 1953. Though he was not specifically writing about Purim-Stalin, Veselovsky’s account of the rise and fall of poetic plots, character types, and literary forms can be seamlessly applied to the events surrounding Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan and the Soviet Jewish response to them: “In periods of national disaster or excitement, either democratic or mystical, the very same fears were perceived, and hopes were clothed in the same or similar images: the last hour was expected, or the last battle, when a redeemer would make his appearance, whoever he might be.”<sup>27</sup> As we will see in the Purim-Stalin texts that follow, historical poetics’ insistence on the correlation between popular (“folk”) lore and literary phenomena and the “cross-cultural circulation of plots and motifs” (Maslov 2015, 129) helps account for the foregrounding of the Purim plot in the Jewish and non-Jewish texts and films explored in this dissertation. It also accounts for the discovery of specific redeemers in these works, when none seemed to exist in reality at the time of Stalin’s death.

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander Veselovsky, “From the Introduction to Historical Poetics: Questions and Answers (1894),” in *Persistent Forms: Explorations in Historical Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 40.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

## Purim-Stalin

“The story of Esther Belongs to that dark period in Jewish history when the national institutions were to all human view destroyed. The Jews were scattered up and down through the provinces..., with no rights but what their conquerors might choose to give them. Without a temple, without an altar, without a priesthood, they could only cling to their religion as a memory of the past, and with some dim hopes for the future.”

-Harriet Beecher Stowe<sup>28</sup>

In 1939, with the Nazis and their antisemitic policies well on their way to overthrowing the rest of Europe, the Jewish historian Simon Dubnow wrote that Jews had been plunged into “the epoch of Haman” (Horowitz 2006, 90). While some thought the Allied victory over the Axis powers brought an end to the epoch, as witnessed by the riotous Purim celebrations that took place in DP camps throughout Europe in 1945-46, others thought such declarations premature. As Philip Goodman wrote in his 1949 work, *The Purim Anthology*, which noted the similarities between the Jews of ancient Persia and those in modern Europe, “Unfortunately, the time has not yet come to institute a new Purim in our generation, although Hitler and the Nazis have been defeated. The festival does not commemorate merely the downfall of the enemy but the deliverance of the people; and that full deliverance has not yet arrived” (xxiii). While Goodman and the other authors of the anthology do not mention Soviet Jews, it seems likely that he had the ongoing Babylonian captivity of the Soviet Jews in mind when writing these words. As Soviet Jews knew all too well, and Western Jews would eventually find out, “In the West, the Holocaust is an ultimate evil. In Russia, there is Stalin” (Gershenson 2013, 217). The Book of Esther seems to have consistently been a favorite among Jews “when they found themselves threatened by a

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<sup>28</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Woman in Sacred History*. New York, 1873, 195.

new “Haman” of their own generation” (Horowitz 2006, 23), and Soviet Jews proved no exception.

Given the widespread, state-sponsored nature of the antisemitic persecutions preceding Stalin’s death, it is understandable why fear and paranoia among Soviet Jews and outside observers produced the deportation legend as the logical final step of this process. This was strengthened by comments supporting the existence of the deportation plan from Stalin’s inner circle after his death, which were meant to distance the Central Committee of the Communist Party from the government’s unprecedented postwar antisemitism in order to place the blame solely on Stalin.

In 1956, a Western diplomatic correspondent quoted Khrushchev as telling communist insiders after the Secret Speech that Stalin had planned to create a new “Pale of Settlement” in Siberia and that he had suffered his fatal stroke when Molotov, Mikoian, and K. E. Voroshilov refused to ratify the idea. Mikoian also refers to the deportations in his memoirs, although only in passing and without mention of the dramatic confrontation described by Khrushchev. More circumstantial evidence is provided by Stalin’s daughter, who recalls N. A. Mikhailov’s wife advocating the Jews’ expulsion from Moscow (Brandenberger 2005, 200).

While in their own memoirs, Khrushchev, Molotov and Kaganovich do not mention the existence of any Jewish deportation plan, statements corroborating its existence are attributed to them by others after Stalin’s death.

How and why has the representation in literature and film of Stalin’s alleged plan to deport Soviet Jews to the eastern USSR on the eve of his death changed from 1953 to the present? What do these changes reveal about the shifting nature of Soviet Jewish identity as it

has been understood from both within and outside of the USSR? What do the changes in emphasis on different themes and ways of understanding the protagonists and antagonists of Stalin's alleged final pogrom reveal about the memory of those who witnessed it and the significance of these events to subsequent generations? Soviet leaders did not realize that erasing all traces of the Doctors' Plot and Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan would end up raising Jewish consciousness, not dampening it as they had anticipated. The texts and films I will examine in this dissertation represent Stalin's death in relation to his alleged Jewish deportation plan. As such, they are examples of a previously unacknowledged "Purim-Stalin" subgenre of the Purim spiel. Viewing them through the lens of this subgenre helps us understand why they took their particular form. As an expression of that increasing Jewish consciousness, these works represented the Soviet Jewish experience of the "black years" preceding Stalin's death as a recurrence of the Purim narrative in order to give meaning to that traumatic experience by conceptualizing it as part of the Jews' eternal struggle against Amalek.

## **Chapter 1: Soviet Literary Representations of Stalin's Postwar Antisemitic Campaigns**

“...we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom.”

-Slavoj Žižek<sup>29</sup>

In this chapter, I will examine the earliest literary responses to the events surrounding Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan. In these works, the Purim theme is altogether absent. My discussion of these Soviet responses will serve as a contrasting example to later inscriptions of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation into the tradition of literary Purim spiels as a means of illuminating the historiographical doubt surrounding the plan's existence. This will include a reasoned argument as to why these early Soviet attempts failed to employ the Purim theme and an analysis of how the ideological system within which these Soviet authors wrote prevented them from representing Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan. I will discuss how government censorship and the state's clampdown on Jewish expression and identity (as well as the Veselovskysts) deprived writers of the theoretical and narrative tools that would have allowed them to make sense of the Doctors' Plot and its consequences in terms of Jewish traditions and history.

### **Censorship of Jewish Themes**

This chapter will focus on Soviet writers depicting the events of Stalin's postwar antisemitic pogrom in their immediate aftermath, using allegory and self-censorship to get their works published in the USSR in a climate of political uncertainty and mutating, yet persistent, government censorship. Literary censorship was a ubiquitous element throughout Russian and

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<sup>29</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Occupy Wall Street: What Is to Be Done next?,” *The Guardian* (April 24, 2012), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/apr/24/occupy-wall-street-what-is-to-be-done-next>.

Soviet history. As a result, Imperial-era and later Soviet readers became adept at reading between the lines of fictional works, which played a key role in the political consciousness of the nation's elites and later the masses, placing the writer in a privileged moral position as the conscience of the nation. This was one of the "specific conditions of Russian historical development" that "stimulated an understanding of literature as intricately woven into the fabric of sociopolitical life" in the USSR (Kilger and Maslov 2015, 10). From the nineteenth century to the present, writers in the Russian and Soviet empires were worshipped and vilified by their readers and governments for addressing the most pressing moral and political issues of their day. Fiction in particular was respected and feared as one of the few public means available to address taboo political questions and social traumas. "It is little wonder that the Russian people revere their novelists in a way that" writers in the rest of the world "can only envy. It was their ticket to sanity and to wisdom."<sup>30</sup> I will analyze the way that the novels in this chapter tried to work around the Soviet censorship regime to represent the recent traumatic events surrounding the Doctors' Plot and Stalin's death in a manner that could be published in the USSR. I will also hypothesize why certain works on the subject were published in the USSR, while others were refused internal publication and had to be published abroad, and even then only decades after they were written.

To understand the censorship regime under which Soviet artists produced their work, here is a brief overview of the several levels at which Soviet censorship was executed: "(1) self-censorship of authors or artists (2) editorial censorship by editors and various advisory boards; (3) official censorship of Glavlit, a body responsible for screening for military and security

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<sup>30</sup> Irving Louis Horowitz, Foreword to *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), viii.

information; (4) penalizing censorship by secret police;...(5) ideological censorship by party leadership” (Gershenson 2013, 8). As Olga Gershenson elaborates in her work on Soviet Holocaust cinema, *The Phantom Holocaust*, “all these levels provided ideological censorship, with the editorial level serving as the most powerful means of control. This structure was put in place in the early years of the Soviet regime, was fully codified in the 1930s-1950s, and was largely the same until 1988, when ideological censorship ended” (8). Soviet writers engaged in self-censorship in the hopes of getting their work published before state agents even began the process of official censorship, forced to walk a fine line between representing the truth as they experienced it and modifying it just enough to align with official ideological demands for publication. Those writing on ideologically sensitive subjects like Stalinist antisemitism had to contend with the additional hurdles of growing official suspicion of, and eventually opposition to, any treatments of Jewish subjects, themes, and experiences.

Two works help provide further insight into how the writers discussed in this chapter navigated official censorship to attempt to inscribe Stalin’s role in the Doctors’ Plot and its attendant state-sanctioned antisemitism into Soviet literature. In *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), Leo Strauss examined how philosophers writing within different censorship regimes balanced “the exoteric and the esoteric” (17) in their work to address taboo subjects while accommodating themselves to the “accepted views” (15) of their societies. As members of “imperfect” societies, they tried to “humanize” them “within the limits of the possible” (17), like the Soviet writers discussed here, who tried to say as much as they could about Stalin’s final antisemitic pogroms at a time when the subject was still taboo in official literature. For Strauss, persecution can prevent neither “independent thinking” nor even “the expression of independent thought” (23):

Persecution cannot prevent even public expression of the heterodox truth, for a man of independent thought can...utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of writing between the lines... For the influence of persecution on literature is precisely that it compels all writers who hold heterodox views to develop a peculiar technique of writing, the technique which we have in mind when speaking of writing between the lines (24).

We will see that Ilya Ehrenburg's deployment of this technique allowed him to inscribe the Doctors' Plot into the novels that make up *A Change of Season* and get them published. Vasily Grossman tried to deploy the same technique in *Life and Fate*, though this did not prevent it from being denied publication. Irina Grekova, on the other hand, foreswore any attempt at writing between the lines in *Fresh Legend*, counting instead on the perceived liberal moment (1962) and venue (*Novy Mir*) to depict exoterically what Ehrenburg and Grossman had depicted esoterically.

So prevalent has this technique been in the almost three centuries of modern Russian literature that Russian literary historians have developed their own unique term for it: "Aesopian language." As recounted in Lev Loseff's *On the Beneficence of Censorship* (1984), Aesopian language is "a special literary system...whose structure allows interaction between author and reader at the same time that it conceals inadmissible content from the censor" (x). First coined in the 1860s by the Russian satirist Mikhail Yevgrafovich Saltykov-Shchedrin (1), the term describes a situation when

the Author, who fully understands the system of political taboos (i.e., the censorship), determines to anticipate the Censor's intervention: dispensing with a number of direct statements in the text and with the straightforward depiction of certain details of real life, he replaces them with hints and circumlocutions. While his rationale in this instance lies



outside literature, the Author has no means but the literary - tropes, rhetorical figures, and intrigues within the structure of the work as a whole - to realize his hints and circumlocutions. The interpolation of these elements must be consistent and systematic; otherwise their effect, should they produce one at all, will be so small as to be insignificant. Properly applied, however, the inserted hints and circumlocutions will have an inevitable influence upon the text as a whole: they will enter into either smooth or conflicting relations with the text's other components, will cause a shift in shades of meaning and emotional emphasis... (18).

While Grekova employed "direct statements in the text and... the straightforward depiction of certain details of real life" in her representation of Stalin's final antisemitic campaign and death, Ehrenburg and Grossman replaced them with "hints and circumlocutions" to do so. Just as writing under persecution for Strauss encourages the author to communicate esoteric meaning between the lines to the informed reader under the guise of socially acceptable exoteric language, the efficacy of Aesopian language depends on "the knowledge of the reader" (39), which is precisely the condition that allows for ideologically taboo ideas and information to slip past the intermediary of the censor to reach the author's intended audience. Writing outside of the USSR, the Soviet emigre Loseff used this system, taught to him by his Soviet teachers to decode the hidden meaning of radical Russian texts from the Imperial era, to read between the lines of Soviet literature for their hidden anti-Soviet content.

By Stalin's death, Soviet Jews had been by and large successfully secularized by the government's decades-long suppression of the religious study and practice of Judaism and Hebrew. Like their creators and real-life counterparts, the Soviet Jewish characters depicted in the early post-Stalin Soviet works discussed below were "Jews in name only, with only minimal

Jewish characteristics” (Gershenson 2013, 27). The government’s crackdown on traditional Jewish ways of life and learning extended to the realms of art and letters. Already by 1943, Soviet censors were omitting “anything to do with biblical references, anti-Semitism, or any parallels with Jewish history” from film and literature (Gershenson 2013, 39). What began as an erasure of Jewish religion, culture and history became a unique form of Holocaust denial shortly after World War II.<sup>31</sup> Stalin’s insistence that all Soviet peoples suffered equally at the hands of the Axis powers and his opposition to “dividing the dead” meant that the unique experiences of Soviet Jews in the Holocaust became a taboo subject until glasnost. This official position meant that the experiences of Holocaust survivors as Jews were largely absent from Soviet films and fiction. “The reason for such a conspicuous absence is clear – to make a...[work]...about a Holocaust survivor means to engage with the subject of Soviet anti-Semitism, and with a particular Jewish fate during and after the war. This was unthinkable” (Gershenson 2013, 225). Especially with Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaign, it became nearly impossible to speak of the particular suffering of Soviet Jews at the hands of Nazis and their allies because such depictions almost inevitably brought to mind the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the fascists’ Soviet collaborators and Stalin’s own attacks on Soviet Jews, particularly his rumored Jewish deportation plan. While the treatment of such Jewish subjects was practically forbidden under Stalin, especially after 1948, it was only marginally easier to address these issues after his death during the Thaw period of Khrushchev’s early years as the next leader of the USSR. While the first few years of this period did see the publication of Ehrenburg’s works discussed here, it also saw the censorship of Grossman’s and Grekova’s more explicit treatments of the subject. The

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<sup>31</sup> This Soviet version of Holocaust denial did not deny the magnitude or apparatus of destruction but consistently omitted any reference to the unique fate of the Jews.

recipient of the 1952 Stalin Peace Prize, Ehrenburg enjoyed a special status among the political authorities as one of the most effective Soviet spokesmen to the West, which likely contributed to the publication of his works on this taboo subject. As late/early as 1963, during the Thaw period after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's cult of personality and the de-Stalinization process that followed, it was still impossible to directly address the former dictator's antisemitism and any reference in particular "to the doctors' plot was still a bone of contention" (Gershenson 2013, 96). When filmmaker Mikhail Kalik brought his script for *Goodbye, Boys!* to Mosfilm, the studio's Artistic Council censored the screenplay's "critique of Stalinism, especially...Stalin's anti-Semitic persecutions," including "a direct reference to the doctors' plot in the intertitle" (Gershenson 2013, 96). This kind of "anticipatory censorship, pressing the filmmaker to make changes by foreseeing objections from above" (Gershenson 2013, 96), was typical of Soviet censorship and accounts to large extent for why *Life and Fate* and *Fresh Legend*, which dealt explicitly with Soviet antisemitism under Stalin, could not be published in the USSR.

Under the neo-Stalinism of Brezhnev's succeeding rule, which began with his replacement of Khrushchev as General Secretary in 1964, it became impossible to even allude to the subject, let alone make a direct reference to it. While in 1963, *Goodbye, Boys!* might have been censored, it was at least ultimately produced and screened. By 1965, Kalik's attempt to adapt the Lithuanian-Jewish Holocaust novel *Stalemate* to the screen met with total failure. There was "no outright, official act of banning, no anti-Semitic, Holocaust-denying verdict that would stun contemporary readers. There was not even direct acknowledgement of institutional censorship. The studio simply let the project quietly die" (Gershenson 2013, 111). Granted, in 1967, the film *Commissar*, based on a short story about the Russian Civil War by Grossman, was

at least produced, thought it was ultimately banned for, among other reasons, “being critical of Soviet anti-Semitism,” which, according to state censors, “did not exist” (Gershenson 2013, 168). Like *Life and Fate*, *Commissar* was only released in the USSR in 1988. Following the 1966 Siniavskii-Daniel trial and the 1967 Six-Day War, “Jewish themed cultural production was terminated” (Gershenson 2013, 124). A tacit censorship of Jewish themes once again calcified. This “policy of silencing things Jewish was itself unmentionable, and as such was communicated strictly off the record” (Gershenson 2013, 79), as the Soviet regime officially continued to present itself as being staunchly internationalist and opposed to antisemitism. Many saw the Siniavskii-Daniel trial as marking the de facto end of the Thaw and beginning of the dissident movement, while Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War marked the death knell for the acceptability of Jewish themes in Soviet culture for decades. The Soviet alliance with the Arab governments against Israel in the war, as well as the virulent anti-Zionist propaganda that accompanied it, were important factors in spurring the Soviet Jewish emigration movement. It was government impediments to this emigration and the concomitant emergence of refuseniks that would eventually spark the international Soviet Jewry Movement. The crushing of the Prague Spring with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 “finished off any traces of liberal hopes” and for the next two decades, “until Gorbachev's perestroika, no criticism of any Soviet regime, past or present, was permitted” (Gershenson 2013, 59). By 1968, the Thaw was unquestionably over, having died an unnatural death as a result of developments within the government and the greater world.

In 1971, after Mikhail Kalik was kicked out of the Filmmakers Union for requesting an exit visa, he sent an open letter to the major Soviet newspapers *Izvestiia*, *Sovetskaia Kul'tura*, and *Literaturnaia Gazeta* condemning state-run antisemitism and the persecution campaign that

was being mounted against him and other Jewish writers and scientists (Gershenson 2013, 124-5). In the letter, he wrote,

In a big and multinational country there has been no place for Jewish culture in the last decades. Entire generations of Jews grew up without knowing their language, their history, and the ancient history of their own people. This is sad and immoral. It always bothered me and limited my opportunities. Now it led me to a creative dead end, because I cannot express what lives inside me.<sup>32</sup>

Having already once been rehabilitated after being arrested and imprisoned as a part of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign under Stalin, Kalik did not wait for a second rehabilitation. He left the USSR soon after the letter was published. Jewish themes were no longer welcome on Soviet screens, having been replaced by “a slew of allegedly anti-Zionist documentaries, which actually verged on being anti-Semitic” (Gershenson 2013, 169). The same was true of literature, as Soviet writers had to wait until perestroika and glasnost to begin once again tentatively addressing Jewish themes. Even then, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan has only received detailed treatments in non-fiction in the countries of the former USSR.

### Socialism in One Country and the Campaigns Against “Rootless Cosmopolitans” and Veselovskyites

Before analyzing the first literary treatments of Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaigns, I will dive further into the background of the campaigns to show how they affected the creation of the deportation legend and the development of the Purim-Stalin genre. This will help

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<sup>32</sup> Mikhail Kalik, “Otkrytoe Pis'mo k Rrusskoi Intelligentsii,” May 2, 1971. Personal archive of Mikhail Kalik. The letter was published in *Sobranie Materialov Samizdata* vol. 22, document no. 1014 (Munich: Samizdat Archive Association, 1970-1972).

demonstrate why the works discussed in this section represent the events leading up to and including the Doctors' Plot in the manner they do, specifically without any reference to the alleged deportation plan, unlike the later Purim-Stalin works. Censorship played a direct practical role in preventing the representation of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan in Soviet film and literature. However, it is my contention that Stalin's war on Jewish memory and internationalism prevented both Jewish and gentile Soviet writers from representing the Doctors' Plot and its resolution in terms of Jewish religious traditions and history. This was embodied in his campaigns against rootless cosmopolitans and Veselovskiyites under the intensification of his prewar policy of "socialism in one country" via the postwar implementation of the 1946 Zhdanov Doctrine (an official policy mandating intellectual conformity to party policy). Soviet policies before and particularly during Stalin's rule caused Soviet writers to therefore represent these events without any reference to the alleged deportation plan, as opposed to the western and post-Soviet writers and filmmakers that subsequently depicted them.

Proposed by Stalin and Nikolai Bukharin shortly after Lenin's death and later adopted as national policy, "socialism in one country" promoted the concept of national communism against earlier orthodox Marxist-Leninist ideas of global communism and permanent revolution, which continued to be espoused by Trotsky and his allies when he was Stalin's main rival to the leadership of the USSR and later during his exile. After Stalin defeated Trotsky in the struggle for supreme power over the Soviet Union, and therefore over the Communist International (Comintern) as well, the USSR increasingly turned away from internationalism toward isolationism. The Comintern turned its focus from supporting world revolution to primarily defending Soviet interests before being disbanded in 1943. Internationalism became increasingly associated with Trotskyism, and as Trotskyism became the worst form of ideological treason in

the USSR (becoming practically synonymous with fascism), the seeds were sown for the postwar antisemitic campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans,” which broadened the crime of Trotskyism to include almost anything to do with internationalism and Judaism.

The ethnic cleansing of Jews from Soviet cultural and intellectual spheres under Stalin was an especially salient manifestation of the regime’s effort to fight any form of domestic criticism or pro-Western feeling resulting from the nation’s temporary return to internationalism during its membership in the Allied coalition during World War II. Jews were particularly vulnerable to the charge of “kowtowing to the west,” which became an increasingly significant offense after the Zhdanov Doctrine went into effect in 1946, due to their ethnic association with Trotsky, their perceived membership in a global network of professional and personal relationships stemming from dispersed family systems, and their highly visible presence in the Comintern. The Zhdanov Doctrine, also known as the Zhdanovshchina, was a cultural policy named after the Central Committee secretary Andrei Zhdanov that enforced Russophilia and anti-Western chauvinism in Soviet culture until Stalin’s death. It laid the groundwork for the ensuing campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans” and Veselovskyites. This policy hit Soviet Jews especially hard, starting with the dismantling and persecution of the JAC, whose members had the official task (given to them by the government) of building support for the Soviet war effort among westerners, particularly Jews. With its members having spent so much time abroad before and during the war cultivating relationships with foreigners of all political persuasions, the JAC became in some ways the archetype for the crime of “rootless cosmopolitanism” invented during the Zhdanovshchina. It is also worth noting that it was Zhdanov’s death under Jewish medical care in 1948 that sowed the seeds for the Doctors’ Plot, as his doctors were

included among the “Zionist doctor-murderers” of the Doctors’ Plot after being retroactively accused of murdering him.

But Jews were not the only Soviet minority vulnerable to such charges. This new breed of antisemitism was

a reflection of a broader postwar atmosphere of extreme Russocentrism and xenophobia in Soviet society rather than...an isolated travesty of justice committed against a single minority group. After all, the celebration of Russian ethnic pride and patriotism in these years was marked not only by the stifling of Jewish cultural self-expression but by the suppression of self-expression among other non-Russian ethnic groups as well. Even before the end of World War II, the Kazakhs, Bashkirs, and Tatars had been denounced one after another for “bourgeois nationalism,” and similar measures were taken between 1945 and 1953 against the Ukrainians, Belorussians, Uzbeks, Armenians, Tajiks, and others. While the antisemitic dimensions of this state-sponsored chauvinism were considerably more severe than the sanctions imposed against the other non-Russian peoples, contextualizing the treatment of Soviet Jews within such a broad atmosphere of intolerance may add perspective and a comparative dimension to...[the]...story (Brandenberger 2005, 204).

This comparative ethnic dimension plays an important element in the Soviet works analyzed in this section, particularly *Fresh Legend*. I will address it later, but the question of internationalism is a more prominent concern, both in the works themselves and in understanding the development of Purim-Stalin.<sup>33</sup> In the wake of Stalin’s interconnected postwar campaigns against

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<sup>33</sup> While these Soviet works emphasize the Soviet nature of their Jewish characters, who are grossly persecuted for their trivial, almost accidental associations with the outside world, the works discussed later will celebrate the internationalism of their Jewish characters as worthwhile expressions of both Soviet and Jewish existence. This



Soviet Jews and internationalism, many Soviet (and increasingly Western) Jews became disillusioned with Soviet “socialism in one country” and eventually turned to its antithesis, the Judeocentric, international Soviet Jewry Movement. This turn included a return to the Jewish roots of their ancestors, which eventually led them toward understanding their experiences under Stalin through the lens of Jewish biblical and secular history, thereby giving birth to Purim-Stalin as the formal elaboration of what were previously rumors surrounding Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan.

On 10 Nov. 1945, Stalin penned a letter to his erstwhile allies Churchill and Truman where he made it clear to them that he would deny western leaders the right to either praise or criticize the USSR. Soon after, the Zhdanovschina was launched in an effort to exert greater intellectual control over Soviet citizens after more of them were exposed to the materially and culturally advanced West during the war. The campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans” followed, with the epithet being used in newspapers to decry anyone seen as “kowtowing to the west.” Due to the fusion of Judaism and internationalism in Stalin’s mind described previously, Jews were the primary targets of this campaign. One of the first victims of the campaign was Ilya Ehrenburg’s and Vasily Grossman’s *The Black Book*, one of the earliest accounts of the Holocaust, which the Soviet government suppressed in 1946. Under Stalin, any attempt to memorialize the Nazi genocide against the Jews was seen as an expression of Jewish bourgeois nationalism and thus forbidden.

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internationalism is visible in the characters of the fathers in *The Gates of November* and *The Testament*, both of whom are multilingual and work as Soviet agents abroad, as well as the African-American character who joins the Soviet Jewish plot to murder Stalin in *The Yid*. The latter is a kind of stand-in for Paul Robeson, an African American communist who was especially sympathetic to the plight of Soviet Jews.

The Stalinist regime portrayed the Second World War as essentially a simplistic conflict between capitalism run amuck and communism fighting the popular class battle. If the imagery of the bourgeoisie in collusion with the Junkers doing battle against the proletariat and Bolsheviks was to be maintained, what was one to do with evidence of a specific assault by the Nazi armed forces against a specific people – the Jewish people? The Stalinist answer was immediate and clear: suppress such views as heretical and erroneous. This was exactly the fate of *The Black Book of Russian Jewry*. The press plates were removed from the printing plant in 1946 - one year following the conclusion of hostilities. This book was viewed as a danger to the Communist regime and its narrow mechanical commitment to social class as the only explanatory variable.<sup>34</sup>

This official policy, a specifically Soviet form of Holocaust denial, was one of the factors that led to the persistent equation of Nazi and Soviet antisemitism that permeates the texts under discussion in this dissertation, from *Life and Fate* to *The Yid*. From Grossman on, commentators noted how the Nazis and the Soviets were united by a common disdain for what the Nazis called the “international Jewish cabal” and what the Soviets termed “bourgeois cosmopolitanism.”<sup>35</sup> Soon after, the government disbanded the JAC, murdered its Chairman, Solomon Mikhoels, and arrested Veniamin Zuskin, Mikhoels’ closest collaborator at the Moscow Yiddish Theater (GOSET), which was itself closed in 1949. Most of the JAC would eventually fall victim to Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaign during the 1952 Night of the Murdered Poets.

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<sup>34</sup> Irving Louis Horowitz, Foreword to *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*, ix.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, vi.

While the term “rootless cosmopolitans” was first applied to literary critics and initially directed primarily at writers, it eventually extended to practically every sphere of Soviet life, including science and medicine.<sup>36</sup> The attack on Soviet Jews under the guise of the campaign against “rootless cosmopolitanism” was accelerated after the USSR turned against Israel shortly after its Independence in 1948. Since Hitler had given antisemitism a bad name, the campaign was increasingly conducted under the banner of anti-Zionism. In 1948, the Kiev-born Golda Meir (then Myerson) became the first Israeli ambassador to the USSR. Her public appearances drew crowds of enthusiastic Jewish onlookers, increasing concerns among Soviet leaders about Jewish nationalism in the wake of a recent JAC proposal to create a Soviet Jewish homeland in Crimea. These incidents, along with the US quickly becoming Israel’s staunchest ally, led to the widespread implementation of the new government policy of accusing Soviet Jews of being bourgeois Western Zionist agents, which would reach its apotheosis in the campaign against the JAC and the Doctors’ Plot (and persist after Stalin’s death). This aligned well with Soviet foreign policy, which supported Israel’s Arab enemies in the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict.

By 1953, the campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans” was a full-out attack on Soviet Jews, now portrayed by the government as undercover agents of international American Zionist anticommunism. Similar “anti-Zionist” campaigns, like the Slánský trial in Czechoslovakia,<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> A representative example was Dr. Yakov Etinger, one of the victims of the Doctors’ Plot, who had precisely the kind of profile that Stalin wanted to eliminate from Soviet society through the campaign. He was a well-read and well-traveled Jew with a well-respected international reputation who was, moreover, opposed to the quack genetic theories of his contemporary Trofim Lysenko, which wreaked havoc on the reputations of many Soviet scientists and led to millions dying from starvation as a result of the implementation of his theories. Etinger was also a Zionist who privately approved of the US and denounced the USSR for their treatment of Israel. Soviet Jews like Etinger felt especially betrayed by Stalin’s antisemitic campaign because the USSR had allowed him to gain professional success in a way closed to Jews during the Imperial period and, furthermore, had just prevented the total annihilation of European Jewry.

<sup>37</sup> This was an antisemitic show trial that led to the lifetime imprisonment or execution of fourteen high-ranking officials in the nation’s Communist Party, including First Secretary Rudolf Slánský, for high treason.

were underway throughout the Soviet bloc. This method allowed Stalin to fight the twin evils of communist internationalism, with its call for greater collaboration and decentralization across the communist world, and internal criticisms of his regime. With the trial against the “murder-doctors” of the Doctors’ Plot about to begin, Stalin fell ill on Purim and died a few days later. By then, his government had turned Jews into the perfect scapegoats for the evils plaguing Soviet society, and were it not for Stalin’s timely demise, many Jews and Soviet-era historians worried “that the purges resulting from the so-called “Doctor’s Plot” (the presumed effort to kill Stalin by medical means) and the various show trials in Eastern Europe (in which a preponderance of those executed were Jewish), would have likely spread to the Jewish masses.”<sup>38</sup>

Stalin’s turn against internationalism was also directed against Veselovskyists. Ostensibly referring to followers of Alexander Veselovsky, the charge of Veselovskyism, which was officially described as a “bourgeois cosmopolitan direction in literary criticism,”<sup>39</sup> could be leveled against any scholar or critic that engaged in what we now call comparative literature. One did not even have to praise foreign literature as being superior to Russian to be accused - it was enough to merely reference foreign works or scholars. In his introduction to Vladimir Propp’s *Theory and History of Folklore*,<sup>40</sup> Anatoly Liberman provides a thorough sketch of the campaign against Veselovskyism and Propp’s participation in it. Here, he provides an elegant summary of how the Russian chauvinism underlying the campaign against “rootless

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<sup>38</sup> Irving Louis Horowitz, Foreword to *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*, ix.

<sup>39</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko and Galin Tihanov, *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011. 171–173.

<sup>40</sup> Liberman, Anatoly. “Introduction: Vladimir Jakovlevič Propp.” Introduction. In *Theory and History of Folklore*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

cosmopolitans” led to its focus on two primary groups of victims: Jews and what came to be known as the Veselovskyites:

Soon after the war another campaign was launched, this time against “rootless cosmopolitans.” The enemy was identified with Jewish scholars and in addition with everyone guilty of sycophancy or kowtowing to the West, as the phrase went. The motto of the campaign became Russian priority. Every discovery in the arts and sciences was shown to have been made by Russians, and a passing reference to the most innocent foreign authority from Jacob Grimm onward or a biography of Pushkin mentioning Byron’s influence on Russian Romanticism could undo a well established scholar (xiii).

As this political vortex homed in on anyone seen to be “kowtowing to the West,” it sucked in the long dead Veselovsky and those considered to be his pupils, including scholars like Propp and even N. Ja. Marr, the one-time dictator of Soviet linguistics (Lieberman xiii). This part of the campaign against rootless cosmopolitans became public on 11 March 1948, when the official party newspaper *Kul'tura i zizn'* (*Culture and Life*) published an article, “Against Bourgeois Liberalism in the Study of Literature,” castigating Veselovsky with the ominous accusation of being a “bourgeois liberal,” an “enemy of the revolutionary democrats” and a “cosmopolitan” (Lieberman xiv). An all-out government assault on anyone whose ideas could even be remotely linked to Veselovsky followed.

Propp’s work will play a significant role in my argument for why the legend of Stalin’s Jewish deportation plan and the Purim-Stalin genre developed the way they did. While his name was not mentioned in the aforementioned article, the destruction of the Veselovsky school of Russian literary theory soon caught up with him. Shortly after the article’s publication, he was forced to engage in an act of public self-criticism where he confessed to the newly minted crime

of Veselovkyism. At a meeting on 1 April 1948 at Leningrad University, he gave the following speech, which was printed in several local newspapers:

I consider the article “Against Bourgeois Liberalism in the Study of Literature” to be a most important document, which determines a decisive stage in the development of our science. It is not fortuitous that the article concerns itself with Veselovskij. Aleksandr Veselovskij was the last undethroned idol of bourgeois prerevolutionary science. This idol, the greatest of them all and therefore the most dangerous, has fallen and fallen irrevocably. No attempts at rehabilitation will save him from the verdict pronounced by history. No compromises, no hesitations of any sort in our assessment of him, that is, of the entire science he represented, can now be entertained... we have not yet rooted out the old science. Tradition is strong and it drags us down... I did not look upon myself as a comparativist, but I interpret the Russian fairy tale in light of the creative output of other peoples, that stand at earlier stages of human culture. Hence my critics’ imputations of harmful cosmopolitanism, which, indeed, I cannot counter... If we once and for all sever ties with the tradition that drags us down, we shall create works worthy of our great epoch (Lieberman xiv-xv).

If a scholar of Russian folktales like Propp could be accused of “kowtowing to the West,” someone like Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work compared Russian and pan-European works across centuries and with one another, was clearly doomed to suffer the same fate. He too became a victim of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign as someone whose work addressed non-Russian literature. In 1952, his dissertation on Rabelais was only awarded a candidate’s degree rather than a full doctoral one. Bakhtin’s work, largely censored like Propp’s during this period and only slowly published in the USSR in the decades following Stalin’s death, also plays a

significant role in the development of my central thesis in this dissertation. His concepts of genre memory and literary chronotopes, along with his carnivalesque vision of satire, help account for the specific development and crystallization of Purim-Stalin.

What effect did the campaigns against Soviet Jews and Veselovskyists, both painted with the brush of “rootless cosmopolitanism,” have on the development of the legend of Stalin’s Jewish deportation plan and its evolution into the Purim-Stalin genre of fiction? One of the salient features of the deportation myth was the creation of documents reportedly written by government apparatchiks that sought to justify the upcoming deportation by comparing it favorably to tsarist deportations of Jewish spies from the eastern front during World War I. World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the ensuing Russian Civil War were catastrophic for Eastern European Jewry, whose death tolls at the time grossly outweighed similar events in the surrounding decades, save for the Holocaust. In attacking Veselovskyists and their theories, the Soviet government was trying to prevent the same thing it had tried to prevent with its earlier crackdown on Jewish religious and cultural practice: memory itself, across time and space. That earlier crackdown had the consequence (and perhaps intent) of causing Soviet Jews to forget their history and religious traditions, such as Purim and its associated spiels, which consciously reminded them of past thwarted antisemitic genocides and thus would have enabled them to see Stalin’s postwar antisemitic purges in a similar light, i.e. part of a recurring pattern of external attack and reprieve (and sometime merely survival) running through Jewish history. By attacking the comparative study of literature, and therefore foreign works themselves, the government was engaging in a similar attempt to prevent its victims from connecting these attacks with comparable past Russian (and foreign) attacks on Jews and internationalists. Already in his attacks on Trotsky, Stalin and his propagandists had engaged in the process of rewriting recent

history to fit his contemporary political agenda. This process had extended through and after the war, and by the time it got to his final antisemitic inquisition, they were rewriting not only recent history, but also ancient history in order to align it with the new policy of Russian chauvinism emanating from the Kremlin. In the cases of Soviet Jews and Veselovskyists, this meant erasing large swaths of history altogether in order to prevent these two groups of victims (and others) from connecting their victimization with similar campaigns in Russian and global history that would have been very unflattering to the Soviet regime, which considered it to be the communist vanguard and the most progressive government that ever existed.

This is not to say that Stalin and his henchmen consciously set out to erase Jewish history and the concept of historical poetics. But that was the inevitable consequence of their prewar campaign against Judaism and postwar campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans.” This attack launched by Stalin’s increasingly chauvinist government against internationalism had its roots at least as far back as Veselovsky’s time, when it manifested itself in Russian society as a conflict between the so-called Westernizers and Slavophiles. Literary scholar Kate Holland notes how Veselovsky’s concept of historical poetics developed in opposition to such Slavophilic worldviews, using Dostoevsky’s later work as an example of the latter:

When contrasted with Dostoevsky’s resistance to Russian modernity, the longing for continuity and the sense of security provided by narrative recapitulations throughout the *longue durée* that permeates Veselovsky’s work can be seen as an alternative and far more benign response to the discourse of historical rupture which proliferated in Russian cultural life in the 1870s and 1880s. It offers a gradualist model of the history of narrative forms which stands in stark contrast to traditional accounts of Russian literary development which saw the tradition as emerging fully formed in the Petrine period of



Russian history. Veselovsky's tracing of motifs and legends over the *longue durée* appeals to an understanding of the deep structure of the past akin to Bakhtin's "great time" (*bol'shoe vremia*), a sense of a shared historical experience embodied in the narrative forms of the *narod* [folk]. It offers a respite from the familiar patterns and endless iterations of Russian exceptionalism which Dostoevsky ventriloquizes, allowing Russia's literary and historical past to be fully integrated with that of Europe and Asia. It is a philological extension of the liberal Westernism that was the generally accepted "tendency" of *The Messenger of Europe*, a "tendency" to which Dostoevsky could not have been more opposed.<sup>41</sup>

The postwar period of Stalin's last years were a time of rupture and turmoil in Russia similar to that of the decades following the emancipation of the serfs under the tsars. Just as Slavophiles had responded to that eruption of Western values into Russian Society with an insistence on the uniqueness of Russian history and values in opposition to those of the West, Stalin responded to the new postwar atmosphere of global cooperation, embodied by international bodies like the United Nations, by reverting to a similar tradition of Russian exceptionalism. With historical poetics and its concept of the *longue durée*, Veselovsky was conceptualizing Russian cultural and creative production as something that had its roots both in centuries of Russian folk culture and millennia of Eurasian history and literary traditions. Through Bakhtin, with his concept of "great time" and genre memory, and other Veselovskiyists working under Stalin, the ideas underlying historical poetics persisted, undermining the government-sanctioned ideologies that came out of the Zhdanovshchina, which insisted on both the uniqueness and superiority of

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<sup>41</sup> Kate Holland, "From the Prehistory of Russian Novel Theory: Alexander Veselovsky and Fyodor Dostoevsky on the Modern Novel's Roots in Folklore and Legend," in *Persistent Forms: Explorations in Historical Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 348.

Russian civilization as something wholly unconnected to the rest of human history and culture. These postwar persecution campaigns were an initially successful but ultimately futile attempt to prevent cultural memory, particularly (but not limited to) that of Soviet Jews, from erupting back to the surface after being repressed for decades to reveal that Stalinism and “socialism in one country” were simply the latest iterations of a long list of attempts in Russian and global history to erase Judaism from the earth.

Stalin’s Russophilic post-World War II denunciation of Veselovskyists and Jews, with their “rootless cosmopolitan” tendencies, demonstrated a fear in particular of the Jewish narod, whose familiarity with their historical traditions and narrative forms were rekindled by the Holocaust. Rather than cutting them off from their coreligionists abroad, Stalin’s attempt to silence the truth about the Holocaust, followed by his own antisemitic persecutions, ultimately had the opposite effect of reconnecting Soviet Jews with global Jewry, although this was not readily apparent after his death and would take decades before coming to complete fruition. Historical poetics helps explain how and why Soviet Jews utilized the Book of Esther and the Purim story to make sense of Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaigns. Despite decades of Soviets efforts to root out Jewish cultural and historical memory from its Jewish citizens, as well as the Nazi “Holocaust by bullets” on Soviet soil, Soviet Jews still preserved sediments of these nearly extinguished traditions by the final years of Stalin’s reign. As Beregovsky’s work on Purim spiels demonstrated, at the onset of World War II there were still Soviet Jews who remembered Ahasuerushpils from memory in surprising detail. Even if these specific people were dead by 1953, the Purim plot and similar stories from Jewish history and literature continued to exist in a dark, hidden region of the Soviet Jewish consciousness of their descendants, apparently forgotten until these old memories were unpredictably renewed in Soviet Jews by the antisemitic

persecutions surrounding the Doctors' Plot. Just as the psychic strain on Soviet Jewry brought on by these persecutions led to the creation of the legend of Stalin's Jewish deportation plan, a similar popular-poetic demand in response to an urgent call of the times led to the subsequent development of the Purim-Stalin genre as a way of representing these events in fiction. By the time we get to the Western and especially post-Soviet representations of these events, Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan is seen as a direct renewal of the Purim plot.

An important element of historical poetics that is especially relevant to the topic of this dissertation is the concept of *perezhivanie*. In its everyday sense, this Russian word means something like "lived emotional experience," but it can also refer to worry or anxiety. For Veselovsky, this concept includes these meanings but also goes beyond them, containing within it multiple layers and subtleties. He uses it to refer to both "a tradition that persists ("survives") through texts and to everyday experience (often prompted by an emotional response to a text)"; as such, the term "serves to foreground the affective power with which cultural perceptions articulated in poetic texts can shape the experience of an individual" (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 11). Veselovsky uses the metaphor of cultural "deposition" or "sedimentation" to explain the specific kind of "survival" he has in mind, where one's experience is historically anchored through the recycling and perpetuation of inherited cultural forms. It is my contention that the anxiety aroused in Soviet Jews by Stalin's postwar antisemitic policies triggered within them buried Jewish cultural memories, particularly those relating to Purim and Imperial-era anti-Jewish pogroms. As such, these newly unearthed memories caused them to shape the rumors surrounding the Doctors' Plot into the legend of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan. These rumors eventually found artistic expression in the old/new genre of Purim-Stalin, where the "survival" of the Purim spiel tradition is evident, albeit adapted and altered to suit the specific

conditions and context of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan. For Bakhtin, who elaborated on Veselovsky's theory of historical poetics in his work, "those literary works are most precious, most properly literary, which display the greatest tension between the labor of finalization and the experience that is being finalized, thus reminding us of literature's essential link to language and other sense-making mechanisms operating in the historical everyday" (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 12). Early Soviet responses to Stalin's postwar antisemitic persecutions shortly after his death captured this tension between living through and representing an experience that had yet to be finalized, as the works below were written in a climate where censorship and the political environment made it impossible to directly represent the events that gave birth to the legend of Stalin's Jewish deportation plan. The apparent absence of the Purim tradition in these works only serves to highlight its resurrection and persistence in the later works that set out to represent the same experience.

Ilya Ehrenburg's *A Change of Season (The Thaw and The Spring)*

"I grew up in a Russian city. My native language is Russian. I am a Russian writer. Now, like all Russians, I am defending my homeland. But the Nazis have reminded me of something else: my mother's name was Hannah. I am a Jew. I say this with pride."

-Ilya Ehrenburg<sup>42</sup>

Ilya Ehrenburg was able to publish the novel *The Thaw* in the 1954 spring issue of *Novyi Mir* and abroad in 1955 and its sequel *The Spring* in the Soviet journal *Znamya* in 1956. Collectively, the two works came to be known under the title *A Change of Season*. Written immediately after Stalin's death and representing something like a return to normalcy after the

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 288.

“winter” of Stalinism, the first novel eventually gave its name to the whole period of Khrushchev's rule, especially the early years of destalinization. It was Khrushchev's 1955 speech denouncing Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress that heralded the inauguration of this “so-called Thaw, often understood as a period of relative liberalization in both politics and culture” in the USSR (Gershenson 2013, 57). But it was Ehrenburg's novel that signaled a change in the atmosphere and projected a (perhaps premature) hope that Stalin's death would lead to a shift away from the authoritarianism of his rule toward a life without fear of government oppression for Soviet citizens, especially Jews. Most important of all, for the purposes of this dissertation, *A Change of Season* was the first officially sanctioned work of fiction in the USSR to address the iniquity of the Doctors' Plot and represent it in literary form, albeit briefly and in passing. However, it makes no (overt) mention of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan.

The time immediately after Stalin's death was one of both uncertainty and increased freedom in Soviet letters. Ehrenburg, one of the USSR's most famous writers globally, took advantage of this situation to get this, albeit allegorical, account of Stalin's reign of terror into print while the opportunity presented itself. Along with many of its Jewish critics,<sup>43</sup> I see the work as a coded confession on Ehrenburg's part, where one must read between the lines of the text to understand its true meaning. If one views *The Thaw* as an allegory of Stalinism, then Stalin himself is represented in the novel by the factory director Ivan Zhuravlyov, a talented director in terms of running his factory and producing the requisite output, but a petty tyrant and philistine when it comes to his relationships with his subordinates and the other characters in the novel. Though Zhuravlyov is presented critically, he is still far more humane than Stalin himself,

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<sup>43</sup> See Joshua Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties: the Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1999).

as Ehrenburg knew, having had personal dealings with the dictator (e.g. the *Pravda* Jewish open letter affair) and surviving the purges that claimed the lives of many of his friends and colleagues.

In *The Thaw* and *The Spring*, Ehrenburg touched on the events of the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign and the Doctors' Plot in late 1952-early 1953 "in a very euphemistic way, referring to 'people of a certain nationality.' Which nationality was perfectly clear to the reader, but the very fact that he needed to resort to circumlocutions reflected a shameful moral atmosphere in which a return to chauvinism seemed quite possible" (Vaksberg 1994, 283). Written over the course of the year following Stalin's death at the height of the Doctors' Plot, Ehrenburg's tentative optimism about the de-Stalinization that soon followed was tempered by an understandable caution about the still tentative position of Soviet Jews, many of whom were just now returning from the gulags to which they had been sent during Stalin's reign. As we shall see, these concerns were justified, as the Thaw proved to be short-lived as a political phenomenon, giving way to the re-Stalinization of the Brezhnev years following Khrushchev's forced resignation. In the novel, the Doctors' Plot is only addressed directly in a minor subplot involving the experiences of a Soviet Jewish doctor, Vera Grigoryevna Scherer, during and after those events. In reality, the Doctors' Plot was denounced by the post-Stalinist regime immediately after the tyrant's death and blamed on overzealous government agents, who were themselves punished. As such, Ehrenburg's work largely followed the party line coming out of the Kremlin at the time regarding the Doctors' Plot, which was likely one of the reasons it was permitted to be published. While the Doctors' Plot is briefly mentioned, there is little overt condemnation in the novel of official antisemitism. The *Pravda* article about the "gang of poisoner-doctors" is mentioned in passing, but, otherwise, there is no discussion of official, state-sanctioned antisemitism, either

under or after Stalin. The personal antisemitism of some background characters is mentioned, and even then, this is only hinted at and never explicitly stated. As with Ehrenburg's other writings, there is no mention made of any planned Jewish deportation, but all of his work had to pass through official Soviet censors before publication. In *Tangled Loyalties: the Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg*, Ehrenburg historian Joshua Rubenstein wrote that both Ehrenburg and his daughter revealed in private conversations that they thought Stalin's alleged 1953 plan to deport Soviet Jews was real. Also, as we saw earlier, Ehrenburg cryptically referred to the *Pravda* Jewish open letter affair elsewhere, but in an ambivalent manner that left the truth of the affair hidden.

In *The Thaw*, the Jewish Dr. Scherer serves as a stand-in for both the victims of the Doctors' Plot and the other Jewish victims of Stalin's other postwar antisemitic campaigns. When the Doctors' Plot is announced in *Pravda*, Zhuravlyov questions Vera's trustworthiness (as a Jew) despite respecting her as a doctor. After the rehabilitation of the Kremlin "poisoner-doctors," Zhuravlyov hypocritically criticizes Vera for having been nervous during the Doctors' Plot, despite his own earlier questioning of her trustworthiness as a result of the revelation of the Plot. Here we see Ehrenburg's ambivalence regarding the rehabilitation of the "poisoner-doctors" and other victims of Stalin's antisemitism after his death: the same people who condemned them in the first place are largely still in power, meaning that the future for Soviet Jews remained unclear in 1954. In addition to Zhuravlyov's "official" antisemitism during the Doctors' Plot, Ehrenburg also depicts the popular antisemitism it unleashed in an episode involving two patients at a hospital where Dr. Scherer works, who say that doctors like her, i.e. Jews, "should not be trusted" (49). While this is the extent of Ehrenburg's treatment of Stalin's antisemitism in this novel, he will have a bit more to say on the subject in its sequel.

Thematically, *The Thaw*'s major concerns are the corruption, nepotism, and popular fear stemming from the generalized government oppression and unwarranted arrests of the Stalin years. One of the characters in the novel, Tanechka, "acted in a Soviet play in the part of a laboratory assistant who unmasked the professor for subservience to foreign ideas. It was terrible, not a live word in it. When she made her speech flaying the professor, the audience laughed and she longed to cry: why do I have to grimace and shout these imbecilities?" (147-8). On the one hand, we see here a brief, almost coded reference to the injustice of the Zhdanovshchina and its crackdown on anyone accused of kowtowing to foreign ideas. On the other hand, we can also read this as a reference to the fate of Ehrenberg and his contemporary Soviet intellectuals that had to parrot Stalin's denunciations of "rootless cosmopolitans." Like Tanechka, they were actors in Stalin's censored theater of social realism, forced by the government to grimace and shout imbecilities denouncing foreign ideas against their will, unable to express their true feelings on the subject. At one point, Zhuravlyov says to his wife, "You have to know when to say nothing"; his wife Lena considers this cowardice but also acknowledges that his World War II colleagues think him "a man of courage" (20). Here, as a stand-in for Stalin, Zhuravlyov embodies official state propaganda in representing Stalin as the man who saved the USSR from the fascists. But, as a "little Stalin" representing the kind of tyranny and cronyism that Stalinism perpetuated throughout Soviet Society, Zhuravlyov also embodies the limits of power of anyone other than Stalin in the USSR, even a powerful factory manager like Zhuravlyov. Even the other members of the Politburo had to "know when to say nothing" around Stalin and each other, since they never knew who was listening and what could be held against them in the future. Like the Megillah, this is a novel about people who must hide their true feelings from one another, saying and feeling one thing in private and another in



public. In not speaking completely truly and openly about the breadth and depth of the horror of Stalin's antisemitism, Ehrenburg is doing something similar for his reading public, hiding his true feelings on the subject even after Stalin's death.

Even though *The Thaw* was criticized by the authorities and the Writers' Union, Ehrenburg had a chance to defend himself in print and ultimately publish its sequel, *The Spring*, two years later. *The Thaw* was an allegory of life in the USSR under Stalin and in the months after his death, while *The Spring* dug a bit deeper into the former while also representing a bit more of the first few years of Khrushchev's rule. The portrait of the latter is not as hopeful as one might expect, given that Khrushchev had just denounced Stalin and his cult of personality in his "secret speech." Dr. Scherer once again appears, though now she does not even refer to the Doctors' Plot by name, but rather as "February '53" (223). Already, by 1956, Ehrenburg can no longer mention this event directly in his fiction, but can only allude to it. The anti-Cosmopolitan campaign is treated in similarly allusive fashion. In the novel, Ehrenburg notes that the character Dmitryeva, the headmistress at a local school, wrote a report in 1949 about a history teacher where she labeled him a "rootless cosmopolitan" and also implicated someone else "to get in with the authorities" (181). Then there is the character Vyubin, a rehabilitated victim of Stalin's Great Purge of the 30s, who "never spoke of what he had been through" (184). Ehrenburg here cautiously brings our attention to the silence of the survivors of Stalin's reign of terror, who rarely (if ever) spoke about their experiences, and never in print. This was particularly true of Stalin's Jewish victims in the face of the post-Stalinist anti-Zionist campaigns that silenced such Jewish testimonies, especially after the Six-Day War. Their silence within the USSR about their experiences relating to Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan, like the lack of concrete evidence verifying its existence, was not proof of its non-existence.

Read closely, *The Spring* demonstrates that Khrushchev's so-called Thaw was only a relative liberalization in Soviet politics and culture. As the novel shows, "the process of liberalization was actually rather tentative, and... new signs of thaw were interspersed with plenty of familiar freezing" (Gershenson 2013, 57). In the novel, the character Dmitry votes to censure his outspoken colleague Solovyov but regrets his decision to do so afterwards. Another character, Savchenko, blames Dmitry initially for supporting the censure, but changes his mind about Dmitry after the latter retracts his support for the censure. With this subplot, Ehrenburg provides a kind of apologia for those that went against their conscience during Stalin's reign, a theme explored in further depth in *Life and Fate*. Dmitry's actions vis-a-vis Solovyov are like Ehrenburg's vis-a-vis the *Pravda* open letter supporting Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan: both did what they could to oppose the overwhelming nature of Stalin's tyranny, but ultimately could not oppose it fully. Another example of this is the character Volodya, a painter that other characters perceive as a hack and jealous cynic, especially in comparison with the character Saburov, a less successful painter but one whose work is considered more authentic to his own true vision. In actuality, Volodya is talented and recognizes talent in others, but turns out hack work in order to be successful in the Stalinist system. He derides Saburov's work only to justify his own hackery, much like the hacks in the Writers' Union who wrote officially sanctioned works of social realism while denouncing the works of censored novelists like Grossman and Boris Pasternak, who transgressed official literary guidelines in both the style and content of their works. Like Dmitry, Volodya seems to be another stand-in for Ehrenberg, a prominent figure who had sustained prominence in a variety of roles in the Soviet Union while weathering and catering to the party's changing ideological demands.

As historian Yaacov Ro'i noted, "The mid-1950s brought new hope to Soviet Jews. The common experience of Stalin's last Black Years, culminating in the "Doctors' Plot," had brought the Jews together and strengthened Jewish solidarity and awareness."<sup>44</sup> *A Change of Seasons* was a tentative expression of this new hope. According to his own words, Ehrenburg's Jewish pride was rekindled by the German invasion and the accompanying Nazi murder of Soviet Jews. As a war reporter, he witnessed this element of the Final Solution when he came West and found that there were no longer Jews in the areas formerly occupied by German, which transformed his sense of Jewish identity. *The Thaw* and *The Spring* shows him surreptitiously opposing that Jewish pride to Stalinist, and by extension Soviet, antisemitism. During Purim celebrations, noisemakers like groggers are used to blot out Haman's name, a practice that can be traced to ancient practices of warding off evil at the beginning and end of seasons (Binder 1949, 212). In *A Change of Seasons*, both works explicitly use the metaphor of Spring to represent the end of the threat posed by Stalin. The tyrant had died during the week of Purim, and a year later in Spring Ehrenburg released his novel celebrating Stalin's demise. While there are no overt references to Purim, or indeed to any Jewish practices or traditions, in these works, could the titles themselves be a Purim reference? For millennia, Purim has been one of the Jewish holidays marking the transition from Winter to Spring, offering hope that Spring may come and Winter may actually end (especially in the cold climates of Eastern Europe). Its tale of Jews avoiding genocide at the hands of an antisemitic political leader on the eve of its inception may have led Ehrenburg to see Soviet Jewish life in the immediate wake of Stalin's death in those terms, even if this only found expression in the titles of the fictional works representing this special Purim. If

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<sup>44</sup> Yaacov Ro'i, "The Role of the Synagogue and Religion in the Jewish National Awakening," in *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*, ed. Yaacov Ro'i and Avi Beker (New York and London: New York U.P., 1991), 117.

that is the case, this surreptitious/subconscious Purim reference gave its name to the entire post-Stalinist era of liberalization, which was indeed a brief respite from the state-sponsored antisemitism for Soviet Jews before it returned under Brezhnev. As with the rest of Jewish history, Russian/Soviet Jewish history also experienced recurring patterns, cycling through periods of antisemitism and liberalization, as the briefness of the Thaw would demonstrate.

### Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*

Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*, written after Stalin's death, was a sequel to his 1952 novel *For a Just Cause*. A heavily censored work published at the height of Stalin's postwar antisemitic terror, the first novel was only published after many rewrites forced on Grossman by the censors, particularly regarding its Jewish characters and themes. Both works in the dyad focus on Soviet life in the USSR during World War II, with the first novel concentrating on 1941 and second on 1942-3. Referred to by many critics as the Soviet *War and Peace*, both novels focus on the Battle of Stalingrad while simultaneously portraying life at every level of Soviet society during those years, from the front lines to the evacuations in the hinterland to the gulags and Nazi concentration camps. As one of the most prolific and important Soviet war correspondents during the war, Grossman witnessed firsthand most of the things he described in the novels, from the Battle of Stalingrad itself to the liberation of German-occupied territories, including concentration camps. Grossman wanted to call the first novel *Stalingrad*, but it was renamed by the censors, likely as a reflection of the antisemitic atmosphere of the period; referring to the first novel, the Nobel laureate Mikhail Sholokhov asked Grossman, "Who gave you the right to write about Stalingrad?", calling it "spittle in the face of the Russian people."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Aaron Lake Smith, "The Trials of Vasily Grossman," Harper's Magazine, May 12, 2020, <https://harpers.org/archive/2019/07/the-trials-of-vasily-grossman/>.

Although *For a Just Cause* was ultimately published and even nominated for a literary prize, it soon garnered harsh official criticism, and in this environment “Grossman would almost certainly have been arrested” if Stalin had not died when he did (Chandler 2006, xiv). Having been part of the *Pravda* Jewish open letter affair, Grossman knew that Stalin’s death had saved Jewish lives, including possibly his own. Grossman submitted its sequel, *Life and Fate*, for publication to the magazine *Znamya* in 1960. “It was the height of Khrushchev’s “Thaw” and Grossman clearly believed that the novel could be published” (Chandler 2006, xv). Instead, it was rejected and “arrested” by the KGB, who raided Grossman’s apartment and confiscated any materials relating to the novel. Mikhail Suslov, the CPSU’s chief ideologue, told Grossman that the novel’s publication would cause more harm than that of *Doctor Zhivago* by potentially initiating a public discussion questioning the need for the USSR’s very existence.<sup>46</sup> While Ehrenburg had been able to get *A Change of Seasons* published, those works had come out in the immediate aftermath of Stalin's death and, moreover, had been far less critical of the tyrant than *Life and Fate*, which directly compared Stalin to Hitler and Nazism to communism. Despite some evidence of liberalization and reform during the early years of the Thaw, the fate of Grossman’s novel proved that the “death of Stalin did not herald a golden age of liberty.”<sup>47</sup> It would not be published in the USSR until 1988. But, unbeknownst to the authorities, Grossman had left other copies of the manuscript with friends, who were eventually able to smuggle it out of the country, leading to its publication in the West in 1980.

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<sup>46</sup> See Robert Chandler, Introduction to *Life and Fate*, New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2006, xi-xv.

<sup>47</sup> John Lanchester, “Good Day, Comrade Shtrum: Vasily Grossman's Masterpiece,” LRB 18 October 2007, London Review of Books (London Review of Books, November 7, 2019), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v29/n20/john-lanchester/good-day-comrade-shtrum>.

While trying to get *Stalingrad* published in the face of censorial opposition during “the height of the postwar anti-Semitic campaign,” Grossman appealed to Stalin directly, who would allow for publication if he removed “a troublesomely Semitic character, the Jewish scientist Viktor Shtrum”:

Grossman refused, as he would subsequently refuse many, many similar calls to remove Jewish characters and references from his work, leading one beleaguered editor to compare him to a “mad bull.” What neither the editors nor the apparatchiks realized was that Shtrum’s namesake had once lived among them. In fact, the character was named after and based upon a friend of Grossman’s, a brilliant physicist murdered in the Terror and subsequently “scrubbed” from history. So thoroughly did the Soviet regime erase all traces of the historical Lev Shtrum that only recently did a literary researcher discover the real-life model for this character... This stubbornness, as it was called at the time, almost led to his own destruction (his arrest was forestalled only by Stalin’s death) and ruined his chances of a successful postwar career.<sup>48</sup>

Grossman defiantly kept Shtrum, a hidden reference to the Great Purge of the 30’s, in the novel, and this episode, along with other unspoken aspects and events of Soviet life under Stalin, made it into *Life and Fate* in similarly disguised fashion. This included Grossman’s surreptitious transposition of events pertaining to the Doctors’ Plot to 1942-3 (the years the novel covered), including the *Pravda* Jewish open letter affair and particularly Grossman’s personal involvement in it. This way, Grossman was able to represent these events in what he hoped would be a novel that would be available to the public without speaking about them directly, as they were still

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<sup>48</sup> Nadia Kalman, “Spiritual Survival,” *Jewish Review of Books*, June 10, 2020, <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/5399/spiritual-survival/>.

taboo, even during the Thaw. This was already visible in Ehrenberg's earlier treatment of these events, which already had to be represented in a far more surreptitious fashion in *The Spring* than in the earlier *The Thaw*.

*Life and Fate*'s Jewish protagonist Shtrum, while inspired by a real-life victim of Stalin and acquaintance of Grossman, was also a self-portrait of the author.<sup>49</sup> Grossman had written some of the first published accounts of Nazi concentration camps and had worked with Ehrenburg on the eventually banned *Black Book of Soviet Jewry*. Like Ehrenburg, he found his Jewish identity rekindled by the Holocaust. Grossman lent many of his personal biographical details to Shtrum, a similarly secular Soviet Jew who rediscovers his Jewish identity (and ultimately pride) as a result of the Nazis murdering his mother in his home village of Berdichev and his growing awareness of the increasing antisemitism in the USSR. In the novel, the physicist Shtrum makes a brilliant discovery in his nuclear research that could alter the course of the war. However, his superiors criticize his work as being out of step with official party dogma and attack his Jewish identity (in a reference to the Zhdanovschina and the campaign against "rootless cosmopolitans"). Transposing those postwar events to the heart of the war (which, however, did in reality display early signs of these campaigns), Grossman has Shtrum "find his work denounced as anti-materialistic and un-Russian" and witness other "Jewish colleagues lose their jobs."<sup>50</sup> Like Grossman in his effort to keep Shtrum's character in the earlier *Stalingrad*, here the character Shtrum holds his ground and refuses to engage in public self-criticism, as Propp and others had done during the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign. As a result, he is forced to resign, at which point he begins to fear arrest, as Grossman and other Jewish intellectuals and

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<sup>49</sup> Lanchester, "Good Day, Comrade Shtrum: Vasily Grossman's Masterpiece."

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

professionals had after the war. As with Stalin's real-life role in relation to Grossman's earlier novel, only a direct intervention from Stalin saves Shtrum and restores him to his former position. This incident mirrored not only Stalin's role in Grossman's personal affairs, but also seemed to refer to another, prewar incident involving Soviet Jewish authors, when Stalin called Boris Pasternak in 1934 to discuss Osip Mandelstam's famous poem satirizing the dictator. Like Grossman vis-a-vis the Doctors' Plot, Pasternak also failed to stand up to Stalin's persecution of someone he knew to be innocent, with Stalin ending that call with the words, "I see, you just aren't able to stick up for a comrade."<sup>51</sup> But in a more general sense, the episode reflected the dictator's often mysterious personal role in the postwar antisemitic campaigns (and earlier purges). As we shall see later, Stalin directed the campaign from behind the scenes while lauding Soviet Jews in public, thereby maintaining plausible deniability in the face of accusations of antisemitism and even presenting himself as a savior of Soviet Jews. In 1952, the same year the leading lights of the JAC and Soviet Yiddish literature were brutally eradicated in the Night of the Murdered Poets, *For A Just Cause* was published and Ehrenburg received the Stalin Peace Prize.

Having thus far encoded general elements of the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign into the novel via Shtrum's experiences, Grossman brings the Doctors' Plot into it directly in an episode involving Shtrum that mirrors the author's involvement in the 1953 *Pravda* Jewish open letter affair, where he signed a letter meant to be published in the newspaper denouncing the predominantly Jewish alleged "murderer-doctors":

In 1952, Grossman was forced to sign a petition condemning the Jewish doctors involved in the notorious non-existent plot; in the novel he assigns a similar humiliation to the

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<sup>51</sup> Olga Ivinskaya, *A Captive of Time: My Years with Pasternak*, New York: Doubleday, 1979, 63.



scientist and alter ego Viktor Shtrum. In doing so he antedated the anti-semitic campaigns of Stalin's last years and brought them forward into the period of the war. This transposition hints that it may have been his encounters with anti-semitism that galvanised Grossman into seeing through the pieties of *For a Just Cause* and turned *Life and Fate* into a great novel.<sup>52</sup>

Grossman did not know at the time that the letter, which called for extreme justice to be carried out against the doctors for supposedly plotting to assassinate Stalin and other Soviet leaders, would never be published. The author was tormented by his decision to sign the letter, and he transferred this suffering to Shtrum after he signs a similar letter denouncing two men he knows to be innocent, causing him to be tormented by guilt for the rest of the novel. Like Ehrenburg had done with his own fictional stand-in Dmitry in *The Spring*, who first denounces his colleague Solvyov before later atoning for his cowardice in doing so, Grossman uses Shtrum to represent his own moral failure in condemning his fellow Jews in the Doctors' Plot. Grossman himself later found the strength to criticize Stalin and his legacy in the novels he wrote after the dictator's death. It is worth noting that Grossman's English translator Robert Chandler believes that the character Sokolov, Shtrum's work colleague, is based on Ehrenberg and that the characters' friendship is based on that of the two writers. In their discussions together in the novel, Sokolov is by far the more cautious of the two and far less critical of the Soviet regime. Sokolov does finally risk his position for the sake of his convictions at the end of the novel, unlike Shtrum, perhaps mirroring Ehrenburg's and Grossman's actions, respectively, during the *Pravda* letter affair. Unlike Grossman, whose post-Stalinist writing was far more critical of Stalin, Ehrenburg initially refused to sign the letter and protested directly to Stalin, whereas

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Grossman, despite some hesitation, did sign it. As Chandler writes, this might also explain the ambivalent nature of the friendship between Sokolov and Shtrum, which waxes and wanes over the course of the novel.

Acknowledging his own cowardice by having Shtrum “frightened into signing an accusatory letter he knows to be false,” Grossman vows to make up for it with his subsequent actions by having Shtrum tell “himself to remember this experience always, to use the shameful memory as a prod for future integrity”.<sup>53</sup> This is also where Grossman/Shtrum’s Jewish reawakening plays a significant role: “After uncharacteristically betraying men he knows to be innocent, after agreeing to sign a slanderous official letter merely because he can’t bear the thought of losing a few new privileges, Shtrum expresses the hope that his dead mother will help him to act better another time” (Chandler 2006, xxiv).<sup>54</sup> The Holocaust and Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaign had finally convinced Grossman/Shtrum that they were Jewish first and foremost and Soviet only by happenstance. Shtrum’s last words in the novel are “Well then, we’ll see... Maybe I do have enough strength. Your strength, Mother” (841). Here, Grossman introduces a concept I will develop later in my discussion of Purim-Stalin, which is that the genre reflected the renunciation of Soviet Jews of the communist ideology of their fathers for the Jewish traditions of their grandfathers after Stalin’s postwar persecutions revealed to them the inherently antisemitic nature of Soviet society. Grossman is a kind of precursor to that, since he belongs to the generation of communist fathers that the next generation of Soviet Jews will turn against. These writers’ deeply held ideological beliefs were shattered by Stalin’s antisemitic

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<sup>53</sup> Kalman, “Spiritual Survival.”

<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the dangers were even greater for Grossman, whose identity was linked to his writing: the idea that he would not be read was perhaps the greatest threat of all.

campaigns and the subsequent eclipsing of survivors' memories of these events during the ensuing regime; Ehrenburg and Grossman laid the groundwork for this reversal by renouncing their once deeply-held Bolshevik beliefs at the end of their lives in the names of their Jewish mothers, who belonged to the generation of grandparents (from the perspective of the subsequent generation of Jewish writers that represented Stalin's postwar antisemitic persecutions in their work). According to the Jewish religion, Jewish identity is passed down matrilineally, so Grossman and Ehrenburg referencing their mothers in returning to their Jewish identities is an example in itself of their return to Judaism. We will see a similar transition reflected in Wiesel's and Potok's representations of Stalinist antisemitism. Younger than Ehrenburg and Grossman, Wiesel and Potok straddled the line between the generations of the fathers and the sons. Accordingly, the fathers in their works will also renounce their communist beliefs at the end of their lives for a partial return to the Judaism of their own parents before their deaths. In turn, their children, the "sons," will more fully take up the mantle of the Jewish identity of their grandparents' generation, a process only hinted at in these early works by Ehrenburg and Grossman.

Whereas *For A Just Cause*, published a year before Stalin's death, demonstrated loyalty to the Soviet regime, *Life and Fate* was radically anti-Stalinist. It dealt directly with official state antisemitism and explicitly likened Bolshevism to Nazism. While previous Soviet works critical of Stalin and the regime had been published after the dictator's death, none of them approached this level of transparency about the crimes committed by the state against its own people under the tyrant. Grossman

broke the taboos of a century, placing the crimes of the Nazi and Soviet regimes on the same pages, in the same scenes... Grossman meant not to unify the two systems

analytically within a single sociological scheme (such as Arendt's totalitarianism) but rather to relieve them of their own ideological accounts of themselves, and thereby lift the veil on their common inhumanity (Snyder 2015, 386).

This is made explicit by having many of the discussions on the subject take place within venues of state oppression, namely prisons and camps: the Soviet gulags, i.e. "labor" camps, and Nazi concentration and death camps. In the Nazi camps, German officers repeatedly compare Nazism to Communism and Stalin to Hitler, particularly in conversations with the Old Guard Bolshevik Mostovskoy. One Nazi even tells him that it was Stalin who taught the Nazis *how to build socialism in one country*. Then there is the implicit criticism of Stalinism in all of the innocent characters shown in Soviet prisons and gulags throughout the novel. At novel's end, "the image of Stalin snatching the sword of anti-Semitism from Hitler's hands at Stalingrad provides a powerful coda to the argument that Nazism and Stalinism are essentially the same phenomenon" (Chandler 2006, xx).

As the first Soviet work to make the explicit connection between Hitler and Stalin, *Life and Fate* laid the foundation for future representations of Stalin as a contemporary Amalek. It also marked the beginning of a "Soviet legacy of representing the Holocaust and Stalinist crimes side by side" (Gershenson 2013, 217), placing the blame for the horrors of the century on both Stalin and Hitler. This legacy was largely muted until glasnost, finding only occasional surreptitious expression in other Soviet works, like the 1965 documentary film *Ordinary Facism*, which similarly established "striking parallels between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia" (Gershenson 2013, 66), though in a less direct way than *Life and Fate*. But this particular legacy

of *Life and Fate* only fully bloomed during the last few years of the USSR before becoming a broadly accepted trope in post-Soviet art and letters.<sup>55</sup>

Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns, which caused Soviet Jews like Grossman to compare Hitler and Stalin, contributed to the creation of the legend of Stalin's Jewish deportation plan. *Life and Fate's* discussion of Stalin's crimes against the Jews alongside the Holocaust represented the subversive link between these subjects in the minds of Soviet Jews. This is relevant to the creation of the legend of Stalin's Jewish deportation plan because Grossman makes explicit comparisons between Soviet and Nazi "camps." Some Soviets had experienced and survived the Nazi concentration camps and returned to tell about them. Soviet citizens thus would have known details about the transportation of Jews to these camps and their destruction there, which likely contributed to the formation of the deportation legend because it linked deportation by train and antisemitic genocide in the minds of Soviet Jews. Furthermore, one of the characters murdered in the novel in a Nazi concentration camp is Sofya Osipovna Levinton, a Soviet Jewish doctor. Given her ethnicity, profession and fate, her inclusion in the text was likely an Aesopian allusion to Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan.

*Life and Fate* set the precedent for similar comparisons between Nazism and Stalinism in later Purim-Stalin works. It gave expression to the sense among Soviet Jews that they had jumped from the frying pan of Hitler's Holocaust immediately into the fire of Stalinist antisemitism. Already seeing Hitler as a contemporary Amalek, even if they lacked the familiarity with Jewish traditions to use that specific word, Soviet Jews now began to see Stalin in the same light. As the Soviet Jewry movement grew stronger and Soviet Jews returned to their national roots, this comparison became more explicit as they increasingly viewed their plight in

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<sup>55</sup> Notwithstanding a simultaneous, competing legacy of Soviet nostalgia that venerates Stalin.

relation to the cycles of violence inherent to Jewish cyclical (as opposed to Soviet linear) time. The seeds of this comparison were present in Grossman's time, and *Life and Fate* implicitly represented these Soviet Jewish fears surrounding the Doctors' Plot and its resolution that would eventually give birth to the legend of Stalin's Jewish deportation plan and its representation in the subsequent works of Purim-Stalin.

### Irina Grekova's *Fresh Legend*

Irina Grekova was the pen name of Elena Sergeevna Ventsel, née Dolgintsova, a Soviet mathematician by training that had already published several works in her professional field before turning to fiction in 1962. One of her earliest attempts in the new discipline was the novel *Fresh Legend* (*Свежо предание*), the first detailed, direct representation in fiction of Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns. She was also the first, though not the last, non-Jew to undertake such an endeavor. The novel was submitted for publication to the literary journal *Novy Mir* in 1962 but was immediately shelved and never published in the USSR. This was the same year that *Novy Mir* its chief editor Aleksandr Tvardovsky published Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the first officially sanctioned Soviet book to openly mention Stalinist repressions and the gulags. Though no account of the reasons provided for the denial exists, it seems that Stalinist (and by extension Soviet) antisemitism continued to be a taboo subject for state publications. The 1959 film *The Fate of a Man* had managed to make an oblique reference to the "infamous doctors' plot, Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign targeting Jewish medical professionals" in a scene where Nazis execute a Jewish doctor: "awash in rays of light", the doctor is filmed in a manner that gives him "the halo of a martyr" (Gershenson 2013, 60). While the so-called Thaw was well underway at this point, references to the Doctors' Plot in the arts already had to be made in a far more surreptitious fashion than in Ehrenburg's dyad, written and

published before Krushchev's "secret speech" had ostensibly inaugurated a new liberalization in Soviet culture. *Life and Fate* had been completely censored in 1960, yet 1961 saw the official publication of Evgenii Evtushenko's Holocaust poem *Babiyy Yar* in the journal *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, which had broken the earlier taboo of representing the Shoah in the USSR. So, while the Thaw did allow for the representation of some previously forbidden topics like gulags and the Holocaust, the censorship of *Life and Fate* and *Fresh Legend* showed that, despite the ostensible de-Stalinization of the period, Stalinist antisemitism was still off limits. Furthermore, by the end of 1962, a marked return to a "repressive policy of party oversight of the arts" was already evident, and in the spring of 1963, Khrushchev told a group of writers and artists at a meeting that *Babiyy Yar* presented a distorted view of the Jewish situation in the USSR by implying that only Jews were victims of fascist crimes during World War II (Gershenson 2013, 58). This speech was an early sign of the neo-Stalinism that would soon follow, indicating as it did a return to the earlier Stalinist Holocaust denial of not "dividing the dead" and insisting that all Soviet peoples had suffered equally from the fascist invasion. As an examination of Soviet antisemitism, *Fresh Legend* fell victim to the Soviet practice of viewing such endeavors as expressions of Jewish "bourgeois nationalism" (even if the writer herself was not Jewish), a policy that had only temporarily gone into remission after Stalin's death. After a brief respite, works criticizing the Stalinist regime and later those examining the Holocaust were once again forbidden and would remain so until glasnost.

*Fresh Legend* would not be published until 1995 in the United States, and in Russia only in 2008. It is a *bildungsroman* about Constantine (Kostya) Levin, a Soviet Jew who is born around the same time as the Russian Revolution and grows up with it. The novel traces his evolution from a passionate belief in the Soviet system to his disillusionment with it as he

witnesses and experiences firsthand Stalin's postwar antisemitic oppression. Like his parents, who had directly experienced the widespread antisemitic persecutions of the Imperial era, Kostya initially loves both the revolution and Stalin. Both of his Jewish parents are loyal and grateful to the Party: his mother, Vera, believes that communism has put an end to antisemitic pogroms in their homeland forever; his father, Isaac, is a devoted Party member that spends much of his time traveling for work (he will be arrested in the Great Purge in a foreshadowing of the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign's repression of Jews and others with connections abroad). The novel highlights how Soviet Jews like the Levins joined the Russian Revolution to rid the world of antisemitism only to lose faith in Soviet ideology as a result of Stalin's repressions, particularly his postwar antisemitic campaigns. As with the works discussed earlier in this section, Kostya's parents represent the fathers' generation of Bolshevik true believers, while Kostya is our first representative of the sons' generation, albeit one still fully caught in the nightmare of Stalinism that will not live to see its gradual defeat. As such, he is really more of a transitional figure between the two generations, an only partially realized precursor of the sons' generation that will fully reject their fathers' Bolshevism in the subsequent works of Purim-Stalin. While his parents turned their backs on the Judaism of their fathers (the grandfathers' generation), Kostya (like Ehrenburg and Grossman) partially returns to it after Soviet communism's inherently antisemitic nature was revealed to him during Stalin's postwar antisemitic persecutions. As with the earlier Soviet novels, Grekova's characters are stuck inside the false spring of the Thaw, still within the Purim story proper, and cannot yet see the coming complete rejection of Soviet ideology by their children nor the ultimate collapse of the USSR's antisemitic empire.

Kostya's family is directly affected by prerevolutionary pogroms, and they are haunted by the violence of the past and the specters of their deceased relatives. Vera's sister and



grandfather died during the 1905 pogrom, and she lives with their ghosts and visions of their dead bodies, carrying that grief until the revolution. However, after the revolution, she sees them as living beings rather than corpses in her visions. She dies during the interwar period thinking that communism had finally put an end to such tragedies. Dr. Ruvim Levin (Isaac's father) has an uncle, Lazar, who, like his biblical namesake, rises from the dead in the memories of his nephew, where he prophesizes that just as his generation was persecuted, so too will the next, post-revolutionary generation be. The Beilis affair runs through the text as an example of historical poetics, popping up every time memories of pre-revolutionary antisemitism are triggered by reminiscent events in the characters' lives. The affair is mentioned for the first time when Vera meets communist revolutionaries before World War I to emphasize to the reader that Jews like her joined the revolution to rid the world of antisemitism; Dr. Levin next brings it up during the interwar period after Kostya's first encounter with antisemitism (in grade school); and it is mentioned again during the postwar Doctors' Plot, when Dr. Levin brings it up again to highlight the antisemitic nature of the Plot. Grekova uses these repeated references to the Beilis affair to emphasize the recurrent nature of Russian antisemitism, as the trope appears during the prerevolutionary, interwar, and postwar periods. As historical poetics contends, these visions are memories of past plots (antisemitic pogroms in this case) triggered by reminiscent present experiences. This is also the case with Kostya's vision of his father's ghost during World War II after he loses contact with his wife and sister, who have (unbeknownst to him) been murdered in the Holocaust in German-occupied Ukraine. Kostya's father had died during one of Stalin's earlier purges, so his appearance at this moment is a way for Grekova to employ historical poetics to link Nazi and Soviet antisemitism, like Grossman had done in *Life and Fate*, before delving head-on into Stalin's postwar antisemitic persecutions. However, as a member of the

fathers' generation, Grekova, like Ehrenburg and Grossman, does not reference biblical or pre-twentieth century Jewish history, either because she was not familiar with it and or knew that it would be immediately censored.

Though he is Jewish, Kostya grows up thinking of himself as a true Soviet citizen. This was also true of Ehrenberg and Grossman and will be a running theme through the Purim-Stalin texts. Eventually, Kostya realizes that he exists on the boundary of two worlds, Soviet and Jewish, and the novel traces the transition of his identity from the former to the latter. Kostya encounters antisemitism for the first time at school, which triggers the second mention of the Beilis Affair in the novel, but this is an isolated incident stemming from another student, and Kostya at this moment shares his family's belief that it is merely an aberration and that communism will soon destroy all traces of this "bourgeois sin," as Soviet propaganda called it. Referencing the early Soviet novel *The Golden Calf* (co-written by a Jew), Kostya asserts that there is no question, referring to the Soviet claim that the USSR had solved "the Jewish question" for good.<sup>56</sup> Like Ehrenburg and Grossman, Kostya's move away from his initial fully Soviet self-identity comes when he realizes that he's not a real Russian, but a Jew, even though he does not know the language or any "Jewish songs." This realization comes right at the moment that his neighbor Genrikh Fyodorovich, a Soviet citizen of German descent, is exiled from Leningrad for the crime of his nationality after being denounced by someone else in the communal apartment. Later, when the kulaks are liquidated, Kostya is reminded of Genrikh Fyodorovich and tries to defend his love for the revolution against his growing doubts and

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<sup>56</sup> Like Lena in the later Purim-Stalin work, *On the Sickle's Edge*, Kostya is a reader who makes sense of the world through literature and for whom the library is a church. But, in these secular churches in an atheist state, the first two writers they discover are Jewish: Freud and Einstein. Reading is a kind of cosmopolitanism, as it takes one beyond the limits of one's national ideology and borders into the past and present of the greater world. It is thus no surprise that the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign went after both Jews and literary comparativists.

skepticism, which are further provoked by his best friend Yuriy's ironic attitude toward Soviet state propaganda directed against these groups. These liquidations foreshadowed Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns and laid the groundwork for the creation of the Jewish deportation legend. Soviet Jews became the new group targeted by Stalin after the war for liquidation, just as he had done with other ethnic groups (e.g. Germans) and social classes (e.g. kulaks) before. Just as those groups had been cleansed after propaganda campaigns and heightening discrimination and persecution, so Soviet Jews believed that a similar liquidation was in store for them after the series of intensifying postwar persecutions and propaganda campaigns targeting them reached a crescendo in the unprecedented publicity of the Doctors' Plot. Kostya's Jewish identity waxes as his belief in Soviet ideology wanes in direct proportion to one another over the course of the novel. Initially, he is a true believer who worships the revolution, unlike Yuriy, a non-Jew and born skeptic who sees through the lies of Soviet propaganda from the beginning. Yuriy claims that Kostya would have been a monk<sup>57</sup> if he had been born into a religious family. At a memorial for the Russian revolutionary dead in Leningrad, Yuriy compares the revolution to an unfaithful woman, foreshadowing the party's betrayal of its values under Stalin, particularly in his antisemitic persecutions and anti-internationalist policy of socialism in one country. Eventually, Kostya will adopt Yuriy's skepticism, but not until Stalin's series of murderous campaigns open his eyes to the truth of Soviet ideology, a theme running through all of the Purim-Stalin texts.

GrekoVA evokes the mutual distrust and widespread paranoia inculcated in the Soviet populace by their government, which used fake anti-government conspiracies to conceal its own

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<sup>57</sup> Or more likely a rabbi? As noted previously, references to antisemitic persecution were often couched in Christian symbols in Soviet works as a form of Aesopian language.

plots to arrest and erase entire categories of citizens. In addition to living with the constant memory of their Jewish dead, killed by Russian imperialists, Nazis, and Soviets, her characters exist in an atmosphere of omnipresent conspiracies and secret plots both real and imagined. The novel begins with a group of underground revolutionaries on the eve of World War I that are part of a real communist plot against the imperial government. Ironically, it was such real communist plots and conspiracies that would later create paranoia about invented anti-Soviet undergrounds during the Stalin era. We first get a glimpse of this during the Great Purge, when Kostya believes the government when it says that his arrested colleagues and acquaintances are spies and enemies of the people. However, he does refuse to denounce his estranged father when he is arrested on the same charges. This almost leads to his expulsion from University, and he is only forgiven after Yuriy reveals Kostya's longtime estrangement from his father. Yuriy calls this a time of demagoguery, and it foreshadows the postwar anti-Cosmopolitan campaign, when Kostya is once again implicated in anti-Soviet activity for "kowtowing to the West" as a result of a cybernetics paper he wrote with Yuriy that referenced foreign sources. As a result of his experience during the Great Purge, by World War II Kostya begins to show signs of skepticism regarding the government, saying that in Leningrad one cannot trust witnesses of death because the true causes are usually other than those reported. These doubts, along with the deaths of his wife and sister in the Holocaust, sowed the seeds for his eventual full turn away from communism toward his Jewish identity during Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns, as it had done with the Soviet writers and characters previously discussed.

After the war, like many unwitting Soviet Jews, Kostya first learns of the state's mounting antisemitism through newspaper reports denouncing "rootless cosmopolitan" theater critics. Yuriy thinks that the anti-cosmopolitan campaign stems from Israel's birth, which he

believes has caused Soviet Jews to be viewed as foreigners in their own land. As with later Purim-Stalin works, *Fresh Legend* emphasizes the few non-Jews that stood up for their Jewish coworkers and friends during this period. Aside from Yuriy and Kostya's non-Jewish wife, there is his coworker Nikolai Prokofievich, who says that Russians are either antisemites or pogromists. Nikolai verbalizes a perspective running through the Purim-Stalin works: while there are always a few exceptions, the majority of Russians/Soviets will at best not lift a finger to help Jews and at worst actively participate in persecuting them. Soon, as with most Soviet Jews, the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign that started in the newspapers enters the characters' lives. Kostya and Yuriy are accused of being "rootless cosmopolitans" due to their cybernetics paper including only foreign sources and no Russian/Soviet ones. Kostya, despite everything that has already occurred, does not yet see this as an antisemitic incident, unlike his wife Natasha and Yuriy. Ultimately, however, having existed until now on the border of his two identities, Kostya is finally forced by the campaign to accept that he can never fully be Russian and will always be seen as a Jew in this society. In a reference to the Russian chauvinism underlying the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign, Kostya is accused of sullyng the name of Tolstoy's famous Russian hero in *Anna Karenina* with his cosmopolitanism. Exemplifying the transition from the fathers' generation to the sons', Vera in the beginning of the novel had thought that the revolution would rid Russia of patronymics, but Kostya is ultimately fired from his job and cannot find work again during the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign specifically because of his patronymic (Isaakovich). Kostya carries his parents' ideology within him, insisting that he has done nothing wrong in being Jewish and using foreign sources in his research, thereby continuing to believe in internationalism and the values of the revolution long after Stalin had betrayed and turned against them. He refused to denounce his father during the Great Purge, and while his

estrangement from him saved Kostya then, it is precisely his father's name that finally proves to be Kostya's undoing after that initial attempt failed. Like other victims of the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign, the government throws his Jewish name in his face as incontrovertible proof of Kostya's guilt. Unlike other Soviet Jews and Hadassah in the Megillah, Kostya had not changed his name to pass as a gentile, though those pseudonyms did not save the victims of the Doctors' Plot and other Jews during the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign, who had their Jewish names revealed/emphasized in the press. This tension around names is a common theme in Purim-Stalin, connecting the Megillah to these texts as a reflection of the way these real-life events helped revive the Purim story in Soviet Jewish minds to formulate the Jewish deportation legend and influence its depiction in fiction thereafter.

Kostya goes insane at the end of the novel because he cannot reconcile his faith in the Soviet system with Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns. His insanity stems from his guilt over being Jewish as a result of the constant antisemitism unleashed upon him by the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign, and he at one point even (unsuccessfully) tries to wipe the word "Jewish" from his passport. Eventually, he can no longer take the pressure and his newfound identity quickly turns into Jewish self-hatred. At the psychiatric hospital, he refuses blood transfusions because he thinks it is the blood of a Christian child and draws a caricature of his nurse with an exaggerated Jewish nose. Kostya writes a letter to Stalin where he says he had no right as a Jew to marry a Russian woman. Finally recognizing himself as a Jew, Kostya cannot live with the reality of being one in a state where that is a crime. Meanwhile, Natasha reads about the Doctors' Plot in the newspapers, which, as with the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign, soon makes its way from the newspapers directly into the characters' lives. Kostya's Jewish doctor at the psychiatric hospital, who had been making good progress with his recovery, is fired as a

result of the Plot and replaced by an ethnic Russian who shirks his duties, which eventually leads to Kostya's death in March just after Stalin's, a posthumous Jewish victim of Stalin's postwar antisemitism. Before he dies, Kostya sees the ghost of Yuriy (killed earlier by the MGB for refusing to help them entrap others in fabricated anti-Soviet plots), a specter reminding him of his misplaced faith in Soviet ideology foreshadowing Kostya's son's generation's turn against communism. Just before he dies, Kostya writes to Stalin after Stalin's death on March 5th, reverting to the communism of his parents as a result of the schizophrenia that landed him there in the first place, a product of his inability to accept his Jewish identity after realizing that it was his inescapable birthright in the USSR. Kostya passes away just before Natasha reads about the rehabilitation of the doctors in the Doctors' Plot in the newspaper. Unfortunately, for Jews like Kostya, this revelation about the fabrication of the Doctor's Plot after Stalin's death was too late to save those that had already fallen victim to his antisemitic terror.

Meanwhile, at a hospital meeting during the height of the Doctors' Plot, Kostya's grandfather Dr. Levin facetiously includes Mendel Beilis along with the Jewish doctors accused in the plot. He dies soon after, but not before first denouncing the antisemitism of the Doctors' Plot and his colleagues for their cowardice. Earlier, we had seen Ehrenburg's and Grossman's literary stand-ins, Dmitry and Shtrum, respectively, cave to pressure to denounce their innocent work colleagues in symbolic representations of the authors' similar denunciations of the innocent Jewish victims of the Doctors' Plot in the *Pravda* Jewish open letter affair. Here, Dr. Levin never gives in to such pressure and immediately denounces the state for inventing the Plot as well as his colleagues for going along with it. As a member of the grandfathers' generation, he represents the pre-Soviet Jews that directly experienced Imperial-era pogroms and the Beilis affair. This grandfather's generation had firsthand memories of Jewish traditions and an

understanding of Jewish cyclical time, not having renounced their Judaism the way that the fathers' generation of Kostya's parents have. Moreover, by throwing his Jewish pride in the face of the authorities and his colleagues, Dr. Levin foreshadows the tough, heroic Jews of the later Purim-Stalin works, who, embodying the spirit both of biblical Jewish heroes like those in the Book of Esther and the tough Soviet Jews of Soviet literature that fought the White Army and the fascists, will stand up to Soviet antisemitism in the same way. However, since the heroes of the later novels exist in works written after the defeat of communism and the collapse of the USSR, they will triumph, whereas Kostya and Dr. Levin, existing in a novel written (and censored) in the middle of the Jews' Soviet captivity, must perforce die as a result of their battles with Stalinist tyranny. Just as Grekova had no way of knowing in 1962 that her work would eventually be published after the collapse of the USSR, contemporary Soviet Jews had no way of knowing that their experience of living under a government espousing official antisemitic policies would eventually come to an end and they would be allowed to emigrate to lands where they could live freely and openly as Jews (or remain in post-Soviet countries that at least officially no longer enforced antisemitic policies).

Unlike the Western and post-Soviet writers that subsequently depicted these events, Grekova cannot see the coming salvation of Soviet Jews in emigration and the collapse of the USSR. As with Ehrenburg and Grossman, she unconsciously describes in this novel the continuing captivity of the Soviet Jews, as Stalin's death did not have the finality of Haman's for them that it did for Western and post-Soviet Jews representing these events later. While the deportation legend is never addressed in this novel, it paints a vivid picture of the atmosphere of fear and paranoia in which Soviet Jews lived at the time. In calling the novel *Fresh Legend*, a reference to a line from Griboedev's famous nineteenth century play *Woe from Wit* ("fresh



legend, but hard to believe”), Grekova understood that even by 1962, people would already have trouble believing the events of the Doctors’ Plot. This novel is thus an effort to memorialize not only those events but also the experiences of their victims and the moment when Soviet Jews fully realized that they would never be accepted as equals by their government and most of their fellow Soviet citizens. *Fresh Legend* was meant to prevent Soviets from forgetting Stalin’s postwar antisemitic repressions, but the government succeeded in preventing the novel from doing so until after the USSR’s collapse.

Kostya dies just weeks after Stalin and the end of his antisemitic terror, and the final words in his notebook are a quote from Ilya Ehrenburg: “The dead have the right to a voice.” Just as Kostya’s parents became communists and joined the revolution to avenge family killed under the Czars, *Fresh Legend* gives a voice to their descendants repressed and killed by Stalin. By quoting Ehrenburg, Grekova also tacitly includes him among those silenced by Stalin’s antisemitic purge, as he could not write freely about the terror he witnessed around him. Little did she know that her account of Stalinist antisemitism, like Grossman’s before her, would not be published for decades. Deprived of knowledge of Jewish religious traditions and history, and prevented from including them in their work even if they were familiar with them, these writers were limited to representing Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaigns in light of recent Soviet and pre-revolutionary Russian history. As such, the events surrounding the Doctors’ Plot are not shown as preparations for Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan. While Soviet Jews breathed a sigh of relief after Stalin’s death, they continued to experience their government’s antisemitic policies, which made Stalin’s death seem like a blip in a system that continued to deny them fundamental rights and freedoms. It was Western Jewish writers that first saw Stalin’s death as a kind of modern-day Purim, and it was now up to them to write about those events and other

aspects of the Soviet Jewish experience to raise awareness about their plight after Soviet Jews themselves were forbidden from doing so as a result of the neo-Stalinism of the Brezhnev years.

## **Chapter 2: Western and Refusenik Responses to Stalin's Alleged Jewish Deportation Plan**

I now turn to the first literary efforts to grapple with these events in a deliberately Jewish cultural context. Elie Wiesel was one of the first Western litterateurs to address Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns, guardedly at first in *The Jews of Silence* and *The Oath*, before offering a template for depicting Soviet Jewish trauma under Stalin in the context of Jewish cyclical time in *The Testament*. While none of these texts explicitly represent Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan, they laid out the central themes and archetypes of the Purim-Stalin genre. These were then fully developed by later writers, who used Wiesel's template to represent Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan for the first time in fiction. These later works presented the constellation of competing plots and narratives, both literary and political, in which Stalin's alleged plan was to occur. I will explore the way in which Elie Wiesel's *The Testament* served as a model of transition between the Holocaust and Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan for representing the destruction of contemporary Jewish communities. Wiesel's works also highlight how Soviet Jewish sons fought their fathers' communist ideologies to return to their grandfathers' Judaism, reflecting the literary-theoretical notion propagated by Russian Veselovskyites like Yuri Tynianov that writers returned to forms bequeathed by older generations in their struggles against the recent past.

Writing outside of the USSR and being deeply familiar with Jewish traditions and history, Elie Wiesel was one the first non-Soviet Jewish writers to represent Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns. He was free of the censorial, ideological, and educational restraints that forced early Soviet authors representing the same events to do so in a largely non-Jewish manner. Responding to what he correctly perceived to be the government-imposed censorship of Soviet Jews on the subject, Wiesel took it upon himself to depict these events during the Cold

War to bring them to the attention of a wider audience. He employed fiction and nonfiction to grapple with the moral and historical significance of these events for both Soviet and Western Jewry. Wiesel saw Soviet Jews as having been abandoned by Western Jews during and immediately after the Stalin period, and these works reflect his efforts, both as a writer and activist involved in the Soviet Jewry Movement, to defend and revive Soviet Jewish existence. They also introduced a new element into the genre: the Jewish Amalekites in the Yevseksia and other elements of Soviet society that were complicit in this oppression. These works were written at a time when Amalek was starting to be associated with the Soviet Union, as Jewish leaders like “the Rav” Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik began to refer to Soviet communists as “the spiritual heirs of Amalek” (Horowitz 2006, 145). Reflecting this Jewish representation of Soviet antisemitism, these were the first works to depict the events surrounding Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan in religious terms, thereby embodying the next step in the development of Purim-Stalin that would find full expression after the collapse of the USSR.

Wiesel, the first major Western Jewish author to represent the plight of Soviet Jews under and after Stalin, dealt with the subject in three works written during the Cold War: the nonfiction *The Jews of Silence* (1966) and the novels *The Oath* (1973) and *The Testament* (1980). Writing during the Soviet period, Wiesel shared the aforementioned Soviet authors' handicap of depicting these events while Soviet Jews continued to experience antisemitic discrimination and even incarceration in the USSR. However, as the Soviet Jewry Movement, an international campaign fighting for the rights of Soviet Jews to emigrate from (and live without discrimination in) the USSR, developed, Wiesel's representations of the Soviet Jewish experience under and after Stalin evolved, mirroring developments in the movement as well as the changing conditions of Soviet Jews. As such, though he does not represent Stalin's alleged deportation plan in these

works, they are the first attempts to depict the Soviet Jewish experience under and after Stalin in an overtly Jewish manner, using Jewish religious practices, texts, and history to place Soviet Jews into the broader context of Jewish time, where the cyclical nature of Jewish holidays and Torah-readings in synagogues encouraged Jews to see traumatic events within their communities as recurrences of similar occurrences and narratives from their collective history. Wiesel's works on the subject are the bridge that connected the Soviet Jewish experience to millennia of global Jewish history, setting a precedent for depicting it through the lens of Jewish traditions.

Wiesel's works dealing with the Soviet Jewish experience showed secular Soviet Jewish communists returning to the Jewish identity and Zionism of their forebears as a synecdoche for the ultimate redemption of Soviet Jews from Stalin and his ideological descendants. They present the next step in this process that was begun by the Soviet writers discussed in the previous chapter, who showed Soviet Jews taking their first, hesitant steps away from the Bolshevism of the fathers' generation toward the Judaism of the grandfathers' generation. In those works, written immediately after Stalin's antisemitic campaigns, the sons' generation is barely visible, either having just been born or still yet to be born. What they showed instead was the fathers' generation realizing the error of their ways in devoting their lives to communism after its inherently antisemitic nature was revealed in the final years of Stalin's reign. We see hints of the next step taken by the sons' generation in the deathbed renunciations (i.e. *teshuva*) of communism for Judaism by the fathers' generation and the brief snapshots of the Judaism of the grandfathers' generation. These elements will also be visible in the works discussed in this section, but Wiesel will elaborate on these processes while introducing the new element of the sons' generation and its struggles with its Soviet Jewish identity stemming from the events and legacy of Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns.

We can employ historical poetics to better understand the process just described because it provides a theoretical explanation for why the sons' generation of Soviet Jews returned to the Jewish identity of the grandfathers' generation and how this process found artistic expression in the works discussed here. The process of applying historical poetics to works such as these involves combining a "deep and specific knowledge" about their "social and historical surroundings" while making "large-scale, *longue durée* claims" about them (Hayot 2015, xii). Hence the need to provide the social, political, and historical contexts in which these works were produced, which then enables us to place them within broader historical and cultural trends. Here, that means understanding how these works both reflect and facilitate a process in which Soviet Jews made sense of their antisemitic oppression under Stalin and his successors. This oppression, combined with their experiences in the Holocaust, led to a general ideological shift among Soviet Jews away from Bolshevism toward the Judaism of their forebears. As this shift progressed, this return to Judaism caused them to reassess their Soviet experience through a Jewish lens, leading them to represent that experience using the language, images, traditions, characters and plots of Jewish religious traditions and history. Soviet Jews themselves could not reflect this transition aesthetically for political and cultural reasons, and also because these forms were alien to them; however much they wanted to embrace them, they lacked the cultural fluency of a Western Jewish writer like Wiesel, who was steeped in traditional Judaism. He combined Soviet Jewish experiences with his Western Jewish education to represent this parochial Soviet Jewish history through a wider Jewish lens that was both a reflection of and imposition upon the former by the latter. This was inaugurated by Wiesel and others applying the biblical Exodus plot to the story of Soviet Jewish emigration. This allegorical connection soon led to the

crystallization of the tradition of representing the events surrounding Stalin's death and the Doctors' Plot as a Purim spiel.

Historical poetics argues that genre “marks a set of affiliations with characteristics appearing in a wide variety of examples and configurations, and remains open to the possibility of future modifications” (Hayot 2015, xi). The aforementioned Soviet works were affiliated by their representations of the events surrounding Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns and death and shared many of the same characteristics presented in different configurations: both as allegories presenting these events in different periods (WWII in *Life and Fate*) and settings (a small postwar factory town in *A Change of Seasons*) and hyper realistic family sagas that ranged from focusing on a two-year period of World War II (*Life and Fate*) to covering the entire pre-revolutionary to postwar period (*Fresh Legend*). The same affiliation that united these earlier works will appear in the subsequent works discussed in this dissertation, which will also share many of their characteristics, like representing generational ideological shifts from Judaism to Bolshevism and back again and presenting the tension between Soviet linear and Jewish cyclical time. However, these later works also contain modifications reflecting changes in Soviet Jewish life, particularly Soviet Jewry's reembrace of Jewish identity, the birth of the emigration, refusenik, and Soviet Jewry movements, and the collapse of the USSR. These changes to Soviet Jewish life will introduce new elements into the genre such as a more literal identification with the Purim story, explicit representations of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan, and the theme of Jewish revenge.

Recognizing this combination of continuity and change lies “at the center of historical poetics as a method,” which understands that the works examined in this dissertation “are ready-made objects for analysis of the mixture of long and instant time” that “operate as effects of and

innovations in the social and cultural problems of their variegated presents, and retain...elements of the sedimented and residual pastness of the past in their later instantiations” (Hayot 2015, xiii). The works that make up the Purim-Stalin genre reflect both past and contemporaneous understandings of Stalinist and subsequent Soviet antisemitism, while carrying within them elements of the Purim spiel genre only hinted at in the earlier works. A similar elaboration of historical poetics’ conception of genre is Bakhtin’s notion of genre’s “organic logic” that is “always accessible in its entirety and ready to flood into any work that touches upon it even tangentially,” as we will see in the Purim-Stalin works to come. This “radical...vision of literary-historical continuity” (Kliger 2015, 230-1) is precisely what connects the aforementioned early secular Soviet works to the later Western and post-Soviet works that increasingly reveal themselves to belong to a particular subgenre of literary and cinematic Purim spiels. Veselovsky argued that “manifestations of verbal creativity do not disappear with the stage of social development that gave them life but persist and can be suddenly reanimated when the socio-psychological demand for it arises again. This notion presupposes a nonlinear model of history, traversed by traces of the past, with which we are ultimately never done” (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 5). While the Purim story appeared at a specific stage of social development in Jewish history over two thousand years ago, it has continued to be perpetually reanimated in Jewish life ever since, both as a result of annual Jewish traditions and in response to events in Jewish history that call it forth to meet those particular Jewish communities’ “socio-psychological” demands. If we accept these manifestations of verbal creativity to be synonymous with genre, we see how this “nonlinear model of history” finds expression in Jewish cyclical time, which is represented metaphorically in these works’ shared genre as well as literally in their representations of the



relationships between the grandfathers', fathers', and sons' generations and their characters' shifting feelings toward Soviet ideology and Jewish identity.

### Soviet Jewish Grandfathers, Fathers, and Sons: Cyclical Jewish vs. Linear Soviet Time

An underlying element of historical poetics elaborated by Veselovky's successors among the Russian formalists was the idea of discontinuity in both literary development and historical consciousness as manifested both subjectively and collectively. This was expressed as "a kind of leaping movement whereby the overcoming of the exhausted forms of the recent past results in the recursion of the past that is more distant"; Veselovsky saw this kind of recursion as being an inescapable part of both literary expression and subjective consciousness, and Formalists like Yuri Tynianov expressed this recursion in familial terms, arguing that in struggling against the forms bequeathed to us by our "fathers" we come to resemble our "grandfathers" (Kliger 2015, 227). Tynianov saw this phenomenon being expressed primarily in terms of literary genre and style. However, as a fundamental aspect of "Veselovskyst" thought censored under Stalin, I argue that this phenomenon defines the Purim-Stalin genre on historic, thematic and symbolic levels. Historically, we see how these texts reverted back to the ancient Book of Esther and the ostensibly forgotten Purim spiel genre, both of which the Soviets tried to erase with their crackdown on Jewish culture and memory, to first make sense of the events surrounding the Doctors' Plot and Stalin's death and then to find a model for representing them. Thematically, the central question of Soviet Jews moving away from their Soviet identity toward the fully Jewish one of their grandparents' generation is represented in these works through ideological battles between Bolshevik fathers and Jewish/Zionist sons. Symbolically, and perhaps most subtly, these texts embody the ideas underlying historical poetics, banned under Stalin as a form of literary analysis, to depict how the reinvention of the Purim-Stalin genre itself as an old/new

form combining ancient Jewish traditions with modern Jewish experiences forsook Soviet ideas of history as a linear progression to return to an older, Jewish model of time as being cyclical, where Jews relive the same plots in different guises. Or, to put it into comparable theoretical terms coined by another twentieth century Jewish thinker, Sigmund Freud, the repressed always returns. As a Jew, Freud would have known this from the Jewish peoples' eternal struggle with Amalek and his descendants, against whom the Tanakh warned every generation of Jews would have to fight no matter how often they defeated them. With Stalin and his fellow Soviet Amalekites having failed to fully repress both the Jewish identity of Soviet Jews and Veselovsky's anti-Soviet literary theories, both returned the following generation, finding perhaps their purest expression in the works of Purim-Stalin.

In Freudian terms, Stalin is in some sense the *primal* father of the fathers' generation of Soviet Jews. While this seems counterintuitive at first, I will develop this idea as I go along to demonstrate why it is appropriate. As an embodiment of Soviet law and, more than any Soviet leader before or after, the state itself, his postwar, chauvinistic rule forever foreclosed the opportunity for Soviet Jews to be true Soviet citizens as part of an effort to destroy Jewish memory (if not presence) in the USSR, as he had done with other minority populations before. As we will see, this effort backfired. It caused many Soviet Jews to realize they could never be truly Soviet the way ethnic Russians were, leading to a resurrection of Jewish identity among them rather than its destruction. Within Purim-Stalin, Stalin combines the roles of King Ahasuerus (a symbolic father of all the subjects within his multiethnic Empire) and the villain Haman. As the sovereign that maintains publicly cordial relations with Soviet Jews, he is like Ahasuerus, and like the Persian monarch he does at times blame the Jews' suffering on his underlings. This also explains the initial Kremlin response to the Doctors' Plot after Stalin's

death: while they conceded the Plot to be a fabrication, they blamed it on overzealous agents in the security apparatus rather than Stalin himself. Only later, and even then only in private conversations recounted by others, did Stalin's successors acknowledge that he was indeed the Haman of this generic recursion. He was both the king and the executioner in relation to both the Doctors' Plot and the alleged Jewish deportation plan. This attitude is reflected in the early Soviet literary representations of these events, which only hint at Stalin's culpability without directly blaming him. Their Western and post-Soviet counterparts, not under the thumb of the Soviet censorship regime, are less ambivalent, recognizing Stalin as a descendant of Amalek, his generation's Haman after taking that mantle from Hitler at Stalingrad.

In generational terms, the works addressed here are filled with Soviet Jewish fathers that took part in the Russian Revolution who fully identified as Soviet citizens and true believers in Marxist-Leninist ideology. These fathers inevitably conflict with their sons, who increasingly identify as Jewish and decreasingly as Soviet during and after the antisemitic terror of Stalin's final years. This reflects a wider pattern among many Soviet Jews, who initially embraced the ideals underlying the political and social emancipations of the Russian Revolution, only to lose faith in these ideals of communist egalitarianism in the wake of Stalin's state-led pogroms. If Stalin is the primal father denying his Soviet Jewish sons the opportunity to fully partake in all of the benefits of Soviet citizenship, then Trotsky is the eldest son, the earliest target of Stalin's antisemitism whose fall from the highest echelons of Soviet leadership into total disrepute as a traitor will foreshadow that of the rest of Soviet Jewry in the subsequent years of Stalin's reign. Just as Trotskyism represented the first iteration of the crime of internationalism during the onset of socialism in one country, so too will "rootless cosmopolitanism" brand all Soviet Jews as

traitors to their country following the start of the Zhdanovshchina immediately after World War II.

As mentioned earlier, Soviet public figures of Jewish origin commonly adopted Russian-sounding pseudonyms. In the early Soviet period, these pseudonyms were rarely questioned in the media, a sign of the largely successful assimilation of Jews into Soviet culture. However, at the height of Stalin's antisemitic pogroms, from the beginning of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign to the Doctors' Plot, the Soviet media often revealed the given Jewish names underlying these pseudonyms. By returning their fathers' (patronymic and familial) names to them, the state made it clear to Soviet Jews that they could no longer be true Soviet citizens, which by that point was practically synonymous with Russian ethnicity. This betrayal by the revolution of Soviet Jewry's faith in communism to eradicate antisemitism, as exemplified by the Jewish protagonists of the fathers' generation in the works discussed here, is the cause of the sons' generation's return to Judaism. While the fathers' generation was ambivalent about accepting this forced return of the grandfathers' names, many in the sons' generation embraced it and used it as one of the justifications for its turn away from Bolshevism and socialism in one country toward the Jewish identity and Zionism of their grandparents.

“The generations which grew up under Soviet rule could formulate their Jewish national consciousness only by defining their attitude toward the Soviet system” (Tsigelman 1991, 54). The fathers' generation, which grew up with the revolution, “filled in the gap created by the deprivation of traditional, moral, and religious education with Marxist-Leninist ideology,” receiving “its apologetics of social and national equality with genuine faith and enthusiasm” (Tsigelman 1991, 43). As a result, theirs was a “secularized and Russified Soviet Jewish identity” (Gershenson 2013, 226). But for their sons, having either witnessed or grown up after

Stalin's antisemitic campaigns, an "acceptance of Jewish values was a corollary of" their growing "hostility toward the Soviet system"; this generation that grew up in the thirties and forties first accepted Soviet ideology but then turned "toward dissident activity and ultimately toward Jewish values and Zionism" (Tsigelman 1991, 54). This second generation of Soviet Jews is different from the fathers' in their approach toward both ideology and Jewish nationalism. They were influenced by different factors such as "anti-Semitic campaigns which were obviously state-sponsored" and "revelations about the Soviet regime" like "those disclosed at the Twentieth Party Congress"; thus, "as a reaction to the Soviet system in general and to Soviet anti-Semitism in particular," their Jewish identities and Zionism (and that of subsequent generations of Soviet and post-Soviet Jews) developed in opposition to the ideology and national identity of the fathers' generation (Tsigelman 1991, 54).<sup>58</sup>

As we have already seen, the years after Stalin's death brought some hope to Soviet Jews with the relative liberalization of the Thaw period. "Stalin's last Black Years, culminating in the "Doctors' Plot," had brought the Jews together and strengthened Jewish solidarity and awareness" (Roi 1991, 117). Informal groups of young Soviet Jews met at sites of mass Nazi execution to memorialize the Holocaust, as its suppression "by the regime only reinforced their growing national and religious identification" (Gershenson 2013, 58). By the late 1950s, the Zionist movement was also reemerging, as Jewish samizdat spread "both literary fiction and legal materials" on the subject and "a handful of enthusiasts" were beginning to provide informal, private instruction in Hebrew to interested Jews; however "the rhetoric of redemption

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<sup>58</sup> It is worth mentioning that this generational shift was also apparent among some non-Jewish Soviets. Zhdanov's son criticized the government's endorsement of Lysenko's theories, which led Stalin to rebuke both father and son: "Stalin actually scolded "the fathers"—Zhdanov, D. T. Shepilov, and M. A. Suslov, the older generation of party ideologists—for failing to control their "sons"" (Roi 1991, 190). This was an early sign of the generational rebellion that would grow during the Thaw and eventually blossom into the broader Soviet dissident movement.

in Zion, of rebuilding Jewish life in a Jewish state,” continued to be “not simply absent, but also unthinkable in the Soviet context” - moreover, “this particular narrative can rarely be found” even in the post-Soviet era in ex-Soviet states (Gershenson 2013, 227), a surprising continuation of Soviet reality among post-Soviet Jews that I will address later to offer a tentative explanation for why Purim-Stalin has not found fictional expression in the former Soviet Union. Rather, it could only find expression in the diaspora both during and after the Soviet period, where the sons’ generation brought Purim-Stalin to its fruition.

In the perestroika film *Ladies’ Tailor* (1990), there is “an Eternal Jew, portrayed as if outside historical time,” seen “sitting in the middle of an empty room that could be anywhere, anyplace, anytime,” “swaying slightly” while “quietly saying the millennia-old words of a traditional funeral prayer, *El Male Rachamim*”; he can be mourning “past suffering,” “future catastrophe,” or both, as his internal clock is set “to a standard Jewish time, from Babylonian exile to eternity” (Gershenson 2013, 210). One of the issues at the heart of the tension between Soviet ideology on the one hand and both Jewish tradition and historical poetics on the other are their conflicting understandings of time. Marxism-Leninism, rooted in Hegelian dialectics, sees history progressing in a linear fashion toward the resolution of all socioeconomic contradictions in communism. As we have seen, historical poetics, as formulated by Veselovsky and subsequent Russian literary theorists, sees literary and cultural history as being discontinuous, where past plots, characters, genres, and motifs perpetually arise and fade in response to socio-psychological and political developments within and across communities. Similarly, Jewish thinkers and practitioners over the millennia have developed an understanding of “Jewish time” as something with recurring patterns, where the same kinds of events, experiences, and sociopolitical developments cycle through Jewish individual and communal existence from biblical times to

the present. As one writer put it, “Jewish time is cyclical and circular”: while the “historical details are interchangeable,” the “patterns and underlying meaning are consistent and eternal.”<sup>59</sup> This view of Jewish time is inculcated in practitioners through annual holidays and celebrations, as well as the tradition of reading weekly Torah portions every Shabbat, which results in working through the entire Torah over the course of a year before starting over again. These cyclical practices have led Jewish thinkers and historians to view Jewish history in similar terms, as a series of repeating narratives, a view I argue is internalized by most Jews, a primary factor accounting for the creation of the legend of Stalin’s Jewish deportation plan and its representation in Purim-Stalin.

However, Judaism also carries an internal tension in viewing time as both linear and cyclical. A linear path can be drawn from Creation through Revelation to ultimate Redemption. Even cyclical holidays that recur every spring, summer and fall are historicized into Exodus (Passover), the giving of the Torah (Shavuot) and the sojourn in the desert (Sukkot) before the final arrival in the promised land.<sup>60</sup> The tensions between the conflicting worldviews of Judaism and Marxism-Leninism are complicated by the competing Messianic view of Jewish time, which sees cyclical Jewish time ultimately coming to end when a Messiah from the line of David eventually gathers all Jews in the land of Israel to usher in an era of global peace. This Messianic view of time is central to Christianity, which views Jesus as this Messiah and sees his eventual second coming as ushering in the “World to come” according to the New Testament. I concur with philosophers like Karl Popper that Marx, the grandson of Orthodox Rabbis and son of

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<sup>59</sup> Jeffrey Veidlinger, “Du Lebst, Mayn Folk’: Bergelson’s Play Prints Ruveni in Historical Context (1944–1947),” in Joseph Sherman and Gennady Èstraïkh, *David Bergelson: from Modernism to Socialist Realism* (Leeds: Legenda, 2007), 282.

<sup>60</sup> Frans Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, translated by Barbara E. Gaili (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

Christian converts, argued for a view of history in his philosophy that reflected a secularized and politicized messianism, which replaced the world to come with the end of history as embodied in communism. This view was embedded in Soviet ideology and found expression in its attack first on Judaism and later, under Stalin, on Jewish memory itself in the anti-Cosmopolitan campaigns, which sought to eradicate these competing cyclical views of time embodied in both Judaism and Veselovskyism. Soviet Jews of the fathers' generation embraced this messianic view of communism, a theme that finds expression in most of the novels discussed in this dissertation. Like Marx, they embraced the secularized and politicized messianism of their forefathers' Judaism, shifting their Messianic hopes away from a scion of the House of David to the leaders of the USSR.<sup>61</sup> They thought the Russian Revolution would inaugurate the world to come in the USSR, only to realize that they were caught in another cycle of Jewish circular time. Stalin's pivot away from international revolution toward socialism in one country was an embodiment of this larger war on memory and historical worldviews considered incommensurate with Soviet ideology. We will see the role that Zionism, i.e. the call for a recreation of and return to the Jewish homeland, played in providing a conclusion to the Soviet Jewish story, especially in Wiesel's works on the subject. Jewish cyclical time is similarly at work in the Soviet Jewry Movement, and the eventual freedom of Soviet Jews to emigrate from the USSR and the empire's ultimate collapse are key to the fruition of the Purim-Stalin genre.

The clash between cyclical Jewish time and progressive Soviet time is visible within the works of the Soviet writers discussed earlier, which represented the events surrounding Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan while straddling the line between these two conflicting

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<sup>61</sup> The title of Dara Horn's 2006 novel about the USSR's betrayal of these hopes of the Soviet Jewish father's generation, *The World to Come*, succinctly summarizes this shift.



understandings of time. They portrayed Russian Jewish history in line with communist propaganda on the subject and within the norms of socialist realism on addressing antisemitism. As such, on the surface, antisemitism is something that existed during the Imperial period but was being progressively eradicated under Soviet rule. This was a perspective mirrored in earlier, officially sanctioned Soviet novels on the subject like Aleksandr Fadeyev's *The Rout* (1926), which I will discuss later. But they also broke with this tradition by representing the aberration of Stalin's postwar return to the earlier antisemitic policies and actions of the Imperial period, thereby showing that history was not developing in a strictly linear path under the Soviets. However, they could not overcome the Soviet taboo on viewing Stalin's antisemitic pogroms within the *longue durée* of biblical and secular Jewish history. As we saw, due to overriding censorship norms, Soviet literature and film of the time could not make overt "Jewish biblical and historical references" and thereby "place Jewish suffering in a...wider context and emphasize...the circular nature of Jewish time" (Gershenson 2013, 35). They could only hint at this, like Grossman does in *Life and Fate* by implying that Nazi Germany and Stalin's USSR were "just another iteration of the cycle of historic persecutions against Jews" (Gershenson 2013, 33) without explicitly referring to this earlier history. Yet this is precisely what subsequent writers in the diaspora did, with their greater freedom of expression and knowledge of Jewish history.

For millennia, the Book of Esther came to exemplify the eternal miracle of Jewish survival for Jewish communities around the world, while Haman became a prototype for all subsequent persecutors of the Jewish people (Carruthers 2008, 12). The "logic behind the annual celebration of Purim" is the "repetition of crisis" through Jewish history (Carruthers 2008, 19), with an emphasis on the betrayal by the government of the local Jewish community's faith in it

to protect them, a theme that finds particular resonance in Purim-Stalin. Since being included in the Tanakh, Jews (and others) “have found a swathe of Mordecais, Esthers, Hamans and even Ahasueruses in the world around them” (Carruthers 2008, 31). This process continued with the creation of the Purim spiel in the early modern period, where Jews similarly identified with the plot and message of these performances, regarded them as being “analogous to their situation as Jews in the Diaspora” suffering the same “persecutions” as the characters and hopefully ultimately gaining similar redemption (Belkin 2009, 21). Just as earlier Purim celebrations in temple, at home, and in the streets annually brought the Purim story to life for its celebrants, these Jewish folk plays blurred the line between “the remote myth” and “the spectators’ actual life,” with the spectators encouraged to identify “personally with the situation, as they shared the space with the players as part of the play” (Belkin 2009, 22). The practice of annually reading and acting out the Megillah encouraged Jews to recognize their own modern Hamans to curse and find modern Mordecais and Esthers to bless, while giving thanks for past and *future* deliverances from such enemies (Binder 1949, 210-11). Simultaneously, its “narrative of danger and survival explains why Purim celebrations have long been at the heart of Jewish self-understanding” (Carruthers 2020, 1).

By the time of the events that gave rise to the legend of Stalin’s Jewish deportation plan, Soviet Jews had only a vague cultural recollection of these Purim traditions, celebrations and reenactments. But those subconscious recollections later organized these events in collective Soviet Jewish memory into what became a fresh legend, a Soviet Jewish variation of the Purim story. As those earlier cultural memories returned with greater clarity after Soviet Jews reclaimed their Jewish heritage in the USSR and abroad, those folk memories combined with their experiences under Stalin to give birth to the narrative recounted in Purim-Stalin. Having lost the

cultural memory of Purim, writers in the USSR didn't include the deportation legend in their representations of the events of 1953. But Jewish writers abroad, first non-Soviets and eventually post-Soviets, eventually included the deportation legend because they were conditioned to view these events in the light of Jewish cyclical history, particularly Purim. The Purim-Stalin genre represented a return of Soviet Jews to Jewish history after falling out of it during Stalin's reign. It was non-Soviet Jews like Wiesel who began this process in fiction before Soviet Jews themselves would continue it in the diaspora. While the Soviet writers discussed earlier had hinted at this, non-Soviet writers like Wiesel exercised their "authorial prerogative for finalization" (Kliger 2015, 237) to endow the events of 1953 with redemptive meaning in the context of Jewish cyclical time. Writing within an ancient tradition, these non-Soviet Jewish writers could exercise the "authorial function of communal and redemptive finalization, endowing" the experience of Soviet Jews under Stalin "with immanent meaning" (Kliger 2015, 237). Trapped inside the Soviet system's linear model of time that was itself debunked by Stalin's return to Imperial era-style state-sponsored antisemitism, early post-Stalin Soviet writers could not know how their story would end, whereas "the present-as-past" temporality of cyclical Jewish time privileged the "authorial finalization" (Kliger 2015, 242) we find in Wiesel by giving him a model in Purim and other Jewish traditions for envisioning the ending to what he saw as the same narrative playing out in these events.

### **Elie Wiesel and Soviet Jewry**

At one point in the Book of Esther, Mordecai says to the eponymous heroine that if she remains silent about Haman's genocidal plans, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place (Esther 4:14). Mordecai's words reflected his faith that even if Esther remained silent and did nothing to stop Haman from carrying out his planned genocide against her fellow

Persian Jews, salvation would come from another source to thwart the viceroy's plans. In the Megillah, Esther does not remain silent and uses her position of influence as the Queen to bring Haman's reign of terror to an end. In the USSR, though Soviet Jewry survived Stalin's reign of terror, the state-sponsored antisemitism unleashed by the dictator continued after his death, albeit in mitigated form. While Soviet Jewish writers and filmmakers got away with the occasional surreptitious references to these events, they were not heard by the outside world. This led to Soviet Jews being perceived as *The Jews of Silence*, the title of Wiesel's nonfiction account of his time observing Soviet Jews in the USSR in the decade after Stalin's death, at the tail end of the Thaw and the beginning of the neo-Stalinism of the Brezhnev era. Subtitled *A Personal Report on Soviet Jewry*, Wiesel's book reflected the (mis)perception that, unlike Esther, Soviet Jews were remaining silent about their oppression at the hands of their government. What he discovered was that despite official censorship, Soviet Jews were speaking out; rather, it was Jews in the West that were the Jews of silence for not speaking up on their behalf, something he sought to change with his articles and books on the subject. An early example of the activism that would define the Soviet Jewry movement, the work finds Wiesel speaking on behalf of Soviet Jews he initially thought were not speaking for themselves, embodying Mordecai's belief that "relief and deliverance" would arise for Soviet Jews "from another place" if not from themselves.

What Wiesel and the Soviet Jewry Movement discovered was that Soviet Jews were indeed speaking for themselves in the form of the refusenik and dissident movements that were agitating internally and eventually externally for the Soviet government to allow its Jews to practice their religion freely, live without discrimination, and be allowed to emigrate. At the time of Wiesel's first foray into the matter, these protests by Soviet Jews themselves were just getting

underway and were being successfully stifled by the Soviet government, which gave Wiesel and other Western Jews the sense that Soviet Jews were remaining silent on their own behalf. It was only after spending time among them that Wiesel realized that this was a forced silence, about which this book helped raise greater awareness in the West. Wiesel's work contributed to the creation of the Soviet Jewry Movement, which both amplified these dissident Soviet Jewish voices and spoke on their behalf to their own governments as well as that of the USSR. As the movement achieved some success in pressuring the Soviet government to allow some of its Jews to emigrate, Soviet Jews were no longer perceived as Jews of silence but rather as formerly silenced Jews that were now reclaiming their position in global Jewish history. Wiesel's subsequent novels on Soviet Jews in the 1970s and 80s reflected this shift, where he now depicted them as both victims of Bolshevism and unwitting dupes of Stalinism that paid the price in the fathers' generation for their complicity in Stalin's crimes. Building on his discoveries about changing Soviet Jewish consciousness in *The Jews of Silence*, *The Oath* and *The Testament* were also the first fictional representations of the generation of Soviet Jewish sons turning against the communist ideology of their fathers toward the Judaism and Zionism of their grandfathers.

Before going to the USSR, Wiesel was not certain how much he could trust the reports of Jewish oppression in the Soviet Union, especially (as a Holocaust survivor) in their comparison with the situation of Jews under the Nazis. But, after visiting the USSR, Wiesel saw himself as a witness to Soviet Jews' silence, much as he had borne witness to the crimes of the Nazis; those he met entreated him, "Do not forget; tell it all" (10). Wiesel's works captured a palpable but inexplicable sense of fear among Soviet Jews. In *The Oath*, a character says that a Jew's fear must be believed. For Wiesel, Soviet Jews spoke a different language, that of fear, which

Western Jews already did not understand only decades after the Holocaust. However, Wiesel also claimed in *The Jews of Silence* that Soviet Jews sometimes embellish attacks on their community “under the influence of...mass paranoia” (16). As an outsider bearing witness to their experience, Wiesel brought both his skepticism and sympathy as a Holocaust survivor, something a non-survivor might not have brought to the mission. This led to a prescient ambivalence regarding the Soviet Jewish experience that was later reflected in scholarly opinion on Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan: on the one hand, Jews who lived through those postwar years had real reason to fear for their lives; on the other hand, those fears might have found expression in the alleged deportation plan as a fantasy of what Stalin was capable of doing, rather than actually planning to do. I believe this ambivalence accounts for why Wiesel does not represent the deportation plan in these works. However, he does for the first time connect Soviet Jewish salvation to their return to Judaism, with the emigration movement as a kind of modern Exodus, where Zionism and emigration would provide the happy ending to the story of their freedom from bondage in the Soviet court of the Red Pharaohs.<sup>62</sup>

The dilemma of God's silence in the face of evil is more pertinent post Holocaust and is engaged with in Elie Wiesel's *The Trial of God*, a purimshpil of a mock prosecution of God within the purimshpil of the trial itself. Edith Pearlman's short story 'Purim Night', set in a post-war Displaced Persons camp, instead presents the State of Israel as the answer to persecution... The story ends with the skeptical Ludwig's return to Israel and assertion of salvation (Carruthers 2008, 27).

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<sup>62</sup> Many Soviet Jews sought a home in countries other than Israel, which led to discussion as to whether the Soviet Jewry movement was a Human Rights movement or a Zionism movement (Olim and Noshrim).

Just as Wiesel had used the Purim spiel model in *The Trial of God* to grapple with the Holocaust, he would employ it in these works to grope toward a conclusion to the story of Purim-Stalin, arguing it was not Stalin's death that saved Soviet Jews, but their return to Judaism and, ultimately, Exodus to the Promised Land of their ancestors.

### *The Jews of Silence*

*The Jews of Silence: A Personal Report on Soviet Jewry* was published in 1966 as a collection of articles Wiesel had written about his experience visiting the USSR in 1965 during the High Holidays. In his 2011 introduction to this work about his first journey to “that forsaken land,” he wrote that, like many Jews outside of the Iron Curtain, he did not know what he would find: “Are they still there? Haven't they been either physically annihilated by Hitler or spiritually assimilated by Stalin?” (vii) As we saw, this connection between Hitler and Stalin reflected a perspective already evident in the works of Grossman, but it was not so widespread before Wiesel's report. Early in the work itself, Wiesel shows skepticism regarding this comparison: for years, he “was unwilling, or unable” to believe the scope “of Jewish suffering in the Soviet Union” portrayed in “all the books and articles” and testimonies “given at public meetings or behind closed doors” (4). He “was sure the reports were exaggerated” to “arouse public opinion” and “stir people from the apathy,” while being mindful “of the danger in drawing facile historical analogies between Communist Russia and Europe under the Nazis” (5). This reflected the ambivalence of contemporary views on Stalin: while the dictator might have prevented Jews from practicing their religion and created a culture of widespread antisemitism, at least he had defeated Hitler. Wiesel himself initially believed that, despite the various forms of state-sponsored antisemitism endured by Soviet Jews, an “abyss of blood” separated “Moscow from Berlin” (5). Like Grossman, Wiesel never simply equated Bolshevism with Nazism. But this

work did mark a transition toward the harder line reflected in the introduction, which ultimately found expression in the Soviet Jewry Movement: Jews were in equal need of being saved from the USSR as they had been from the Nazis. As a Holocaust Survivor, Wiesel knew what it meant to be forgotten, as well as the importance of bearing witness, and he used his stature to bring the world's attention to the plight of Soviet Jews.

Wiesel's uncertainty about Soviet Jewish life reflected the imposed Soviet silence on the topic discussed earlier. Wiesel noted that during the Stalin era, Jews were tricked into registering for exit visas only to be imprisoned, causing contemporary Soviet Jews to "hesitate to apply for emigration permits" (71). Instead, he claims, they "prefer to wait ... and to be silent" (71), though in reality many had already applied for and received such permits at this point. Scholars of the Doctors' Plot have argued that the accused doctors vowed never to discuss their ordeal after their release because of the possible consequences for themselves and their families in the always unpredictable political climate of the USSR. Unable to discuss it, their ordeal remained incomprehensible to even the doctors themselves. For Dr. Yakov Rapoport, who wrote a memoir on the subject, the plot reflected only Stalin's diseased antisemitic paranoia, rather than a systematic effort to answer the Jewish question in the USSR once and for all. Government agents involved in executing the Doctors' Plot have said that they were working primarily from oral, not written, orders. Stalin "rarely wrote anything down, kept no diary, and destroyed nearly everyone around him who knew too much" (Brent and Naumov 2001, 29). The dictator "seldom committed his deeper political strategies to writing" (Brent and Naumov 2001, 30). After Stalin's death, those directly involved with the Doctors' Plot were either executed or imprisoned. Beria did his utmost to "eradicate all vestiges of the plot from public consciousness" (Brent and Naumov 2001, 250). This government erasure of the Doctors' Plot from public consciousness



continued under Khrushchev, who wanted to sweep away all scrutiny of it, which would only lead to an examination of the system and apparatchiks that gave birth to it and, thus, Khrushchev himself. Wiesel was uncertain about what he could believe about reports of violence against Soviet Jews because they might be shared either by informers to mislead him “into spreading false reports” or “good men who had simply spoken out of fear, embellishing what they had heard with details of their own imagining” (16). These “good men,” a synecdoche for Soviet Jewry, “acted under the influence of that mass paranoia which from time to time attacks the Russian Jewish community” (16). This Jewish fear “lurks in every pair of eyes” and “makes itself felt in every conversation,” having “penetrated the cells of their bodies” and clinging “to them like a hateful second skin” (81). It “has remained with them from the days of Stalin,” as “many of the horrors of that period have yet to be uncovered. The general populace feels practically nothing of this fear; apparently everyone but the Jews has managed to forget those days. The Jews alone remain bound in terror, and who can predict when, or if, they will ever be released?” (81). This perceived misinformation and paranoia, combined with the imposed silence from the government and survivors themselves, might further explain why the Doctors’ Plot was not mentioned in this work. And while it is mentioned in his subsequent novels on the subject, the legend of Stalin’s Jewish deportation plan is not.

In his opening note to the reader, Wiesel asserted that Soviet Jews had fallen out of Jewish history, writing that he went to the USSR “to penetrate the silence of the more than three million Soviet Jews who have, since the Revolution of 1917, lived apart from their people” (xi). This effort to “act as a witness” was part of an effort to return them to Jewish history: “I went to Russia drawn by the silence of its Jews. I brought back their cry” (1). A Holocaust survivor, Wiesel knows from experience “that for Jews there exists only one destiny” (110). Wiesel

quickly learns “of the attempts being made to annihilate the Jewish Soul by eradicating all memory of its historical identity” and replacing it with antisemitic propaganda like Kichko’s *Judaism without Embellishment*, a blatantly defamatory book written by “a member of the Academy” and “printed by a government press and distributed in tens of thousands of copies by an official government agency” (32). The Soviet government wants its Jews “to feel cut off from world Jewry” by censoring “every news item concerning Jewish action taken on their behalf” in order to convince them “to abandon their illusory expectations of help from America or Western Europe” and depend instead “solely on the good will of the Kremlin” (61). Thus, the only way for Soviet Jews to overcome their isolation and solitude was to locate their millions of “lost brothers and exchange with them a sign of life” (58), something Wiesel and the Soviet Jewry Movement set out to help them do. He met a young, non-religious, Yiddish-speaking Jewish woman “whose parents had been born after the Revolution” and “had received an anti-religious education” (63). Her parents were the product of the “error of the great Jewish revolutionaries”, who thought “fifty years ago that to realize their universal dream they had first to deny their attachment to Judaism” (112). Now, their children have realized that “no enduring truth could be proclaimed” (112) that emanated from this lie and denial. She had imbibed all of the anti-Jewish propaganda of her parents’ generation “from textbooks, government pamphlets, and the press”: “the Jewish religion...was based on outdated values”; “the Jewish people...was made up of capitalists and swindlers”; and “the State of Israel...was aggressive, racist, and imperialist” (52). And yet, she is an early example of the sons’ generation’s insistence on pride in its Jewish identity: “What does it matter what they think of us ... it's what we think that counts... I’ll tell you why I am a Jew. Because I like to sing” (53). Though she had most likely never witnessed a Purim spiel, it is Jewish song that allows and encourages her to break her silence. Similarly,

despite being “a sworn communist” like “his father before him,” another Jew, who had fought in World War II “and had been decorated in Berlin,” decided that as long as the government “made him feel like a Jew” by thwarting his professional development “on account of his Jewishness,” “he might as well act accordingly” (54).

Citing Ehrenburg, who “wrote in his memoirs that he would call himself a Jew as long as a single anti-Semite remained on Earth” (55), Wiesel’s work reflected the process introduced by Ehrenberg and Grossman in their works discussed earlier, whereby Soviet antisemitism was precisely what returned Soviet Jews to their Jewish identity. By 1965, this

is an important factor in bringing young people together at the synagogue to rejoice in the Torah. Precisely because it is not easy to be a Jew in Russia, Jewish consciousness will continue to grow. “We are Jews for spite,” one student said to me... For want of better teachers, it is the anti-Semites who are making them Jews... Fifty years of Communist rule...have proved to the Jews that no matter what they do, they will always remain an unwanted element in Russian society, denied the right to live as Jews and yet, as Jews, unable wholly to assimilate into non-Jewish society (55).

In Russia, Jews “are not Russian enough,” while in the other Soviet Republics, “the complaint is just the opposite,” “Jews are much too Russian” (78). Unlike Wiesel and his Western coreligionists, Soviet Jews don’t “live in a country where Jews can afford the luxury of asking questions” (55). For them, “being Jewish is not a matter of words...but of existence”; “a Jew is one who knows when to ask questions and when to give answers ... and when to do neither” (55). Through disenfranchisement and imposed silence, the Soviet regime had made Jews instead of Soviets out of them.

Despite this silence, Wiesel sees “tens of thousands of Jews singing and dancing” outside a synagogue “in the heart of Moscow” on “the night of Simchat Torah” (56). After the destruction of second temple, music and revelry were forbidden to Jews except on Simchat Torah and Purim; in the case of the latter, this eventually developed into the Purim spiel (Binder 1949, 209). People accused his account of Simchat Torah in Moscow of being imaginary, claiming that the idea that fifty years after the Revolution young people in Russia would sing “in the streets of their desire to express their identity” and “link their destiny with the destiny of their people,” having “secretly learned what was not allowed to be taught them in school,” was “a myth” (108). This was because to them a “Jew in fear...was natural,” whereas “a Jew stronger than his fear did not exist” (3). In his discussion of Simchat Torah, Wiesel introduces the theme of Soviet Jewish self-realization, laying the groundwork for its evolution into Jewish self-defense and revenge in later Purim-Stalin works. In his epilogue to the book, written years later, Wiesel noted that Israel’s 1967 victory in the Six-Day War “gave Soviet Jews a clear, indisputable reason to be proud of being Jewish. With pride in Israel came a deep desire to make a personal contribution to the life and future of the Jewish state,” though “no sooner had the Six Day War ended then the granting of exit visas came to a halt,” with “no chance of applications being granted as long as diplomatic relations with Israel, broken off in the war, were not restored” (118). In Israel’s victory, Soviet Jews saw Jewish warriors standing up to their enemies, an image that post-Soviet Jewish writers would later adopt to reimagine Purim-Stalin as a story of Jewish self-defense and revenge against their Soviet oppressors.

In his 2011 introduction, Wiesel wrote that the book reflected a “time when Jews in the Soviet Union exposed themselves to peril by wanting to remain Jewish. Today nearly a million of them live in Israel. Others emigrated to America. How can the author of *The Jews of Silence*

not experience pure joy?” (ix). Wiesel noted that the love of the Soviet Jews he met in 1965 for Israel exceeded “that of young Jews anywhere else in the world” (56). They regarded the State of Israel “not as a territorial unit operating according to its own laws and within its own borders, but as a distant dream filling the veins of reality with sacred blood” (66). While God gave “the reality of Israel” to the West, “to dream of Israel he left to the Jews of Russia” (75). Zionism is essential to Wiesel’s understanding of Soviet Jewish existence: “For the first time the history of Israel coincides with that of Soviet Judaism and also that of the Diaspora, and inside this history is an interdependence” (110). As such, whatever “sustains the Jew of Kiev reassures the Jew of Petach Tikvah; whatever mortifies the old dreamer of Odessa humiliates the young warrior mounting guard over Suez” (110). Wiesel the storyteller, engaging in mythmaking by transforming and enhancing his encounters, recounts a meeting with a rabbinical scholar in Moscow that, in “comparing the present situation to that of the recent past,” quoted “the commentary given by Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk to a verse of Exodus”:

“and the King of Egypt died, and the children of Israel sighed by reason of their bondage.” The question was raised: All the time Pharaoh was alive the Jews labored and suffered; why, then, did they sigh at his death? Rabbi Menachem Mendel answered that before Pharaoh died, even to sigh had been forbidden. “Do you understand?” the scholar said. “Today we are permitted to sigh... although only when no one is listening” (86).

By introducing Stalin as Pharaoh and referring to the coming Soviet Jewish emigration movement before it had really begun in earnest as a modern Exodus, Wiesel shifts the discussion of the Soviet Jewish experience from the linear Soviet time of the writers discussed earlier toward that of cyclical Jewish time. By representing it as a repeat of Exodus, which he will develop more fully in his subsequent novels on the subject, Wiesel created the metaphorical

bridge subsequent writers would cross to link the events surrounding the Doctors' Plot and Stalin's death to Purim.

### The Oath

In *The Jews of Silence*, Wiesel wrote that what tormented him most about his experience in the USSR was not the Jews of Silence he met there, but the silence of the Jews he lived among: "we were the Jews of Silence, the Jews enjoying security, the Jews of the Western world" (108). Soviet Jews had already begun to speak out about their oppression, while asking Jews of the West to speak out forcefully, openly, and directly on their behalf. Having done his part to break that silence in that 1966 nonfiction work on Soviet Jewry, Wiesel would go on to write two fictional treatments trying to make sense of their history and experience in relation to global Jewry of the past and present. The first of these was *The Oath* in 1973, which told the story of Azriel, the only survivor of a 1920's pogrom in the fictional Hungarian town of Kolvillàg that swears an oath of silence to never speak about the pogrom afterwards. Azriel becomes a Jewish "Navenadnik," or wanderer, enduring a kind of living death from this forced silence until he finally tells his story to a suicidal child of Holocaust survivors that claims to have no story of his own. This gives the latter a reason to live, since he now carries a story inside of him that he must preserve. Both find meaning in bearing witness by speaking of the dead and thus keeping alive their memory, like Wiesel had done with the Holocaust and the plight of Soviet Jewry and Grossman and Grekova had done for the survivors of the Shoah and Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns. Quoting Levi-Yitzhak of Berdichev (Grossman's birthplace), Wiesel writes that, "Man is responsible not only for what he says, but also for what he does not say" (154). Unable to bear the silence surrounding the oppression of Soviet Jews by Stalin and his successors, Wiesel chose instead to bear witness to it through his literary work, a task

embodied in his characters' fates. Wiesel celebrated and embodied the role of the witness in Jewish tradition, which claimed that God's covenant with the Jews was dependent on them accepting the responsibility of bearing witness, which linked past and future generations to one another that would remain alien otherwise. But, unlike his Soviet predecessors, Wiesel represented his victims fighting back, as shown by the young Jewish students who defend themselves during the pogrom, seeing themselves "as disciples of the young General Bar Kokhba, occupying the Judean mountains, erupting into the legend of their people" (190). Here, Wiesel presented a vital step in the development of Purim-Stalin, showing Jews engaging in self-defense rather than being merely the passive victims they were in the earlier texts. Wiesel asserts that no one is required to explain suffering, "only to fight it" (169). These students embody the old/new Jewish warriors that will take revenge against their Stalinist oppressors in later Purim-Stalin works like *The Yid*, which also invokes Bar-Kokhba via a play about the ancient Jewish uprising produced in Mikhoels' Moscow State Jewish Theatre. Like Wiesel, later Purim-Stalin authors will use words as their weapon to avenge the victims of Stalin that had no real weapons of their own with which to defend themselves against him.

Wiesel connected this story of forced silence and ultimate revelation with Soviet Jewry through the character of Abrasha, a Jewish recruiter for the Comintern for whom Azriel works for a time, helping him recruit new communists from Talmudic schools and converting them to Bolshevism. Wiesel describes Abrasha as "another kind of Navenadnik," whose communist message represented a "repudiation of the Holy tradition" that parents (the grandparents' generation) abhorred and the young (the sons' generation) embraced (71). Wiesel presents Azriel and Abrasha as opposing foils, disparate twins representing their generation's split between following the religious traditions of their ancestors and embracing the new communist religion,

respectively. Abrasha spoke “with a fervor not unlike that of a Talmudic student,” which Azriel and many Soviet Jewish leaders had been, calling communism “messianism without God” (73). He believed, like the other Jewish Bolsheviks of his generation encountered in the early Soviet texts, that communism would finally put an end to Jewish suffering and was thus Jewry’s only hope for salvation. Azriel, a pogrom survivor like Vera in *Fresh Legend*, is initially won over to this message, before renouncing it after Bolshevism’s antisemitic reality is revealed to him during Stalin’s purges, which claim Abrasha’s life. Abrasha’s fate embodied that of all of the internationalists, especially Jews, purged during the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign and earlier. A twentieth century version of the Wandering Jew, Azriel represents the entire cycle of Eastern European Jewry’s ideological evolution over the course of the century, as embodied in Purim-Stalin, from Judaism to communism and back again. Abrasha’s fate shows the failure of the Soviets’ effort to take Jews out of cyclical Jewish history into their own linear version of it, while Azriel’s breaking of his oath of silence to tell the history of his community to the young man represents Eastern Europe Jewry’s return to millennia of global Jewish history. Wiesel argues that everything in Jewish history is connected and linked: “The sacrifice of Isaac and the destruction of the Temple and the successive pogroms all over the Ukraine and Poland” (193). Jews are “the people of memory” for whom oblivion “is the worst of curses”; a “deed transmitted is a victory snatched from death,” while a “witness who refuses to testify as a false witness” (194). Jewish memory robs “the executioner of his final victory” because the “survivor-storyteller” is immortal, saving the “traces of his crimes” and “evidence of his cruelty” as “examples and warnings for the benefit of mankind present and future” (242). Azriel and the young man both find their purposes in life in being messengers transmitting Jewish history, from which the Soviet regime, particularly under Stalin, tried to erase and permanently separate Soviet



Jews. However, Azriel also learns that not all words can be trusted, and that silence, “transmitted only among the initiated like a secret tradition that eludes language” (194), must also be deciphered to understand history. As with the rest of the Purim-Stalin genre, which attempts to represent an alleged deportation plan that was not contemporaneously committed to paper by either its perpetrators or victims, Wiesel’s works on Soviet Jewry are an effort to decipher their silence to reveal the truth of their experience.

### *The Testament*

“I lived a Communist and I die a Jew.”

-Paltiel in *The Testament* (16)

Wiesel’s next novel was *Le Testament d'un poète juif assassiné* (1980), translated into English as *The Testament* (1981), which tells the story of a Russian Jewish poet, Paltiel Kossova, who abandons his religious upbringing to become a Comintern agent, only to be killed on Stalin’s orders by his former colleagues as part of the Night of the Murdered Poets. Unlike the other victims, however, he leaves behind a “testament,” which his NKVD interrogator hoped would be a confession of his crimes against the government but becomes instead a memoir about his journey from Judaism to communism and back again. After his death, his wife and son Grisha eventually emigrate to Israel, where his testament comes to light. Wiesel here develops the Abrasha subplot from *The Oath* into its own novel, while introducing and developing the sons’ generation’s return to Judaism and Zionism in a major way for the first time in the Purim-Stalin genre. This theme of shifting ideologies between the generations as an embodiment of the cyclical nature of Jewish time is reflected formally in the novel's narrative structure, which unfolds in a cyclical rather than linear fashion, like *The Oath* before it.

Paltiel, unlike Abrasha but like Azriel in the previous novel, grows up in a religious household in Imperial Russia and receives a religious education. Thus, like other contemporaneous observant Jews, Paltiel's family linked itself to the present "while living in the past" (39). Psychologically and culturally, they exist within Jewish cyclical time. Growing up with the pogroms and widespread antisemitism of pre-revolutionary Russia, Paltiel visualizes his enemies as "Egyptians in the time of pharaoh. Looters in the time of Haman. Crusaders in the shadow of icons, their faces twisted by hate. The enemy never changes. Nor does the Jew" (43). This is the first time Purim is referenced directly in any of these texts, a sign that Wiesel is beginning to link the Soviet Jewish experience with the Purim story, which he will develop later in the novel. Paltiel's family survives a pogrom by hiding, an experience they compare to that of the biblical Israelites: God made the Egyptians/pogromists "deaf and blind...And us He made mute... Like Egypt, long ago" (46). The pogrom is not only another iteration of the cycle of antisemitic violence stretching back to the Torah; it is, in a metaphorical and psychological way, the *same* experience. Also, in this pre-revolutionary period, silence is the only means of survival, as it will be again under Stalin and to some extent his successors, until that silence is partially broken by Soviet Jews after Stalin's death and only fully after they emigrate and the USSR collapses. In Purim-Stalin, Jewish silence is a product of state-sponsored antisemitism, whereas *spiel*, in all of its variegated meanings, is synonymous with freedom. Being a Jew in a Christian (and later Soviet) world "meant to know and become accustomed to fear" (40). But, fear is also "one of the Biblical curses" (137), a product of living within Jewish cyclical time, knowing that peace and violence alternate with one another in Jewish history. Paltiel's father forces him to say the Shema Yisrael during a pogrom, telling him, "You're not to leave God just because the enemy is close" (44). In times of heightened Jewish fear, this proximity to death triggers a return

to one's religious heritage - many Soviet Jews, longtime Bolsheviks and atheists, were reported to recite the same prayer during their trials and executions during Stalin's various purges.

As many of the characters (and authors) already encountered, Paltiel eventually saw communism as the only way to defeat first antisemitism and then fascism. He is "a good communist; one who repudiated his forebears" (38). Later, after renouncing communism for Judaism at the end of his life, Paltiel sees this earlier repudiation as the product of "being coerced into choosing between exile and disavowal" (189), as had been the case with other Jewish converts through millennia of Jewish history. He becomes an agent of the Comintern (like Potok's real-life protagonist in the post-Soviet *The Gates of November*) and travels around Europe fomenting revolution, recruiting others to the Party and enacting the USSR's foreign policy, like Abrasha had done in the previous novel. His experiences lead to his gradual disillusionment with the Party, though he only realizes this in retrospect after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In Mandate Palestine, he meets a Jewish woman who is a fellow communist that believes "Jewish and Arab blood are the same" and that, "led by the Party," they will "unite in a common front against" the English occupation (166). Ten weeks after saying this, during "bloody riots in Hebron," she herself is "attacked, raped and murdered by a band of Arab marauders who knew nothing of the Communist ideal of human brotherhood" (166). This is an iteration of cyclical antisemitic violence, one of many augurs in the novel of the Party's betrayal of Jewish trust under Stalin, and a foreshadowing of Soviet Jewish salvation via Jewish nationalism and emigration to Israel.

As in the earlier Soviet texts, ghosts appear before Paltiel to remind him of his Jewish heritage during moments of trauma. In Spain during the Civil War, a universalist liberation struggle localized in a nation that had once expelled all of its Jews, a vision of his father appears

implored him to “be a good Jew” (204). Though Paltiel no longer observes the commandments of the Torah and transgresses its laws, he still carries his phylacteries and tefillin around with him in his knapsack, without however putting them on. Representing the Jewish idealism that led Soviet Jews to communism’s message of universal liberation, Paltiel tells this paternal specter that he is fighting this war not just for Spain, but also “for the sake of the Jews” as well as his “Father” (204). Though he has renounced Judaism and his family, Paltiel has internalized the laws of God, the Jewish Primal Father, and thus He and his own father have merged in his mind, representing the link between his familial and cultural heritage that remains somewhere within even if he has rejected it outwardly. In 1946, he titles his published volume of poems *I Saw My Father in a Dream*, even though not a single poem in it mentions his father because he has self-censored by removing all such references before publication. This is an allusion to Stalin’s postwar policy of erasing any final vestiges of Jewish culture; appropriately, it is represented here by Paltiel erasing his father (and the Jewish Heritage he represents) from his work. Paltiel wrote the titular poem as a commemoration for the dead after visiting the grave of his family, who died in the Holocaust. In the uncensored version of the fictional poem, which in the novel would only be published abroad (like *Life and Fate*, *Fresh Legend*, and Soviet Jewish tamizdat literature), he writes,

In my dream my father asked me if he is still my father... I have found a new Rabbi, I told him, a new sage, a new prophet. Advocating brotherhood and equality and peace among nations... A prophet like Isaiah, a dreamer like Hosea, a consoler like the Besht... He laughed when I mentioned his name. Rabbi Karl, our teacher Karl, our prophet Karl Marx. My father is laughing and there are tears in the silence of my dream (257).

Wiesel develops an idea mentioned in his earlier works, which is the replacement by the fathers' generation of Soviet Jews of the Jewish messianism of their forefathers with the secular messianism of Marxism-Leninism. After his reconversion to Judaism, Paltiel notes how the Party was "a sort of religious order. I had only to recall my youth and substitute the Party for the Law or for God... I would even say that my religious education helped me orient myself in my new faith: more than the pure Marxists, I excelled in exegesis as well as in obedience" (279). Like religious Jews fervently awaiting the Messiah, communists tried "to hasten events, to prepare man for the Messiah or the Messiah for man" (142). And like many new converts, they perverted the beliefs of their ancestors to justify spreading their faith by any means necessary: "Great suffering is to precede the luminous explosion of the Messianic age, our mystics tell us... is it possible that those who bring about suffering, hence injustice, hence evil, are doing the work of salvation?" (164) Paltiel compares Marxism directly to Christian messianism: "Paul says that to save the world you must amputate it; to save the arm, you must cut off the little finger. The old metaphor: The worse things are, the better they will become. The more blood flows, the nearer peace" (164). Wiesel places Jews embracing communism within cyclical Jewish history, seeing it as another iteration of Jewish conversion going at least as far back as the first Jewish Christians. Once they convert, however, they fall out of Jewish history. Paltiel exclaims, "Poor Messiah! All the things done for you in your name - all those things you're made to do" (164). Paul's Christian messiah is the same as that of Marxism-Leninism. Paltiel even has a fellow Jewish Comintern agent named Paul, whose story and ideology mirrors that of his biblical namesake. Like Saul, he too changed his name to Paul (from Wolfe). This new Paul is a "messenger of the Revolution" who felt he too had the right "to dethrone kings and gods" (170). At one point, Paul has a meeting with Stalin, when he was just the People's Commissar of

Nationalities, where Stalin asks him if he knows the Bible, to which Paul responds, “No... I have no desire to read the Bible. I am not interested in stories that the rich use to oppress and trick the poor” (171). Though Paul had actually read the Bible, he disowns this knowledge as a way of proving his renunciation of Judaism for communism. Stalin however admits that he studied the Bible at the Seminary, which might have given him the idea for the ambivalent way he would present himself in the events leading up to his alleged Jewish deportation plan, as an Ahasuerus-like protector rather than a Haman-like persecutor. Many of these secular, communist Jews were taken in by this ruse, even seeing in Stalin a Messiah-like figure before realizing their horrible mistake. Later on, Paltiel will similarly describe his relations with his NKVD interrogator as developing “under the sign of religion,” as the latter urges him “to repent, to confess, to purge” himself, “to expiate, to atone, to seek pardon, to be worthy of salvation” (35). Paltiel notes that “these acts are all essentially religious. Priest or inquisitor, you serve the party whose attributes are divine” (35), and whose leader, Stalin, is infallible, if not divine, in the eyes of his followers.

During their meeting, Stalin returns Paul’s father’s name to him: Wolfe Isakovich Goldstein. All of the Jewish Comintern agents in the book take on pseudonyms to conceal their Jewish identities. Paltiel and his fellow Jewish Comintern agents adopt Spanish names while fighting there: “Sheer Madness, all these first names borrowed from operettas, ludicrous masks we donned to run to the battlefield or possibly to death? Whom do we deceive? The Angel of Death is not fooled” (196). They changed their names to avoid “the ties and responsibilities of a name” (199), which caught up to them when Stalin’s regime returned their fathers’ names to them during the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign before purging them. While they may have duped themselves into thinking they could become true Soviets by changing their names, Stalin’s antisemitic campaigns proved they never fooled the Soviet regime. In opposition to the Jewish

commandment to preserve life at all costs, Stalin is the “Angel of Death” for whom death was the means by which he tried to build a new communist utopia.<sup>63</sup>

When Stalin became their enemy, communist Jews (like the followers of Sabatai Zevi, Jacob Frank and other false Messiahs before them) were stunned by the depth of their betrayal, which led to shame and ultimately silence in their inability to speak of their disillusionment. Though Paltiel was not ashamed of having believed in the revolution, he realized after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that he could no longer believe in the Party after “seeing what it has become” (16). Even before World War II, and long before his postwar antisemitic campaigns, Stalin sacrificed Soviet Jews for an alliance with the Nazis. Paltiel notices how after this Soviet Jews “lowered their voices, tried not to be noticed, ... remained in the background” (219). Jews “were no longer supposed to be seen in public... they were to melt into the shadows; they no longer counted. Their opinions, their fears, their feelings, their lives carried little weight” (220). Paltiel returned to the USSR like a dutiful citizen, only to witness firsthand this growing government antisemitism that would culminate in Stalin’s postwar anti-Cosmopolitan campaign, a “new-style pogrom” (281). Stalin’s campaigns were an old/new experience for Soviet Jews, a new iteration of an ancient cycle. While Paltiel feels he is witnessing his “second pogrom” (281) after the one he endured with his parents in pre-revolutionary Russia, it is in reality just another of many pogroms perpetrated against Jews throughout their history. In Odessa (the most Jewish city in the USSR), Paltiel is urged not to speak of his former friends or reminisce about his past as, “under present circumstances, a past is only cumbersome” (217). His official crime is being an internationalist (like Abrasha before him) that had spent the previous decades spreading and

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<sup>63</sup> For Wiesel, the inquisition against Soviet Jews under Stalin mirrored that of the Orthodox Russian Czars – like them, Stalin tried to cleanse the country of Jews in the name of the state religion (Communism) in an attempt to create a Great Russian Empire.

recruiting for the Communist Revolution abroad; but his real crime is being a Jew. These two crimes are now one and the same in the eyes of the regime. The JAC, as a state-sponsored Jewish organization whose official task was to raise international Jewish support for the USSR, had given Soviet Jews the false hope that “one could be a Jew and a communist at the same time” (279); their repression as a part of the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign destroyed this illusion forever. However, in a foreshadowing of how Soviet Jews would first internalize state-sponsored antisemitism before transforming it into Jewish pride, Paltiel acknowledges the “internationalist character” of Jewish nationalism, saying that “there is a deeper and more substantive kinship, because it is far older,” between Jewish strangers across the world “than between two gentile citizens of the same country, the same city and the same profession” (57). The widespread antisemitic persecution leads him to embrace this crime of Jewish cosmopolitanism and brings him back to Judaism:

A Jew may be alone but never solitary, for he remains integrated within a timeless community, however invisible or without geographic or political reality. The Jew does not define himself within geographical categories...; he expresses and identifies himself in historic terms. Jews help one another in order to prolong their common history, to explore and enrich their common destiny, to enlarge the domain of their collective memory (57).

Paltiel realizes that he cannot escape his Jewish identity because it is based on a collective history and memory he shares with all other Jews, which Stalin attempted to destroy and Soviet Jews only slowly regained after his death. By this point in the narrative, everything seems to bring Paltiel “back to Jewish memory,” because “the Jew within” him “was possessed of a memory more ancient than the Communist’s. The Communist conceded to the Talmudist” (190).



He puts on his phylacteries for the first time in decades moments before being arrested by the NKVD.

In prison awaiting execution, Paltiel notes “a black, evil silence rising” and thinks, “I never knew silence could move” (22). Earlier, we saw how the silence surrounding/reflecting the growing antisemitism in the USSR under Stalin began with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. By Paltiel’s arrest, this silence has grown exponentially to encompass not only the Holocaust but the government’s own purges of its Jews, a silence that will only ease slightly after Stalin’s death and only fully after the collapse of the USSR. Victims of Stalin’s earlier purges “had disappeared without a trace. It was forbidden to remember them” (221). Wiesel’s works about Soviet Jewry capture Stalin’s war on Jewish memory and the various facets of their government-enforced silence, with their manifold shades of meaning reflecting submission, salvation, ignorance, fear, pride, and resistance. Soviet Jews unable to speak about these crimes discovered that “silence too could turn into torture” and “become a prison” (179). Wiesel argues that once you are “a slave of silence, you are no longer a man,” and that “God Himself was afraid of silence” (181). This Soviet Jewish silence is the silence of the shame mentioned earlier, emanating from the realization by Jewish communists of the depth of their betrayal by their ideology under Stalin. This betrayal has reduced them to silence about their former ideological beliefs, which can only be broken by returning to the Judaism of their fathers, which provides the language and models for them to make sense of their experience. This takes the form here of “teshuvah,” or repentance, a Hebrew word that literally translates as “returning.” “The process of repentance, as laid out by Maimonides, includes three stages: confession, regret and a vow not to repeat the

misdeed.”<sup>64</sup> Paltiel’s testament, a “confession” of his anticommunist crimes to his Soviet inquisitor, expresses his regret for abandoning the Judaism of his ancestors while vowing to return to it, even if only in his final days among the living.

After the birth of his son Grisha, named after his father Gershon, Paltiel “burst into tears” when the mohel pronounced the name of his father (284). Paltiel thinks of his father and son, the generations surrounding him, as one: “The same thought enveloped them both, the same desire to protect them. I was overwhelmed by remorse: I had lived without being able to help them. And I was afraid: judged by either one of them, what can I say in my defense?” (286) What Wiesel says in Paltiel’s defense is that though he was a Cominternist, an innocent dupe deceived by Stalin before becoming one of his victims (hence the teshuvah of his final testament). This issue of Jewish collaboration with Stalinist terror will be explored in greater depth by Potok in his works on the subject.

Paltiel finds that even in silence as deep, absolute, and profound as that enforced on Soviet Jews by Stalin and his agents, there is hope: “The words you strangle, the words you murder, produce a kind of primary, impenetrable silence. And you will never succeed in killing a silence such as this” (25). Stalin’s regime tried to strangle Soviet Jewry’s religious heritage and murder the words they would use to bear witness to his antisemitic crimes. But, as the history of Russian literature teaches, manuscripts, or in this case testaments, don’t burn. During Paltiel’s interrogation, the testament he wrote in his cell is transcribed by the stenographer Zupanev, who hides it afterwards in secret. Like so many literary works in Russian/Soviet history, Paltiel’s testament is miraculously preserved and eventually published abroad despite the government’s

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<sup>64</sup> MJL, “Teshuvah, or Repentance,” My Jewish Learning, November 30, 2017, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/repentance/>.

effort to destroy it. Zupanev, himself a silent witness to Stalin's crimes and Russian proto-dissident, has "learned to hear the words people leave unsaid, to read the words one promises oneself never to utter as they take shape in the mind" (84). Like Grekova, Andrei Sinyavsky (aka Abram Tertz) and other non-Jewish Soviet dissidents concerned with the plight of Soviet Jewry, Zupanev got "access to the forbidden memories of an entire people reduced to silence" (89) in the form of Paltiel's dying testament. When Grisha meets Zupanev after Stalin's death, the former stenographer has become an old Soviet night "watchman of ghosts" (29) from whom he receives his father's testament to share with the world and give meaning to his existence (much like the dynamic between the young man and Azriel in *The Oath*).

Grisha is a mute as a result of a literal self-imposed silence, having cut his own tongue in two by biting down on it in a fit of rage stemming from his unprocessed anger over his father's murder. This act embodies Soviet Jewry's impotent rage over Stalin's antisemitic crimes being not only unacknowledged and unpunished in the USSR, but also being covered up by Brezhnev's neo-Stalinist regime. Zupanev tells Grisha that each "generation shapes its own truth" and asks, "Who will tell our truth when the witnesses have been murdered?" (90). Zupanev worries that the "crazy historians, the paralyzed acrobats" will do so, unless "the mute orators" and "mute poets...cry forth our truth" (91). Wiesel does not trust historians to tell the truth of the Soviet Jewish experience, as we will see with the later Purim-Stalin authors, who go against the general consensus of contemporary historians to depict Stalin's Jewish deportation plan as a reality and not a legend. Zupanev decides that Grisha will remember his father's testament and tells him that "later, far from this land, you will write it down and you in your turn will assume your role: you will speak on behalf of your dead father" (290). Grisha goes from being a mute Soviet Jew in the USSR to being a writer "In place of his father" (14) after he immigrates to Israel, where he

speaks on behalf of the dead. Named after Paltiel's father, Grisha will embody in his journey his family's return to the Jewish identity of his namesake's generation in the ancient homeland of the Jewish people through the words of his father's last-minute renunciation of communism.

Having lost/forsaken their fathers, both Paltiel and Grisha have many surrogate fathers throughout the novel that steer them away from and help them return to their Jewish roots, respectively. Paltiel's were those in the Party, whose ideology he adopted, while Grisha's guides him back to the traditions of his grandfather and namesake. After Zupanev reveals his father's ultimate reversion to Judaism, Grisha meets another father figure in the narrator, a writer (and stand-in for Wiesel), who faces the "arduous" task of getting Paltiel's "mute son to talk" (13). "Poor Father!", exclaims the narrator, "Your son, your heir, can articulate only unintelligible sounds; your only son is mute" (26). Like Wiesel with Soviet Jewry, the narrator will eventually coax Grisha into telling his story and, by extension, that of Soviet Jewry. For, though he is mute, Grisha "promised himself that...he would learn to understand words before they were born and after they had disappeared" (52). With the narrator's help, he comes to understand the words of the silent Jewish dead to tell their story, as Wiesel's successors will do in subsequent Purim-Stalin texts; like their Soviet predecessors, these writers show that "the dead are not mute; they speak, they cry out" (181). These "men and women of so many forgotten or burned cemeteries" (181) were waiting for the right model to give their silent words meaning, which these writers ultimately found in traditional Jewish narratives like Exodus and Purim.

For Wiesel, writing during the Soviet Jewry Movement, Soviet Jews would only be liberated from Soviet oppression once they could leave the USSR and reenter Jewish history by rejoining their co-religionists. "Truth, for a Jew, is to dwell among his brothers" (16), so nowhere could Soviet Jews return to the truth of their ancestors in a deeper way than in the

ancient Jewish homeland of Israel. Grisha and his mother immigrate to Israel, a symbol of the return of Soviet Jews to the Zionism and Jewish identities (if not necessarily religiosity) of their ancestors.<sup>65</sup> As we have seen before, this return to Jewish identity is, in symbolic terms, conferred matrilineally, a sign that Paltiel's family has returned to Judaism in both spirit and form. The novel represents both the Zionism and anticommunism of the Soviet Jewry Movement shared by many ex-Soviet Jews today: "the place a Jew occupies in universal history is determined by his place in Jewish history... if you believe you must forsake your brothers in order to save mankind, you will save nobody, you will not even save yourself" (205). This is a central theme in Wiesel's writing, prevalent in many of his books and in his stance against Jewish assimilation and false universalization, that is projected onto Soviet Jews here. Wiesel denounces the chauvinist universalism of Bolshevism for the internationalism of Jewish nationalism, arguing that Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns and the USSR's subsequent antisemitic/antizionist policies revealed the lie of communist progressive/linear communist time and proved that Jews exist in cyclical Jewish time.

In prison, Paltiel told his NKVD interrogator that the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign that landed him there reminded him of the Book of Esther. When the interrogator thinks that he is naming a collaborator, Paltiel responds that he is "way off" and that he's referring to "ancient history" (183). Paltiel tells him the Purim story and explains why Haman hated Mordechai so passionately:

Because this solitary Jew was the only one who refused to greet him. Haman states it clearly: 'When I see him, erect and dignified, so different, the rest no longer matters; as I

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<sup>65</sup> The early Zionist pioneers of Bilu (aka the Palestine Pioneers) were secularizers, changing the biblical admonishment "Oh House of Jacob, let us go in the way of the Lord" (Isaiah 2:5) to "Oh House of Jacob, let us go" and taking it as their motto.

face his determination, the honors bequeathed on me by others lose all value.’... “But you, Citizen Magistrate, ... live in the present, not in ancient history, thus draw your own conclusions from Haman's mishap. Think of how he ended ... think of his victories and let me have mine (183).

Paltiel has accepted the truth that Jews live in an always-present past, where ancient history is constantly recurring, unlike communists like the interrogator, who only lives in the progressive present, which tries (in vain) to erase the past by denying both subjective and collective memory. Here, Wiesel elaborates on the passing reference to Purim made earlier to sow the seeds of Purim-Stalin reaped by later authors. Like Haman, Stalin could not stand the Jewish exceptionalism of Soviet Jews, so he tried to eradicate them - but in failing to do so, his mishap was the same as Haman's, and the ultimate victory of Soviet Jews over their oppressors will be the same as that of the ancient Persian Jews. Zupanev tells Grisha about Paltiel's miniature Purim spiel: “We were preparing a trial and he was pestering us with Haman!” (184) Paltiel has finally abandoned linear Soviet time to return for good to cyclical Jewish time, where Soviet Jews are simply reliving the Purim story in the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign. Wiesel avoids having to discuss the existence of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan by having Paltiel die before it was to occur, leaving no characters in the novel to directly witness the events of those days of Soviet Jewish fear and paranoia. However, in discussing the aftermath of the Stalin-Ribbentrop Pact, he does use that direct connection between Bolshevism and Nazism to circumspectly allude to the alleged deportation plan. Paltiel notes that if Hitler had at that moment “demanded the deportation of a million Jews to Siberia, his demand would have been studied with great seriousness, and would not have been rejected. My seniors in Moscow knew better than I. No one spoke of these matters, not even in whispers” (220). Like Grossman had

done, Wiesel backdates the events of the alleged deportation plan to discuss it indirectly. As a direct survivor of Nazi concentration camps, Wiesel was hesitant to fully and directly equate Stalin's antisemitism with Hitler's, which discussing the alleged deportation plan in detail could be construed as doing.<sup>66</sup> Paltiel also sees the GOSET production of *The Revolt of Bar Kokhba* (which Goldberg will directly reference in his tale of Purim-style revenge against Stalin and his antisemitic henchmen in *The Yid*). Zupanev tells Grisha, "Imagine their faces...on the day your father's song will come to haunt them from all corners of the globe" (296). Grisha, too, starts "devising plans for vengeance and justice" (263) while still in the USSR. Subtly, but surely, Wiesel has passed the legend of Stalin's Jewish deportation plan into Jewish fiction, laying the groundwork for its elaboration in later works, while introducing the element of Jewish revenge that will lead to the full flowering of Purim-Stalin in the post-Soviet fictional treatments of the subject.

### **The Refusenik Response: David Shrayer-Petrov's *Doctor Levitin***

Soviet samizdat/tamizdat literature occupies a liminal space between the Soviet and Western fictional representations of Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns discussed so far and the emigre literature I will examine in the following chapter. These works were written in the USSR and were never intended for publication there, being either circulated clandestinely internally (samizdat) or smuggled out of the country and printed abroad (tamizdat). Until the final years of the USSR during glasnost and its collapse soon after, tamizdat literature was the only published "Soviet" work that dealt openly with the Doctors' Plot. This is exemplified by the

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<sup>66</sup> Throughout his life, Wiesel argued for the unique nature of the Holocaust, which could not be equated with any other genocide or ethnic cleansing, including Stalin's. See Michael Berenbaum, *The Vision of the Void: Theological Reflections on the Works of Elie Wiesel* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 181-201.

tamizdat novel *Doctor Levitin* by the refusenik David Shroyer-Petrov. Written in 1979-80 after the author officially became a refusenik, the novel was smuggled abroad and published in Jerusalem in 1986. The author's family was allowed to finally emigrate in 1987 and the novel was published in Russia in 1992 during the first post-Soviet spring. Completed the same year *The Testament* was published, the novel benefitted from not having to conform to Soviet censorship, since the author knew it was never going to be published in the USSR. Furthermore, since Shroyer-Petrov was a refusenik that had already lost his former privileges as an officially sanctioned writer after being expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers, his writing put him into no greater danger of government reprisal than he was already in. Still writing within a Soviet milieu, his work represents how Soviet Jewish perceptions of Stalin's role in the Doctors' Plot and his relationship to Soviet Jewry had shifted since the Thaw period in the wake of the Soviet Jewry movement and its amplification of Jewish identity.

Set in the late 1970s, the novel concerns the household of the eponymous protagonist Doctor Herbert Anatolyevich Levitin, a respected Moscow doctor and professor of medicine. Herbert lives with his Russian wife Tatyana, their son Anatoly, and Tatyana's father Vasily, a retired veteran and Party member. Herbert's grandfather was a Jewish teacher and Talmudic scholar that lived in a Jewish shtetl before the revolution. His son Abraham, Herbert's father, changed his identifiably Jewish name to the Russian Anatoly, joined the revolution, moved to Moscow and became a doctor. During the Doctors' Plot, he was arrested and only released after Stalin's death, dying shortly thereafter during the summer of 1953. Despite witnessing his father's arrest, Herbert sees Russia as his homeland and does not consider himself a Zionist. The epigraph to the novel's prologue is taken from a poem written by the author: "We know we are Russian; You consider as Jews." The "You" here are the Soviet authorities, but this attitude was



shared by many non-Jewish Soviet citizens like Herbert's Russian father-in-law, a Russian peasant by social and ethnic background who spent most of his life in a village. His dislike for his son-in-law stems in part from harboring lingering suspicions about Jewish doctors borne from reading about the Doctors' Plot in Soviet newspapers as it unfolded.

Though registered in his passport as a Russian, Anatoly's Jewish background prevents him from entering medical school. At his entrance exams, his examiner gives him the most difficult possible questions and then nitpicks his answers to justify his failing grade. Failing to be accepted into a university makes Anatoly vulnerable to being drafted into the Soviet army just as the USSR invades Afghanistan. Herbert uses his connections as a respected doctor and professor to get his son into night classes at the university, which he hopes will eventually enable him to be accepted into the university as a fulltime student. Herbert nevertheless decides to apply for an exit visa to Israel for his family, in accordance with his legal rights as laid out in the Soviet constitution, in case Anatoly fails to be admitted into the university. The application causes Herbert to lose his job and gets his son expelled from night classes. Their application is eventually denied, turning the family into refuseniks and guaranteeing Anatoly's eligibility for the draft. Meanwhile, to further complicate matters, Anatoly impregnates his girlfriend, Natasha. In an act of desperation, Tatyana sleeps with Pavel, an old boyfriend from her village, who is now in charge of military recruitment in the Levitin's district, to try to prevent Anatoly from getting drafted. She considers the affair to be a betrayal of her husband, but reasons that it is the only way to save her child from fighting in the Afghan War. Regardless, when Pavel discovers that the Levitins are refuseniks, he refuses to help Anatoly, who is drafted and dies shortly thereafter while on duty in Afghanistan. The trauma of losing her child causes Tatyana herself to die soon after from grief.

Herbert notes that by the late 70s, Soviet Jews, particularly young people, were becoming more interested in their history and traditions, as was depicted in Wiesel's work. Anatoly exhibits this yearning to discover the native Jewish roots that had lain dormant in his family during the Soviet period. Father and son steadily come to view their Jewish identity from both a historical and contemporary perspective, understanding their current predicament through the lens of the past. Following Grossman's example, Shrayner-Petrov discusses the rise of the Nazis, which eventually forced German Jews from their professions and ultimately left the lucky ones with the sole possession of a one-way exit visa from the Reich, in connection with the plight of contemporary Soviet Jews, particularly refuseniks like himself. This direct comparison between Nazism and Bolshevism is immediately followed by a depiction of Herbert's experience during the Doctor's Plot. He recalls how his mother told him to suppress his martial instincts and be silent in the face of the antisemitic insults that his classmates and neighbors hurled at them, including when their neighbor wished out loud for all Jews to be exiled to Birobidzhan. During this time, his mother bit her pillow at night so he would not hear her tears (as Herbert does when he becomes a refusenik to prevent his son from hearing his own tears). Herbert mourned Stalin's death because he, like many Soviet Jews at the time, thought his rule prevented an even great spread of antisemitism. Herbert only realized Stalin was a false Mordecai and the Haman of that tale after reconnecting with his Jewish heritage as an adult.<sup>67</sup>

As a youth, Herbert suffers from a timidity he considers common to many Jewish boys that he believes has remained in their hereditary memory as a yoke forced upon their genes

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<sup>67</sup> Curiously, their Christian neighbor thanks St. Nicholas the Wonderworker for saving the Levitins during the Doctors' Plot, another example of how depictions of Jewish suffering in Soviet fiction were often couched in Christian symbolism as a form of Aesopian language. Here, it serves the added metonymic purpose of linking the persecution of Jews to that of other minorities under Stalin as a way of connecting the deportation of the latter to the potential planned deportation of the former.

during their ancestors' time in ghettos and the pale of settlement. However, he and a Jewish schoolmate also violently avenge themselves against a Russian boy that told them to go back to Palestine after trying to move in on Herbert's love interest at a school dance. A similar thing happens during Herbert's time as an officer in the Soviet army, when he takes revenge against a fellow officer that had called a Jewish cook a "dirty kike," prompting his victim to accuse Herbert of being a "defender of Jews." Later, during a trip to Lithuania, Herbert describes how the medieval Lithuanian ruler Vytautas the Great first settled Crimean Karaites there because they were renowned warriors who became the heart of the Lithuanian military. At a nondescript local Karaite museum that Herbert has a hard time finding, their ancient weapons on display attest to their past military glory. Herbert recalls these memories of Jewish revenge and martial prowess after becoming a refusenik, when the state's underlying antisemitism reveals itself to him as a recursion of the Doctors' Plot.

After the death of his wife and son, Herbert goes from being a kind philanthropic Jew ministering to the sick to a self-described "predator" seeking revenge. He decides to kill Pavel, who becomes a synecdoche for his family's Soviet Amalekite oppressors. In preparation, Herbert puts on his best "emigration" suit, which he had only previously worn when seeing Anatoly off to the army. The Amalekites the Israelites first encountered during the Exodus triggered their initial turn toward martial self-defense, which then became a vow to fight Amalek in every generation in revenge for that initial attack against their ancestors as they helplessly wandered the desert. In the novel, emigration similarly becomes directly linked to Jewish warriors and revenge, as Herbert's exodus attire becomes his military uniform. The fabricated Doctors' Plot is symbolically made real when the Soviet Jewish Doctor Levitin becomes an actual murderer, poisoning Pavel, a representative of the Soviet regime. Herbert considers this murder only a step

on his path of revenge, seeing the killing as an act in keeping with his blood ties, since those guilty of his son's death belong to the Russian nation. Though he cannot physically emigrate, his family's death has finally separated him from his erstwhile Russian milieu and returned him, at least psychologically, to his Jewish heritage. Accordingly, Herbert feels a sense of inner freedom after exacting retribution from Pavel, as he is now free in spirit (if not in body) from the shackles of the USSR's Russian chauvinism.

After killing Pavel, Herbert goes to the emigration appeals office, where the typist becomes another symbol of the Soviet regime that brought his family to ruin. However, just as he prepares to attack her, she turns into an owl and flies away, before returning to human form as a state pharmacist that claims the government has found the cure for the disease of freedom plaguing refuseniks and other dissidents. Herbert manages to kill her with a pair of shears and douses her with gasoline before setting her and the Levitins' emigration files on fire. The last sentence of this penultimate chapter reads, "Herbert Anatolyevich's last sensation was the joy of revenge." In the afterword, the writer's son Maxim Shroyer refers to this "phantasmagoric revenge" of Herbert's, who has carried out these acts of imaginary revenge against the embodiments of the state's antisemitic regime in lieu of having any legal or practical resources at his disposal with which to defend and avenge himself. A prisoner of conscience in the USSR, Herbert (like the author) is helpless in the face of the regime's totalitarian authority, and therefore can only fantasize about the revenge that he may one day enact against the Soviet Amalekites.

Earlier in the novel, a farewell party for the Levitin's friends allowed to emigrate reminds Herbert of both a wake and a wedding, symbolically mourning their dead life in Russia while celebrating their impending rebirth in Israel. Refuseniks like the Levitins, meanwhile, remained

in a kind of existential limbo, cast out of Soviet society but prevented from leaving the empire. The novel's epilogue describes Anatoly's pregnant widow Natasha leaving the country during the first days of February 1980, as winter was turning toward early spring. Though Anatoly became a victim of Soviet antisemitism, his child will be born in freedom, completing the Exodus initiated when Herbert first applied for an exit visa for his family.

### **Chapter 3: Humor in Purim-Stalin**

“The Jew...does not lose courage. He feels that in the end the obstinate Mordecai will overcome the Hamans who will meet their downfall, and the Jews will rejoice again... The Jew laughs. He makes fun of the Hamans who seek to wipe out the people of Israel.”

-A.S. Sachs<sup>68</sup>

As mentioned earlier, one of the origins of the Purim spiel, along with parody songs that mocked characters in the Megillah, was the Ashkenazi tradition of the Badhan, a jester that entertained wedding guests through erudite humor that mixed Talmudic and topical references. Badhans were liminal figures that provided comic interludes between the more solemn moments at a wedding. When Purim spiels first developed, this notion of humor as a transitional tool remained in the form of comic interludes, usually supplied by a fool similar to a Badhan, between the drama of the surrounding material. Setting aside these interludes, Purim spiels, which dramatized the Purim story and other biblical episodes, could be performed in comic and/or tragic modes. In this section, the middle chapter of my dissertation, I will be looking at *The Red Monarch* as precisely such a comic interlude in the development of Purim-Stalin.

Published in 1979 and adapted into film in 1983, *The Red Monarch* represents a comic transition between the initial solemn literary representations of the events surrounding Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan in the works of early post-Stalinist Soviet writers and Elie Wiesel’s first two works on the subject, on the one hand, and later, equally somber Western and post-Soviet literary treatments of the subject that explicitly represented the deportation plan, on the other. *The Red Monarch*, which uses humor to represent the alleged deportation plan as real, thus provides the missing comic element of the Purim spiel absent from earlier literary

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<sup>68</sup> A.S. Sachs, *Worlds That Passed*, trans. Harold Berman, Philadelphia 1928, 228.

treatments of the subject that allowed later writers to explicitly represent the deportation plan, both in itself and as a modern recurrence in Jewish cyclical time of the Purim story, itself a depiction of Jewry's never-ending struggle with Amalek. Wiesel's *The Testament*, published a year after *The Red Monarch*, was the first published literary work to explicitly link Purim to the events surrounding Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan.

Like *Fresh Legend*, *The Red Monarch* was written by a non-Jew, Yuri Krotkov, an ethnic Russian born in Stalin's home country of Georgia that defected to the West in 1963. And like Grekova, his initial profession was not that of a fiction writer; he worked for TASS and later the KGB, like Solomon and Leon in Potok's later *The Gates of November* and "The War Doctor," respectively. It is worth noting that the only explicit examples of humor in the texts previously discussed occur in *Fresh Legend*. The non-Jewish Yuriy quotes the nineteenth century satirical literary figure Kozma Prutkov (the pen name of a group of Russian writers), "Don't joke with women, such jokes are low and vulgar," and uses math to satirize Marx's *Das Kapital*.<sup>69</sup> Yuriy is later purged during the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign. His humor was emblematic of his skeptical critiques of the regime and its ideology, which exceeded the limits of acceptable criticism in a communist society, presented in a novel that the regime prevented from being published. In line with the works discussed in the previous chapter, *The Red Monarch* was published abroad after Krotkov emigrated, freeing him from Soviet taboos on representing Stalin's antisemitism and employing explicitly Jewish religious references. Even after Stalin's death, Soviet Jews did not yet see the victorious conclusion of Purim-Stalin at hand, and therefore could not yet present it in

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<sup>69</sup> In Milan Kundera's Soviet era anticommunist novel, *The Joke*, one of the characters, Ludvig, also satirizes Marx in a postcard he sends to a fellow communist friend in the early 1950's. This eponymous joke causes Ludvig to be expelled from college and the Communist Party. The novel traces Ludvig's efforts to exact revenge on these former Communist friends that betrayed him. Though the novel was published in Czechoslovakia in 1967, its 1968 movie adaptation was banned almost immediately when the Prague Spring ended after the Soviet invasion that year.

the humorous light of a Purim spiel; Stalin's death was a false ending, as they remained in the middle of their Purim story. But Western Jews like Wiesel, familiar with the narrative arc of the Megillah and seeing the events surrounding Stalin's death through the lens of Jewish history, could see and represent these events as a recurrence of the Purim plot. Soviet immigrants like Krotkov and later post-Soviet Jewish writers could and would do so as well once they were living in safety and freedom beyond Soviet borders and after the USSR's collapse, respectively.

In this chapter, I will examine *The Red Monarch* as a humorous, non-Jewish representation of the events surrounding Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan that utilizes the comic elements inherent to the Purim spiel. As such, it made possible subsequent Purim-Stalin works while simultaneously being an example and product of the genre. Employing Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque and his unique definition of satire, I will examine the humor inherent in the Purim story (as exemplified in Purim spiels) and trace their parallels with the legend of Stalin's Jewish deportation plan, particularly with regard to the figures of Ahasuerus and Haman as comical figures mirrored in Stalin and his henchmen. Krotkov's representation of the alleged plan in his carnivalesque *The Red Monarch* preceded and made possible the legend's canonization in subsequent literary texts, starting the following year with Wiesel's *The Testament*, while its Purim spiel humor set a precedent for the post-Soviet Purim-Stalin works *Khrustalyov, My Car!*, *The Yid*, and *The Death of Stalin*, the latter being the only Purim-Stalin text that explicitly included the elements of both comedy and revenge. I will also propose an explanation for how it came to be that a non-Jew like Krotkov was the first writer to employ Purim spiel humor in his representation of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan.



### The Carnavalesque Season of Purim: Satire and Ritual Laughter in Purim-Stalin

As I have already mentioned, Purim is a late winter/early spring holiday that marks a transition between the death of both the year and nature associated with winter and the return to life associated with spring. In the Megillah, this is represented symbolically as a cyclical movement between life, death, and rebirth, as its Persian Jewish characters find success in the characters of Mordecai and Esther under Ahasuerus, near death in the genocidal plans of Haman, and ultimately rebirth with the hanging/execution of Haman and the Jews' self-defense/revenge against the viceroy's sons and henchmen. Purim is presented as an existing feast holiday in the Megillah itself and has been annually commemorated by Jews around the world for millennia with feasts and often rowdy celebrations. In his anthropological study *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (1890), James Frazer mapped Purim on to an ancient Babylonian New Year festival (Carruthers 2008, 49-50), emphasizing its status as a transitional holiday marking the ending of the old year and the beginning of the new in line with similar existing celebrations in the region. Purim thus "coincided with the holiday period in the pagan calendar in western Asia. Haman may have deliberately chosen a holiday of this sort for the execution of his plans. The merry-making, half-inebriated rabble could the more easily be aroused to join in the slaughter of innocent people" (Grayzel 1949, 10). Other scholars have noted Purim's carnivalesque place in both the Jewish calendar and Jewish tradition, referring to "the traditionally Bacchanalian season of Purim" (Horowitz 2006, 91) and calling the holiday "the Jews' own Saturnalia" (Carruthers 2008, 269). The "late-winter Jewish holiday" has also been equated with Mardi Gras and "the pre-Lenten Fastnacht of German-speaking Europe - the northern equivalent" of Latin Europe's carnival (Horowitz 2006, 248). It is worth noting that Purim masquerades started among fifteenth century Italian Jews in imitation of carnival

(Goodman 1949, 326) around the same time that Eastern European Jews began performing Purim spiels. In his study on Purim spiels in the Russian Empire and the USSR, Beregovsky posited a similar link between Purim spiels and the carnivalesque Slavic holiday of Maslenitsa. Arriving just before Purim and similarly marking a transition between winter and spring, Maslenitsa (like Mardi Gras) is a time of revelry and gluttony that precedes the Russian Orthodox Great Lent, a time of fasting to commemorate Christ's suffering. The "juxtaposition of the genocide and feast" in the Megillah "suggests that the opulent gluttony of the empire, as expressed in the banquets that opened the book, leads it into consuming even its subjects" (Carruthers 2008, 162). Just as Mardi Gras and Maslenitsa were often portrayed in literature and art in terms of gluttony in opposition to the want of gaunt winter, feasting will play a similar role in Purim-Stalin of representing the ravenous hunger of the Soviet state, which ended up consuming its own citizens, most obviously in the manmade Holodomor of the 1930's, but also symbolically in Stalin's series of purges that led to the final, thwarted pogrom of the Doctors' Plot.

As with these other holidays in Europe and the ancient Middle East alongside which it was celebrated, Purim embodied elements of the carnivalesque, as developed by Bakhtin in his work, that found its literary equivalent in the Megillah and later works associated with it like the Purim spiel. Subversion, liberation, humor, role reversal and chaos find expression in the Megillah, Purim festivities, and the Purim literature to which they gave rise. The "tropes of reversal found within the story – the fall of the villain, Haman, and the rise of the good Jew, Mordecai, to prominence – are enacted in the topsy-turviness" of the holiday: "The festival has a carnival atmosphere, as students take the place of their teachers to mock and create anarchy; men dress as women (and less often vice versa), and Jews dress as non-Jews" (Carruthers 2008, 11).

Usually celebrating the holiday as minorities among majority communities often hostile to the Jews, the “frolicsome Jew” of Purim was a “far cry from the repressed Jew” (Horowitz 2006, 253) of the surrounding year. This was a time when Jews could act out their resentment of their subaltern status among their hostile, socio-politically stronger neighbors by taking symbolic revenge against them in the guise of Haman and his sons/henchmen, who were often surreptitiously made to resemble their real-life counterparts. During Purim festivities, Jews used humor to mock their enemies behind their backs and subvert the existing social order.<sup>70</sup> They used the Purim story as a means of symbolically acting out their liberation from their non-Jewish rulers and exacting their revenge against them through role reversal, whereby the Jews were victorious and their oppressors were punished. Purim festivities, particularly the Purim spiel, could also serve a subversive function within the community by debunking “the upper classes by focusing their jibes on the nether regions of the powerful” (Belkin 2009, 43), resulting in the kind of obscene humor characterizing the *The Red Monarch*, *Khrustalyov, My Car!*, and *The Death of Stalin*. Purim gibes were aimed at those perceived to be the powerful and oppressive within the Jewish community itself. Traditionally, these were the wealthy, community leaders, religious authorities, and recent converts to the dominant local religion. In Purim-Stalin, the latter are embodied in the Yevseksiya and other Jewish government agents that worked to undermine Jewish traditions and identity within the USSR. “Because Haman inhabits the role of enemy, Ahasuerus is left with the unenviable role of buffoon... This mixture of the serious and the humorous is indicative of gallows humor in much Jewish response to Esther” (Carruthers 2008, 53). As we will see in this chapter, the comic and the tragic are closely linked in Purim-

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<sup>70</sup> For more on the relationship between humor and oppression in Jewish history, see Chaya Ostrower, *It Kept Us Alive: Humor in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad va-Shem, International Institute for Holocaust Research, 2015).

Stalin. On the one hand, we have the traditional carnivalesque reversal of the King as fool, though the complex relationship between Haman and Ahasuerus is mirrored in the depiction of Stalin and the Politburo in the subsequent texts. Because Stalin is both Haman and Ahasuerus in Purim-Stalin, it is rarely he who is depicted as the buffoon. If anything, he is the wise fool, the rustic Georgian bandit outsmarting his enemies with his peasant wiles. The Politburo comes in for most of the mockery, being both Stalin's henchmen and, in some cases, the Ahasuerus-like saviors by intervening against Stalin on behalf of the Jews (in accordance with the rumors presented in the texts in the previous chapter).

In his entry on "Satire" (1940) for the Soviet Literary Encyclopedia,<sup>71</sup> Bakhtin elaborated on the manner in which the satirical elements underlying carnivalesque humor illuminated the theme of transition in festivals like Purim, which symbolized the cyclical movement from winter into spring. Bakhtin saw the laughter associated with the humorous elements of carnivalesque celebrations like Purim, starting with the early mocking of Haman in effigy before evolving into medieval Purim parody songs and modern Purim spiels, as being inherently dialectical. It reflected both the narrative arc of the Purim story itself (from assimilation to genocidal threats to the triumphant survival of Jews) and the annual transition from winter and spring, commemorated by the formalized ritual traditions and celebrations of Purim. For Bakhtin, such carnivalesque laughter fixes

the very moment of this change, the moment that the old dies and the new is born simultaneously. Therefore, the festive laughter is at once both mocking, cursing, and shaming laughter (shaming death as it departs, winter, the old year) and joyful, exuberant,

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<sup>71</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Satire (1940), for the Literary Encyclopedia," in *Persistent Forms: Explorations in Historical Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

and welcoming (rebirth, spring, fresh vegetation, the new year). This is not mere ridicule; the negation of the old is tightly linked to the affirmation of the new and the better. This negation in jesting images therefore had a spontaneously dialectical character (375).

The humor inherent to Purim spiels and other Purim celebrations encouraged Jews to see the Purim story as one of dialectical tension between the old and the new that ultimately resulted in the negation of the former and the affirmation of the latter. This may explain why Ehrenburg would call his works on Soviet life after Stalin's death *A Change of Seasons*, *The Thaw*, and *The Spring*. Purim celebrated Persian Jewry's rebirth after thwarting Haman's planned genocide, encouraging Jews to engage in "mocking, cursing, and shaming laughter" at Haman and his henchmen that was simultaneously full of joy and relief for their own salvation. Early Soviet writers could not engage in such laughter because they were still under the rule of Stalin's (albeit less genocidal) henchman after his death. Only those writing about these events after emigration and the USSR's collapse could engage in such Purim laughter because they were fully free, not conditionally like Soviet Jews still in the USSR.<sup>72</sup> Krotkov could mock the thwarted plans of Stalin and his henchmen to deport Soviet Jews to the east because he was safely outside the Soviet sphere of influence and the regime's punitive hands. Yakov Rapoport writes in his memoirs that he annually celebrated his release from prison after Stalin's death with other survivors of the Doctors' Plot in private as long as the Soviets remained in power; his memoir on the subject was only published during glasnost in the final, twilight years of Soviet rule, after Gorbachev explicitly encouraged citizens to explore the regime's unsavory past. Potok could

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<sup>72</sup> However, refuseniks like David Shrayer-Petrov, who had already paid the price of dissent and thus had no illusions regarding liberation from the Soviet regime, also had some bizarre measure of freedom, as exemplified by his proto-Purim-Stalin tamizdat novel *Doctor Levitin*, written and published abroad in Israel while he was still a refusenik in the USSR.

later show Khrushchev cackling in celebration of Stalin's death because, writing after the fall of the USSR, he knew that Soviet Jews would ultimately survive Stalin's henchmen, including Beria. Similarly, the *The Death of Stalin* came full circle by using the dark humor of its "mocking, cursing, and shaming laughter" to show that Stalin's henchmen (as well as his son Vasily) would ultimately suffer the same fate as their leader, overthrown one by one until the regime itself collapsed.

For Bakhtin, satire is characterized by six elements that have their origin in the carnivalesque humor of folk festivals:

- (1) the dialogical character of ridicule and shaming (the mutual ridicule of the choruses);
- (2) the moment of parody and teasing that is inherent to this ridicule; (3) the universal character of ridicule (the ridicule of gods, of the old king, of the entire reigning order [Saturnalia]); (4) the link between laughter and the material-corporeal generative principle (profanity); (5) the essential relation of ridicule to time and to temporal change, to rebirth, to the death of the old and the birth of the new; (6) the spontaneous dialectical nature of ridicule, its combination of ridicule (the old) and merry-making (the new) (375).

We see how these elements found expression in Purim celebrations and spiels. For (1), you have the collective shaming of Haman by Jews (as a chorus) commemorating Purim in synagogues and at home by blotting out his name with noisemakers, hissing, and whistling. In Purim-Stalin, this finds expression in Jews collectively shaming Stalin in special Purim Megillahs like those created by Rashin (addressed in the next chapter) and the chorus-like nature of the Politburo as represented in the other works in the subgenre, who often speak collectively under a coryphaeus (usually Beria or Khrushchev) either in agreement with Stalin (to his face) or comically cursing

the dictator behind his back. For (2), you have the medieval Purim parody songs that get translated into the parody and ridicule of characters from the Megillah in Purim spiels. In Purim-Stalin, we see this in the teasing banter between Stalin, his victims, and the Politburo, or internally amongst the latter. There is also the parodic use Stalin makes of the Purim narrative in his torment of individual victims and Soviet Jews collectively, whose fate in the alleged deportation plan would have been a cruel parody of the salvation experienced by Persian Jews in the Megillah. For (3), you have the often ridiculous portrayal of the old king Ahasuerus in Purim spiels, as well as their underlying criticism of the entire socio-political hierarchy. In Purim-Stalin, the targets of the satire become not only Stalin and his henchmen, but indeed the entire ideological system and form of government they represented. For (4), you have the exceptional profanity of Purim, a topsy-turvy time when Jewish elders and traditions could be mocked with impunity, which finds particular expression in the sly obscenity of *The Red Monarch* and ubiquitous profanity of the post-Soviet Purim-Stalin works. For (5), I have already mentioned Purim as a seasonal festival symbolically enacting the annual rebirth of the natural world in the transition from winter to spring. For the Persian Jews of the Megillah, this meant their collective rebirth after their near-death experience under Haman following the latter's execution. For Soviet Jews, Purim-Stalin represents their survival of Stalin's thwarted alleged genocide and their eventual collective rebirth after the collapse of the old Soviet order. For (6), we see how the Purim story combines the ridicule of the political order in Haman and Ahasuerus with the Jews' celebration over surviving Haman's genocidal plot and enacting revenge on him and his sons and henchmen. As Bakhtin writes, "In images of the ridiculed old, the populace ridiculed the reigning order with its forms of oppression, while in images of the new it made incarnate its highest hopes and aspirations" (375). Purim-Stalin ridicules the oppression of the collapsed

Soviet order while celebrating the Jewish traditions to which that collapse enabled Soviet Jews to return. Jews for millennia have seen the Purim story as one where their forebears survived their rulers' oppressive reign in order to return to and carry on their own ancient traditions. By annually celebrating and retelling this story, they were conditioned to see Purim as a recurrent narrative in Jewish history, one that applied to them as much as the Jews of ancient Persia. Equally, they found solace in the story's tale of Jewish redemption, giving them hope for their own future redemption from oppression or encouraging them to see such past redemption as their own Special Purim, as evidenced by the representations of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan in the works of Purim-Stalin.

The comic elements in Purim celebrations later inscribed in Purim spiels reflected what Bakhtin referred to as the traditional freedom of the such holidays' "popular-festive ridicule and profanity directed against everything that is dying, departing, or old (winter, the old year, the old emperor)", while its "obscenities must also be understood in connection to the popular-festive forms of laughter (the traditional connection of laughter and cursing with death, on the one hand, and with the generative force of fertility and the material-corporeal principle, on the other)" (381). This is reflected generically in the aforementioned Purim traditions in the ridicule of the old king Ahasuerus and the profanity directed against the genocidal Haman, an Amalekite whose recurring defeat by Jews in Jewish history is directly connected with Jews' cyclical rebirth in the wake of such victories. In Purim-Stalin, we see how Soviet Jews and their allies internalized these Purim traditions to express their own rebirth in the wake of the deaths of Stalin and his Soviet successors, a kind of last laugh at their Soviet enemies following their own liberation and the demise of the Soviet system. The satire expressed in these works "gives voice to the very world that is being ridiculed. The dying world - the old government, the old social structure, the



old truth - continues to play its role in the person of its representatives and in a subjectively serious way, but objectively it is already in the position of a fool; its ambitions elicit only laughter” (386). By the time of the sons’ generation, which had returned to their Jewish roots in opposition to the old Bolshevik beliefs of their dying fathers and their decrepit Soviet government, social structure, and truths, Stalin and other representatives of the fathers’ generation could no longer be taken seriously; as the texts examined from this point on demonstrate, they and their ideas were now the objects of ridicule.<sup>73</sup> In formal terms, communism and the Soviet government become Ahasuerus, the decrepit and dying objects of ridicule, while Stalin becomes Haman, the genocidal enemy to be cursed and erased alongside a return to Jewish fertility in the spiritual and cultural rebirth of Soviet Jewry. In the literary and cinematic Purim spiels of Purim-Stalin, it is important to show the decrepit, dying body of Stalin and his primary henchman Beria because this act unmasks them and undermines the idealized, static ideology they represent. It humanizes them and thus makes them vulnerable, demonstrating that they too are subject to decay and ultimately death. The laughter of Soviets and Jews in exile and after the collapse of the USSR is akin to “risus paschalis— that is, paschal laughter: during Easter, tradition permitted laughter in church, which was understood as a cheerful rebirth after a long fast and sorrow” (383). Propp will also refer to this paschal laughter, further evidence of him and Bakhtin working from the same comparative literary tradition stemming back to Veselovsky: “on Easter the priest told jokes from the pulpit to induce laughter in his congregation. Easter is the holiday of the divinity's resurrection and at the same time the holiday of the resurrection of nature” (138). This is the laughter we see in emigre post-Stalin and Jewish

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<sup>73</sup> It is worth noting that a similar process found expression in early Soviet propaganda, often in Yiddish, against the Jewish traditions and beliefs of the grandfathers’ generation by the Bolshevik Jews of the fathers’ generation (which, at that time, was the sons’ generation reacting to the truth of their own fathers).

post-Soviet Purim-Stalin works that is noticeably absent from the earlier works of the Thaw period, which represented merely a reduction in the “long fast and sorrow” of Soviet antisemitic oppression rather than the cheerful rebirth that would only come decades later. Bakhtin also notes that “Laughter and ridicule were to a certain extent legalized and tolerated on other holidays as well” (383), which explains why Stalin’s death and Soviet Jewry’s subsequent exodus from the USSR also finds comic representation on other Jewish holidays like Passover, where the Soviet Jewish experience was similarly presented in the biblical terms of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. One of the most famous slogans of the Soviet Jewry Movement was “Let my people go!”, and their demonstrations and literature often included caustic parodies of Soviet leaders.

As I mentioned earlier, the transition from winter to spring was commonly represented in terms of the tension between gluttony, feasting, drunkenness, and their opposites in art depicting carnivalesque holidays like Purim. Bakhtin noted that

Greediness and drunkenness bear the same distinct character of a realistic symbol in medieval satire. In the folkloric, popular-festive system of images food and drink were linked to fertility, rebirth, universal excess (the image of the fat belly was also linked to this positive motif). Under the conditions of class reality, these images attain new significance: with their help the greed and sloth of the clergy are ridiculed; the abundance of food and drink become greed and drunkenness (384).

Wiesel (and later Potok) developed the trope of Bolshevism as a new messianic religion for Soviet Jews of the fathers’ generation that replaced the Jewish messianism of their forebears. The fathers’ generation of Soviet Jews embraced and echoed the regime’s Marxist-Leninist propaganda regarding the greed and sloth of the Jewish clerics they had forsaken for the secular

apparatchiks of their new Bolshevik religion. By the sons' generation, these apparatchiks are seen as the new clerics, and the texts in this and subsequent chapters emphasize their greed and gluttony by representing, in often comically exaggerated terms, the excessive drinking, feasting, and revelry undertaken by Stalin and his henchmen while the rest of the country suffered from forced fasting and sometimes even starvation stemming from the regime's disastrous collectivization and agricultural policies. Occurring during the winter of 1952/3, the Doctors' Plot is depicted in such a way as to emphasize the harsh wintry conditions for average Soviets, particularly the deprivations of Soviet Jews (especially those arrested and deported to gulags), against the gluttonous debaucheries of Stalin and his court. The Megillah itself opens with King Ahasuerus throwing a lavish banquet for his court and dignitaries, and the Book of Esther contains more feasts within it than any other book in the Tanakh.<sup>74</sup> Just as the constant, elaborate feasting of Ahasuerus and his court emphasized through contrast the genocidal threat facing the Persian Jews through their planned extermination, so the abundance of the bacchanalian feasts of Stalin and the Politburo represented in the texts below highlight the misery of the Soviet Jews in these texts (and in reality) as they awaited their alleged coming deportation to gulags and exile in the cold Soviet east. The chapter in *The Red Monarch* dealing with Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan, "The Jewish Question," starts with Stalin eating in a private anteroom at the theater with "General Vlasek, a rare idiot, fate, with the face of a butcher." Stalin "stopped chewing" only to begin a conversation with Beria about the deportation plan (85). We see here both the gluttony of Stalin and the ridicule directed at the fools that surround him. Early in *The Death of Stalin*, there is an even more carnivalesque banquet with Stalin and members of his

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<sup>74</sup> For more on the carnivalesque nature of the feasts in the Megillah, see Trisha Wheelock's dissertation, *Drunk and Disorderly: A Bakhtinian Reading of the Banquet Scenes in the Book of Esther*.

Politburo, where they drink, dance, and carouse like Ahasuerus and his own drunken princes. On the other hand, according to Jewish tradition, during the feast of Purim one is encouraged to drink until he can no longer tell the difference between “cursed be Haman” and “blessed be Mordecai” (Horowitz 2006, 50). This tradition reflects the narrative reversal of the Purim story, where Haman went from being the king’s viceroy, feasting alongside him while planning a genocide against the Empire’s Jews, to being hung on his own gallows that he had erected for the Jews as Mordecai, Esther, and the rest of Persian Jewry celebrate their victory and take their revenge on Haman’s collaborators. This is expressed in the similar reversal traced in Purim-Stalin representing the trajectory of the Soviet Jewish experience, which begins with Stalin and his henchmen feasting while planning to ethnically cleanse the USSR’s Jews and ends with Soviet Jews celebrating their own victory over the Soviet regime with these texts and their own Special Purim. Even before Soviet Jews formerly conceived of Stalin’s death in Jewish terms as a Special Purim, some annually celebrated their survival of the dictator’s pogrom with celebratory feasts, as attested by Yakov Rappoport in his memoirs.

In his essay “Ritual Laughter in Folklore” (1939), Propp examined the relationship between laughter, death, and rebirth in folktales. Applying his observations to the texts examined in this dissertation provides further insight into how the dynamic between these elements in Purim helped explain the development of Purim-Stalin and the role of humor therein.<sup>75</sup> Propp noted the role that ritual laughter played in the different folktales he examined, arguing that it reflected the religious traditions of the communities out of which these tales grew. In many of these tales, a living person penetrates the kingdom of the dead where he must conceal that he is

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<sup>75</sup> As Veselovsky’s intellectual heirs, both Bakhtin and Propp use a comparative approach in these essays - synthesizing literary works and cultural and religious traditions from different countries and centuries - that would soon be discouraged in the USSR during WWII and prohibited during the Zhdanovshchina until Stalin’s death.

alive, “otherwise he will provoke the wrath of its inhabitants as a transgressor who has crossed the forbidden threshold”; in such scenarios, the character “gives himself away as a living person” by laughing (128). Laughter thus, as Bakhtin similarly argues, is intimately connected with life, whereas the dead do not laugh. This interdiction “of laughter also occurs in ritual, namely, in the rite that represents the descent into the kingdom of death and the return from it, namely, the initiation of youths at the onset of puberty” (130). This literary trope thus reflects a communal reality. In these stories, as in life, “It is forbidden to laugh in the kingdom of death” (130).<sup>76</sup> We can extrapolate from this generic element of the folktale to see how a similar dynamic is at work in the transition from Purim traditions and spiels to Purim-Stalin. The Book of Esther, written after the events described therein, could portray its Jews celebrating because they had already survived Haman’s genocidal plot against them by then. The same goes for subsequent Purim celebrations and spiels, which used humor to commemorate and represent an already fulfilled act of past Jewish salvation. These subsequent representations could be, and often were, aspirational as well, using this past example of Jewish salvation to provide hope for contemporaneous Jews’ own future salvation. This could explain the lack of Purim spiel humor in early Soviet literature about Stalin’s antisemitic campaigns, which nevertheless subconsciously inscribed dramatic elements from the Purim story into these representations of recent events. These writers, and the Soviet Jews on whose behalf they wrote, were still in a kingdom of death even after Stalin’s death. To rephrase Nietzsche, Stalin was dead, but the shadow of Stalinism persisted in subsequent Soviet regimes. Only after Jews left the Soviet kingdom of death and it collapsed could they overcome Stalin’s shadow for good, allowing them and the writers representing their

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<sup>76</sup> Some in Jewish literature do laugh at death, like the character of Gyula in Elie Wiesel’s novel *Day*. This laughter, however, often reflects the author’s knowledge of ultimate collective (if not personal) Jewish survival.

experience to laugh about this overcoming of death, which gave birth to the comedic element that is fundamental to many of the Purim-Stalin works. The converse of death is life, so

If all laughter ceases and is forbidden upon entrance into the kingdom of death, then entrance into life is accompanied by laughter. Moreover, if there we saw the interdiction of laughter, here we observe the command to laugh, or laughter under compulsion. The thought goes still further: laughter is endowed not only with the power to accompany life but also with the power to call it forth... if presence in the state of death was accompanied by the interdiction of laughter, the return to life, that is, the moment of a new birth, was accompanied by laughter, possibly obligatory laughter (131).

Soviet Jews leaving Stalin's kingdom of death and experiencing freedom in the wake of its demise were not only free to laugh, but they were also obligated to do so. Soviet Jews were obligated to simultaneously laugh derisively in the face of death and joyfully at their rebirth: "The threshold separating life from death is called the laughing threshold, or the threshold of laughter. That side of the threshold it is forbidden to laugh; this side it is necessary to laugh" (133). Just as Purim marks a transition between the death of nature in winter and its rebirth in spring, the laughter in these Purim-Stalin works marked Soviet Jewry's transition across a similar threshold from Soviet death to Jewish rebirth. While the rebirth itself was cultural, it was represented in terms of Purim as a salvation from metaphorical death under Stalin and his alleged deportation plan.<sup>77</sup> In *The Red Monarch*, only Stalin and Beria, in roles that are equivalent to

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<sup>77</sup> It is worth noting how this theory aligns with Wiesel's categorization of Soviet Jews as the Jews of silence. In the Soviet kingdom of the dead, not only was laughter forbidden, but so was speech itself. Recall how Paltiel in *The Testament* calls such silence a kind of death. Yet, as Wiesel showed, this was an ambiguous silence, as Paltiel simultaneously writes his testament while practicing an external silence. Soviet Jews spoke an Aesopian language that Western Jews took some time to decipher, which helped break their own silence on the subject of Soviet Jewish oppression.

Haman and Ahasuerus in the Megillah, laugh and play jokes during Stalin's reign. Others in the work can only do so, and even then in comparatively muted fashion, after Stalin's death.

In the Tanakh, Sarah "laughed at the good news that she would be given a son", which probably reflected this same kind of "magic laughter" (130). This is likely because the name of her son, Isaac, means "laughing." Isaac was the only son of Sarah and Abraham, the first patriarch of Israel; Isaac thus continued the Jewish line after God fulfilled his promise to his parents that Sarah would give birth to a son after passing childbearing age. "The Jews knew well that Yishak means 'he who laughs'... In later days Yishak was connected with Ishakel (God laughs). If the connection is valid, then Isaac laughs not only as one who was born, but also as a parent and progenitor" (130). This laughter embodies God's fulfillment of his covenant with Abraham to ensure the survival of the Jewish people by giving him a son, whose laughter represents life itself. Just as Isaac is Sarah's laughter at the joy of giving birth and guaranteeing Jewish continuity, so the laughter of Purim-Stalin is an expression of Soviet Jewry's return to the traditions of Abraham and Isaac. "Laughter accompanies the passage from death to life; it creates life and accompanies birth. Consequently, laughter accompanying killing transforms death into a new birth, nullifies murder as such, and is an act of piety that transforms death into a new birth" (134). This explains the comedy of revenge in the killing of Haman in Purim traditions, most notably Purim spiels, which find expression in the Purim-Stalin texts in this and subsequent chapters. With the previous Soviet and Western texts having established Stalin as a modern Haman and, thus, Amalekite, these subsequent humorous works reflect this Jewish tradition by portraying the death (and later murder) of Stalin and his henchmen as acts symbolizing both the rebirth of Soviet Jewry and the enactment of the ancient biblical commandment to destroy

Amalek and his seed. Propp further elaborates on this connection between this ritual laughter and birth:

The early form of the magic of laughter is based on the idea that the dead do not laugh, only the living do. The dead people who have entered the realm of the dead cannot laugh, while the living people who have entered it must not laugh. On the contrary, each birth of a baby or a symbolic new birth in rites of initiation and other similar rites, is accompanied by laughter that is believed to possess the power not only of accompanying but also of creating life. Therefore, birth is accompanied by obligatory ritual laughter (145).

The Purim-Stalin texts in this dissertation trace this cycle of the death and rebirth of Soviet Jewry in the fathers' and sons' generations, respectively. The works of the previous chapters show that the fathers' generation of Soviet Jews could not laugh because theirs was a living death, whereas the sons' generation was prohibited from laughing until they left the USSR and/or it collapsed.<sup>78</sup> While they were still in the USSR, they were like living people in the realm of the dead. By returning to the realm of the living after emigrating, they experienced individual rebirths that nevertheless represented only a partial rebirth for Soviet Jews, which only became complete after the collapse of the USSR. This is perhaps why we see this paschal laughter in the non-Jewish Krotkov's work about Soviet Jewry: as a non-Jew, he could laugh in full on behalf of Soviet Jewry, whereas Soviet Jews themselves had to wait until all of their coreligionists in the USSR were fully free after its collapse before they could participate completely in such obligatory ritual laughter.

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<sup>78</sup> The latter could also hide this laughter in their private return to Jewish traditions, as exemplified by the homebound Purim spiels that began to take place in the USSR at least as early as the 1970s.



Like Sarah in the Book of Genesis, Esther is the female fertile element in the Megillah, embodying the symbolic link between laughter, continuity, and seasonal rebirth in the Purim story. She represents the rebirth of Persian Jews in exile after their near genocide at Haman's hands. In being the instrument that saves the Jews, she is the link between nature and Judaism that represents the cyclical near-death and rebirth of Jews throughout their history, particularly in the diaspora. It is worth noting that the Sages of the Great Assembly added the Book of Esther to the Tanakh in Israel, centuries after the story itself took place. It was only canonized after the story returned to the Jews' ancient homeland from the diaspora, just as Purim-Stalin would only reach its fruition after Soviet Jews were able to leave for Israel (and later elsewhere). This also explains why some Soviet and other Jews saw Stalin as a new Ahasuerus/Mordecai after his armies defeated Hitler, only for him to take the mantle of Haman from Hitler as the next Amalek to threaten the survival of Soviet Jews after the war. By seeing their story through the lens of Purim, Soviet Jews were unwittingly enacting the tradition of special or second Purims practiced by other diaspora communities for centuries. Holocaust survivors had performed Purim spiels in DP camps after being liberated from the Nazis, acting out a similar return from the kingdom of the dead. Soviet Jews could not laugh in Stalin's kingdom of the dead, when they were under threat of ethnic cleansing, and suffered from an interdiction on laughing under the Soviet governments after his death, which continued to suppress Judaism without necessarily threatening the very existence of Soviet Jewry. Hence, we saw a flicker of the Purim spiel humor in the Thaw, but it was only a partial thaw before the return of neo-Stalinism and therefore could not rise to the full ritual laughter of the Purim spiel, which would have to wait for emigration (i.e. *The Red Monarch*) and the collapse of USSR (i.e. the post-Soviet Purim-Stalin revenge novels). The Talmudic injunction that it is the duty of man to mellow himself with wine on

Purim until he cannot tell the difference between “cursed be Haman” and “blessed be Mordecai” (Carruthers 2008, 270) is a sign of Jewry’s cyclical victories in their eternal battles against Amalek because Mordecai must triumph over Haman before the Jews engage in such bacchanalian revelry. The sacred laughter of victory was only available to those who had crossed over from the land of the dead into that of the living and been fully initiated into their ancient religious community. When Soviet Jews returned to the Jewish traditions of their ancestors during the late Soviet period, abroad, and after the fall of the USSR, they celebrated their triumph over the Soviet Amalekites symbolically by first laughing at them (as we will see in this chapter), then reconceiving their survival of Stalin’s final pogrom as a Special Purim, and finally by taking their holy vengeance retrospectively against their Soviet oppressors in the later revenge novels.

#### The Book of Esther for Non-Jews

As we saw with Grekova, non-Jewish Soviets also took an interest in representing Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaigns, as Krotkov did in *The Red Monarch*.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, the writers of the later *The Death of Stalin* were not Jewish, nor was the director of its film adaptation.<sup>80</sup> Through its inclusion in the Christian Bible, non-Jews have been familiar with the Purim story for millennia, and many non-Jewish writers and artists have incorporated its story, characters, and themes into their own work over that period.<sup>81</sup> Despite appropriating it for their own purposes, non-Jews have had a tendentious relationship with both the Purim story and

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<sup>79</sup> However, the director of its 1983 film adaptation, Jack Gold, was Jewish.

<sup>80</sup> But David Schneider, one of its four screenwriters, is Jewish.

<sup>81</sup> For more on the non-Jewish reception of the Book of Esther, see Jo Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries* (Hoboken, NJ, USA: Wiley Blackwell, 2008).

Purim celebrations as expressions of Jewish identity. Since ancient times, Jewish communities have used the Purim holiday as a form of symbolic self-defense and revenge against their often-hostile non-Jewish neighbors. Some expressed their resentment of their Christians neighbors by making the effigy of Haman resemble Christ, a form of symbolic resistance to Christian oppression slyly acted out in jest “amidst shouts and revelry” (Horowitz 2006, 215). Hitler played the same role for Jewish survivors in DP camps celebrating Purim in the years after their liberation, as Stalin eventually did for Soviet Jews in the works of Purim-Stalin. Other communities made their effigies of Haman and his henchmen resemble local or national officials and other social and political leaders held by these Jewish communities to be responsible for their oppression. As we saw, this led to the banning of such Purim celebrations in some places, where non-Jews rightly or wrongly assumed that they were surreptitious means of symbolic Jewish resistance to their rule and ideology.

As Purim coincided with the similarly carnivalesque festivals of their non-Jewish neighbors, it was not uncommon for the latter to likewise use their own festivities as excuses and means to mock and humiliate their Jewish neighbors. For example, during carnival in Rome between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, Roman Jews were forced against their will to participate in foot races and present prizes at the festival’s end to reinforce their subaltern positions in the city’s religious hierarchy. Furthermore, “from the early seventeenth century masked processions called *giudate*, based on mock imitation of Jewish rites, became a common feature of the Roman Carnival” (Horowitz 2006, 270). Many non-Jews in Eastern Europe living alongside Jewish communities would have similarly been familiar with Jewish rites and traditions from attending their local Purim spiels (Shatzky 1949, 359), where they might have seen their own traditions and leaders mocked on stage and in the streets. As we will see, this

nexus of humor, violence, and resistance becomes a staple of Purim-Stalin, which is particularly evident in the post-Soviet revenge novels discussed in Chapter 6, which interpolate this legacy of Jewish resistance into the memory of Stalin's antisemitic persecutions. It also shows that many non-Jews were familiar with the underlying themes of Jewish self-defense, liberation and revenge at the heart of the Purim story that were acted out in Purim celebrations and spiels.

In his essay "On the Jews and Their Lies" (1543), Martin Luther wrote that Jews loved the Book of Esther because it fit so well "their bloodthirsty, vengeful, murderous greed and hope".<sup>82</sup> This kind of view, which acknowledged both the hopeless position of European Jews and the theme of revenge at the heart of the Purim story, later influenced Hitler and the Nazis, who held Luther and his ideas in high esteem as an early German proto-nationalist and antisemite. Like Stalin later, Hitler was familiar enough with Jewish traditions to understand that contemporary Jews regarded him as a modern Haman and saw their experience under Nazi oppression as a recursion of the Purim story. As perhaps "the most infamous Haman", Hitler "interpreted himself as such, declaring in a speech delivered on 30 January 1944 that if he were defeated, the Jews would have a 'second triumphant Purim'" (Carruthers 2008, 32). Already by 1941, Hitler had closed and barred synagogues and banned reading the scroll of Esther on Purim (Goodman 1949, 374). In the days surrounding Purim in 1943, Nazis committed some of their most symbolically evocative Jewish massacres. A hundred Jewish doctors and their families were shot in a cemetery in Czestochowa, while Jewish doctors in Radow were taken to nearby Szydlowiec and killed after being told they were being transported to Palestine. The Nazis played a similarly sinister "Purim prank" on the Jews of the Piotrkow ghetto, where eight

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<sup>82</sup> Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. E.W. Gritsch and R.C. Gritsch, Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1969, 188-89.

university educated Jews (plus the cemetery watchman and his wife) were killed after also being told they were being sent to Palestine. The cemetery watchman and his wife were conscripted to make a quorum of ten, corresponding to the number of Haman's sons hanged in the Megillah (Horowitz 2006, 91). The parallels between these Nazi Purim pranks and Purim-Stalin, particularly as an extension of the Doctors' Plot, are uncanny. As we saw, as part of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan, the indicted Jewish poisoner-doctors were to be hanged in the Red Square on the days surrounding Purim. The rest of Soviet Jewry were to be transported to the eastern regions, including Birobidzhan (the autonomous Soviet Jewish district), for their own salvation, just as these Jewish victims of the Nazis were promised that they would be transported to Palestine. Also, recall that many Soviet Jews were afraid to register for emigration visas even after Stalin's death because those that had done so under Stalin were arrested and deported to gulags as part of a government ruse eerily similar to the aforementioned Nazi Purim trick. When Nazi Julius Streicher was hung after the Nuremberg Trial, he called out to the crowd, "Purim Feast, 1946" (Goodman 1949, 376). Like Stalin and his Soviet henchmen, the Nazi brass were aware of Jewish holidays and traditions, employing them with cruel irony against the Jews to undermine their hopes of salvation until it finally came at the end of World War II. Even after the war, some former denizens of the Third Reich were still uncomfortable with the "nationalistic spirit seeking revenge upon those that persecute the Jews" embodied in the Megillah (Horowitz 2006, 39). This expressed both an implicit admission of guilt on their part and a recognition that Jews would see the Holocaust as part of cyclical Jewish history, with the Nazis and their collaborators as modern Amalekites against whom they were duty-bound by the Tanakh and related Purim traditions to seek vengeance.

Stalin, a former seminarian who was undoubtedly familiar with the Book of Esther, might have intended to present himself as a modern-day Ahasuerus saving Soviet Jews from their would-be murderers by sending them east. He had already done so during World War II when he evacuated Jews from the western Soviet Socialist Republics ahead of the invading Germans<sup>83</sup> before leading the Red Army to victory over the Third Reich. Many contemporary Jews, both in the USSR and abroad, accepted this official portrait of Stalin as a modern-day Ahasuerus, mourning the death of the man who had indeed helped put an end to the Nazi menace.<sup>84</sup> This perspective will be foregrounded in Rashin's Special Purim megillah, *Purim-Stalin*, where Rashin implies that Stalin himself utilized the Purim myth in crafting the alleged Jewish deportation plan in such a way that he would be seen as either a modern Ahasuerus (at worst) or a Mordecai (at best) by saving Soviet Jews from the anger of the Soviet mob through deportation. In this reading, if Stalin is viewed as a savior of Jews, as he was by many communist Jews, then the accused Jewish doctors stand in for Haman and his sons. The Jewish doctors then are the enemy and Stalin is Ahasuerus saving the Jews from themselves by deporting them to protect them from the wrath of Soviet citizens. The Soviet citizens could be seen as either the Jews or the Persians of the Book of Esther venting their wrath against their enemies, depending on whether you assign the roles of Ahasuerus or Haman to Stalin, respectively. Either way, the hanging of the Jewish doctors indicted in the Doctors' Plot on the eve of the alleged mass Jewish deportation in this case would be a direct reference to the hanging of Haman and his sons in the Book of Esther. Moreover, in the satirical tradition of Purim spiels,

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<sup>83</sup> At the outbreak of World War II, "between a million and a million and a half Soviet Jews fled eastward from German occupied territories, either evacuated in an organized Soviet effort or individually as refugees. They were joined by Polish-Jewish refugees uprooted by rumors of anti-Jewish violence" (Gershenson 2013, 6-7).

<sup>84</sup> Ben Cohen, "Why Couldn't Soviet Jews See Stalin for the Anti-Semitic Monster He Was?", Tablet Magazine, February 26, 2013, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/surviving-stalins-purges>.

it could perhaps even be considered a parody of the Purim story, slyly mocking the Jewish holiday in the same way that Jews mocked Jewish history and tradition in their own Purim celebrations and spiels. In the topsy-turvy tradition of carnivalesque Purim spiels, this would be a reverse of the Jewish Purim tradition, where the Jews are hung and persecuted instead of their enemies. *The Testament* and other works examined in the previous chapter saw that early Purim-Stalin writers were already forging this connection between Stalin's knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish traditions and his persecution of his Jewish enemies. Like the Nazis had done by executing Jews on Jewish holidays, Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan might be viewed as a similar, cruelly ironic way to use Jewish holidays against Jews themselves. And if the deportation plan never existed, this connection would be a way for writers to retrospectively make sense of Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns by examining them through the lens of Jewish history. As we will see in *The Red Monarch*, it was a non-Jewish writer who was the first to connect the Purim story with the humor of Purim traditions like Purim spiels in the context of Stalin's Jewish persecutions. By doing so, he provided the final element necessary for writers and directors to be able to represent the events surrounding Stalin's death in relation to his postwar antisemitic campaigns as literary and cinematic Purim spiels.

Yuri Krotkov's *The Red Monarch: Scenes from the Life of Stalin*

An ethnic Russian born and raised in Soviet Georgia, Yuri Krotkov defected to the west in 1963 in the middle of a successful career as a playwright, screenwriter and KGB agent. He eventually settled in the United States and published *The Red Monarch: Scenes from the Life of Stalin* there in 1979. True to its title and the author's background in theater and film, it is a novelistic series of fictional "scenes" featuring the dictator inspired by stories told to the author by the Georgian friends and acquaintances he shared with Stalin. Though written in prose, each

chapter is heavily dialogue-driven and occurs in an intimate setting, lending itself to easy adaptation to stage and screen - the 1983 film adaptation is an extremely faithful rendering of the work. While the opening scenes take place just before and during World War II, the bulk of the work is set after the war. As such, the novel focuses primarily on Stalin's antisemitic postwar campaigns, failing health, death, and the very early years of the Thaw, much as the Megillah concentrates on Haman's time in power at the end of his life, his death, and the immediate aftermath thereof. Like the other texts in this dissertation (with the exception of Rashin's *Purim-Stalin*), *The Red Monarch* does not explicitly identify itself as a Purim spiel, but it is my contention that the genre's tropes, spirit, and narrative arcs influenced the novel's humor and formal structure. Published the year before Wiesel made the first connection in fiction between Purim and Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns in *The Testament*, this fictional work was the first by a (former) Soviet author to both directly mention Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan and do so in relation to Jewish history and cyclical Jewish time. While Krotkov does not represent the alleged deportation plan in relation to Purim (but rather to the Jews' Babylonian captivity under Nebuchadnezzar), this depiction of Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns as a comedic Purim spiel was the first example of Purim-Stalin in that it linked Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan to the *longue durée* of Jewish history and its inherent notion of the recurrence of archetypal narratives and events. And it was Krotkov's escape from the censorship of the humorless Soviet land of metaphorical cultural death that allowed him to represent Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan in the form of a humorous Purim spiel.

In his introduction to the work, Krotkov writes about portraying "the end of Stalin...not only as a factual happening, but also with a pinch of exaggeration" - "as a result, in some episodes, something that began as quite realistic was transformed and brought to the edge of the



grotesque” (8). Needless to say, portraying Stalin and his death in an exaggerated, grotesque fashion was unthinkable in the USSR at the time of Brezhnev’s neo-Stalinist rule. Krotkov could only do so on the other side of the Iron Curtain, the threshold between the USSR’s interdiction on such laughter and the West’s commandment to do precisely that (according to Propp’s theory). Born in 1917, the start of the Russian Revolution, Krotkov might not have seen any Purim spiels himself, but growing up in the multiethnic milieu of Soviet Georgia, he would have likely absorbed some of Purim’s spirit and narrative details from his Jewish neighbors, who have existed in the area as an ethno-religious minority since the Babylonian captivity. Just as characters in folktales are obligated to laugh once they have returned to the land of the living or transmitted their cultural heritage through procreation, Krotkov may have seen his passage to the West as a kind of personal rebirth, one that may have unconsciously spurred him to depict the last days of Stalin in light of the folk traditions of his Soviet Jewish friends and neighbors. On the website of the film’s distributor, the 1983 adaptation of the novel is described as “humorous look at Stalin” where he and Beria “are the double act to end them all,” with “the Kremlin as their stage and the Politburo as their stooges.”<sup>85</sup> One review of the film called it a “jet black comedy” where Stalin is portrayed as a “prankster” and Beria as a “jester,”<sup>86</sup> while another described Stalin as a “buffoon” in the film.<sup>87</sup> These descriptions capture both the novel and the film’s Purim spiel-like comedic theatricality, where the Kremlin becomes a stage for Stalin and Beria’s “double act,” similar in form to the Jewish figure of the Badhan out of which the Purim

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<sup>85</sup> “Red Monarch,” Goldcrest Films, accessed September 30, 2020, <http://www.goldcrestfilms.com/films/view/distribution/red-monarch>.

<sup>86</sup> Time Out Worldwide, “Red Monarch,” Time Out Worldwide, accessed September 30, 2020, <https://www.timeout.com/movies/red-monarch>.

<sup>87</sup> “Red Monarch: TV Guide,” TVGuide.com, accessed September 30, 2020, <https://www.tvguide.com/movies/red-monarch/review/127421/>.

spiel developed. Moreover, the idea of the Kremlin as a stage for Purim-Stalin has a precedent in the tradition of Purim spiels being performed in private homes, public streets, and non-religious venues, an idea that I will develop in later chapters.

Organized as a series of scenes, the novel's inherent theatricality lends itself to this kind of Purim spiel humor and dramatization. Purim spiels and other Purim celebrations used meta-theatricality to represent the past as the present and the present as the past while commenting on the cyclical and interchangeable nature of the Jewish experience. Krotkov likewise uses theater and film as metaphorical devices to comment on Stalin's use of theatrical and cinematic devices (as well as literary plots and historical precedents) in his political policies and self-representation. Stalin here is depicted as someone who is at least as familiar with Jewish history and literary traditions as Krotkov, using them against Soviet Jews as much as the author uses them to tell the Soviet Jewish story. The dictator is a consummate actor, playing different roles depending on his audience and goals. Like Haman and Ahasuerus in Purim spiels, he can be both a comic and dramatic figure, alternately a terrifying purveyor of genocide, crafty schemer and trickster, and decrepit monarch. And like Purim spiels, this is a comedy about horrific events, lending its humor a dark and tragic edge even during moments of the highest buffoonery, as Nazis did with their Purim pranks during the Holocaust. Stalin here never passes up the opportunity "to make fun of a person" and "tease him" (39), usually while their life is at stake. He teases his devoted bodyguard about his silent slippers only to have him arrested when his own joke begins to annoy him; threatens to return his former colleague to a gulag after he refuses to believe Stalin when he makes fun of his stalwart ideological beliefs by confessing that he was a Czarist spy before the Revolution (the former colleague had insisted on Stalin's perfection); and constantly toys with Beria, alternately promoting him and threatening him with damning

evidence. Stalin and Beria's witty banter is the laughter of death, as both connive to kill the other while cooperating to exterminate others; as masters of this silent kingdom, they alone are allowed to laugh. As a "joke," Stalin accuses his bodyguard of plotting to take revenge on behalf of his invented kulak parents (ostensibly purged during forced collectivization) by assassinating him with the help of the British government, in line with the era's anti-cosmopolitan hysteria. Later, Churchill is described as "throwing out his caustic jokes about Soviet dictatorship" (31) at the World War II Tehran conference, where Stalin plays a prank on President Roosevelt by inventing an assassination plot against him that Stalin then himself "thwarts" (as he was supposed to thwart the populist pogrom against Soviet Jews before exiling them during his alleged deportation plan). Here, these fake plots and political animosities are depicted humorously, but they also lay the groundwork for the later post-Soviet Jewish revenge novels, where these plots become "real" and are transformed into successful assassinations of Stalin. Churchill will use the Tehran Conference to do so in the Jewish-American author Ben Bova's *Triumph* (1993), while the invented Jewish Doctors' Plot to assassinate Stalin will be transformed into an actual Soviet Jewish plot to kill the tyrant in self-defense before he can put his deportation plan into action in *The Yid* (2016).

One of Krotkov's sources for the novel's dramatized anecdotes was the Georgian actor Gelovani, a "good comic actor" who met Stalin and played him in several Soviet films. Gelovani made fun of Stalin to Krotkov and provided him with several historical accounts that the author then "reproduced satirically" (10) in the novel. It is worth noting that Gelovani was a comic actor that portrayed Stalin on stage and screen in dramas according to the strict regulations of socialist realism, which ultimately ruined his career as a comedian. In the novel and film, Gelovani and Stalin are portrayed in comedic terms; whereas Gelovani could not laugh at Stalin in the USSR

(at least in public), Krotkov could finally do so abroad and even depict Gelovani doing so as well. Across the Iron Curtain, Krotkov returned to Gelovani his laughter and previous life as a comedian, if only in fiction. In the scene, “Two Stalins,” Stalin and Gelovani dine together, enjoying a “long, traditional, sumptuous Georgian dinner, with an abundance of food, toasts, and songs” (199), an exaggerated carnivalesque feast at the royal court ending in drunken debauchery that stands in stark contrast to the literal and metaphorical winter for the Soviet people outside the Kremlin. When Stalin dies, Gelovani as the dictator’s double fears he will suffer the same fate, a possible reference to his subconscious concern about the revenge coming to claim Stalin’s henchmen and feasting partners after his demise. The actor fears that “these heirs of Stalin’s” will kill him and embalm him instead of Stalin, whose body (according to rumors) was not responding to the embalming process. This fear points to the many Stalinist policies that continued after his death (albeit in attenuated forms) as his shadow in the form of his “heirs” in the Kremlin, which continued to kill even after his own demise (241). Gelovani feels Stalin’s death as his own, also showing how closely actors could identify with their roles in Purim spiels, carrying them over into their own lives. In this, he is like the Soviet Jews, who had internalized Purim spiels until they came to see their real-life experience under Stalin as one.

The “Two Stalins” also hints at the divide between the real and idealized Stalin in Soviet history, reflecting his split between Haman and Ahasuerus, respectively, in Purim terms. The opening scene begins with a description of Stalin's physical deformity - “his left arm, which was shorter than the right and seemed to hang limply from his shoulder” (13). Krotkov also constantly brings attention to the Red Monarch’s “puny” stature and pockmarked face. This is the “real” Stalin - small, ugly, and deformed - in opposition to the “ideal” Gelovani, who portrays the dictator on stage and screen as a taller, younger, and more attractive figure. This

reflects both the inherent theatricality and duplicity of Stalin's existence, divided between the ruthless murderer behind closed doors and the kind father of the nation in public. As such, the real Stalin could not be portrayed within Soviet socialist realism, but only in the aesthetically and politically liberated literature and films of the Western and post-Soviet worlds. Krotkov depicts Stalin teaching Gelovani how to walk, stand and look more like him in the Kremlin; while an emigre novel and Western film could show Stalin defying his own socialist realist rules this way, such alleged feedback never altered the ideal portrayal of Stalin in the USSR. Here, with his grotesque and decrepit physique, Stalin at times resembles the aged Ahasuerus of the Purim spiel; like the Persian monarch, Stalin is outwardly kind to his gullible public (e.g. he treats a frightened girl kindly when she interrupts him mourning his deceased wife at the cemetery and later sends her a giant teddy bear; though her own father died in one of Stalin's purges, the girl always remembers Stalin as the kind old man who sent her a gift). However, if this seems like a contradiction, where the "real" Stalin is both the kindly old Ahasuerus and the conniving Haman, this dual characterization aligns with both rabbinical writings on the Megillah and the variety within the Purim spiel genre. Both provide examples that treat Ahasuerus as an ambivalent figure, one that is both complicit with Haman in planning to exterminate the Jews and then equally complicit in letting Mordechai reverse course and take revenge against Haman and his fellow Amalekites. Stalin embodies Ahasuerus and Haman as the two sides of authoritarian power in its equally arbitrary mercy and cruelty. He is the man that first rescued Soviet Jews from Hitler only to then turn on them in a similar fashion. And while Stalin might resemble the easily manipulated Ahasuerus in his failing physical condition, he is always the Haman that manipulates all those around him to achieve his murderous ends until his own demise in proper Purim spiel fashion. Whereas such ambivalence was unthinkable in a Soviet context, writing in

the West allowed Krotkov to depict such nuances, for which the Purim story has long since served as a precedent. Stalin himself in the novel talks about two Lenins, one kind and the other cruel and heartless, and how the latter eventually won out. Here, Krotkov points to the transition that Purim-Stalin embodied in Jewish consciousness from seeing Soviet Jewry's liberation as being first from Stalin and eventually from Bolshevism itself. If Lenin is equivalent to Stalin in his heartless cruelty, then the problem for Soviet Jews was the entire ideological system, not just one aberrant ruler. This also points to why Purim-Stalin is a delayed Special Purim - it can only come to fruition beyond Soviet borders and after the USSR's demise, since Stalin's death was only a step toward Soviet Jewry's salvation, not salvation itself.

Beria here is depicted as a similarly ambiguous figure in line with the Purim story and Soviet reality. He is both potentially the killer (like Mordechai/Esther) of Stalin-Haman (possibly through poisoning, as Vlassek hypothesizes (232) in line with theories mentioned by Wiesel, Potok and several historians) and the one who (like Haman) persecuted the Jews when he "uncovered" the Doctors' Plot, with which he perhaps "hoped to strengthen his shaky position" vis-a-vis Stalin-Ahasuerus (204). Beria curses Stalin and hopes for his death while simultaneously inventing espionage stories that become his victims' "confessions" to justify Stalin's suspicions. Beria is an ambivalent adviser in Stalin, both complicit in his genocidal plans and occasionally helpful to Jews. Stalin refers to Beria as his gestapo (46), pointing to the transition from Hitler to Stalin as modern Amaleks (and their political systems as Amalekite ideologies) first set forth in *Life and Fate*. And while Stalin is the "hangman," his closest associates in the Politburo are "the hooting crowd" surrounding him (16), just like Haman and his henchmen. Krotkov here again expands the blame from merely Stalin to the entire system he represents. Just as Haman and Ahasuerus are seen as a tandem alternately working together and

at cross purposes at the apex of the Persian court, Beria and Stalin are constantly shown feasting, drinking wine, plotting, and telling jokes together while secretly conniving against each other. Beria is presented with women selected for him by his underlings during his often bacchanalian professional duties, just as Ahasuerus was when he was selecting a new bride during the course of his nearly nonstop revelries. One of Beria's guards, Sarkisov, is in charge of "women affairs" and in the state security apparatus is called "the head of the marshal's harem" (98-9). Sarkisov combines the Purim roles of Hegai, the King's chamberlain and "keeper of women" who looked after the virgins brought to Ahasuerus, and Shaashagaz, another chamberlain of the King, who kept the house of concubines and sent concubines to Ahasuerus whenever the king requested. As with Purim spiels, this conflation of debauchery and feasting lends the novel much of its carnivalesque atmosphere, becoming the source of bawdy humor in both. And like the Purim story, these ongoing revels serve as a masquerade for the protagonists' murderous intentions.

Krotkov's Stalin "feared" the parallel between himself and the czars and "preferred a comparison between himself and Christ" (225). He does not want his reign to be viewed as a recursion of the antisemitism and despotism of the czars, a view encouraged by the perception of history as cyclical and recurring in similar forms in Jewish and Veselovskyite traditions, respectively, both of which violate the view of time as linear propagated by Marxist-Leninism. Stalin's son Vasily compares his father to Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great in precisely such a rhetorical recursion in violation of the official maxim of linear Soviet time, while in private Stalin himself talks favorably about Ivan's suppression of the boyars during his reign. Stalin allows such rhetorical recursion for himself and his family while outlawing historical poetics and comparativism to Soviet writers and intellectuals during the Zhdanovshchina. Krotkov's Stalin admits that such parallels are valid, but Krotkov could only express them in his work abroad. In a

recurring dream, Stalin hopelessly watches a river flow backward, perhaps implying his helplessness to enforce Soviet linear time and conceding that the past, despite Soviet efforts to erase it, can never be separated from the present. Stalin's preference to be compared to Christ reflects an inherent contradiction and inevitable process within Soviet ideology addressed earlier by Wiesel and later by Potok. First, as an atheist ideology, Marxist-Leninism replaced the messianism of Judaism and Christianity with the Cult of Personality, transforming their secular leaders into messiahs. Second, despite waging a war on religion, Stalin was a former seminarian whose religious upbringing (according to the writers of Purim-Stalin) profoundly influenced his reign. Like Jesus, Stalin's "schoolmates had almost crucified him," after which he "started going to church more often...and entered the seminary" (14). Afterwards, Stalin would go on to be perceived as a savior by Soviet Jews and others before being viewed as a modern Haman and be castigated and abused in the works of Purim-Stalin. Stalin is thus both the false messiah recurring throughout Jewish history and the Christ abused and burned in effigy by Jews during Purim celebrations in symbolic revenge against their Christian oppressors. As a seminarian and son of a "religious fanatic" mother (16), Stalin would have known the Book of Esther from the Old Testament, which might have influenced his alleged Jewish deportation plan later.

The Purim narrative arc - from success to near death to rebirth - is repeated in miniature as a kind of *mise en abyme* in the work separate from the alleged Jewish deportation plan itself, as it will be later in *The Death of Stalin*. In one scene alluded to earlier, Stalin reunites a Georgian couple (from the Bolshevik Old Guard) arrested in 1937, blaming Yezhov (here in the role of Haman as someone purged by Stalin in an act of parodic Purim vengeance) for the arrest and taking credit for the reunification (*à la* Ahasuerus). Stalin also unites them with their daughter in a parody of Purim resurrection, reunification and procreative continuity. Stalin, as



Ahasuerus does with Mordechai and Esther, elevates the couple to a privileged position of power after their close brush with death. He also laughs during this same episode as he reveals the trick he played on his former comrade-in-arms during Imperial times, when Stalin informed on him while working as a spy for the czarist police. His laughter highlights the cruel humor underlying the entire episode, similar to the twisted humor employed by Nazis during their antisemitic persecutions that parodied Jewish traditions, revealing Stalin's self-awareness in using such plot devices to achieve his political ends. Later, Stalin quotes the Roman satirist Juvenal, saying that people need bread and circuses, a reference to the nightmarish carnival of his own reign.

These aforementioned elements seem to point to the subconscious influence of the Purim spiel on the novel, but this conjecture is strengthened by Krotkov's explicit references to Stalin's problems with Soviet Jewry throughout the novel, particularly his alleged Jewish deportation plan. The novel's overt Jewish element is introduced with the (real-life) figure of Mekhlis, the chief of the secretariat (i.e. Stalin's personal secretary), a "smart" and "tall stately Jew" (15). Stalin respects Mekhlis "in his heart" and calls him "my Jew" (19); he is depicted here as the Mordechai to Stalin's Ahasuerus. When Mekhlis of his own volition places a special button for tea on Stalin's telephone to expedite the leader's constant requests for it, Stalin erroneously suspects that Mekhlis is "tired" of bringing him tea "because he considered it beneath the dignity of the chief of the secretariat," which causes Stalin to become "seized with wrath" (19). This episode is reminiscent of the Megillah in several ways. One, it shows a Jew finding favor in the inner circle of the Red Monarch, as Mordechai does with Ahasuerus in the beginning of the Purim story. Second, it shows Stalin becoming unjustly irate with Mekhlis for a perceived slight the latter never intended, as Haman does with Mordechai when he refuses to bow to the viceroy out of religious conviction rather than any particular animosity toward Haman. Krotkov also

implies that Mekhlis' perceived slight played a role in Stalin's decision to launch his postwar antisemitic campaigns, as Haman does against the Persian Jews after Mordechai's own apparent disrespect. In both cases, anger at an individual Jew provokes ethnic cleansing against the entire Jewish population. In his anger, Stalin "would make fun of Mekhlis by telling vulgar Jewish anecdotes" (20), i.e. jokes, an example of the humor of cruelty perpetrated by Stalin against his would-be victims. Stalin's wrath against Mekhlis is soon generalized into a suspicion of all Soviet Jews, as it was during the anti-cosmopolitan campaign. He even suspects his Russian Foreign Minister Molotov of being connected with American Zionists through his Jewish wife (100). At one point, an American journalist interviews Stalin and tells him his own Jewish anecdote: "A Moscow Jew is reading *Pravda*, where it is written that the Soviet citizens will not only catch up to, but surpass America. The Jew then turns to his wife and says Sarah, at the point we surpass America, we will get off and stay there" (144). This classic example of Soviet Jewish humor is the kind that might have been whispered in the USSR behind closed doors but could only be published abroad. It is significant that this is a non-Jewish American telling Stalin this joke, reflecting the growing reach of the Soviet Jewry Movement by the time of the book's publication, especially in the USA. Tellingly, the American is the only character in the work besides Stalin and Beria to initiate humor, rather than be a victim of it. For Stalin, this is a taste of the anti-communist humor soon to be unleashed by both Jewish and non-Jewish Soviet emigres, who are free to laugh at their time in the USSR now that they have escaped.

In the scene, "The Jewish Question," Krotkov explicitly mentions Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan for the first time in a fictional context, a year before Wiesel would allude to it in *The Testament*, where he became the first to connect it to Purim in a work of fiction. The scene opens with Stalin complaining to Beria about the alleged ear locks of the father of his daughter

Svetlana's Jewish fiancé. Beria's investigation has concluded that the proposed father-in-law does not actually have ear locks, which would be evidence of the crime of "bourgeois nationalism" (i.e. Jewish observance), but this is the same kind of antisemitic teasing leveled at Mekhlis earlier. Stalin has no grounds to suspect any of these Jews of any wrongdoing; like Haman with Mordechai, he is simply inventing pretenses for his antisemitic terror. Beria laughs at Stalin calling the fiancé's father a "crook with ear locks" (86), an example of the work's black Purim spiel humor, where laughter is associated in hindsight with Soviet Jewry's darkest moments. Svetlana's fiancé's last name is Moroz (Russian for "frost"), a possibly serendipitous reference to the metaphorical winter experienced by Soviet Jews under Stalin before the Thaw that followed his death. Like Mordecai hiding Hadassah's Jewish identity by changing her name to Esther, Stalin "baptizes" his Jewish son-in-law with the "good Russian name" Morozov (91) to do the same. While Jews are being persecuted across the Empire, with their Jewish names being returned to them by the press to reveal their hidden identities, Stalin must do the opposite to hide from the public that he is simultaneously bringing a Jew into his family. This act is an implicit reference to Stalin's complicated and variegated mapping onto the characters of the Purim story in Purim-Stalin. Of course, Stalin's act is more sinister than Mordechai's, as the Morozovs must hide their Jewish identity or be arrested on Stalin's orders. As such, it is a kind of parody of the Purim story, in line with the topsy-turvy humor of Purim spiels. The name change "must be done secretly, so that no rumors are spread" - it is a "government secret" that will cause both father and son to be arrested should they reveal it (92). This is another example of the forced silence experienced by Soviet Jews under Stalin, one that could only be broken once they were beyond Soviet borders. Furthermore, note that Moroz must be "baptized" from a Jew to a Russian, which after World War II is synonymous with Soviet identity, to be accepted

by the political elites, just as Jews were forced to convert to Russian Orthodoxy during the Imperial period to achieve similar acceptance. However, just as such conversion was looked on suspiciously during the Imperial period, Stalin admits that even changing the fiancé's name is still not enough for the Soviet leader to fully accept him, lamenting, "Ah, these damned Jews, there is no getting away from them" (92). Here, like Hitler, Stalin is represented viewing Judaism as an inherent metaphysical state that cannot be erased through conversion, rendering Jews incapable of ever becoming true Soviets.

In line with the texts in the previous chapter, Krotkov also depicts the tension between the fathers' and sons' generations already appearing during the end of Stalin's reign. Stalin is surprised to discover that Svetlana's fiancé does not play chess but rather ping-pong. "That isn't a Jewish game," Stalin insists, to which Beria replies, "The younger generation...are breaking away from the traditions of their fathers" (87). Here, Stalin exhibits the Russian antisemitic stereotype of Jews as physically inept intellectuals, while Beria reveals that the sons' generation is breaking with their fathers' traditions by engaging in physical activities like ping-pong. Krotkov thereby introduces the question of Jewish masculinity, implying that the sons' generation of Soviet Jews will possess more physical prowess than their fathers, paving the way for the Jewish warriors of the later revenge novels, who will reap vengeance on behalf of their chess-playing fathers (who themselves, as Red Army soldiers, reaped vengeance against White Russian antisemites on behalf of their ineffectual, religious fathers). As we see, each generation does battle both against and on behalf of their ideologically mistaken fathers. Stalin had earlier said that in Soviet society "a son does not have to answer for his father's sins" because "communists are not avengers" (54). On the one hand, this is patently false, as Stalin earlier had his bodyguard arrested on a false assassination accusation explained as revenge for the fate of the

guard's kulak parents during the Purges. Also, the Bolshevik Jews of the fathers' generation were attacked under Stalin for the crime of their parents' Judaism, not their own. On the other hand, it might also be a veiled reference to the coming Jewish vengeance of the post-Soviet generation as being both un-communist and anti-communist in its ethnic and political nature. As with other sons of non-Jewish Soviet leaders, Stalin's sons Yakov and Vasily also break with their father. Vasily tells his father that Yakov despised the Soviet state and signed anti-Stalinist leaflets for the Nazis, while Vasily is a vulgar drunk constantly undermining and ridiculing his father by calling him "papasha." "Papasha sounds like a character in a musical comedy," replies Stalin, "And does comrade Stalin resemble a musical comedy papasha? Respectful sons do not address their fathers in that way" (73). However, Stalin and his son are now in Purim-Stalin, a Purim spiel (which were often musical comedies) where sons do turn against their fathers and particularly Stalin himself, the Father of all the Soviet peoples.

Growing up as a seminarian in the multiethnic milieu of czarist Russia and Georgia, when Jews still performed Purim spiels, Krotkov's Stalin reveals himself to be an expert of the history and traditions of the Jewish people. In "The Jewish Question," Krotkov dramatizes Stalin's decision to deport Soviet Jews to the far east, a rumor for which no paper trail exists. But rather than Ahasuerus (or Haman), Stalin compares himself to Nebuchadnezzar and his deportation plan to that of the Babylonian King forcing the ancient Israelites into exile. Stalin approvingly explains to Beria how the "Babylonian Czar" Nebuchadnezzar "invaded Jerusalem, sacked it and took the Jews into captivity" (89). While this might not make *The Red Monarch* an Ahasuerus-spiel, Purim spiels represented many biblical stories and events from Jewish history besides the Book of Esther. Thus, Krotkov explicitly referencing the Babylonian captivity instead of the Purim story makes it no less of a Purim spiel. Like the Nazis before him, Stalin

knows all the Jewish “traditions, rituals, and so on” but looks disparagingly on them; he describes the antithetical relationship between communism and “the rabbis and damned Zionists,” who use the idea of the Jews as a chosen people “to conceal the class divisions and class struggle among Jews” and “limit the social consciousness of the working masses” (89). He understands, like the sons’ generation of Soviet Jews soon will, that communism is antithetical to Judaism and Zionism. This ultimately leads him to the conclusion that Jews can never truly be Soviets, just like they could never truly be Germans in the Third Reich. Using Jewish and Soviet history as an example, Stalin says that “perhaps also the Jews should be sent” away to the Crimea as “a preventative measure,” just as Nebuchadnezzar had done with the Israelites and Stalin himself had already done with several other national minorities (including the Crimean Tatars). Stalin justifies this measure by insisting that a “certain amount of autonomy will be useful for both the Russian and the Jewish people. But as it is, the Russians are complaining about Jewish dominance” (90). If the Russians are complaining, this is primarily because of official antisemitic propaganda. But such reasoning is only an excuse to rid himself of another troubling minority suddenly regaining its national identity after the Holocaust, while simultaneously strengthening his rule by pandering to the Russian ethnic majority. Stalin tells Beria to think “the organizational measures through, so this won’t look like a deportation. The Jews should express their desire themselves” (91). This could be a reference to both the *Pravda* Jewish open letter, which allegedly called for a voluntary exile of Soviet Jews, as well as Stalin’s foresight in disguising this forced deportation as a voluntary Exodus to maintain his appearance as a savior, rather than an enemy, of Soviet Jews. While he is actually Haman (or Nebuchadnezzar), Stalin, as the “leader of the international proletariat” (which includes the Jews), wants to present himself as Mordecai (or Ahasuerus) saving the Jews from the Russians.

Writing abroad after Stalin's death, Krotkov illustrates and uncovers this deception by presenting it as a modern Purim spiel, with the Jews likewise ultimately escaping their would-be destroyer, who dies instead.

When Stalin dies, Beria, his erstwhile companion in the Haman-Ahasuerus matrix, is relieved and calls his former leader a villain in an effort to immediately rewrite the recent past to make himself look more like Mordechai within Purim-Stalin. There are rumors, implicitly spread by Beria himself (as seen here and later in Potok's texts and *The Death of Stalin*), that he was responsible for Stalin's death as an act of both revenge for the dictator's crimes and preemptive self-defense, as many of these texts (as well as historians) imply that Stalin was soon to turn against his closest advisers the way he had done many times before. Instead, as happened in real life, Stalin's successors take revenge on Beria in Stalin's stead. The last scene details the rumors describing all the different ways they killed Beria, thereby acting out a communal revenge fantasy against Stalin on behalf of his victims in a repetitive and increasingly bloody fashion. Here, as in later works like Potok's "The War Doctor," Rashin's "Purim-Stalin," and *The Death of Stalin*, the Politburo takes on the role of Mordecai and the Persian Jews in taking vengeance against the Amalekites in the form of Beria, a connection strengthened by the Politburo's various Jewish elements (e.g. Molotov's Jewish wife and the Jewish Kaganovich). Though Jews themselves will only kill Stalin and his henchmen in the post-Soviet novel *The Yid*, this work represents a link in the chain in the development of Purim-Stalin that started with Soviet Jewish writers being unable to explicitly represent Stalin's antisemitic campaigns to post-Soviet Jewish writers portraying Jews taking justice into their own hands by personally taking revenge against Stalin.

At the reading of Khrushchev's 1956 "Secret Speech" denouncing Stalin at the Moscow Writers' Union at the end of the novel, Krotkov describes the atmosphere as "half-funeral and half-wedding or birthday celebration": "despite the fact that conversation was subdued, as though there were a casket in the room, the mood was one of elation... It's the way it is in the theater before the curtain goes up on a comedy" (246). Krotkov here represents the slow, partial return from the kingdom of death to the land of the living for Soviets after Stalin's death. It is significant that he portrays this transition among writers, who are the ones who will be representing this in their work for both their fellow citizens and the outside world to gauge its development. It is still "half-funeral" because the celebration cannot be complete as long as Stalin's heirs remain in power. The film version even closes with a rendition of Yevgeny Yevtushenko poem "The Heirs of Stalin." They can almost see the recent tragedy of Stalin's reign in hindsight as comedy, but while the USSR persists, the curtain on the comic Purim-Stalin can only go up outside of Soviet borders. The writers listen to a dramatist reading Khrushchev's speech for five hours, delivered "as though she had been to the other world and returned alive" (248). With the speech denoting an official beginning to the Thaw, it traces the movement from the Stalin period, a time of metaphorical and literal death, to the return to life represented (albeit only partially) by the speech and Khrushchev's reign. After the speech, the writers call to remove Stalin's portrait, as if they are destroying his effigy, and sing The Internationale to express their liberation from Stalinist oppression. Singing this song implies that as citizens of a workers' state, they have realized that they must liberate themselves from both capitalist and communist tyrants. They express a need to take up weapons and go to the barricades to defeat the cult of personality, a harbinger of what citizens behind the Iron Curtain would do decades later. As part of the Thaw, Khrushchev even promises to give Russian Jews "corn matzo" (253), implying that not only is



state-sponsored antisemitism over, but that Soviet Jews are now experiencing a veritable internal Exodus, when they ate matzo to sustain themselves. In reality, Soviet Jews would soon be eating matzo abroad, as the Soviet Jewry Movement eventually led to their mass emigration from the USSR in what many Soviet and Western Jews saw as a recurrence of the biblical Exodus. Only after this reprise of the Exodus would Soviet Jews come to retrospectively see Stalin's death as their own Special Purim.

*The Red Monarch* was the first work of fiction to depict Stalin's death and his alleged Jewish deportation plan in the manner and spirit of a comedic Purim spiel, making it the first true entry in the Purim-Stalin genre. Its generative-corporeal humor and obscenity set a precedent for the later comedic Purim-Stalin works like *Khrustalyov, My Car!* and *The Death of Stalin*. While neither of those works explicitly reference Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan, for reasons I will develop when I discuss those works, they built on and elaborated the underlying Purim spiel spirit animating *The Red Monarch*. While (primarily Jewish) Western historians during the period broadly considered Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan a historical fact and could freely include it in their accounts of Soviet Jewry, Jewish and gentile Soviet writers could only represent the plan outside of the confines of the USSR, as Krotkov does in this emigre novel. By utilizing the Purim spiel genre to represent Stalin's final years and death, Krotkov was the first to link Purim's carnivalesque spirit with those events. Precisely one year after the book's publication, Elie Wiesel in *The Testament* became the first Jewish writer to depict those same events as a recurrence of Purim. However, since most Soviet Jews continued to live in the false spring of the post-Stalin USSR, it was only after the collapse of the USSR that both Soviet and non-Soviet Jewish writers and activists came to see the Soviet Jewish ordeal that began under Stalin to be finally over. Only then did these writers begin to represent the Soviet Jewish

experience during Stalin's last days and his alleged Jewish deportation plan as a Special Purim, as we will see in the next chapter. As historians grew more skeptical of the plan's existence due to a lack of concrete evidence in the newly opened Soviet archives, writers and filmmakers conversely represented it as a historical fact as part of a broader effort to make sense of the Soviet Jewish experience in the context of Jewish history. Now that Soviet Jews had returned to Jewish cyclical time, the deportation plan became a part of that history as yet another recurrence of the Purim story.

Aleksei German's *Khrustalyov, My Car!*

The post-Soviet/Russian film *Khrustalyov, My Car!* (1998) elaborates on the tradition introduced by Krotkov by presenting Stalin's death as a comic Purim spiel, which will be developed further in later works like *The Yid* and *The Death of Stalin*. Aleksei German, a Soviet Jew, took seven years to complete *Khrustalyov, My Car!*, starting production at the end of the Soviet Union. While liberated from the shackles of Soviet censorship to represent these events freely, it is my contention that German, writing in the post-Soviet shadow of that recent oppression, was not able to embody the Jewish element of his Soviet Jewish identity in the same way as his emigre counterparts. As such, like his Soviet predecessors, he is unable to represent the alleged Jewish deportation plan because his religious identity remained aesthetically foreclosed to him, preventing him from identifying Stalin's death amidst the Doctors' Plot with Purim. However, like Grossman and Ehrenburg, the genre memory of Purim and Purim spiels remained inside him from the *longue durée* of Jewish history, causing him to nevertheless represent these events in the carnivalesque manner of a Purim spiel.

*Khrustalyov, My Car!* is a fictional account of the days bookending Stalin's death, told from the perspective of a Jewish military doctor and his family that get caught up in the Doctors'

Plot. German, who downplayed his Jewish roots until the final years of the USSR, highlights the fraught nature of Soviet-Jewish identity, especially during the end of Stalin's reign. The Jewish protagonist, Yuri Klensky, is a towering figure, a charismatic General and military doctor built like a circus strongman with noticeable sexual appeal, being an object of desire for several women (and men) throughout the course of the film. This is the new Jewish warrior of early Soviet fiction, yet still not the proud Jew of the post-Soviet revenge novels. German's film captures a transitional moment when the Soviet era gave way to the post-Soviet, when Soviet Jewish identity was in flux, still being formulated, as Klensky's ambiguous characterization reflects. Like many Soviet Jews of the fathers' generation, he thought he was accepted in Soviet society, so he does not worry about the anti-cosmopolitan campaign raging around him until he suddenly finds himself enmeshed in the Doctors' Plot. Even his neighbor thinks he is Russian, not Jewish. Klensky's son refers to his Jewish cousins, implying that he does not consider himself Jewish, despite having a Jewish father. At the hospital Klensky supervises, he meets a patient being administered an enema who is his exact doppelganger. The Purim spiel humor of the scene, with its obscene corporeal laughter revolving around the nether regions, also symbolizes the divided nature of the Stalin-era Soviet Jew, caught between both identities without fully belonging to either. Also, as the Mordecai of this Purim spiel, he reflects the popular representation in Ahasuerus-spiels of the character as both "a lewd fool" and a hero "rendered in rabbinic seriousness" (Carruthers 2008, 270). The "lewdness" of the enema, here a tool for healing, will be reflected and turned upside down later in a scene involving Klensky's nether regions, where it will symbolize his carnivalesque reversal of fortune. Immediately after this encounter, a foreigner comes to the hospital with news for Klensky about the general's sister in Stockholm, who does not actually exist. Klensky quickly realizes that this is a fabrication by

the security organs to implicate him in a false double life as a “rootless cosmopolitan” with international ties to justify his imminent arrest in connection with the Doctors’ Plot.

Klensky is arrested and immediately beaten and raped by his fellow prisoners with a pole, rapidly descending from the top of the Soviet order to its bottom. The healing enema used earlier on his doppelganger has been replaced with another phallus of a more sinister order. His brutalization and near-death experience at the hands of the regime serves as a synecdoche for Soviet Jewry. He becomes an Esther figure, sodomized and thus metaphorically feminized, transformed from a virile Jewish warrior and object of feminine desire to a castrated object of male desire, the emasculated “peaceful citizen” of decades of Russian and Soviet propaganda. He is Esther in drag, a man playing the role of the ancient heroine, as male Purim spielers had done for centuries. With no comparable female figure in the film, Klensky is forced to perform both roles. While he is personally deported as part of his imprisonment, there is no mention in the film of a planned mass Jewish deportation. With no explicit mention of Jewish tradition or history here, the Doctors’ Plot cannot be connected to the Purim story, the necessary link for representing the alleged deportation plan. However, in following Mordecai’s story arc, he is soon avenged for his fall from power, as his rapists are subsequently beaten in turn with the pipe used to sodomize him earlier by the same security organs that had previously arrested Klensky. Like Mordecai, the same power that had suddenly threatened his power and very existence just as precipitously helps Klensky exact his revenge against his tormentors.

Events like these are depicted throughout the film in a carnivalesque, “Felliniesque” manner, as many critics noted. Klensky refers to the military hospital he operates as a “circus.” Several people are shown joining an actual circus over the course of the film, as Klensky eventually does himself at the end of the tale. The work is saturated with cursing and humor

revolving around the nether regions, i.e. copulation and bowel movements, that characterizes Purim spiels and festivities. But it is a cruel, pitch black humor, like that found in *The Red Monarch* and *The Death of Stalin*, highlighting Stalin's death as a return from the netherworld of the old regime to the land of the living for Soviet citizens, first glimpsed in the Thaw but only fully realized with the collapse of the USSR. On the eve of Stalin's stroke, Klensky jokes that Death, an orderly, is working overtime in his hospital. Klezmer music and almost nonstop folk singing rings throughout, and Klensky and the other characters are constantly drinking, often getting so drunk that they would not be able to tell Haman-Stalin from Haman-Mordecai, a problem for Soviet Jews at the time. Or Klensky from his doppelgänger, for that matter. Klensky attends feasts before his fall from grace and after his return to power, first as a respected court Jew in the form of a Soviet General and then as merely a citizen spared death by a Purim miracle, which takes the form of Stalin falling ill, which necessitates Klensky's removal from captivity and transposition to Stalin's bedside to attempt to save the king. Purim feasts blend with royal feasts in the court of Stalin-Ahasuerus, as the two bleed together in a kind of infinite generic regression, combining with the events surrounding Stalin's death to form Purim-Stalin. Klensky, standing in for Soviet Jewry, is saved from the netherworld of captivity in deportation by Stalin's stroke on Purim, which eventually leads to his liberation.

1 March 1953 is depicted as a snowy winter night that transitions into the first day of a cold spring. After his fall from grace, Klensky returns to power as he is brought in by the government to attempt to rescue Stalin-Ahasuerus, only to pronounce his death as Stalin-Haman. Stalin is shown as being old and decrepit, having soiled himself before Klensky's arrival. Klensky then further humiliates his body, pushing his belly to force Stalin to pass gas in front of his erstwhile subordinates. Beria calls Stalin "the Father": he is the ravaged body of the old

regime, falling apart in comically humiliating fashion in front of the audience to discredit his reign. Klensky refuses to perform surgery on Stalin, thereby guaranteeing his death, a passive form of revenge for the tyrant's crimes that will be amplified in later Purim-Stalin works. After Stalin's death, Beria tells Klensky that he can go home and that he will be a prince, signifying the Jew's return to power (a la Mordecai). However, just as Beria will soon be executed by the regime, Soviet Jewry's triumph will be a circuitous affair. While they were liberated from Stalin, they still had to deal with his communist heirs through the cold spring of the Thaw era and final decades of Soviet power until the true spring of the USSR's collapse. Meanwhile, in their apartment, Klensky's son is told not to be ashamed of being Jewish, at which point he breaks into the traditional Russian song, "Tumbalalaika". In this partial thaw, Klensky, the father, disappears, as much of the father's generation did, never actually making it home from deportation. Instead, he merely continues his festive drinking after Stalin's death on a train with a traveling circus he has joined. This is both a Purim celebration and a sign that he remains stuck in this story, never to experience the full liberation from Soviet oppression of the next generation. Only the son, the story's narrator, will one day cease to be ashamed of his Jewish heritage and tell this tale of Soviet Jewry's survival of Haman-Stalin and their eventual post-Soviet resurrection to subsequent generations. Initiated at the end of communism and realized in the early years of post-Soviet Russia, the film embodies the transition of Soviet Jewry from the fear of the Soviet period to the liberation that followed its termination. The film's very name embodies the partial nature of the Thaw of Stalinism following the dictator's death that only fully melted away after the end of the USSR. "Khrustalyov, My Car!" were the first words of the post-Stalinist USSR, shouted by Beria to his driver after confirming Stalin's death. Yet it was only after the regime's collapse almost forty years later that artists in the former USSR like

German could finally represent that moment, with all of its ambivalence and absurdity, without censorship. It is my conjecture that the transitional nature of this period in the region prevented German from representing Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan in his film. The film betrays its inscription into the *longue durée* of Jewish history through its representation of Stalin's death in a carnivalesque mode in the manner of a Purim spiel. However, living in the land of the events the film depicts may have caused German to shy away from accusing the Soviet regime of planning to deport all of its Jewish citizens, as former Soviet Party members and bureaucrats continued to be a part of the Russian government that funded the film's production.

## **Chapter 4: Purim-Stalin as a Special Purim**

“In its emergent, strong form a genre is essentially a socio-symbolic message, or in other terms, that form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right. When such forms are reappropriated and refashioned in quite different social and cultural contexts, this message persists and must be functionally reckoned into the new form. . . The ideology of the form itself, thus sedimented, persists into the later, more complex structure as a generic message which coexists . . . as a mediatory or harmonizing mechanism . . . with elements from later stages”

-Fredric Jameson<sup>88</sup>

Forming part of both the Jewish and Christian Bibles, the Book of Esther has been employed by writers of both religions for two millennia to comment on and make sense of recent history and current affairs. Before forming the basis of Purim spiels in Ashkenazi communities in the early modern period, it was adapted for the stage by European Christian writers for consumption by predominantly Christian audiences. Scholars like Ahuva Belkin have argued that Purim spiels were influenced by these European Christian works, which helped create a model (along with native Jewish traditions) for Ashkenazi Purim spielers to adapt the Megillah and other stories from the Tanakh and Jewish history for theatrical productions within their communities.<sup>89</sup> In other words, a Jewish tradition that was adopted and adapted by Christian writers then helped beget a new Jewish literary genre that represented the original tradition in a new form at least partially influenced by Christian interpretations of the original Jewish tradition. Similarly, we will see how a non-Jew’s representation of Stalin’s death and his alleged Jewish deportation plan like *The Red Monarch*, informed by Purim spiel humor, informed later Jewish

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<sup>88</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), 141.

<sup>89</sup> Ahuva Belkin, *Ha-Purim Shpil: ‘iyunim Ba-te’atron Ha-Yehudi Ha-‘amami* (Yerushalayim: Mosad Byalik, 2002).



literary and cinematic representations of those same events. A year after *The Red Monarch* was published, Elie Wiesel published the first Jewish fictional representation of Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns and death that compared those events to those in the Megillah in his novel *The Testament*. However, both of these works discussed these events only in passing, without much detail and still in a largely allusive manner. Only with the collapse of the USSR did Soviet Jews and their allies finally view their salvation from Soviet oppression as being complete. It was then that a Western Jewish writer like Chaim Potok could represent Soviet Jewry's salvation from Stalin's alleged deportation plan through the tyrant's death as a recurrence of the Purim story in a detailed, sustained manner in *The Gates of November*. Using Veselovsky's method of *historical poetics* and his concept of generic *recursion* as part of the *longue durée* of literary history, I will look at how Potok fit his ostensibly nonfiction narrative into the mold of the Purim story. This and his subsequent work on the subject, *The War Doctor*, raised the question of Jewish Amaleks in the USSR and their role in coming to terms with Soviet Jewish trauma under Stalin. He was elaborating on a theme introduced by Wiesel in his work, and in doing so, Potok used the traditional elements of the Purim spiel to add a uniquely Soviet component to Purim-Stalin. Potok elaborated this fusion of Jewish narrative tradition and Soviet Jewish history into the first literary representation of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan and thus provide the first literal example of the Purim-Stalin genre only hinted at in the works discussed previously.

Now that Soviet Jews were free from the USSR, a land of Jewish cultural death, many slowly returned to Jewish life. Doing so encouraged them to see Stalin's death as a recurrence of the Purim story because their metaphorical captivity under Stalin's successors was only now at an end. Using the rabbinic concept of special Purims, I will examine how and why post-Soviet Jewish writers and filmmakers adapted the Purim story to make sense of their experience during

the Black Years of Stalin's final years in power. I will elucidate how Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan was first reimagined to more closely align with the Book of Esther in the special (post-)Soviet megillah *Purim-Stalin* (1996) by Soviet emigres Alexander and Bella Rashin. This created a blueprint for subsequent post-Soviet Jewish writers to represent the events surrounding the alleged plan as a special Purim, thereby linking their unique trauma under their Soviet Haman to the *longue durée* of Jewish history to which they had returned after the collapse of the USSR.

This chapter will explore how the return of Soviet Jews to Jewish consciousness enabled them to make sense of their Soviet experience in a way that was previously foreclosed to them. This created a need to rewrite Soviet Jewish history to make it better align with Jewish history and traditions like special Purims. One result of this recreation of Soviet Jewish history is the sudden need to find Esthers and Mordecais in Stalin's alleged deportation plan where there were none before.<sup>90</sup> By assigning these roles to historical characters in his reworking of the Megillah, the Rashins caused a reevaluation of their roles in the deportation plan that would reverberate in later works in the genre, namely *The Yid* and *The Death of Stalin*, which merged the Rashins' rewriting of the Book of Esther with the carnivalesque qualities of *The Red Monarch* and *Khrustalyov, My Car!* Soviet Jews were now free to represent these events themselves, and, like Wiesel, Potok and Krotkov before them, they turned to Jewish history and religious traditions to find a model to do so. By creating an unambiguous representation of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan as a special Purim, the Rashins also helped set the stage for the inclusion of the

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<sup>90</sup> This new development in fictional representations of these events even extended to work by historians working on the subject. Describing Sophia Karpai, a Jewish doctor arrested during the Doctors' Plot that refused to cooperate with her interrogators by giving them a confession, Jonathan Brent wrote, "It satisfies the imagination to think that the fate of the Jews of Russia might have depended on this latter day, unknown Esther" (Brent and Naumov 2001, 307).

final element of Purim-Stalin so far largely missing from fictional depictions of this event - Jewish revenge - which would be provided by the texts examined in the next chapter.

### Special Purims

“While certain Purim practices are widespread, they are precisely situated and overwritten by local concerns and emphases. Purim is always specific to the time and place within which it is celebrated and in this sense is ‘secular’, meaning literally ‘of its time’” (Carruthers 2020, 2).

In his 2003 work on Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan, *Why Didn't Stalin Murder All the Jews*, Alexander Rashin analyzes the events surrounding it through the lens of “special Purims.” This is the “old and established tradition within Jewish life” of documenting and celebrating deliverances of Jewish communities or families from those seeking to destroy them, which are then annually “celebrated by the descendants of those who were saved”; these special Purims include “a retelling of the events that took place” with accompanying festivities (256). Whereas Purim is observed universally, special Purims “commemorating days of deliverance of a local Jewish community” are “kept only by the descendants of the members of that community” (Goodman 1949, 15). Traditionally, these special Purims do not overlap with universal Purim, which may reflect the rabbinical mandate against mixing “joy with joy” (Goodman 1949, 15). Thus, if by chance “a day of deliverance of a local community or of a family fell on the day of the original Purim, its anniversary was advanced or postponed, or the new celebration was merged with the old” (Goodman 1949, 15-16). This injunction against combining the two perhaps provides another reason why it took so long for Soviet Jews to acknowledge their deliverance from Stalin via his death in the days following Purim as their own special Purim. It also helps to explain why early Soviet Jewish texts dealing with Stalin’s death

were not explicitly Purim-oriented. It is possible that folk memories of this injunction either prevented an explicit link between their salvation from Stalin and Purim, or the former was merged with the latter in line with this ancient custom, thereby removing any impetus for special acknowledgment.

Apart from special Purims, many local Purim celebrations historically emphasized the “overlap or contiguity between a community’s experience of (and deliverance from) mortal danger and its celebration of the triumph of the Jews over their adversaries during the distant days of Mordecai and Esther” (Horowitz 2006, 287). This overlap between local and universal Jewish salvation commemorated by Purim also explains why Purim spiels, locally written and produced community plays, have since at least the Middle Ages transposed “the Esther story to include current political and social interests” (Carruthers 2020, 3). Varying “as widely as the geographical and historical spread of Purim celebrations themselves,” special Purims and Purim spiels exemplify the festival’s constant “metamorphosis for current and proximate concerns”; in both cases, “the Esther narrative of threat and miraculous reprieve is mapped onto local events,” with some communities even producing “new scrolls that rewrite the Esther story to fit local histories of threat and escape” (Carruthers 2020, 3). Inventing unique local Purim customs was a way for communities to create a distinct “sense of cultural patrimony by including the possession of venerable traditions that it was their sacred duty to perpetuate” (Horowitz 2006, 280). In this sense, Purim-Stalin became a way of perpetuating the specific history and traditions of Soviet Jewry, which would then be perpetuated by the descendants of those who had experienced the events it commemorates. Furthermore, these local Purims “could be observed in either their home communities or in those to which they emigrated” (Horowitz 2006, 281), as Purim-Stalin would be by Jews from the former USSR both within and outside of its geographic borders.

At least as early as the sixteenth century, local Purims had been declared and observed in Jewish communities around the Mediterranean (Horowitz 2006, 305). Communities observing special Purims included those of Crete, Cairo, Algiers, Saragossa, Narbonne, Padua, Shiraz, Chios and Lepanto (Horowitz 2006, 283), to name just a few, with many of these them creating special megillot commemorating their unique salvations that were read annually during these local Purims. This tradition soon extended beyond the Mediterranean. In 1614, Frankfurt's Jewish ghetto was plundered and its Jews driven out by an angry mob; in 1616, under a new city council, the leaders of the mob were executed and the town's Jews were permitted to return, "which they commemorated with a local Purim" (Horowitz 2006, 89). Local Purims continued to proliferate throughout Europe well into the twentieth century. On the eve of World War II, a rabbi in Padua instituted one in 1927 "after an unsuccessful attempt by local fascists to torch" his synagogue (Horowitz 2006, 306). In 1942, during the war itself, the Jews of Casablanca established a local Purim to commemorate their recent liberation from the fascist occupation by American forces. The community wrote a special *Megillat Hitler* for the occasion, which described the dictator as a descendant of Haman and Amalek (Horowitz 2006, 91). After the war, Jews in nearby Tunis celebrated Purim by decorating their effigies of Haman with the dictator's trademark mustache. Meanwhile, Purim celebrations were held by Holocaust survivors throughout European Displaced Persons (DP) camps that prominently featured Hitler in the same role. In the Landsberg DP camp, survivors organized a week-long Purim carnival that included a symbolic burning of *Mein Kampf* (which Hitler had written in the local prison in 1924) and multiple Hitler effigies (Horowitz 2006, 92). An Israeli rabbi even suggested instituting a local Purim in 1967 to commemorate Israel's victory in the Six-Day War (Horowitz 2006, 314),

showing the continued appeal of the tradition even after the reestablishment of Israel as a homeland for the Jews after nearly two millennia of diasporic existence.

Throughout the twentieth century, many Jewish writers and scholars commenting on the Purim story did so “in light of the historical repetitions or echoes of the Ancient Persian Empire’s attack on the Jews. Attacks on Jewish communities became horrifically commonplace in modern Europe and Russia especially and echo the story of Esther so closely that they demand recognition as the story’s most pertinent and pressing context for interpretation” (Carruthers 2020, 25). Goodman, Horowitz, and other recent Purim scholars also make this claim, yet none of them make any mention of Stalin or his alleged Jewish deportation plan in relation to Purim, demonstrating how little this tradition is known outside of a (post-)Soviet context. The Book of Esther ends in Jewish triumph, with their enemies defeated and their planned genocide thwarted. During the Soviet era, Purim-Stalin met the last two conditions, but not the first. A complete Jewish triumph would have to wait until the USSR collapsed, explaining why only post-Soviet works on the subject could fully take on the characteristics of a special Purim. Many of the most famous special Purims (e.g. those in Shiraz and Saragossa) involved Jewish converts to Christianity or Islam informing on the Jewish community before ultimately being punished for their betrayal of their former coreligionists. We have already seen this theme echoed in the Jewish NKVD/MGB/KGB officers and Yevseksiya members in the works discussed previously, who similarly abandoned their religion and helped destroy its traditions before falling victim themselves to Stalin’s various purges. Conversely, the Jews of the sons’ generation that returned to the Jewish identities of their grandparents were ultimately rewarded with the collapse of the antisemitic Soviet system and the ability to escape beyond its reach. The message of both local and universal Purim is that “God had come through again for the Jews in their time of need, and

their salvation should be acknowledged and celebrated for generations” (Horowitz 2006, 291). The end of the Megillah enjoins Jews to memorialize Purim so that its events will be remembered by their descendants. While this memorialization became taboo for Soviet Jews due to the government’s anti-Jewish policies, this special Purim came into existence alongside their return to Jewish consciousness after they began to reexamine their story through a Jewish lens. Special Purims are an example of what Eric Hobsbawm calls “invented traditions”: in the Purim-Stalin texts discussed in this dissertation, we see the invention of a new tradition by Soviet Jews that both commemorates their unique communal history while integrating it into a longer, widespread Jewish tradition. Every year after Stalin’s death, “the survivors of the Doctors’ Plot gathered for a party on that day as an anniversary of freedom. They celebrated survival.”<sup>91</sup> Without knowing it, these avowedly atheist Jewish doctors were carrying on the ancient Jewish tradition of special Purim, which would only be acknowledged as such forty years after Stalin’s death with the collapse of the USSR.

The concepts developed by Veselovsky in his *Historical Poetics* and by his Soviet followers provide an analytical framework for understanding how Purim-Stalin came into being and why it took the form we see in the works analyzed in this dissertation. Veselovsky argued that “the most distant past does not go out of existence but is perpetually brought back in re-articulated form in the present” (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 8). The Book of Esther, and the multiple genres it gave rise to, continued to inform the Soviet Jewish experience even when it could not be explicitly invoked before being rearticulated in a uniquely Soviet form as a special Purim, with its own Purim-Stalin megillah, commemorating Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation

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<sup>91</sup> David Remnick, “The Lone Survivor of Stalin’s Final Purge,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, May 14, 1990) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1990/05/14/the-lone-survivor-of-stalins-final-purge/c1ca17dd-45ec-45b8-a2bf-c231530c6e3b/>.

plan. Veselovsky's conception of literary history ruled out the possibility of the invention of genuinely new aesthetic forms. Instead, "patterns from a seemingly long-forgotten past" like the Purim narrative were revived by the need to express new "feelings and aspirations" (Somoff 2015, 66), like those unleashed by the USSR's collapse and its Jews' need to make sense of their history within a context of rediscovering their Jewish heritage. This new literary development of Purim-Stalin arose from a change in the Soviet Jews' "sociohistorical environment," which altered their "perceptual and emotional demands" and redeemed "long-standing formulas," charging them with new significance, so that a "new stamp" could be placed "upon old forms" (Somoff 2015, 69). Historical Poetics insists "on the impossibility of forgetting" and "the impossibility of avoiding extant poetic formulas" (Somoff 2015, 70). For Veselovsky, inherited formulas like the aforementioned Purim traditions "are subject to adaptation by individual participants in the tradition who seek a discursive correlate for their social and psychological experience" (Maslov 2015, 140), hence the variety we see within the unified Purim-Stalin genre. Bakhtin's phenomenological aesthetics is traversed by a similar historiological axis, "in which the authorial pole of meaning-making, with its holism, its capacity for legitimate finalization and the production of redemptive meaningfulness, is ultimately linked to the 'archaic' vision of the world and to tradition" (Kliger 2015, 235). Only the collapse of USSR made possible the holistic meaning-making of Purim-Stalin by providing it with both a historical and metaphorical finalization, retrospectively endowing the black years of Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns with redemptive meaningfulness by linking it to the archaic tradition of Purim.

### The Book of Esther as a Secular Jewish Text

Immediately after taking power, the Yevseksiya and other elements of the Soviet Communist Party attacked the Jewish religion and Hebrew culture as part of the government's



widespread attack on all religion in the USSR. As a result, the government was largely successful in creating a secular Jewish culture among the majority of Soviet Jews that emphasized Yiddish as their national language and communism as their state religion. In practice, this campaign against Judaism and Hebrew was simultaneously an attack on Jewish memory. While not necessarily erasing Jewish cultural and religious memory, it did cause these traditions and memories to go underground. Soviet Jews, like other forcibly converted Jews before them, were forced to hide their beliefs from public view and maintain them in secret, either within the dubious privacy of the home or, more often, the silence of their concealed thoughts.<sup>92</sup> Regardless of these secret beliefs, this outwardly secular Soviet Jewish culture meant that Soviet Jews were deprived of the tools of millennia of Jewish history and culture to make sense of their persecution. However, since these tools were only concealed, not destroyed, it is my contention that Soviet Jews made use of them when it came time to make sense of Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns. First, it gave them the cultural and historical tools to organize the information surrounding Stalin's antisemitic acts at the time of his death into what came to be known as his alleged Jewish deportation plan by viewing them in the context of Jewish history. Second, as Soviet Jews began to increasingly re-identify with their Jewish roots after Stalin's death, their own secular Jewish culture led them toward the Book of Esther as a secular Jewish text that most closely resembled their experience.

Along with the Song of Songs, the Megillah is the only book in the Tanakh that does not mention God. Granted, apocryphal additions to the Megillah in the Septuagint provided this missing religious element that was lacking in the original text, presenting its Christian readers

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<sup>92</sup> "In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Esther became a heroine to crypto-Jews (also known as *conversos* or *Marranos*) of Iberian descent, first in Western Europe and then in the New World, who closely identified with her as a Jew who - like them - was obliged to keep her true identity secret" (Horowitz 2006, 52).

with a version that more easily melds with God's presence in the other books of the Old Testament. But for Jews, the Purim story is presented as a secular miracle of Jewish survival, emphasizing the preservation of the Jewish people. And, like Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan, many scholars have questioned the historicity of the events depicted in the Megillah. This makes it particularly appropriate for comparison with the similar plight of the largely secular Soviet Jews living under Stalin in the officially atheist USSR. Purim is "a secular story from beginning to end: the miraculous deliverance is achieved by purely human means; the revenge taken by the Jews and the rewards granted to Mordecai are equally human" (Grayzel 1949, 4). Its heroine Esther breaks dietary laws, marries a Gentile, and seamlessly assimilates into Persian society (Carruthers 2008, 10), making her a model with whom the similarly assimilated Soviet Jews could easily identify. It is precisely such eccentricity in the Megillah, with its emphasis on self-reliance and radical tolerance of assimilation, that Soviet Jews appropriated for its subversive potential. For these secular Jews so long separated from Jewish traditions and the larger Jewish world, "there is something alluring about this wilderness text that promises an alternative perspective from the mainstream, a heterodoxy to be tapped into for seditious means" (Carruthers 2008, 2). And so, the Purim story became a template for these long-marginalized Soviet Jews, a way to both understand their Soviet past and align with their Jewish future.

Curiously, the Megillah is the only book of the Tanakh that has not been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The "Qumran community did not include Purim in its liturgical calendar, illustrating how closely its canonicity is tied to its festival" (Carruthers 2008, 8). This illustrates how intimately the Book of Esther is linked to action/praxis. It has never been merely a text in Jewish culture, but rather both a guidebook for understanding Jewish history and a practical model for understanding anti-Jewish violence and how to respond to it. As a guide for how to

live as an assimilated, diasporic Jewish minority among hostile gentile majorities, the Megillah would have little to offer an insular, mystical Jewish sect like the Qumran community. But for Soviet Jews who lived under and survived Stalin, it offered a formula for understanding their experiences in the context of a cyclical model of Jewish history that promised both that Amalek would constantly wage war against Jews and that Jews would triumph against him each time.

### Gender and Purim-Stalin

Purim spiels were the only overtly theatrical activities permitted by local Jewish authorities for many Eastern European communities from the early modern period to the birth of the Soviet Union. They had their roots “in the skits of yeshiva students,” who performed “from house to house in the hope of food or monetary recompense” (Carruthers 2008, 269). As we have seen, these skits were later performed by amateur and semi-professional troupes in the same fashion during Purim, eventually making it onto theatrical stages and other official Jewish venues where the entire community could take in these performances en masse. However, despite these developments, Purim spielers themselves continued to be exclusively male until the practice came to an end during the Soviet period. Within the Ahasueruspiels, Esther herself often played “second fiddle to Mordecai,” appearing “relatively little.”<sup>93</sup> The focus on Mordecai in the final chapter of the Megillah enabled “many to read Mordecai as the manly hero of the book instead of the female Esther” (Carruthers 2008, 277). Purim was indeed once known as Mordecai’s Day, as it is called in the Books of the Maccabees, to honor the character whom many saw as the book’s true hero (Goodman 1949, 369).<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Yair Lipshitz, “Topsy Turvy.” n.d. סגולה. <https://segulamag.com/en/articles/topsy-turvy/>.

<sup>94</sup> Rabbis may have been uncomfortable with an assimilated, intermarried woman who hid her Jewish identity and had relations with a Gentile king as the story’s heroine. Nevertheless, the scroll is named for Esther, the name assumed by Hadassah to hide her (Jewish) identity.

The carnivalesque nature of the holiday, whose topsy-turviness reflects the Jews' reversal of fortune in the Purim story, suffused its celebration with many varieties of transgression against traditional communal norms that made their way into Purim spiels.

Its transgressive qualities are established in *Targum Rishon... Esther Rabbah* explains the "institution of Purim as God's response to Haman's accusation that in not keeping the king's laws the Jews do not celebrate Calends nor Saturnalia. God says to Haman: 'I will overthrow you before them, and they will observe an additional festival for your downfall, namely, the days of Purim'" (Carruthers 2008, 267-8).

Among these transgressions were crossdressing, often emphasized for comic effect, with bearded Esthers and grotesque Vashtis that reversed these characters' depictions in the Megillah. In reality, this meant that women were physically excluded from Purim spiels. This had the effect of progressively erasing women from the dramatization of Purim in these communities, which laid the groundwork for Purim-Stalin as a modern special Purim with no obvious female protagonists. Furthermore, given traditional Russian and Soviet stereotypes about Jewish men being inherently passive and feminine, who don't fight on the battlefield but rather on the "Tashkent front,"<sup>95</sup> male protagonists become the drivers of the action in Purim-Stalin works to reassert this formerly maligned masculinity among Soviet Jewish males. However, in reality Soviet Jewish women also fought in the war, which gets reflected in the pugnacity of some of the female characters in the revenge novels, albeit in roles of far less significance to the plot than Esther in the Megillah. These female characters, while receiving less attention in these

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<sup>95</sup> Tashkent was a major evacuation site for Soviet citizens living along its western frontier fleeing the Axis invasion. Evacuees generally consisted of women, children, the aged and the infirm. It became a common antisemitic trope during and after World War II in the USSR to ironically/disparagingly refer to Jews as having spent the war on the "Tashkent front."

narratives, make up for it by displaying significantly more martial spirit than Esther. This could reflect the further hybridization that Purim-Stalin internalized beyond Soviet borders, where Purim spiels included female performers, often even in male roles. The result in these Purim-Stalin texts is a noticeable lack of primary female protagonists (sometimes missing altogether), while the few who appear do so in very minor roles but with an aptitude for violence and thirst for revenge often equal to their male counterparts.

### Soviet Purim Spiels and Jewish Religious Rebirth

“...the history of cultural practices cannot be sundered from the history of efforts to reconstruct and understand (or, alternately, to suppress the memory of) those practices.”

-Elliott Horowitz<sup>96</sup>

Whether or not Stalin truly planned to deport Soviet Jews to the empire's far east on the eve of his death, the plan was quickly presented by some, particularly religious Jews, in the context of Purim. A tradition within the Hasidic Chabad movement claims that Stalin died as a result of a recitation of a discourse by the contemporary Chabad leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, at a public Purim Farbrengen in 1953, the day Stalin was paralyzed by the stroke that resulted in his death a few days later. While such religious Jews in the West immediately connected Stalin's death to Purim, Soviet Jews had to return to their cultural and religious heritage before they could consciously make such a connection. Efforts by Soviet authorities to suppress Jewish religious practice, exacerbated by Stalinist efforts to erase wider Jewish cultural memory, were hesitantly reversed by the efforts of refuseniks and other Jewish activists within and beyond Soviet borders. This reversal was accelerated by official social

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<sup>96</sup> Elliott Horowitz, “The Rite to Be Reckless: On the Perpetration and Interpretation of Purim Violence,” *Poetics Today* 15, no. 1 (1994): 9. Accessed February 2, 2021. doi:10.2307/1773202.

reforms during glasnost before reaching full fruition with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which saw Jewish religious life flourish in the former USSR in unrestricted fashion for perhaps the first time in the region's history since the rule of the Khazars. Simultaneously, post-Soviet Jews began exploring their unique traumatic heritage by representing the Stalinist period in ways hitherto prohibited them. For many, this memory work coincided with an exploration of their Jewish identity through a religious lens for the first time. The Purim story itself deals explicitly with the concept of Jewish memory, i.e. remembering God's commandment to do battle with the Israelites' perpetual enemy, Amalek:

The Purim synagogue service frames how the story of Esther is interpreted. Deuteronomy is read on the Sabbath before Purim, Shabbat Zakhor, in order to tie the story to God's injunction to the Jews to 'Remember (zakhor) what Amalek did', attacking them on their journey from Egypt to Canaan (Exodus). Because Haman is called the Agagite, he is understood to be a descendant of the last Amalekite king, Agag, the Amalekites functioning as a prototype of all enemies of the Jews. The story inspires a memorial, and even for some a provocation to hatred (Carruthers 2008, 11).

Many Soviet Jews, celebrating Purim in a synagogue and hearing this injunction for the first time, began to see their own recent liberation as one from a modern Amalekite kingdom, with Stalin as its last king before a process of slow liberation led to the kingdom's downfall decades after his death. Some Orthodox thinkers have even argued that the primary purpose of Purim is to serve as a "continual stimulus to inspired Torah learning" because it was the "slackening of Torah study" that had made the Jews vulnerable to Amalek and Haman in the first place.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Yosef Deutsch, *Let My Nation Live: The Story of Jewish Deliverance in the Days of Mordechai and Esther; Based on Talmudic and Midrashic Sources* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publ., 2004), 351.

Beregovsky thought that his work on Purim spiels, suppressed during his own lifetime, was a memorial to a dead artform in a graveyard, as Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jewish life had been seemingly eradicated, first with the Holocaust and then by Stalin's postwar destruction of Soviet Yiddish culture. The return to Jewish identity and practice among Soviet Jews at the end of the century proved him wrong, though most of his generation (that of the fathers) did not live to see this conclusion to the Purim-Stalin story. Even post-Soviet Jews that never returned to the religion proclaimed a strong sense of Jewish cultural identity, as appropriately reflected in the Megillah. While the Megillah does not reference Israel, it does present a "coherent, yet unspecified, 'Jewish' identity," so much so that a commentator in the Talmud feared that it undercut "Jewish integration into other nations in its aggressive self-identity" (Carruthers 2008, 40). Many assimilated Western Jews continue to echo this fear while also disavowing the book's message of revenge. Post-Soviet Jews, however, largely embraced the book's celebration of aggressive Jewish self-identity after decades of being forced to suppress it by government decree and social pressure. The first works of Purim-Stalin discussed earlier originally served as a revolt against the Soviet ban on Jewish culture; subsequent post-Soviet works served as both a continuation and a commemoration of that revolt after it had achieved its goal of national liberation. As the Rashins, Soviet Jews that only began attending synagogue after immigrating to America, say in their *Megillah Purim-Stalin*, Biblical commentators point to God's absence in the Book of Esther as a sign that He is present even when he appears to be absent.<sup>98</sup> The events recounted in Purim-Stalin and the Soviet Jews'

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<sup>98</sup> In most handwritten copies of the Megillah, each column, except for the first column and the column that lists Haman's sons, begins with the words HaMelech, the King, as a sign of God's hidden presence in the work.

deliverance “on such a scale” proved to the Rashins that God had not abandoned the Jews (257), while works like theirs proved that neither had Soviet Jews abandoned their Jewish heritage.

Former refusenik Maxim D. Shrayer, son of David Shrayer-Petrov, provided his own autobiographical account of growing up as a refusenik and emigrating from the USSR in *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story* (2013). The author dedicates a chapter to the “Purim-shpil,” where he discusses the clandestine Purim spiels that his family and friends would perform in their homes during their time as refuseniks, while his father was penning the protest novel that would be published in Israel the year before the family was finally allowed to emigrate. Though Purim spiels as a genre were resurrected during the final years of the USSR in secret performances like these, they were not yet examples of Purim-Stalin, which necessitated emigration and/or the regime’s collapse to bring its narrative arc to an end and thereby enable its creation. *Leaving Russia* belongs to another subgenre of Soviet Jewish literature that can be called the “exodus novel,” alongside other examples like *Doctor Levitin* (1986) and Emil Draitser’s *Farewell, Mama Odessa* (2020).<sup>99</sup> Linking Soviet Jewish emigration to the Biblical Exodus encouraged the further reconception of other aspects of the Soviet Jewish experience in relation to different elements of Jewish cyclical history, such as special Purims. As with pre-Soviet Purim spiels, these homebound performances repeated “the original mythic act,” where performers and spectators became “partners in creating the theatrical fiction, in which the present and the past merged in the very same space” (Belkin 2009, 17). A “reception history confronts real readers and their contexts in relation to a story, and tries to grasp why and how it is read in certain ways,

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<sup>99</sup> Leon Uris’s novel *Exodus* (1958), about Holocaust survivors settling Mandatory Palestine, was a samizdat sensation among Soviet Jews, some of whom were imprisoned for distributing such “anti-Soviet propaganda”. In the novel, many of these survivors become warriors fighting for Israel’s independence. Edwin McDowell, “‘Exodus’ in Samizdat: Still Popular and Still Subversive,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, April 26, 1987), <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/26/books/exodus-in-samizdat-still-popular-and-still-subversive.html>.



for certain purposes, at certain times” (Carruthers 2008, 5). Performing and witnessing Ahasueruspiels for the first time in nearly a century, these Soviet Jews received its narrative in the context of their own unique history, which they soon perceived as a modern Purim story. “The transformation of oppression into triumph is a familiar application for diasporic Jews,” where a community under threat “is provided with a promise of transformation, a promise retrieved from the previous triumph of the Jews over Haman” (Carruthers 2008, 249). These Soviet Purim spiels reflected that promise as an aspiration just before it was fulfilled, laying the groundwork for the full fruition of the genre once their triumph was complete.

Purim spiels are a way for otherwise helpless Jews to imagine themselves as warriors. In this exodus context of Soviet emigration, they become allegories about survival and escape, but also about ultimate victory and revenge. Shroyer recounts how in Moscow 1987, an unofficial troupe consisting mainly of refuseniks asked his father David to write a Purim spiel for them. They wanted “something more than a Russian language rendering of the Book of Esther puffed up with Yiddish and Hebrew songs,” which had by this time already “been done to death” (261), implying that such performances had been taking place for some time. The resulting manuscript is contemporary and topical, reflecting perestroika and current refusenik concerns, which is only possible when one perceives one’s own experience as a reflection of the Purim story. Maxim refers to Lev, one of the actors, as a real life “Jewish fighter” (262), unlike the many Jewish protesters that passively succumbed to the plainclothes police that regularly broke up their protests. Perhaps inspired by Lev and the Jewish heroes of the Purim spiel, Maxim himself stands up to the state “thugs” that harass him and insist that he is not “paying his debt to the motherland” by refusing to join the military (270). Maxim was responding to a typical Soviet antisemitic slur that claimed Jews could not fight and refused to perform their military service,

unlike ethnic Russians. One of Maxim's protest signs reads "Auschwitz, Babi-Yar, and Refuseniks - a Jewish Tragedy" (269), linking the Holocaust to Soviet Jews and the refusenik movement as yet another example of the cyclical nature of Jewish time. Doing so connects the suffering of the refuseniks with the promise of ultimate triumph and redemption.

Maxim refers to a "Purim-shpil season" (267), when these "underground Purim-shpil performances" took place at different apartments (263) throughout his native Moscow. Maxim brought both his American acquaintances and other foreigners to these performances, which ironically confirmed Stalinist fears about Jews as rootless cosmopolitans with global connections working to undermine Soviet power. Of course, refuseniks were forced into these clandestine meetings with foreigners only because the regime forbade them from publicly celebrating their cultural heritage. One performance is even "videotaped by an American diplomat" (267) like a self-fulfilling prophecy of Stalin's fabricated Doctors' Plot.<sup>100</sup> Maxim ends the chapter with a discussion of his grandparents (the fathers' generation according to my schema), who changed their names in an attempt to free themselves of "Judaic tell-tale signs" and become "outwardly Slavic" (273). His grandmother was "a typical member of that first all-Soviet generation," brainwashed "into accepting Stalin's collective fatherhood" (273). Though "she remained "Jewish" in her official papers," she was Russified and became outwardly assimilated, looking and deliberately acting "Slavic and un-Jewish" in order "to conceal Jewishness in her public life" (274). This is contrasted with Maxim's great-grandfather (of the grandfather's generation), who began every morning by putting on tefillin and saying prayers; however, his daughter forbade him from speaking Yiddish in public and herself concealed any Jewish practices while outwardly

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<sup>100</sup> David Shroyer-Petrov, "Purimshpil 1987/5747 in Moscow Written by David Shroyer-Petrov," YouTube (YouTube, February 15, 2016), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxW\\_RNscgTQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxW_RNscgTQ).

adopting Orthodox Christian ones to blend in with her neighbors (274). In this context of forced concealment and outward assimilation,

Great-grandmother Fanya, who outlived Stalin by ten years, spoke of the day Stalin died as a day of Jewish liberation from what looked like certain death at Stalin's hands. She was referring to the anti-Semitic campaign of Stalin's last years that culminated with the so-called Doctors' Plot. At the time of Stalin's death on 5 March 1953, many Soviet Jews expected deportation to remote areas and feared the worst (261).

However, it was the only in witnessing these secret Purim spiel performances that Maxim began to connect his great-grandparents' and grandparents' survival of the Doctors' Plot with Purim: "In my refusenik youth, the idea of a miraculous escape through some divine or fatidic intervention, which lies at the heart of the Purim story, resonated with special significance. As we watched the Purim-shpiln in crowded Soviet apartments, we would relish the Jewish victory over ancient enemies and dream of our own escape from Soviet Babylonia" (261). Writing about his time in the USSR, Maxim compares it to Babylonia, as Krotkov had done in *The Red Monarch*; only after emigrating could he begin to tentatively reformulate the Soviet Jewish experience as a recursion of the Persian Jewish one under Ahasuerus and Haman. Maxim's grandfathers' siblings went to Mandatory Palestine, and the family was only able to reunite after Maxim and his parents made their own escape during the last years of the USSR, thereby completing the narrative arc of Purim-Stalin, which was now ready to be represented as a special Purim.

#### Alexander and Bella Rashin's *Purim-Stalin*

In 1996, the Soviet Jewish Americans Alexander and Bella Rashin wrote *Purim-Stalin*, an alternative megillah that invented a special Purim commemorating Soviet Jewry's salvation

from the eponymous dictator. Alexander included *Purim-Stalin* in his autobiographical study *Why Didn't Stalin Murder All the Jews* (2003), an account of his exodus from the USSR to America, embrace of Jewish religious practice, and research into Stalin's death and his alleged Jewish deportation plan. Rashin discovered that his study of Judaism and Stalin's death overlapped in the little-known tradition of special Purims, which called for the descendants of Jews delivered from destruction to annually celebrate this event as a reminder of God's intervention in human affairs. Special Purims are meant to be celebrated on the day of the original deliverance in the Jewish calendar, which in this unique case coincided with regular Purim, an astonishing coincidence. The *Megillah Purim-Stalin* was performed by the Rashins' congregation in 1996, the first time this special Purim was publicly commemorated. Prior to the collapse of the USSR, the memories and personal accounts of Stalin's Jewish victims remained "private and secret nightmares hidden from the rest of the world" (256) as personal and archival information about the circumstances surrounding the alleged deportation plan remained inaccessible. Only after Soviet Jewry's final liberation from the USSR could this "modern Purim deliverance" be fully "told and retold" (257). While Krotkov and Wiesel had metaphorically connected Purim to Soviet Jewry's deliverance from Stalin earlier, it was only after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe that writers like Rashin and Potok could present Stalin's death specifically as a Purim miracle and recurrence because only now had this special Purim reached its triumphant conclusion with the collapse of the USSR.

The *Megillah Purim-Stalin* closely follows the original in both its narrative and language. The Book of Esther and *Purim-Stalin* both begin by informing the reader that Ahasuerus and Stalin each ruled over vast empires. Immediately after introducing Stalin, Rashin brings in "another brutal dictator" in Hitler, setting them up as parallel Amaleks with mirroring ideologies

(Stalin's "International Socialism" and Hitler's "National Socialism") similarly persecuting massive Jewish populations in turn (257). In the image on the cover page of the special megillah (255), the main characters in the story are drawn in caricature, with Stalin and Hitler side by side, unrolling barbed wire and placing it around the victims of Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns. This reflects Stalin's quick adoption after the war of many of Hitler's ideas about the Jews, particularly "as wandering aliens who are never loyal to the country in which they reside," which caused the former to also begin "to think of ways to exterminate them" (259). Like Hitler, Stalin divided Soviet Jews between "pure Jews" and "half-breeds," though Rashin insists that, as with the Nazis, both groups were meant to be victims of Stalin's "extermination" (not merely deportation) plan (260). However, having just saved the Jews from Hitler, Stalin eschewed Hitler's public campaign of Jewish annihilation for "a systematic program of inventing heinous crimes that were being committed by Jews, for which only the death penalty could be sufficient punishment" (259). This served Stalin's purpose of continuing to be perceived as Mordecai in public while plotting like Haman in private. In this context, the Doctors' Plot to poison Stalin and his henchmen was a pretext for official antisemitic persecution, just as Haman's false accusation against the Persian Jews plotting against Ahasuerus was the cause of his own subsequent attempted official genocide campaign. The alleged planned public hangings of the Jewish "poisoner-doctors" to "incite mobs to commit pogroms" similarly mimics Haman's plans to hang Mordecai as part of his antisemitic genocide (259). By immediately connecting Stalin to Hitler, as earlier Soviet Jewish authors like Grossman had done, Rashin links the two as modern Hamans bent on antisemitic genocide, making it easier to represent Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan as part of a thwarted mass extermination.

Immediately after the alleged planned hangings, Rashin mentions the Pravda Jewish open letter calling for Soviet Jewry's deportation "to Siberia and the Far East," thereby linking the letter metonymically to the intended antisemitic pogroms and making it a part of the same murderous enterprise. Some "Jews loyal to Stalin" signed the letter (259), making them Jewish Amalekites, an implicit accusation that runs through many of the Purim-Stalin texts. While some signatories like Grossman tried to atone by creating anti-Stalinist and anti-Soviet work after Stalin's death, others continued on as Soviet Amalekites by supporting official antisemitism, most notably the members of the Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Public, whose Jewish members denied the existence of Soviet antisemitism while actively denouncing Israel and Western Jewish "bourgeois nationalists."

Georgy Zhukov is introduced early on as Stalin's "greatest general" who was spared from the purge that decimated the Red Army on the eve of World War II (258). This seemingly miraculous event is both a *mise-en-abyme* and a foreshadowing of the story's Purim narrative: Zhukov is saved to lead the USSR's victory over the genocidal Nazis before becoming one of several Mordecai-like figures in the text that will save Soviet Jewry from Stalin and his henchmen. Though Mordecai was "popularly represented as a lewd fool" in Yiddish Purim spiels, as he is in *Khrustalyov, My Car!* and *The Death of Stalin*, the various Mordecais here are "rendered in "rabbinic seriousness" (Carruthers 2008, 270). Just as Mordecai saved Ahasuerus from a plot on his life, Zhukov saves Stalin and the USSR from Hitler's attempt to destroy both. As with Haman's jealousy of Mordecai's popularity with Ahasuerus, Stalin is jealous of Zhukov's victories (in the eyes of Soviet people) and claims them all for himself. And like Haman, he tries to invent a plot against Zhukov to destroy him. This plot fails, causing Zhukov to turn against Stalin and plan his revenge, just as Haman's attempted plot against Mordecai

caused the latter to plan Haman's destruction in turn. Stalin recalls Zhukov from exile so that he can "play a major role in the deportation," but this turns into "a fatal mistake" for Stalin, as Zhukov uses "this opportunity to seize control of the army...and its power" (261). Like Haman, Stalin's plot backfires when his own scheming is used against him. Haman built some gallows for Mordecai upon which he himself was eventually hanged. Similarly, having called in Zhukov to help enact the deportation plan, Zhukov ends by using the power granted him to plan Stalin's demise instead.

"Retellings of Esther in the purimspiel were allegorical in the sense that they often applied the narrative to a contemporary concern. As tales of reprieved threat, purimspiel – explicitly and implicitly – would identify the current enemy of the Jews in the Haman figure and celebrate heroes as Esthers and Mordecais."<sup>101</sup> In the works previously discussed, the writers and filmmakers have implicitly found Purim spiel roles for the actors involved in Stalin's death and his deportation plan. In writing a special megillah, Rashin inevitably mimics the Purim spiel's allegorical tendency to map the Purim story's characters onto the protagonists of its contemporary tale. In Purim-Stalin works, Stalin often combines the roles of both Monarch (Ahasuerus) and Amalek (Haman), while different figures filled the role of Haman's killer (Mordecai), Soviet Jewry's savior (Esther), and minor characters like court advisers and harem keepers. Here, as a special megillah, each real-life historical figure has to be given a role corresponding to the Book of Esther. However, since this is a generic recursion "reappropriated and refashioned" in quite a "different social and cultural" context, these traditional roles are mixed and combined to fit this particular historical narrative. The Jewish Lazar Kaganovich and

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<sup>101</sup> Carruthers, Jo. "Melodrama and the 'Art of Government': Jewish Emancipation and Elizabeth Polack's Esther, the Royal Jewess; or The Death of Haman!" *Literature & History* 29, no. 2 (November 2020): 149. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306197320945947>.

non-Jewish Voroshilov, Molotov and Zhukov form a collective Mordechai, while Voroshilov and Molotov's Jewish spouses provide a composite Esther. Like the Georgian couple in *The Red Monarch*, Molotov's Jewish wife had also been previously deported by Stalin. While Rashin only mentions this in passing here to explain her role in this special megillah, her deportation and reunion with Molotov will be elaborated upon in *The Death of Stalin* as a decisive factor in Molotov's decision to join Khrushchev against Beria, who becomes a Stalin stand-in for communal revenge in that work (like he was in *The Red Monarch*).

In this work, Stalin's dislike for Jews is ascribed to his many Jewish rivals, as Haman's similarly genocidal feelings are ascribed to his rival, Mordecai (259). Stalin sees Israel's siding with America as a betrayal after the USSR's initial support for its creation. Rashin highlights this act of so-called betrayal as a primary reason for the postwar antisemitic campaigns, like Ahasuerus approving Haman's genocidal campaign after the latter convinced him that all of Persian Jewry were plotting against him. Stalin similarly accuses Soviet Jews of mass treason. In reality, as we have seen, the campaigns were already underway by then, having started during the war. But Rashin shifts this timeline to better align it with the original Purim narrative. Likewise, whereas most historians viewed the deportation plan as a campaign of ethnic cleansing and/or cultural destruction, Rashin makes the deportation plan part of an extermination campaign. Having fully linked the deportation plan to Purim, what might have appeared in milder terms to earlier observers now takes on the ideological message of Purim proper, so deportation is transformed into extermination. Having placed the deportation plan into the Purim tradition, its representation as a Special Purim means that these events must be altered to harmonize with the Book of Esther. Even the worst previous allegations against Stalin are thus now exceeded, and he



goes from being a dictator engaging in ethnic cleansing/population transfer (as egregious as that is) to the equivalent to Hitler, plotting to murder “between three and four million Jews” (260).

Now that the alleged deportation plan has been transformed into a special Purim, the historical events must include the elements of resistance and revenge with which the Megillah culminates. Rashin thus becomes the first to explicitly introduce the theme of Jewish self-defense against Stalin, elaborating on examples of Jewish self-defense and revenge against Soviet authorities from the works discussed earlier. He shows Stalin being aware of such possible “bourgeois nationalist” resistance and proactively working against it: “All former and current military personnel of Jewish origin were to be killed as soon as possible, to prevent any significant resistance. Many Jews in the military were suddenly transferred to the Far East divisions where they had few connections with comrades-in-arms” (260). Rashin thus implies that Stalin is aware of being in a Purim spiel; knowing the plot beforehand, he takes active measures to prevent it from unfolding as it traditionally would. As in *The Red Monarch* and *The Testament*, the author suggests that Stalin is familiar enough with Jewish traditions to use them for his purposes against the Jews themselves. Knowing that Jews engage in self-defense in a Purim spiel, he tries to change the ending, as the Nazis had done with their cruel Purim pranks. Rashin has Stalin send Jewish warriors and potential resistance fighters to the Far East, which puts us squarely in the winter chronotope of metaphorical Soviet Jewish death. In this land “where frigid temperatures of -40°F are the norm,” “concentration camps” are built “consisting of barracks with no heat and no insulation”; “rails were built from the barracks to ravines, while trains and cattle cars were being moved toward the major cities”; “it was planned that only half of those who are being deported would reach their destination,” while plans for “distribution of the property and apartments of deported Jews were prepared, and some Jews were visited by

expectant owners, even before they left” (260). Having earlier established a direct link between Stalin and Hitler as fellow Amaleks enacting similar plots to destroy their Jewish populations, Rashin now uses imagery taken from Holocaust film and literature to further tie the alleged deportation plan to a Nazi-like extermination plan. While such images and details are present in Soviet era accounts from historians and witnesses of the deportation plan, their inclusion here connects them specifically to the Holocaust by bullets on Soviet territory. Although the concentration camps without heating and insulation brings to mind both the Nazi death camps and the Gulags, the mention of rails leading from these barracks to *ravines* specifically connects the deportation plan to Babi Yar (i.e. Babi Ravine), the site of the largest mass murder of Jews by the Nazis in the USSR. In such a Soviet context, “ravine” can only refer to the Holocaust. Rashin chooses this word specifically for its evocation of the Shoah in the context of Stalin’s deportation plan. Cattle cars on which only half of the passengers would survive their journey serves a similar purpose, as such practices are associated with both the Nazis and the Soviets. Cattle cars would have been linked in the Soviet Jewish imagination with deportation to the gulags (as many had either experienced this firsthand or knew others that had) and Nazi extermination camps. As Ukrainian Jewish poet Aleksandr Galich put it, “Our train to Auschwitz leaves today and daily” (Gershenson 2013, 209). Earlier Soviet deportations, both population transfers of national minorities and individuals being sent to the gulags, sometimes took the same lethal form as their Nazi equivalents to concentration camps. The pre-prepared distribution of Jewish property and apartments and visits from expectant owners would bring to mind Nazi practices, as Soviet authorities did not prematurely give away their arrests in such a fashion.

Rashin notes that there were “rumors and signs everywhere” of the mass deportation, “but many could not believe this could actually happen” (260). These are the same rumors that

never materialized but nevertheless eventually gave rise to the legend of Stalin's Jewish deportation plan. While historians debate the veracity of these rumors and signs, divided between those that believe that they pointed to formulated plans and those that attribute them to the paranoia and hysteria triggered by Stalin's antisemitic postwar campaigns, Rashin uses them to create a representation of these events where these rumors and signs materialize into concrete reality. In acknowledging that many nevertheless did not believe these rumors and signs, Rashin points to the ambiguity of Stalin's role in both Purim-Stalin and Soviet Jewish consciousness. This was the man that had just saved Soviet Jews from a similar fate at the hands of the Nazis, so it seemed incredible that he would now attempt to finish what he himself had prevented the Nazis from doing. Having earlier set himself up as an Ahasuerus-Mordechai, he would now become Ahasuerus-Haman. One possible reason why this switch seemed so hard to believe was that it reversed the traditional Purim narrative, where Ahasuerus goes from supporting Haman against the Jews to defending them from Haman. If Soviet Jews were already atavistically thinking of their experience in terms of Purim, this would not align with the traditional narrative and would thus seem incomprehensible.

Rashin uses the term "Stalin's clique" (258), creating another parallel between Stalin and Haman as both having henchmen. Malenkov and Beria specifically are cast as Stalin-Haman's "fellow-killers" (260). Like Haman, Stalin both underestimates and misreads his associates. Haman thought that Ahasuerus would support his attack on the Jews unhesitatingly, while underestimating Mordecai's ability to outmaneuver him with his powerful secret (i.e. Esther's Jewish identity). Similarly, Stalin (in this version of events) thought that his closest advisers would execute his plans without question, even though they "knew from past experience that after each major purge, Stalin had eliminated those that had carried out his orders, claiming that

they had gone too far” and “knew that he would do the same to them after this deportation exercise was over” (261). Like Haman, Stalin did not think that anyone within the court would try to resist him. Some scholars have supported the theory that Stalin was poisoned and that the report that he had a stroke was invented by the perpetrators to cover up their crime. Rashin embraces this theory as one that fits in with the themes of revenge and self-defense in the Purim story. If Stalin died from a stroke, then this would fit in with later versions of the Megillah that emphasize God’s invisible hand in human affairs to protect the Jewish people. However, this is more of a Christian reading of the Book of Esther, as that element was missing from the original version of one of only two texts in the Tanakh to not mention God. The idea of Jewish self-defense and the righteous murder of Haman and his fellow Amalekites better fits in with the work’s fundamentally secular narrative. Thus, by choosing the poisoning theory, Rashin’s take on the events better aligns with the version of the Megillah in the Tanakh. Furthermore, it fits the irony and satirical spirit of the holiday, where Stalin’s fabricated Doctors’ Plot, which accused Jewish doctors of plotting to murder him, becomes real when his own closest advisers poison him instead. Rashin has Stalin poisoned while in his “bunker” reading the results of the interrogations of the “doctors-poisoners.” Like “ravine” earlier, Stalin’s death in his “bunker” in this context immediately brings to mind Hitler’s suicide in his own bunker at the end of World War II. This way, Stalin-Haman dies in the same way as his fellow modern Amalek, linking their deaths as part of Soviet Jewry’s decades-long struggle against these seemingly disparate foes united by their hatred of the Jews. Stalin’s death here falls on March 1, 1953, corresponding to the exact date of the Festival of Purim in the Jewish year 5713. In reality, Stalin died a few days later, but Rashin’s account of these events fits the Purim model better if Stalin-Haman’s death falls on the exact Purim date. In Rashin’s account, Stalin’s “deportation and extermination

program was discarded” immediately after he was buried (261). Again, this fits the Purim model better than the historical chronology itself. Just as there is no archival evidence of the plan’s existence, there is equally no evidence of its discontinuation after Stalin’s death. However, the surviving “poisoner-doctors” were indeed released soon after his death, and the campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans” and related government efforts to remove Jews from their occupations and universities were reined in, though never fully discontinued, as Soviet Jews continued to suffer less extreme forms of discrimination and quotas in employment, housing, and universities throughout the duration of the regime’s existence.

Rashin sums up by emphasizing that the 14th Day of Adar “take on additional significance as we recall and observe in every generation, the deliverance of Jews from their enemies” (261). He thus highlights the cyclical nature of Purim as both a fact of Jewish history and a religious imperative stemming from God’s commandment in the Tanakh that Jews must wage war against Amalek in every generation. Having left linear Soviet time and returned to cyclical Jewish time, Soviet Jews like Rashin now view their experiences in the USSR as recursions of events from Jewish history and stories from the Tanakh. Rashin calls for “congregations and Jews all over the world” to “begin to retell the story and commemorate this deliverance of 4 million Jews each year, during the traditional Purim celebration” (262). The annual celebration of Purim forces Jews to recall those events from the distant past, leading them to perceive the present through the lens of those earlier events. Soviet Jews were denied the ability to “recall and observe” this “deliverance” in the USSR. As the sons’ generation escaped and returned to the Jewish traditions of their grandfathers’ generation, those black years of the fathers’ generation were reconceived in light of Jewish traditions and beliefs. Accounts of the events recounted in Purim-Stalin were “effectively hidden or destroyed by the Soviet

government” and only became available after its collapse, which gave “access to the private stories, the family nightmares, and the secret documents and remnants” of that experience (262). Just as the Soviet Jewry Movement saw itself as a recursion of the Exodus story, Soviet Jews now saw their experience under Stalin during the postwar years until his death as their generation’s Purim. But they could only conceptualize this as a deliverance from their enemies after the USSR’s metaphorical world of Jewish cultural death collapsed and they returned to Judaism and its conception of Jewish history as being cyclical. As an “aide-mémoire” (Carruthers 2008, 4), Soviet Jewry’s rediscovery of the Megillah accelerated the “Purimification” of Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan as part of a wider gradual remembering of their Jewish heritage.

#### Chaim Potok’s *The Gates of November*

Chaim Potok was a Conservative Rabbi by training who grew up in an Orthodox Jewish household in New York and wrote a commentary of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Tanakh), a history of the Jewish people and many other Jewish-focused nonfiction works and novels. He counted Wiesel among the many admirers of his work. He was active in the Soviet Jewry Movement, an experience that he recounted in *The Gates of November* (1996), a nonfiction work on the subject that also provided a subjective account of Soviet Jewish history through the person of real-life refusenik Vladimir Slepak and his family. Potok would also address the Soviet Jewish experience again in his last work, the tripartite novel *Old Men at Midnight* (2001), whose middle section, “The War Doctor,” depicts the Doctors’ Plot as, among other things, a struggle between Judaism and communism as embodied in two Jewish characters. Written after the collapse of the USSR, when state antisemitism officially ended and Soviet Jewish survival was finally guaranteed, these works reflected the conclusion of Soviet Jewish

oppression that Stalin's death had promised but not fully delivered. They represented the closure that was a necessary prerequisite for post-Soviet writers to fully embrace the Purim spiel genre as a model for depicting those same events in their fictional works.

Though some commentators had compared Stalin's death vis-a-vis Soviet Jewry to the Purim story early on, it wasn't until Soviet Jews began emigrating from the USSR and its neo-Stalinist antisemitic policies that the events surrounding Stalin's death were overtly depicted in the tradition of the literary Purim spiel in fiction. The false spring of the Thaw period revealed that Soviet oppression of Jews had not ended with Stalin's death. Only Soviet Jewish emigration in the ensuing decades began the process of providing the closure their story required to retrospectively reconceive Stalin's death during his postwar antisemitic campaign as a modern Purim story. This closure gave the legend of Stalin's Jewish deportation plan the happy ending it required to be represented as a modern Purim spiel. While Wiesel only provided a brief sketch of Purim-Stalin in *The Testament*, at a time when some Soviet Jews had emigrated but most still lived under Brezhnev's neo-Stalinist rule, the USSR's collapse gave Chaim Potok the psychological impetus to present Purim-Stalin in full detail now that all Soviet Jewry was free from Soviet oppression. Writing retrospectively about the Soviet period, Potok like Wiesel first dealt with the plight of Soviet Jews in a nonfiction work, *The Gates of November* (1996). Here, he combined elements introduced in the works discussed earlier - the relationship between the ideology of the grandfathers', fathers', and sons' generations as a mirror of that between linear Soviet and cyclical Jewish time - with a detailed representation of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan. Like Wiesel, Potok only links these events to those in the Purim story in passing. I believe Potok does not dwell on this link because he has not yet completely elaborated the underlying theme of Jewish revenge in both the story of Purim and Soviet Jewry vis-a-vis

Stalin and his henchmen. While he hints at this underlying connection, later post-Soviet Jewish writers develop this connection to bring Purim-Stalin to its apotheosis as a tale of retrospective Jewish revenge against their Soviet oppressors. Potok's next work on the subject, and his last overall, was the fictional *Old Men at Midnight* (2001), a tripartite novel where a Jewish woman recounts three men in her life who told her their stories of witnessing and surviving the Holocaust and Stalin's antisemitic terror. In the second part, "The War Doctor," a Soviet Jewish defector tells her about his traditional Jewish upbringing in Czarist Russia before becoming a communist and joining the NKVD. It concerns his encounters with a Jewish doctor, whom he first encounters during the Revolution and then again as his interrogator during the Doctors' Plot. Here, Potok elaborates on the theme of Jewish Amalekites he first introduced in *The Gates of November*, pitting Stalin's Jewish victims and collaborators against one another. As I will elaborate in the following chapter, I believe this encounter represents Potok's working through of tensions within American Jewry between those who supported and those who opposed communism and the USSR, as embodied in the ambivalent relationship between the story's protagonists. The tension is resolved on the page through an act of vengeance that connects the Nazi and Soviets as Soviet Jewry's Amalekite enemies over whom they ultimately triumphed.

*The Gates of November* tells the true story of the family of Volodya Slepak, a famous Soviet Jewish dissident who was among the last refuseniks allowed to emigrate from the USSR. Like *The Testament*, this work relates the conflict between a Bolshevik father and his son, who embraces the Jewish roots and Zionism of his grandfather's generation that his father had renounced. This crucial pivot in the son's beliefs comes during Stalin's postwar repression of Soviet Jews. The book contains a detailed account of Soviet Jewish life during the Doctors' Plot and the first complete literary representation of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan. It also



develops the theme of Jewish Amalekites inherent to Purim-Stalin, which was alluded to by the Soviet authors discussed earlier and introduced by Wiesel in his works on the subject. Of all of the works discussed in this dissertation, *The Gates of November* takes the hardest stance against these Jewish Amalekites that worked with the Soviet regime to first destroy Jewish culture and later played a role in Stalin's all-out postwar attack on Soviet Jews. I will propose possible explanations for Potok's stance and how, as an American, it compares with those of later post-Soviet authors writing on the same subject.

While the work's narrative is related in the cyclical manner familiar to us from Wiesel's novels, as opposed to the linear narratives of Soviet works on the subject, I will present it here in a linear fashion for the sake of clarity. So, although he does not appear as a character, the story of the Slepak family starts with (Grandfather) Solomon, who was "a melamed, a poor teacher of children" (18) during the Imperial period. His "life's dream was to send his son, Solomon, to a yeshiva...where he would study for the rabbinate" (18). Instead, his son Solomon (who belongs to the fathers' generation for our purposes), "a student in his father's little school" (18), joined the Bolsheviks even before the Revolution began and headed a division of partisans in the Far East fighting Japanese troops, Cossack bands, and Admiral Kolchak's White Army during the Civil War. Early on, Potok introduces the theme of Jewish revenge that he, like Wiesel, will mostly allow to simmer in the background before later post-Soviet writers make it their central concern in Purim-Stalin: "Small wonder the story about the Jewish Red Army soldier who, half crazed, ran about executing wounded Ukrainians abandoned by the retreating Whites" - "with every head he cut off he screamed, 'This is my payment for my murdered sister, this is my retribution for my murdered mother!'" (39) This Soviet Jewish revenge against Imperial antisemites will be recycled in their revenge against Soviet ones in later Purim-Stalin works.

After the war, Solomon, now a father in his own right to his son Volodya (Vladimir), is sent to Japan as a correspondent for Rosta, the Russian Telegraphic Agency, a forerunner of Tass, the telegraphic agency of the Soviet Union. As the first Russian in any official capacity in Japan since the Revolution, “He would need to change his obviously Jewish name. After all, he was now representing the new Russia” (46). Immediately, we see that Solomon, like the Soviet Jewish Bolsheviks of his generation encountered earlier, must change his name and thereby symbolically complete his renunciation of the Jewish identity and traditions of the grandfather’s generation. Potok, even more than Wiesel, sees this conflict between Soviet and Jewish identity to a great degree as a Jewish civil war. It is Deputy Commissar Litvinov, himself of Jewish origin, who tells Solomon that, “In all the world there are saying the Jews have taken power in Russia... It’s not good for you to go as Solomon Izrailevich Slepak. Change your name to Semion Ignatievich. A good Russian name” (46). By renouncing his father’s name, Solomon, whose patronymic Izrailevich means “son of Israel,” has symbolically forsaken the Jewish heritage that goes along with it (which he has already done ideologically and in practice). Traveling in China on their way to Japan, Solomon (now going by Semion), along with his son and wife Fanya, is stopped on a train by armed White Russians, who tell Bolsheviks and Jews to stand aside to be executed (49). Only the other passengers’ disgust with the thought of killing a child prevents the family’s execution. Like Soviet Jews under the Nazis in World War II, the Slepaks are doubly damned as Jews and Soviets, and this incident demonstrates how closely those two identities were linked for Soviet Jews until Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaigns.

However, as Litvinov’s words demonstrated, Soviet Jews were only masquerading as Russians with their pseudonyms and assumed identities, and the tension between their Soviet and Jewish identities is present from the beginning. During the revolution, the chief Rabbi of

Moscow, Jacob Mazeh, “hearing Trotsky say that he was not a Jew and would not help Jews, stated that it was the Trotskys who made the Revolution and the Bronsteins – Trotsky’s original Jewish name - who paid the bills for it” (39). Jewish Bolsheviks like Trotsky and Solomon Slepak thought they could escape their Jewish identities by changing their names and the stigma that went along with them. However, changing your name wasn’t enough to do so, even before Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaigns: “Trotsky had refused Lenin’s earlier offer of deputyship, in part out of concern that his taking such a high position would give the Soviet Union’s enemies a final justification for claiming that the country was controlled by Jews” (48). Though Trotsky became an archetype for the old/new Jewish warriors of the later Purim-Stalin revenge novels, he lacked the Jewish pride of his biblical predecessors with whom these later writers combined his traits as a “new Soviet man” to create their unique protagonists. In their struggle to succeed Lenin, Stalin called Trotsky and his Jewish allies like Kamenev and Zinoviev “internationalist-minded” “rootless cosmopolitans” for caring “more for socialism in other countries than in their own” (63). Even during this early formulation of his policy of socialism in one country in the 1920s, this was already Stalin’s “way of calling someone a Jew without sounding like a tsarist anti-Semite” (63). Echoing sentiments expressed by Wiesel, Potok reminds us that such antisemitism was inherent to both Russian and Soviet existence, as “the urban Russian hated Jews because they were ‘rootless cosmopolitans’” and “the rural peasants hated them because they were ruthless oppressors” (63).

Potok emphasizes the internecine nature of this conflict by highlighting Jewish Amalekites like Lazar Kaganovich, who was “among Stalin’s most loyal adherents” (63) and would play an appropriately ambivalent role in later Purim-Stalin works. Elaborating on Wiesel’s introduction of this theme, Potok spends a lot of time on the role that Soviet Jews

themselves, particularly under the aegis of the Yevseksiya, played in destroying Jewish culture in the USSR. Already during the revolution, it resolved that the Zionist Party served a counterrevolutionary role by hindering the penetration of communist ideas among the Jewish masses and urged suppressing the activities of the Zionist Party and all other communal organs. In 1919, the Jewish Commissariat, one of whose leaders was a former rabbi and Lubavitcher Hasid, was “appointed to the task of tearing down the Jewish community” (61) and a government decree (carrying Stalin’s signature as the People’s Commissar of Nationalities) soon closed all Jewish establishments. Religious education, circumcision, and the Zionist movement were banned, Jewish marriage and divorce laws were repealed, and the Hebrew language suppressed. Henceforth, Soviet Jews “were to be a nationality culture, with Yiddish as their language, and socialism as their secular religion. The campaign to cripple Judaism and assimilate the Jews into Communist culture was waged by Communist Jews... It was a Jewish civil war, brutal and unrelenting” (62). As a result, “Zionists and religious Jews quickly came to regard Communist rule as a grim continuation of the repressive regime of the tsars” (62). As we have seen, the Yevseksiya and other Soviet organs carried out their task of destroying Jewish culture with ruthless efficiency: “So successful did Stalin think the anti-Jewish program to have been that by the mid-1930s he was certain that the young generation of Jews knew nothing of Judaism. And he was in no small measure correct” (64).

Using the Slepaks’ story as a synecdoche for the Soviet Jewish experience, Potok details the trajectory of Stalin’s various antisemitic campaigns in his lead up to his representation of the alleged Jewish deportation plan. Potok shows how the seeds for the destruction of the JAC were already present in its creation by the government. The plan for the JAC was originally submitted to Stalin as a memorandum by two Polish Jewish Bundist refugees at Beria’s request in 1941.

They soon disappeared and years later “it was discovered that Stalin had penned on their memorandum the words... ‘Shoot both of them’” (81). Still, the JAC came into existence in 1942 with Stalin’s approval as “the only Jewish institution in the entire Soviet Union officially recognized by the Soviet government” (81). Its postwar repression encapsulated many of the features of Stalin’s wider antisemitic campaign, representing the cleansing of Soviet Jewish culture that laid the psychological groundwork among Soviet Jewry for the would-be physical ethnic cleansing at the heart of the legend of Stalin’s Jewish deportation plan. JAC members were declared “agents of American Zionism, plotting to create a Jewish state in the Crimea with the intent of using it to establish a bridgehead for American imperialism”; the original Jewish state within the USSR, Birobidzhan, was weakened by the purges of the 1930s when “many of its leaders, accused of being Trotskyites, nationalists, and Zionists, were imprisoned, exiled, executed” (64). Crimea was selected to replace Birobidzhan as the Soviet Jewish Republic because of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee’s (JDC) earlier work there with Jewish collective farms and because the “Crimean Tatars had been permanently exiled in May 1943 for collaborating with the Germans - loaded onto cattle wagons by the NKVD and sent on a four-month journey across the barren steppes to Central Asia” (83). In addition to the Crimean Tatars, millions “among the national groups under Soviet rule had been expelled to Central Asia, Siberia, and the Arctic to forestall their possible collaboration with the Germans; after the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe in 1944-1945, half a million Germans, Poles, Hungarians, Bulgars, and Romanians were deported to Siberia” (86). Thus, the accusations against the JAC were emblematic of the mixture of fact and fabrication that characterized the antisemitic propaganda of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign that made possible the rumored deportation plan; the JAC had indeed proposed the Crimea as a new Soviet Republic, with the approval of members of the

Politburo, but the regime added the fantastical claim that it would serve as a bridgehead for American imperialism. Similarly, it was a small leap for Soviet Jews to combine the factual details of new barrack construction in the Far East and the widespread Jew-baiting of the Doctors' Plot with the alleged plan to deport Soviet Jews en masse to those recently constructed barracks, like the Crimean Tatars and so many others before them. Solomon Slepak, the dedicated Old Bolshevik and "noted writer of articles for *Izvestiya* and *Pravda* under the pseudonym M. Osipov" (89) was a member of the JAC. He was fired from his job at a publishing house during this time for being a Jew and because "his having lived so many years abroad was now of itself sufficiently strong cause for job termination" (88).

During Rosh Hashanah in September 1948, in the middle of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, Israel's first Ambassador to the USSR, Golda Myerson (Meir), was greeted by "a vast crowd of Jews" outside of a Moscow synagogue with the Hebrew cry, "The Jewish people lives!" (87) Potok believes that "Stalin was confounded by that crowd" and "raged at the Jewish nationalism he thought long dead, perceiving it as an open threat to his power" (87) He claims that this display gave impetus to the "subsequent brutal effort by Stalin once and for all to eradicate Jewish culture inside the Soviet Union," which "was the absolute reverse - and, ironically, was to a large extent fueled by - the foreign policy of the Soviet Union toward the new state of Israel" (87). These opposing policies of supporting the creation of Israel at the UN (which served the Soviet goal of disempowering the British Empire) while repressing Soviet Jews allowed Stalin to plausibly present himself as Ahasuerus while playing the role of Haman.<sup>102</sup> During the ensuing anti-cosmopolitan campaign, seventy percent of the writers,

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<sup>102</sup> Harry S. Truman, the US President during Israel's creation, saw his role in Israel's modern history in similarly biblical terms. When a friend referred to him as "the man who helped create the State of Israel", Truman responded, "What do you mean, 'helped to create'? I am Cyrus." Paul Charles Merkley, "I Am Cyrus," Christian History |

artists, and scholars singled out for criticism in the press were Jews. Typical of Stalin's antisemitic masquerade, one "could never say with certainty that Stalin's fury was directed only against the Jews; always a few non-Jews, too, would be arrested, exiled, shot" (88). As we have already seen, newspapers "in all the Soviet republics trumpeted against "men with no backgrounds," "rootless cosmopolitans," "vagabonds without passports," "renegades foreign to Russia," "individuals who had no grasp of the history and poetry of Russia, of the Russian soul - and everyone understood that these epithets were directed against the Jews, who were purported to lack deep feelings for the land of Russia and the Soviet way of life" (88). This unprecedentedly public Jew-baiting gave rise to a "tense incipient pogrom atmosphere" through much of the land, as "Jewish children were attacked in Russian schools" and it "became dangerous for Jews to walk the streets" (88). To protect themselves, "some Jews burned their Jewish books and broke off all contact with Jewish relatives and friends overseas" (88). This marked the end of any "open and effective Jewish culture in the Soviet Union" (88).

During the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, Volodya's wife Masha, a Moscow medical student, recalled how foreign names were effaced from medical school textbooks. It was "discovered" that Blumberg Symptom "had really been discovered by a Professor Shchyotkin" and was renamed after the latter (115). When someone later realized that Blumberg was a Russian rather than a Jew, it was renamed Blumberg-Shchyotkin Symptom. Then, after the Doctor's Plot was revealed, the antisemitic atmosphere managed to get exponentially worse, as the euphemism "cosmopolitan" gave way to direct accusations against Jews. Newspapers told

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Learn the History of Christianity & the Church (Christian History, August 8, 2008), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-99/i-am-cyrus.html>. According to the Tanakh, the Achaemenid King Cyrus the Great ended the Babylonian captivity, allowing Jews to return to Israel and rebuild the Temple.

citizens “to be wary of Jews, whose links with Western powers enabled them to take on the work of imperialist spies and collaborators,” saying that it was necessary to crush such “loathsome vermin” and “enemies of the people” (104). Rumors circulated about “Jews putting poison into medicines” and “establishing nests of Zionist spies in the government and in the universities” (104). As a result, citizens shouted at Jews on the buses and in classrooms, “You poisoners! You poisoned all our great leaders!” (104) Many Russians stopped going to their Jewish doctors and demonstrations took place against Jews throughout the country: “Mid-twentieth-century industrial Russia had resurrected the medieval image of the Jew as demonic poisoner” (104). Masha knew many of the doctors arrested as part of the Doctors’ Plot. Like Dr. Levin, she was forced to attend meetings at her hospital where Jewish doctors were coerced to speak out “against Jewish traitors and the Jewish conspiracy and Jewish professors who are poisoners” (102). Despite himself being a victim of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, Solomon insisted that, “It’s true that among Jews, and especially Jewish doctors, there are traitors” (103). He felt that in the “class struggle” against “capitalist enemies” it was better “to arrest and prosecute a hundred innocent people and catch among them one spy than to let the spy go free” (103). As we will see, this moment was Volodya’s political awakening that marked the beginning of the rupture in their relationship, symbolizing the divide between their generations of Soviet Jews. In response to Solomon's continuing blind defense of the regime, Volodya says that he “will never accept such a philosophy” and vows to never join his father’s Party (103).

Earlier in the work, Potok introduced the theme of Jewish cyclical time in reference to Russia’s antisemitic violence by discussing the synagogue at Mstislavl, the shtetl home of the Slepak forebears, whose intended destruction in 1708 was “suddenly halted by Tsar Peter the Great” when he “visited the synagogue and mysteriously and abruptly ordered his soldiers to



cease their plundering and killing of Jews. ‘Only with the help of God did the Tsar save us,’ comments the record book of that Jewish community.” (19) Though Potok does not call it such, this event in the Slepak ancestral past “that invites us to contemplate the miracle of a pogrom mysteriously averted” (19) implicitly invokes Purim, with its story of an ambivalent ruler turned suddenly benevolent to help save a Jewish community from destruction. “But,” Potok continues, “the hand of God seemed unable to save others. And so we have photographs of a different sort: pogroms consummated with singular barbarousness” (19). Potok here invokes the cycle of violence and reprieve that characterized Russian Jewish life under czars that were capable of both inducing and ending pogroms, which continued with the at times ambivalent representation of Stalin as both Ahasuerus and Haman in Purim-Stalin. “Quiescent for three decades” following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, “the rooted Russian hatred of the Jew surfaced in an especially insidious form during Stalin’s final years,” when he decided “to solve once and for all time his problem with the...Soviet Jews” (105).

By the time Potok wrote this work, the equation between Stalin and Hitler was well-established in Western letters. “Stalin probably killed more Russians during the 1930s than Hitler did during the Second World War” (69). After describing the rabidly antisemitic atmosphere in the USSR induced by the Doctors’ Plot, Potok provides the first detailed literary representation of Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan. The Slepaks and others “began to sense the start of a vast organized campaign against Soviet Jewry... But to what end?... What did Stalin have planned for the Jews?” (105) As the antisemitic “hysteria increased, distended to proportions never before known in the Soviet Union,” it seemed that the “entire nation was being readied for programs, a bloodbath,” when “new rumors swept through” Moscow (105). Potok insists that secret “meetings were taking place in the Kremlin” where a “carefully prepared scenario was

being arranged by Stalin for the Jews” (106). He then enumerates the various versions of the plans that “floated about like insidious poisons” (106). In one version that was later confirmed by MGB Major Alexi Rybin, who was present at two meetings where the details were worked out, “there was soon to be a public trial of the doctors, who would all be found guilty and sentenced to be hanged from scaffolds on Red Square” (106).

What follows from Potok is an account of the salient elements of the alleged deportation plan recounted earlier, including the intended lynching of the accused by rabid mobs, nationwide programs, mass deportations of Jews to barracks in Siberia on freight trains marshalling near Moscow, and lists of Jews being prepared in police precincts. “Jews in the major cities of Soviet Russia would be given two hours to pack, allowed one bag per person,” and all those who perished on the journey would be thrown from the trains into the “frozen fields and forests...of the Siberian winter” (106). These rumors are given chilling confirmation “by chance” to Masha from “an old and close friend” of her mother's, who witnessed truckloads of Jews leaving the nearby village of Davidko (106). Another friend tells Masha that his father, a government interrogator, told him about the coming mass Jewish deportation to Siberia. Masha and Volodya thus saw these Jewish transports from Davidko “as a rehearsal for things yet to come” (106). The deportation would be “accomplished in the open – as a magnanimous act by Stalin, as the only possible way of saving the Jews from the wrath of the people, and in the wake of an urgent, importuning letter to the editor of *Pravda* signed by leading Soviet Jews” (107). The letter would “ask Comrade Stalin to send the Jews of the Soviet Union to the farthest corner of the land for reeducation”; this letter “that was to save Soviet Jewry” was composed by “Jews slavishly obedient to Stalin” (107). And while “the letter itself has yet to be found in the Kremlin archives,” Potok has no doubt that “it will surface one day” (107). Potok here both invokes the

Jewish Amalekites “slavishly” serving Stalin and counters the argument already being made by historians that their inability to find this letter disproves its existence. As we saw, when a version of the letter was found, it made no mention of mass Jewish deportation; but Potok, like Wiesel and subsequent Purim-Stalin authors, gives more weight to the subjective experiences of poets and the survivors of Stalin’s antisemitic campaigns than a lack of archival evidence corroborating their testimonies. In his residential building’s office, Solomon “found himself looking at a list of the Jewish residents in the building” with his name on it (107). Years later, when Solomon was forced to admit this, his son replied, “You have to be crazy to help them do this against yourself” (109). Solomon replied by leaving the room “without another word” (109). Despite this silence of shame (represented previously in Wiesel’s works) from the fathers’ generation of Soviet Jews after discovering their betrayal by Stalin’s government, Solomon nevertheless calls Israel “a fascist state” (145) when Volodya decides to emigrate there after all of these events years later. Solomon, despite being the “son of Israel,” holds onto his generation’s anti-Zionism until the end. Potok invokes the claim, broadly accepted by Soviet-era Western scholars, that “Stalin’s intention was to rid the major population centers of Jews and bring to an end his perceived troubles with that arrogant people” (117). Instead, “he died...around the holiday of Purim, when Jews celebrate the deliverance of an ancient Persian Jewish community from annihilation at the hands of a minister of state named Haman. No one in the Slepak family, however, knew enough about anything Jewish to make such a connection” (109). Later, on April 4, “the third day of Passover, the festival that marks the Israelites’ deliverance from slavery in Egypt, an occasion no doubt overlooked by Solomon Slepak,” he read in *Pravda* that those accused in the Doctors’ Plot were being released (109). Potok combines the Books of Esther and Exodus to foreshadow the Slepaks’ return to cyclical Jewish time with the aid of

Jewish activists and writers like Potok and others in the Soviet Jewry Movement. Once the story of Soviet Jewry was retold through the story of Exodus after the beginning of the emigration/refusenik movements, it only required a small metaphorical leap to retell the events surrounding Stalin's death through the prism of Purim. This was only something Western Jews could have done, since Soviet Jews lacked the necessary knowledge of Jewish traditions to initially perceive their experiences in this light. Only after emigration and their reconnection with the Jewish traditions of their grandfathers did they too reconceive their plight under the Red Pharaohs in Jewish, rather than Soviet, terms.

What follows is Potok's discussion of the subsequent birth and development of the dissident and refusenik movements through Volodya as an embodiment of the sons' generation of Soviet Jews. Like Kostya in *Fresh Legend*, Volodya in 1950 found it "impossible to get a job because during his childhood he had lived abroad" (93) and, more importantly, because "Jew" was written in his internal passport/identity card. When they first met, Masha told Volodya she feared "remembering too much" and wished she knew more about her family, but there was no one to ask: "After the Revolution, people tried to conceal their past, bury it as deep as they could" (95). She was named Masha, instead of Miriam after her grandmother, because her parents feared Russian antisemitism and like many of their fellow Soviet Jews, "sickened to blinding rage by tsarist oppression, had thrown away the very last marks of their Jewishness, joined the Bolshevik Party, and helped to make the Revolution" (96). During the Thaw, Jews were expelled from their positions in the upper echelons of the government and Party and disproportionately victimized during the government's "campaign against economic crimes" that "netted an astonishing number of Jews, whose names were prominently announced in the press"

(124). Potok notes how this “atmosphere of hatred generated by the anti-Semitism in the Soviet press” at the time was “starkly reminiscent of the late forties and early fifties under Stalin” (124).

As I mentioned earlier, the 1966 Sinyavsky–Daniel trial in many ways marked the beginning of the Soviet dissident movement, as this legal farce “breached” the “line of submissive endurance” for many Soviet citizens (129). A few months after the trial, Potok mentions the 1966 Moscow Simchat Torah celebrations documented by Wiesel in *The Jews of Silence*, acknowledging that work’s (and writer’s) influence on his own interpretation of the Soviet Jewish experience. But “the Soviets Jewish dissident movement finally begin to take form after – in a few places even before – the 1967 Six-Day War,” which was “the quickening moment” for future refuseniks like Nathan Shcharansky and “Jewish circles like those of the Slepaks and their friends” (139). The Israeli victory was violently condemned by the Soviet government and media, as the “very air throbbed with official hysteria directed against Jews” (139). While “public celebration of the Israeli victory was, of course, out of the question,” a “number of private celebrations by Jewish students resulted in police harassment, searches, arrests” (139). As a result of these events, “Jewish dissidents, and the movement they were soon to be part of,” were filled “with a slowly growing sense of belonging to the Jewish people” and began “to cast about for ways to leave the Soviet Union” (140). However, Volodya insists that it was Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaigns even earlier that “really turned us into a separate people” (138). Among the USSR’s Jews, “religious ideas invariably ignited the fires of nationalism” and thus “the Soviet authorities fought hard against overt manifestations of religion” in their ranks (135). Soviet Jews “had witnessed, silently until now, the gradual collapse of Judaism all around them,” but, as one Soviet Jewish immigrant told a conference on Soviet Jewry in Brussels, Soviet Jews now “were seeking the community of fellow Jews” (164).

Due to the success of earlier Soviet efforts to destroy Jewish culture, identity, and memory in the USSR, even “those sympathetic early on to the cause of Soviet Jewry had not really believed that knowing and committed Jews were still to be found in the USSR” (164).

On 5 March 1977, the anniversary of Stalin’s death, an American activist for Soviet Jewry was listed as a CIA agent in an article in *Izvestia*. Potok, seeing these events through the lens of both recent Soviet Jewish history and cyclical Jewish time, saw this as an “ominous warning” (189). Then on March 12th, an article in *Pravda* claimed that the dissidents were “supported, paid, and praised by the West” and that Jews specifically were in the pay of the CIA and thus “a threat to the security of the Motherland” (179). Like they had been under Stalin, Jews were once again accused of being spies for the Western powers. In this language mirroring that used by the press during the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, Volodya and Masha “heard echoes of old purges and the ‘Doctors’ Plot.” (179) A contemporaneous Soviet Jewish activist, Ida Nudel, commented that Soviet Jews were being accused of spying on the USSR “only because an accusation of having murdered a Christian boy would be completely ridiculous in a country of atheists” (190). As with Dr. Levin in *Fresh Legend*, the Beilis Affair for these Soviet Jews was still a touchstone for understanding current Soviet antisemitism through past Russian examples of the same. Now that they were reconnecting with their Jewish roots and seeing their present predicament in light of millennia of Jewish history, they could not help but see its cyclical nature. When Volodya and Masha decide to emigrate, the government has the school that their son Leonid attends incite him against his parents, almost in a knowing recognition of the generational tension within Soviet Jewry about their split identities. The Trans-Siberian Railroad that earlier transported Solomon as a young Bolshevik and Comintern agent to China as a representative of the Soviet government now transports his son Volodya into exile as a prisoner

of that same government. After Brezhnev, his successor Andropov, “a former head of the KGB who had once referred to Volodya and other refuseniks as a menace that should be exterminated” (224), continued his predecessor’s neo-Stalinist policies. It was only during perestroika in 1987, after several years spent in prison camps and internal exile under Gorbachev’s rule, that Volodya and his family were finally allowed to emigrate to Israel. Potok notes it was only after they were free of Soviet oppression in the land of their ancestors, their suffering at the hands of Stalin’s successors finally over, that he could tell their story.

The work’s title comes from Alexander Pushkin’s famous novel-in-verse, *Eugene Onegin*: “A tedious season they await / Who hear November at the gate.” While Potok does not explicitly use Purim as a model for representing Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan here, I believe the title, like Ehrenburg’s works on the same subject, embodies a possible underlying reference to Purim-Stalin. The October Revolution that marked the beginning of Soviet rule actually occurred in November according to the New Style (Gregorian) calendar that replaced Imperial Russia’s Old Style (Julian) calendar. Thus, the revolution itself marks a shift away from an older to a newer concept of time, in addition to the aforementioned turn toward a linear understanding of history at odds with Jewish cyclical time. In reference to Soviet Jews, the title could refer to the “tedious season” of Soviet rule they endured before it ended with the collapse of the USSR. Just as Purim is a spring festival marking the end of both winter and Haman’s oppression of ancient Persia’s Jews, so too does Potok’s work depict the true end of Stalin’s oppression of Soviet Jews that was prematurely ascribed to his death. And as a “monument to the Jews slaughtered and buried in Babi Yar was put up only...after the demise of the Soviet Union” (85), it was similarly only after then that Soviet Jews and their sympathetic observers could memorialize the end of their suffering under Stalin and his successors by seeing their experience

during the immediate postwar years as a recurrence of the Purim story. This, in turn, allowed writers like Potok to finally represent Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan in an overt manner, having discovered a narrative model for it within Judaism that could provide its disparate elements with meaning and form.



## **Chapter 5: The Purim-Stalin Revenge Novel**

Shylock: “And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?”

-William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (III.i.66-7)

Employing Bakhtin’s notion of genre memory and Propp’s morphological elements of the folktale, both inspired by Veselovsky’s Historical Poetics, I will look at how the Purim spiel, once it becomes formalized as a genre that writers used to depict Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan, brought a new element to its representation heretofore largely unseen in previous fictional treatments of the subject: revenge. In Soviet times, this element of the plot was foreclosed because Soviet Jews continued to be hostages to the regime, even after Stalin’s death and the supposed thwarting of his alleged deportation plan. This morphological element only becomes available after the fall of the USSR, when literature depicting Jews taking revenge on their Soviet oppressors can exist because Soviet Jewish lives are no longer endangered by the state. In line with Propp’s conceit of punishment and triumph as the last two of the thirty-one functions of a folktale, Stalin’s foiled Jewish deportation plan can only become a Purim spiel after the villains are seen to be punished to signify Jewish victory. Earlier fictional attempts had toyed with the idea that Stalin’s death was punishment enough. However, the false promises of the Thaw and subsequent neo-Stalinism showed that only the USSR’s collapse could provide the kind of absolute, collective punishment for the Soviet Amalekites necessary to create the psychological and narrative closure that was a prerequisite for the realization of Purim-Stalin as a rebirth of the Purim spiel narrative in a (post-)Soviet context.

The texts in this chapter are primarily concerned with the problem of Jewish revenge against Soviet oppression. *Triumph* (1993), *Old Men at Midnight* (2001), and *On the Sickle’s Edge* (2016) connected Soviet Jewish revenge with Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaigns in

allusive ways similar to the texts discussed earlier, while emphasizing the revenge elements that could only be treated as fantasy in earlier works like *Doctor Levitin. On the Sickle's Edge* (2016) and *The Yid* (2016) have been compared to Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* in their attempts to represent Soviet Jewish history in a way that allows Soviet Jews to defend and revenge themselves on their oppressors. They do so in a manner that both illuminates such previously underrepresented historical accounts of self-defense and provides alternative histories of such behavior to compensate for their lack in reality. *The Yid's* alternative history of Jewish doctors and actors murdering Stalin to prevent his alleged Jewish deportation plan combines a detailed account of the plan with an unambiguous act of Jewish revenge against the dictator, an apotheosis of Purim-Stalin that functions as a capstone of the subgenre. *The Death of Stalin* (2012/2017) serves as the subgenre's epilogue, presenting Stalin's death as a Purim spiel revenge fantasy robbed of its overtly Jewish character. Like Christian retellings of the Purim narrative, Purim-Stalin has become universalized to serve as a commentary on matters both Jewish and not. With the history of Stalin's rule constantly being rewritten as a result of the continuing questions and ambiguity surrounding his alleged Jewish deportation plan, such fictional efforts help with the psychologically ameliorative memory work necessary for processing the multigenerational trauma resulting from the black years of Soviet Jewry for its survivors and their descendants.

#### "Genre Memory" in Bakhtin and Propp

"A literary genre, by its very nature, reflects the most stable, 'eternal' tendencies in literature's development. Always preserved in a genre are undying elements of the archaic. True, these archaic elements are preserved in it only thanks to their constant renewal, which is to say their contemporization. A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always new and old simultaneously."

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "genre memory," proposed in 1963 in the second edition of his book on Dostoevsky, further elaborated the kind of "literary-historical continuity" that Alexander Veselovsky introduced with his own theory of Historical Poetics, which argued that each new poetic epoch works with literary phenomena bequeathed from antiquity that constrain the boundaries of new artistic production (Kliger 2015, 227). Veselovsky argued that modern literature presents "the new content of life" within forms "shaped by age-old formulas, images, and motifs" (Kliger 2015, 227). As such, literary history was radically continuous in the sense that "an unseverable connection between the experiences of the past and those of the present" underlay literary production (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 10). Both individual works and entire genres respond to contemporaneous "socio-psychological demands" by reverting to earlier literary forms, whereby "the symbolic recreation of what is desired influences its actualization"; ideologies are thus encoded in literary works as "action, not as passive reflections or 'models' of the social sphere," being "meaning-making activities that respond to an imperfect world" by expressing communal lack and enacting "socio-psychological" desires through fiction (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 11). Veselovsky laid the groundwork for future literary theorists to perceive the "constructive principles of literary discourse that have a historical (rather than cognitive or psychological) nature" and fall "outside the individual author's control" (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 14). His theory provides for a "historical account of inherited plots," arguing that literary works always have a history (by participating in the history of forms), respond to history (in that they are produced by a particular historical conjuncture), and form history itself (by defining present

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<sup>103</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 106.

and future historical experience and practice) (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 15). Historical Poetics thus helps “ascertain the role and boundaries of inherited tradition [predanie] in the process of individual creativity” (Kliger and Maslov 2015, 15). As such, the same iterability found in popular legends is present in “self-consciously artistic literature,” for self-consciousness “does not rule out patterns that reveal regulating laws.”<sup>104</sup> Fictional texts are thus themselves always “historical events” (Kurke 2015, 91), and only by combining “literary/generic arguments with historical and political considerations” can one fully understand the full extent to which such texts are always acts of creative memory (Kurke 2015, 100).

According to Bakhtin, genre memory is the related notion that “undying elements of the archaic” are always preserved in genre, which is “reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre” (106). As such, a genre “lives in the present but always remembers its past...[and] beginning,” embodying “creative memory in the process of literary development” (106). It is for this reason that “genre is capable of guaranteeing the unity and uninterrupted continuity of this development” (106). Not only is “the archaic stage of the genre...preserved in renewed form at the highest stages of the genre’s development,” but “the higher a genre develops and the more complex its form, the better and more fully it remembers its past” (230). Moreover, genre memory “does not presuppose conscious knowledge of all or even the most prominent works of the tradition,” as “even tangential contact with late or minor instances of a genre can allow an author to intuit the most essential elements of the genre as a whole” (Kliger 2015, 239). For Bakhtin, genre memory within literature has its cultural parallel in the “great memory” of the *narod*, which is a conception of the past where time is nonsynchronous, where the past returns eternally and

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<sup>104</sup> Alexander Veselovsky, *From the Introduction to Historical Poetics: Questions and Answers*, 57.

irrevocably; as such, time is not linear in great memory, “but rather a complex form of a rotating body” (Kliger 2015, 243). Within great memory, “the present is itself part of the past, entwined with it, incapable of decisively separating itself from it” (Kliger 2015, 245). Accordingly, within the narod’s great memory, “a more distant past may suddenly appear closer to us than the past that is more proximate according to an ‘objective’ chronology” (Kliger 2015, 246-7). We see this clearly in the various appropriations of the Book of Esther in Purim spiels and special megillot, and it is present (albeit less obviously) in the works of Purim-Stalin, where the novelistic appropriation of Esther is more “allusional and vague” (Carruthers 2008, 17). While works like *On the Sickle’s Edge* and *The Yid* do not announce their generic identity as explicitly as the *Megillah Purim-Stalin*, they embody the same genre memory.

Genre memory and great memory further overlap for Bakhtin in the “classical principle of character construction,” whose proper historical foundation is the kind of archaic social world that is “constituted by the value of one’s kin, conceived as a category of the validating being of otherness” (178). A protagonist is fated in such a world to be “interpolated into an immemorial sequence of events transcending” their “consciousness and will” (Kliger 2015, 234) while being “bound by an indissoluble relationship to the fatherhood and motherhood of” their “kin and kind” (Bakhtin 2015, 178).

The bonds of kinship determine the hero, rendering action and responsibility dependent on where one happens to fit into the dense network of ancestral relations. The role of the author, meanwhile, appears to be limited to an aesthetic ventriloquy of tradition. No new content is invented as the author is allowed to apply [themselves]...to the accentuation of the forms and significations organizing the traditional society from within (Kliger 2015, 234).

We see this played out in the importance of familial relations and generational conflict in the Purim-Stalin texts, where characters' behavior is often determined by the generation to which they belong in relation to the history of the USSR. Protagonists of the sons' generation return to the Jewish consciousness of their grandparents in opposition to the communism of their parents while embracing the martial virtues of their ancestors that were either repudiated by their parents or expended in defense of communism rather than toward its opposition. The authors of the Purim-Stalin genre inevitably accentuate these traditional ancestral relations within the apparently radically new context of Soviet life, which reveals itself in these texts to be a recurrence of similar previous antisemitic societies. These works invoke the "temporal vastness" of Jewish existence, participating "in the *longue durée* of historical processes" while being rooted "in the age-old creative practices of the common people: non-official myth, ritual, carnival, folklore" (Kliger 2015, 242).

In Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), the final two (of thirty-one) morphological elements that constitute a folktale are the punishment of the villain and the hero's marriage/ascension to the throne. The final element can play out in several ways:

1. A bride and a kingdom are awarded at once, or the hero receives half the kingdom at first, and the whole kingdom upon the death of the parents.
2. Sometimes the hero simply marries without obtaining a throne, since his bride is not a princess.
3. Sometimes, on the contrary, only accession to the throne is mentioned.
4. If a new act of villainy interrupts a tale shortly before a wedding, then the first move ends with a betrothal, or a promise of marriage.
5. In contrast to the preceding case, a married hero loses his wife; the marriage is resumed as the result of a quest (designation for a resumed marriage).
6. The hero

sometimes receives a monetary reward or some other form of compensation in place of the princess' hand (63-4).

In the Megillah, Haman, his sons and his henchmen are all punished with death, after which the two heroes are rewarded: Mordecai with a prominent position in Ahasuerus' court and Esther with her marriage to the King "resumed." As dual heroes, their collective rewards combine to fulfill both aspects of Propp's final morphological element. We saw that this final element was missing from the Soviet-era texts analyzed earlier, where Soviet Jews continued to be victims of Stalin's successors after his death, which foreclosed the possibility of ultimate victory.

Ehrenburg's protagonists breathe a sigh of relief but experience no cathartic redemption and continue to speak in hushed tones about their suffering under Stalin. Grossman's survivors similarly can only hope for a future moment when their losses and sacrifices will be redeemed. Grekova's hero is dead by novel's end, unable even to survive Stalin's final antisemitic pogrom. Krotkov had the last laugh at the expense of Stalin and his henchmen with the publication of *The Red Monarch* abroad, but his characters that survive Stalin are grateful merely for the tyrant's death. In Wiesel's *The Testament*, the protagonist too succumbs to Stalin's murderous plan, while his son returns to Jewish life only after escaping to Israel but finds nothing like Mordecai's triumphant victory there. As a helpless refusenik, Doctor Levitin can only fantasize about getting revenge against the state. Only in the post-Soviet works do the protagonists experience this final morphological element of the Purim-Stalin folktale. The Slepaks are able to resume their marriage and reunite their family in Israel after it was sundered by Stalin's successors in the USSR. Moreover, their Aliyah has more of a festive quality than that in *The Testament*: the Slepaks' arrival in Israel feels like a final victory and fulfilling reward for their previous suffering, whereas Grisha arrives to Israel as a broken mute and only begins his slow process of

recovery and return to Jewish life once he is already there. Rashin's special Megillah *Purim-Stalin*, written the same year *The Gates of November* was published, shares that book's sense of ultimate triumph beyond the USSR as a result of its collapse, not merely Stalin's death. Rashin's and Potok's works were able to express this sense of triumph because the USSR's downfall was the metaphorical punishment against the Amalekite Bolsheviks necessary for the folktale to reach this final morphological element. Potok's tale of Jewish revenge, *Old Men at Midnight*, brings an overarching, redemptive meaning to its Soviet Jewish protagonist, concluding on a note of catharsis, its protagonists having redeemed their trauma through violent expiation in accordance with God's commandment to destroy Amalek as retribution for his crimes against the Israelites. The Jewish protagonists of *On the Sickle's Edge* and *The Yid* do the same against their Soviet oppressors. This overlapping of genre memory and great memory meant that as Soviet Jews remembered their Jewish history with their return to Jewish practice, their personal, family, and cultural memories of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan filtered through this practice to reemerge as a recurrence of the Purim narrative genre. This reemergence led post-Soviet writers to append the one plot element heretofore missing from (or only alluded to in) previous fictional treatments of the plan: revenge.

#### Purim-Stalin as a Post-Soviet and Diasporic Phenomenon

“Purim is the holiday of Diaspora. It is the only Jewish holiday that celebrates an event which took place in Diaspora...”<sup>105</sup>

As exemplified by the postwar Purim festivities in the Landsberg DP camp mentioned earlier, the holiday could only be celebrated after Hitler was defeated and the camp's Jews were

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<sup>105</sup> Daniel Boyarin, “Introduction: Purim and the Cultural Poetics of Judaism-Theorizing Diaspora,” *Poetics Today* 15, no. 1 (1994): 2. Accessed February 2, 2021. doi:10.2307/1773201.



liberated from this existential threat. During the celebration, one ex-inmate dressed as Hitler in the role of Haman asserted, “So Haman ended, so Hitler ended, so will end all enemies of the Jews”; this masquerade allowed the Jewish Purim spieler to dictate and control his character in order to mock the Nazis and “emphasize the transfer of power.”<sup>106</sup> Likewise, Purim-Stalin could only be celebrated in the diaspora and after the end of USSR, where its burlesque of foiled Stalinist mass murder allowed Soviet Jews to both mock the downfall of their former oppressors and emphasize the transition to a new, safer sociopolitical reality. Since its inclusion in the Tanakh, Jewish commentators have recognized the antagonistic potential of the Megillah’s representation of triumphant Jews and worried about its potential to “incite the ill will of the nations” (Carruthers 2008, 8). Hence the Megillah’s inscription into a post-Soviet context, when the repercussions of the potential incitement of such ill will could be minimized. During Purim celebrations, “Mordecai’s triumph is the key scene for the trope of reversal that pervades” the festivities, as his individual triumph “pre-empts the triumph of the whole Jewish people” (Carruthers 2008, 228). While such a mass reversal of fortune was only possible for Soviet Jews after the fall of USSR, we have seen how individual victories and tentatively formulated thoughts of revenge among emigrants and survivors of his antisemitic campaigns against Stalin’s successors served as a synecdoche for Soviet Jewry as a whole before the latter’s total liberation was complete. In the *Targum Rishon*, Ahasuerus endowing Mordecai with control over the empire’s laws at the end of the Megillah is interpreted as “an expression of a permissive attitude towards Jews generally, meaning that under the new regime they had permission to study the Law” and practice their religion (Carruthers 2008, 249). Soviet Jews could similarly only do so

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<sup>106</sup> Toby Blum-Dobkin, “The Landsberg Carnival: Purim in a Displaced Persons Center,” in *Purim: the Face and the Mask: Essays and Catalogue of an Exhibition at the Yeshiva University Museum, February-June 1979*, New York City (New York: The Museum, 1979), 57.

with the collapse of communism as a manifestation of what they increasingly saw in retrospect as their own Amalekite oppression.

The events described in the Book of Esther almost certainly took place many years before the text itself was written and canonized. Some historians have argued that it was written “at the time of the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus of Syria” (Grayzel 1949, 5), and thus long after the events recounted therein, to reflect its author’s contemporary concerns. We have seen how Purim festivities have encouraged “secular” observance throughout history reflecting the celebrating communities’ contemporary situations, much as the post-Soviet Purim-Stalin works analyzed in this chapter used Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan to address the new realities of their post-Soviet and diasporic existence. Though scholars disagree on the exact date and author, the Megillah was probably composed by one or more Jews writing for the remnant that had returned to Judah from Persia after the events described in the text. Similarly, the most detailed fictional treatments of Stalin’s alleged deportation plan were written many decades after his death, outside of the former USSR after the empire’s collapse. According to the Talmud, the Book of Esther was written by the Anshe Knesset Hagedolah, “Men of the Great Assembly,” “a panel of 120 prophets and sages that constituted the ultimate religious authority at the onset of the Second Temple Era in the Land of Israel.”<sup>107</sup> Yet the Megillah itself says it was written by Mordechai and Esther, then later rewritten by the Men of the Great Assembly. The Purim story was a tale that was retold many times before reaching its final form, like the retellings of Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan, which passed through many voices in different lands and times before arriving at its current forms.

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<sup>107</sup> [https://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article\\_cdo/aid/4319284/jewish/Who-Wrote-the-Book-of-Esther.htm](https://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/4319284/jewish/Who-Wrote-the-Book-of-Esther.htm)

The Book of Esther notes that Persian Jews took vengeance on Haman and his followers after his attempted genocide was thwarted. The post-Soviet Jewish revenge novels discussed in this chapter serve the same function, albeit in literary form, as Soviet Jews could not themselves take revenge on Stalin or his henchmen, who continued to rule for another forty years after his death. It is worth noting that one possible candidate for the author of the Book of Esther is Nehemiah, who was a descendant of those who lived through the events described therein. Similarly, Goldberg and Frankel are post-Soviet Jewish writers whose fictional treatments of the deportation legend deal with the suffering of their forebears. The Book of Esther says that Purim celebrations predated the text itself, like the private Soviet Purim spiels and festivities that predated their canonization in the Purim-Stalin texts addressed in this dissertation. Purim's popularity in Jewish communities across the world, particularly in America, has made its narrative so familiar that the Book of Esther is the best known of all the Books of the Tanakh for most Jews; references to Purim are so replete in American popular culture, from *Sex and the City* to the film *For Your Consideration*, that Esther's tale has become "a household story" there (Carruthers 2008, 4). The post-Soviet American writers addressed in this chapter were thus encouraged to think of their families' heretofore suppressed Soviet experience in the context of this widespread, annual celebration of Jewish cultural memory.

The vulnerability of the Persian Jews in the Book of Esther has always resonated "with Jewish communities living under Gentile rule" (Carruthers 2008, 35). Post-Soviet Jews similarly saw their own experience reflected in the text as a transition from the vulnerability of diasporic life in the USSR to the safety of life in America and the West more generally. Representing not only "the uncertainty and instability of diaspora existence," the Megillah also exposed "the machinations of the ebb and flow of life under an... oppressive government" (Carruthers 2020, 1-

2). Post-Soviet diasporic Jews were able to easily map their life under the CPSU onto the ancient text, particularly in contrast to the greater political freedom in which they now found themselves. Jewish-American commentators have interpreted Mordecai's elevation to the upper echelons of state power as both a triumph of Jew over Gentile and an endorsement of Jewish-Persian cooperation similar to that between Jewish Americans and their neighbors (Carruthers 2008, 279). In its tale of Jewish power reversal, the Megillah models both the negative and positive aspects of life in the diaspora, which Jewish Soviet-Americans like Rashin and Goldberg internalized before writing openly about both the terrors of Jewish life under Stalin and their desire for revenge against the dictators' henchmen from the security of America. Esther's exilic double life forced her to negotiate a dual identity (Carruthers 2008, 39), as embodied in her dual names of Hadassah and Esther, which "suggest to many readers the dualism of her existence as Jewish maid and Persian queen"; Esther's "Hebrew" name is thus both Hadassah and also Esther "because of the Jewish tradition in which it is aligned with the similar-sounding Hebrew term for 'hidden', *hastir*" (Carruthers 2008, 105). These multiple layers of linguistic and cultural identity would have been particularly relevant to Soviet-American Jews, who first changed their Jewish names to disguise their identities in the USSR before, in many cases, changing them back again in America to conversely seem less foreign, while simultaneously maintaining the memory of their Russian name (if not the name itself) as a reminder of their double life as exiles from both Zion and their native USSR. Haman was motivated by a "fear of a united, but dispersed, Jewry using their influence, beyond the reach of the authorities, to stir dissent" (Carruthers 2008, 145), causing him to accuse Persian Jews of disloyalty, knowing that state security for Ahasuerus was reason "enough for the oppression of a select number" (Carruthers 2008, 149). A similar train of thought led to Stalin's accusation of "rootless cosmopolitanism" against Soviet Jewry, which he

argued inherently made them traitors against the USSR and potential (if not already active) agents of global anti-Soviet forces. The Jews' diasporic existence from the times of Haman to Stalin has long made them vulnerable to such accusations, which continue to this day.<sup>108</sup> For centuries, spectators watching Purim spiels have identified with their plots and messages, perceiving them to be “analogous to their situation as Jews in the Diaspora, still suffering persecution and winning redemption” (Belkin 2009, 34). While Soviet Jews could only identify with the persecution aspect, post-Soviet Jews were also able to identify the spiels' redemptive endings with their own.

### Jewish Self-Defense

“How pleasant it is to fight!”

-Yosef Trumpeldor<sup>109</sup>

In the Megillah, after Haman is hanged on the gallows he had intended for Mordecai, the Persian Jews are still subject to annihilation due to the irreversibility of the law Haman convinced Ahasuerus to pass, which called for the Jews' destruction on the day that came to be celebrated as Purim. As a result, Mordecai and Esther convince Ahasuerus to augment the law to allow Jews to defend themselves against those intent on murdering them, leading them to kill seventy-five thousand of Haman's henchmen (including his ten sons). Mordecai and Esther penned this decree authorizing Jewish self-defense, which many commentators have interpreted (with both approval and rebuke) as revenge against their Amalekite enemies after Haman's just punishment. After Stalin died, and the alleged deportation plan with him, Soviet Jews found

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<sup>108</sup> Emil Draitser's *Farewell, Mama Odessa* (2020) expressly links this kind of xenophobic Soviet antisemitism to the recent rise in the West of similar populist antisemitic conspiracy theories about global Jewish power.

<sup>109</sup> Trumpeldor was a Russian-Jewish Zionist who helped bring Jews to Palestine during the Yishuv period. He died defending a Jewish settlement in Mandate Palestine against an Arab attack and became a Zionist national hero.

themselves victims of less violent forms of oppression they could do nothing to oppose, as reflected in the Soviet era novels discussed earlier. In the post-Soviet novels, this simmering resentment about their former helplessness finds expression in protagonists that now take the fight to their Soviet enemies. We saw a hint of this in Stalin's preemptive strike against Jewish soldiers in the Megillah *Purim-Stalin*, where the Rashins imply that Stalin's familiarity with the Purim narrative made him justifiably suspicious of their reaction to his deportation plan. In *Old Men at Midnight*, while Leon in "The War Doctor" cannot yet take his revenge against his Soviet oppressors because they still hold power over his former Jewish compatriots, the proceeding protagonist in the "The Trope Teacher," living in a post-Soviet world, gets symbolic revenge for Leon and all the other oppressed Jews of the century by narrating his killing of an unarmed Nazi camp guard in what can only be termed an act of revenge. Many commentators have recognized Mordecai as a Jew with "attitude" whose defiance is affirmed and admired in the Megillah (Horowitz 2006, 63). His refusal to bow before Haman "has reverberated for centuries" (Horowitz 2006, 8), making him a model of Jewish courage in the face of oppression for millennia of Jewish resistance fighters, including the secular Jewish warriors of the Red Army. The old-new, uniquely post-Soviet Jewish fighters of the revenge novels engaged in self-defense to make up for the passive acquiescence of real Soviet Jews in 1953, thereby better aligning the historical events with the Purim narrative model.

In his speech on "Muskeljudentum" ("Muscular Judaism") at the 1898 Second Zionist Congress in Basel, Max Nordau encouraged his fellow Jews to eschew the helplessness of diasporic existence and take up the oldest traditions of their Israelite forebears to "once more

become deep-chested, sturdy, sharp-eyed men.”<sup>110</sup> This “new” “muscular” Jew became associated with the early settlers of Mandate Palestine and their Sabra descendants, but also had their counterparts in the Eastern European Jewish revolutionaries and Red Army soldiers that had helped to overthrow the Russian Empire. In the latter context, their archetypes were figures like Leon Trotsky and other historical personages that served as the models for the fictional Jewish warriors in early works of Soviet literature like Isaac Babel’s *Red Cavalry* (1926) and Alexander Fadeyev’s *The Rout* (1927). Indeed, the “trajectory of a typical Jewish character” in early “Soviet literature and film” involved their transformation “from a Jewish intellectual to a proletarian fighter” (Gershenson 2013, 14). This trajectory existed within the larger framework of socialist realism, which demanded the transformation of apolitical intellectuals into communist fighters in Soviet fiction (Gershenson 2013, 14). In the 1933 play *Mamlock* concerning Nazi antisemitism by the German Jewish playwright Friedrich Wolf, the eponymous protagonist is a German Jewish scientist that strongly and proudly identifies as a Jew, praising his devoted Jewish staff as “Maccabean” and citing the biblical Jews David and Samson “as examples of bravery and heroism” (Gershenson 2013, 15). In 1934, Wolf moved to the USSR and eventually helped adapt the play into the 1938 Soviet film *Professor Mamlock*, which removed these lines exemplifying Mamlock’s Jewish pride and portrayed him instead as “Jewish in name only” with “absolutely no Jewish characterization” (Gershenson 2013, 15). However, though Mamlock himself “is rendered less Jewish,” the film still highlighted the Nazis’ “anti-Jewish persecution” and made “a strong case against antisemitism” (Gershenson 2013, 15). As a persecuted Jewish scientist, Mamlock’s debasement at the hands of his Nazi oppressors

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<sup>110</sup> *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehudah Reinharz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 547-8.

prophetically foreshadowed Stalin's later campaign against the Jewish "murderers in white coats" of the Doctors' Plot (Gershenson 2013, 18). The film exemplified the way the new Soviet muscular Jews of the Lenin period were de-Judaized under Stalin, robbing them of both their Jewish pride and the recognition of their martial heritage and abilities while paying lip service to the fight against fascist antisemitism.

Half a million Soviet Jews fought in the Red Army against the fascist invaders and thousands more fought as partisans behind enemy lines. Their numbers were disproportionately high among the greater Soviet population in terms of per capita percentage of enlistment, deaths in battle (200,000), and official decorations for their military service (Gershenson 2013, 173). As we saw with Ehrenburg, the news "of Nazi atrocities against fellow Jews or family members sparked their Jewish identification"; Soviet Jewish soldiers "were driven by a desire for revenge" and "motivated to dispel an age-old stereotype of Jews as unfit for military service" (Gershenson 2013, 6). As one Soviet Jewish officer wrote, "The German thugs massacred my relatives who were living in Odessa and destroyed our happy quiet life. And I want to take revenge for it. Revenge, revenge, and more revenge, in every place and at every moment."<sup>111</sup> Covering the war for the JAC newspaper *Eynikayt*, David Bergelson, "the most famous Soviet Yiddish writer" and later a victim of the Night of the Murdered Poets, presented both "a picture of Jewish loss" and "Jewish pride, vengeance, and heroism" (Gershenson 2013, 30). Like contemporaneous Zionists in Palestine, who "emphasized a link between the heroic Jewish past in antiquity and the current rebuilding of Jewish life in the yishuv," "Bergelson reached for the heroic past to create models for Jewish heroism in the present" (Gershenson 2013, 32). His fictional characters during this period were "not typical victims - passive, unable to resist, and saved from their sure death only

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<sup>111</sup> Cited in Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 292.



by the intervention of a powerful outside agent,” but rather “active and resourceful heroes” (Gershenson 2013, 37). These works placed “Nazi persecution in a broader historical context of other persecutions and libels against Jewish people” and his characters became mouthpieces for “Bergelson’s own call for revenge and retribution” (Gershenson 2013, 35-6). As mentioned earlier, despite their disproportionately high numbers in the Red Army, Soviet Jews were perceived and stereotyped as “the fighters at the Tashkent front,” i.e. “cowards hiding in the evacuation” (Gershenson 2013, 181). The “Soviet euphemism of choice for Jews” during and after the war became “peaceful residents” (Gershenson 2013, 52). This was both a form of soft Holocaust denial, as it avoided bringing attention to Jews as a particular target of the Nazis, and an example of the classic Russian (later Soviet) stereotype of Jews as helpless victims rather than vengeful warriors. We see this tension between the prewar, old-new muscular Jewish warriors and these postwar Soviet stereotypes in Wiesel’s and Potok’s works, whereas the former will return with a vengeance in the revenge novels discussed in this chapter.

The Holocaust image of the helpless Jew meekly submitting to this death at the hands of the Nazis persisted in both the East and West after the war. In his philosemitic work *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946), Sartre referred to Jews as “the mildest of men, passionately hostile to violence. That obstinate sweetness which they conserve in the midst of the most atrocious persecution, that sense of justice and of reason which they put up as their sole defense against a hostile, brutal, and unjust society, is perhaps the best part of the message they bring to us and the true mark of their greatness.”<sup>112</sup> The contemporaneous Jewish-American critic Harold Rosenberg argued that Sartre “had consciously permitted himself to accept the anti-Semite’s stereotype of the Jew” with this

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<sup>112</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. G.J. Becker, New York, 1948, 117.

archetypal description.<sup>113</sup> As David Nirenberg argued in his work on the subject, *Anti-Judaism* (2014), Judaism has frequently been associated, both figuratively and literally, with anything negative in Christian society and culture for almost two millennia.<sup>114</sup> One such negative concept was that of cowardice, timorousness, servility, and other related notions of weakness, particularly of the physical variety. In fifteenth century Spain, the Catalan term *jueu* (Jew) was used as a pejorative to mean a coward who refused to take vengeance (Horowitz 2006, 190). The seventeenth century Spanish writer Juan de Quinones de Benavente wrote an entire treatise “attempting to prove that Jewish men menstruate,” implying that Jewish men were in effect women punished for the crime of deicide with castration (Horowitz 2006, 195). This depiction of Jewish men as being inherently effeminate had a long shelf life.<sup>115</sup> Likely originally conceived sometime during the diasporic period, it extended well into the twentieth century, with even Jews sometimes perpetuating it. The nineteenth century anthologist of Jewish humor, L.M. Buschenthal, asserted that oppressed Jews, “like women,” can only attack verbally, their lack of strength compensated by their wit, while the twentieth century philosopher Otto Weininger, a Jewish convert to Protestantism, similarly saw the Jew “basically as a male with a female sensibility” (Horowitz 2006, 209). Relatedly, a seventeenth century English Bishop, Simon Patrick of Ely, wrote that Jews were noted in his day “to be mean spirited, and faint hearted: it being scarce ever heard, that a Jew listed himself for a Soldier; or engaged in the defense of the

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<sup>113</sup> Rosenberg, Harold. *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture, and Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973, 281.

<sup>114</sup> David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014).

<sup>115</sup> See Matthew Biberman, *Masculinity, Anti-Semitism and Early Modern English Literature: from the Satanic to the Effeminate Jew*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Country where he lives.”<sup>116</sup> As we saw, this charge was still being levelled at Soviet Jews after WWII, befitting “Russian anti-Semitic stereotypes” of Jewish men as “emasculated, frail, unattractive” (Gershenson 2013, 14).<sup>117</sup>

However, by the nineteenth century, on the eve of the rise of modern Zionism, some Western gentiles were beginning to notice a difference between Western and Eastern Jews in their willingness and ability to engage in self-defense. On the hand, Western observers were struck by the “timidity” of Ottoman Jews and “their alleged unwillingness to revenge themselves upon their...enemies” (Horowitz 2006, 200): “There is a subdued and spiritless expression about the eastern Jew... It is impossible to express the contemptuous hatred in which the Osmanlis hold the Jewish people; and the veriest Turkish urchin...has...meed of insult to add to the degradation of the outcast and wandering race of Israel. Nor dare the oppressed party revenge himself even upon this puny enemy...”<sup>118</sup> The English traveler Charles Macfarlane similarly described the Jews of the Ottoman Empire as being known for their timidity and cowardliness: “Throughout the Ottoman dominions, their pusillanimity is so excessive, that they flee before the uplifted hand of a child.”<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, Macfarlane noted, “in England the Jews become bold and expert pugilists, and are as ready to resent an insult as any other of His Majesty’s liege subjects”; Macfarlane saw this alleged difference between English and Ottoman Jews as

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<sup>116</sup> Simon Patrick, *A Commentary on the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy*. London, 1700, 557.

<sup>117</sup> The Soviet Jewish poet Boris Slutsky expressed the pervasiveness of this stereotype during his Thaw-era poem “About Jews” (1960): “They are nasty people, those Jews / And as soldiers they are no use: / While Ivan is fighting the war, / Abe is stashing cash in the store. / I have heard this since I was a child... / I have not sold anything, ever / I have not stolen anything, ever... / Bullets spared me in the field / As proof of this ultimate truth: / When they say “Jews never were killed! / They all came back home — cunning Jews!” Olga Dumer, trans., “Boris Slutsky. About Jews,” accessed April 13, 2021, <https://ruverses.com/boris-slutsky/about-jews/>.

<sup>118</sup> Pardoe, Julia. *The City of the Sultan*. London, 1837, 2:361.

<sup>119</sup> Macfarlane, Charles. *Constantinople in 1828*. London: 1828, 1:115-16.

“striking proof of the effects of oppression in one country, and of liberty, and of the protection of equal laws, in the other.”<sup>120</sup> Something similar may account for the comparable difference between the Jewish protagonists in the post-Soviet revenge novels published in the West decades after Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan and the earlier Soviet (and even Western) portrayals of Soviet Jews as helpless victims in the affair. The Soviet-era novels could not help but reflect the reality of Soviet Jews, who had little recourse against their totalitarian government. The post-Soviet works could imagine these same people as vengeful warriors, fighting back against their oppressors and even seeking (and getting) revenge against Stalin and his henchmen, because Judaism had, in a metaphorical sense, defeated the Soviet Amalekites, a victory that now found symbolic expression in these fictional old-new Jewish fighters.

After the Shoah, many Western Holocaust films portrayed “Jews as either feminized or as children, in order to express weakness and victimization” (Gershenson 2013, 47). The few Soviet films dealing with the subject, perforce obliquely due to official censorship, similarly represented Jews mostly as women and children, “victims in need of protection and defense” that are “helpless without their protectors” from other Soviet nationalities, usually Russian (Gershenson 2013, 62). Conversely, many non-Holocaust related, postwar Soviet World War II films depicted Jewish Red Army fighters and partisans, thereby undermining “a western canon of representing Jews as victims,” instead modelling them as “active heroes” (Gershenson 2013, 224). Though robbed of their religious identity and ethnic pride, and only capable of active heroism within a larger multiethnic Soviet collective, they nevertheless reflected Soviet Jewry’s martial spirit. In this, these films reflected the inherent problem of Soviet Jewish identity for the regime: Jews must be shown as proud Soviet citizens but not as proud Jews. This dialectic tension finds

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

expression in the characters from the fathers' generation in the Soviet era works discussed earlier. The character of the sons' generation will reverse this dialectic, becoming proud Jews but no longer proud Soviet citizens. In the postwar revenge novels, there is a synthesis of these opposing dialectics, as the Jewish protagonists now take pride in their old-new identity as new muscular Jews that combine the martial spirit of their biblical ancestors with their status as fully liberated citizens taking part in the Soviet struggle against czarist terror, the fascist invasion and even Soviet oppression itself. In defending his 1958 novel *Exodus*, the Jewish-American novelist Leon Uris asserted that "we Jews are not in truth what we have been portrayed to be. In truth we have been fighters."<sup>121</sup> Uris was responding to the image of the emasculated Jew as a non-fighter perpetuated by early Western Holocaust film and literature. It is not surprising that *Exodus* was a major samizdat hit for Soviet Jews, who identified with the Holocaust survivors turned Jewish warriors in the novel fighting to regain their ancestral homeland. Similarly, in his 1965 Holocaust novel *Stalemate*, it was important for Lithuanian-Jewish novelist Ichokas Meras "not to show ghetto Jews as passive victims" but rather as engaging in armed struggle, committing small acts of defiance against the Nazi occupiers, and ultimately triumphing over the Nazi commandant before perishing themselves (Gershenson 2013, 104). While this is "only a victory on moral grounds, rather than an actual defeat of the Nazi," the novel's "triumph of human dignity" was an important counterweight to many contemporary Soviet novels and films, which depicted Soviet Jews as merely "peaceful victims" of the fascist invaders (Gershenson 2013, 104). This linked it to the Soviet novels depicting the Doctors' Plot discussed earlier, which displayed a Purim-like promise of ultimate Jewish triumph at a time when this was still an unrealized hope.

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<sup>121</sup> Uris, Leon. *Interview* by Joseph Wershba, *New York Post*, 2 July 1959.

It was in response to this image of the Jew as “an easy mark, as one who backs off, as one who allows himself to be pushed back, as a ‘patsy,’” that Meir Kahane penned his book *Never Again!* (1971) and helped found the Jewish Defense League (JDL) in the United States in the immediate wake of Israel’s Six Day War. Kahane argued that, “Not only does that image cause immediate harm to Jews but it is a self-perpetuating thing. Because a Jew runs away and because he allows himself to be stepped upon, he guarantees that another Jew in the future will be attacked because of the image which he has perpetuated.”<sup>122</sup> For Kahane, “the tough, free, young *sabra*” that fought and won the Six Day War was “hardly a ‘New Jew’” but rather “the resurrection of the ‘Old Jew.’”<sup>123</sup> In a Soviet context, an “Old Jew” was traditional and religious, while a “New Jew” was physical, strong, and defiant, both of which contrasted with the stereotypical Soviet Jew, who was a secular “peaceful citizen” (Gershenson 2013, 214). Uris and Kahane had collapsed the Old and the New Jew into the Old-New Jew of their literary imaginations and political programs. Likewise, the Jewish protagonists of the Purim-Stalin revenge novels embody a similar rebirth of the biblical Jewish warrior in a Soviet context reimagined as just the latest in a series of exiles starting with the Babylonian, with Stalin and his successors as the new Nebuchadnezzar-Hamans. Appropriately, much of the JDL’s activity was directed toward the Soviet Jewry Movement, sometimes engaging in violence against Soviet properties and officials. While Soviet Jews could not engage in similar acts of self-defense, post-Soviet Jews like Goldberg (who moved to the US during the heyday of the JDL’s activities) internalized this image of the old-new Jewish warrior, later employing it in his retelling of Stalin’s final antisemitic pogrom. In response to then Senator Joe Biden’s threat to cut off US aid

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<sup>122</sup> Kahane, Meir. *Never Again!: A Program for Survival*. (Los Angeles, 1971), 140-2.

<sup>123</sup> Kahane, 151.

to Israel during Prime Minister Menachem Begin's 1982 testimony in front of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, the old Jewish warrior responded in the same spirit:

Don't threaten us with cutting off your aid. It will not work. I am not a Jew with trembling knees. I am a proud Jew with 3,700 years of civilized history. Nobody came to our aid when we were dying in the gas chambers and ovens. Nobody came to our aid when we were striving to create our country. We paid for it. We fought for it. We died for it. We will stand by our principles. We will defend them. And, when necessary, we will die for them again, with or without your aid.<sup>124</sup>

Just as more recent American films like *Defiance* (2008) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) have depicted Jewish heroes avenging Jewish victims of the Holocaust as a way of rewriting the popular narrative about Jewish victimhood, the post-Soviet Purim-Stalin revenge novels similarly retell the story of Soviet Jewry as one of resistance and Jewish pride rather than simply one of passive victimization and rescue by their concerned foreign coreligionists and non-Jewish allies.

### Purim Revenge

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), Sigmund Freud recalls hearing about his father Jakob's antisemitic humiliation as a youth in Moravia, when he was attacked by a Christian in the street and told, "Jew! Get off the pavement."<sup>125</sup> Jakob did not avenge this attack, causing Sigmund to compare Jakob negatively with the Carthaginian general Hamilcar, who made his son Hannibal swear "to take vengeance on the Romans" after his defeat at their hands. Hannibal

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<sup>124</sup> Ronn Torossian, "Menachem Begin To Joe Biden: I Am Not A Jew With Trembling Knees," The Jewish Press, April 3, 2015, <https://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/opinions/menachem-begin-to-joe-biden-i-am-not-a-jew-with-trembling-knees/2015/04/03>.

<sup>125</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. A.A. Brill. New York, 1950, 98-99.

had a place in Sigmund's "phantasies" from that point on.<sup>126</sup> Such "phantasies" of revenge speak to a common psychological need among disenfranchised peoples, as Jews were for nearly two millennia of European history. Even an assimilated and emancipated Jew like Freud could harbor fantasies of revenge against his father's antisemitic persecutors, reimagining himself as a famous warrior like Hannibal in order to carry out such vengeance while simultaneously wishing that his father had been able to defend himself in the first place. As this anecdote demonstrates, memory can be an aggressive act "among people with limited access to other forms of aggression" (Horowitz 2006, 110).

Modern Purim studies have privileged "anthropological and psychological interpretations" of the holiday, with its origins "commonly traced to a pre-Lenten carnival" whose purpose was to dispel the fear of persecuted Jews by serving "as a 'safetyvalve' explosion of repressed Jewish resentment" (Carruthers 2008, 275). This "riotous, licentious" festival has provided Jewish communities around the world "an occasion for collective catharsis" over their peoples' ancient "deliverance from its enemies" while acting out "a mimesis of vengeance against evil" (Belkin 2009, 15). As we have seen, such festivities traditionally provided a carnivalesque license to engage "in acts of ritualized aggression" (Horowitz 2006, 269). Foremost among these was "the symbolic violence of smiting Haman, understood as the fulfillment of the obligation to obliterate the Amalekites," an "almost universally practiced symbolic killing" whose far-reaching effects commentators have argued often moved "beyond symbol or fantasy": "Purim participants proclaim the death sentence and claim sovereignty. As a communal ritual, the 'smiting of Haman' emphasizes the place that ritual plays in the perpetuation of a set of ideals, ideologies, traditions - of the self-positioning and aspirations

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.



toward sovereignty that social traditions produce” (Carruthers 2020, 69). In the diaspora, where Jews were often second-class citizens with limited civic rights and dubious legal protections, Purim’s ritualized violence both modeled the self-defense and revenge they could not pursue in reality against their oppressors and expressed the hope for a future existence where they could practice their traditions as a sovereign people.

The Megillah has long inspired diasporic Jewish communities under the yolk of foreign oppressors. It is likely that most of the fourth century discourses in the Midrash *Esther Rabbah* were written “under Roman rule at a time when the rabbis relished the idea of revenge” (Carruthers 2008, 249). In *The Guide for the Perplexed* (1190), Maimonides employed the concept of *lex talionis* (law of retaliation) to justify the severe punishment promised the Amalekites, claiming that God “commanded that Amalek, who hastened to use the sword, should be exterminated by the sword.”<sup>127</sup> In his *Book of Commandments*, he similarly wrote that the Tanakh commands Jews “to remember what Amalek did to us in attacking us unprovoked”: “We are to speak of this at all times, and to arouse the people to make war upon him and bid them to hate him, and that hatred of him be not weakened or lessened with the passage of time.”<sup>128</sup> Writing in the twelfth century, Maimonides recognized that revenge against contemporaneous Amalekites was not a practical possibility, so he interpreted God’s commandment to remember Amalek as one whose purpose was to maintain anger toward Amalek’s descendants down the centuries until a time came when Jews could once again take their revenge in practice, not merely in words, fantasy, and theatrical simulation. These Jews that could not take their revenge against their oppressors with material weapons often retained their hatred “through hardened

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<sup>127</sup> Maimonides, Moses. *Guide to the Perplexed*. Trans. and ed. Shlomo Pines (Chicago, 1963), 3:41.

<sup>128</sup> Maimonides, Moses. *The Commandments*. Trans. Charles B. Chavel (Judaica Press, 2000), 1: 203.

anger...in their hearts.”<sup>129</sup> Though many later rabbis interpreted the Tanakh’s injunction to remember Amalek with enmity to apply only on the Sabbath before Purim, even this reduced burden commanded Jews to annually harden their hearts against Amalek and his descendants (Horowitz 2006, 134).

However, the Megillah encouraged Jews not to gloat over the defeat of their enemies. It linked the killing of Haman’s ten sons to the injunction to obliterate the memory of Amalek, justifying their deaths by arguing that they continued their father’s violence against Jews and as such were “thereby utterly at blame for their end” (Carruthers 2008, 265). Indeed, as far back as the Middle Ages, some Jews demonstrated discomfort at this slaughter and thus required such psychological justification to transform what might appear at first glance as gratuitous violence into “reasonable self-defense” (Carruthers 2008, 257). They also probably felt a need to avoid overly triumphalist expressions of Jewish vengeance against their former enemies so as to avoid unnecessarily aggravating their current non-Jewish neighbors and rulers (Carruthers 2008, 257). Regardless, in thus “aligning mercy with the victims,” the Megillah makes the narrative’s concluding “extermination of the enemy necessary for the preservation of the innocent” Persian Jews, who the former was planning to murder if he had not been stopped (Carruthers 2008, 241). As such, this act of revenge is depicted as morally righteous (and even divinely mandated) self-defense, providing justification for the vengeful fantasies of future Jews that saw their own suffering mirrored in the Purim story they annually read, heard and acted out in their homes and communal spaces.

While ever weary of unduly provoking their gentile neighbors, medieval Jews nevertheless often executed mock justice on Purim to redress Christian injustices done to them,

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<sup>129</sup> Smail, D.L. “Hatred as a Social Institution in Late-Medieval Society.” *Speculum* 76 (2001): 108.

as “normal circumstances prevented such justice from being done” in everyday life (Horowitz 2006, 268). As Nietzsche said, “in punishment there is much that is festive,”<sup>130</sup> and Jews unleashed their pent-up resentment stored over the course of the year in this mock vengeance during Purim. Medieval Italian Jews had a custom called “Ira” (Italian for *vengeance*), which involved calling for revenge against a Haman puppet as the community gathered around it (Goodman 1949, 323). Later, Purim spiels gave similar vent to such suppressed feelings and hopes heightened by the communities’ current suffering, for here was “the realm of freedom where the Jew could be assured of ultimate triumph over his enemies” (Shatzsky 1949, 361). As mentioned earlier, though the Ahasuerus-spiel was the most popular variant, other biblical stories where ancient Jewish warriors triumphed over their enemies were also part of Purim spieler’s repertoires. The genre memory of these other spiels persists into the Purim-Stalin texts, where Bar Kokhba and the Maccabees are often referenced, particularly in *The Yid*.

In his autobiographical account, “Purim in Minsk, White Russia,” Daniel Persky described his childhood recollection of celebrating Purim in Imperial Russia before emigrating to America in 1906:

the violent hubbub which we make on Purim conceals a secret symbolic meaning. What we are trying to do is silence our pains by our yelling. Screams are the fit accompaniment to misery. The cry for help is the fit accompaniment to redemption... We... drop bombs in the form of noisemakers to shatter the ranks of our foes, spiritually and physically, to wipe their evil from our hearts, to cause the murmur of our sorrow, the flame of our

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<sup>130</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. W. Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale. New York, 1967 [1887], 67.

humiliation and the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, to be forgotten in a firmament-shattering and earth-shaking racket (54-55).

Jewish emigres from Russian lands like Persky equated their humiliation at the hands of their Imperial Russian enemies with the suffering of the Persian Jews in the Megillah. They saw their Purim-like redemption in their emigration to the West and Palestine, and many progressive Jews viewed the revolutionary overthrow of Czar Nicholas II as justified revenge for their coreligionists' suffering at the hands of a modern Amalek. By the time of the Soviet Jewry Movement, traditional Imperial Russian enemies of the Jews like the Cossacks and the Black Hundred were combined in the Jewish imagination with both the Holocaust and their contemporary Bolshevik enemies. In the Russian (and especially Russian Jewish) popular imagination, pogroms and the Holocaust became metonymically connected (Gershenson 2013, 159), with both playing a role in the representation of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan when later Soviet and American writers connected Hitler and Stalin as modern Amaleks and Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns as a recurrence of both Czarist-era pogroms and continuation of Hitler's final solution. Just as the house of Haman is destroyed after their patriarch's death for trying to annihilate the Jews, Stalin's henchmen (as a synecdoche for Bolshevism itself) must also be punished in the Purim-Stalin texts in accordance with morphological mandates of the Purim genre. Since Haman enlisted local authorities to execute his plan to extinguish Persian Jews, the Jews' subsequent revenge is traditionally seen by Jewish commentators as self-defense against Haman's orders, which could not have been rescinded even after his death. Similarly, while Stalin's antisemitic campaign was rescinded after his death, the antisemites persisted in Soviet power, thereby necessitating the revenge presented as self-defense we see in the post-Soviet Purim-Stalin texts addressed in this chapter.

It is worth noting that the scenes of killing that bring the Jews' victorious reversal of fortune to its fulfilment in the Megillah have provoked both "repulsion and triumphalism" (Carruthers 2008, 256) among Jews and non-Jews alike through the centuries. The beating of Haman's effigy was encouraged in some synagogues but discouraged in others for fear of arousing Christian hostility (Goodman 1949, 325). Indeed, some argued that hanging Haman in effigy may have given rise to the blood libel against Jews (Grayzel 1949, 12), another reason some among the latter discouraged the practice and its related mimesis of Jewish revenge. The prior owner and/or reader of an eighteenth century Italian Megillah housed at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York scratched out its scenes of revenge, including those of Esther asking for the slaughter of Haman's ten sons, in an attempt to erase them from the book (Carruthers 2008, 257). Similarly, "the illustrated editions of Ester produced in Europe during the first decades of the twentieth century shied away from depicting scenes of Jewish vengeance" (Horowitz 2006, 100), while "Jewish artists working during the interwar years rarely depicted the hanging of Haman, and none, it seems, were willing to depict the hanging of his sons" (Horowitz 2006, 102). This reticence likely reflects the persistently tenuous condition of Jewish existence in Europe through the Holocaust. Indeed, even illustrated editions of Esther published in Europe and America during the years immediately following World War II continued "to shy away from depicting the sons of Haman hanging, although it became more common to depict their father himself hanging from a gallows" (Horowitz 2006, 104). Some of this reticence for American Jews might be connected with the image's resemblance to the lynching of African Americans, as exemplified by the popular Jazz song "Strange Fruit," which describes a "black body swinging in the Southern breeze" and "hanging from the poplar trees," which was written by Abel Meeropol, a New York City Jewish schoolteacher and child of immigrants from the

Russian Empire (Horowitz 2006, 106).<sup>131</sup> Regardless of the reasons, many Christian and Jewish scholars up to the present day have echoed Barry Walfish's description of the Megillah as "an embarrassment," being "offended by its particularistic, nationalist tone and especially by the bloody scenes of revenge and the joyful triumph of the Jews over their enemies."<sup>132</sup>

Writing shortly after the Holocaust, Philip Roth noted that being an American Jew was still associated with a contempt for physical aggression (Horowitz 2006, 205). He criticized Leon Uris's "new image of the fighting Jew" (Horowitz 2006, 205) in *Exodus* as a Hebrew hero perpetrating violence as a stereotype equal in its simplification to earlier images of the defenseless Jew. The consequences of the mimetic nature of Purim festivities, particularly Purim spiels and the abuse of Haman's effigy, have not been lost on many of the Megillah's proponents and critics:

Instead of merely commenting on revenge, a minority of readers take the book's scenes of slaughter as a dictate for violent action. One of the most extreme of recent years is the massacre of 29 Muslims by Baruch Goldstein on Purim 1994 at the Patriarch's Cave in Hebron. Avirima Golan in Haaretz, 28 February 1994, reported one response to the news: 'A Purim miracle, I'm telling you, Purim miracle' (Carruthers 2008, 265).

Many blamed the massacre on the Megillah's implicit incitement for eternal revenge against the descendants of Amalek. Indeed, Elliott Horowitz's *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (2006) highlights this event as another example and inevitable consequence of centuries of incitement to Jewish violence against their neighbors by the Megillah and its

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<sup>131</sup> There was also the 1915 lynching in Georgia of the Jew Leo Frank, who was falsely accused of murdering a female employee at the factory that he managed.

<sup>132</sup> Barry Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 75.

associated rituals and festivities. The film *Esther* (1986), Israeli director Amos Gitai's adaptation of the Megillah, took a similar view of the text as one that can lead people who are persecuted to become new persecutors. As such, it left out Mordecai's concluding scene of triumph as a comment on the need to oppose the violence the story potentially encourages and thus avoid the cycle of revenge it can inaugurate (Carruthers 2008, 232).

Likely influenced by similar critiques, the United Kingdom's Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz had resisted using Purim terminology in the 1930s. However, by 1941 he was speaking "of the war against Nazism as a battle with Amalek," which he stressed should not be left in divine hands but rather carried out by men and nations (Horowitz 2006, 143). Similarly, in 1963, the Reform rabbi and Biblical scholar Samuel Sandmel wrote that the Megillah seemed to him "at one time to have no place in Scripture, both because of its barbarity and what seemed to me then its unreality. But Hitler was a Haman *redivivus*, and the generation of those who...[were] adults in 1932 discovered that the legends about the age of Xerxes came to be a traumatic modern experience."<sup>133</sup> The Purim-Stalin texts remind us that, unlike for Western Jews, the epoch of Haman did not end with the fall of the Third Reich for Soviet Jews but continued until the death of Stalin, while his Amalekite legacy persisted into the final years of the USSR. While some Jews in the West saw the Megillah as barbarously outdated, particularly after Hitler's demise, Soviet Jews continued to see Esther as their contemporary for decades after. In writing openly of Jewish vengeance, the later, diasporic Purim-Stalin revenge texts conversely reflect the security and stability of American Jewish life after the Cold War, particularly from a post-Soviet perspective in relation to their prior experiences in the USSR. Unable to process their collective

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<sup>133</sup> Samuel Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures: An Introduction to their Literature and Religious Ideas* (New York, 1963), 504.

psychological trauma in the immediate aftermath of Stalin's death, and lacking the Jewish cultural tools available to their coreligionists in the West, Soviet Jews only came to see their postwar experience as a recursion of the days of Esther once those tools and the wherewithal to use them become available to them beyond Soviet borders after the final downfall of their modern Amalekite oppressors.

### Ben Bova's *Triumph*

In line with the other gateway Purim-Stalin texts written by non-Jews discussed earlier, it is worth noting that arguably the first post-Soviet revenge novel in the genre was also written by a non-Jew. Ben Bova's *Triumph* (1993) presents a Purim-Stalin revenge-style narrative outside of an explicitly Purim narrative. The novel presents an alternative history where Winston Churchill succeeds in assassinating Stalin in 1945 before he can launch his postwar antisemitic campaign. Rashin argued that Stalin's preemptive neutralization of Jewish Red Army soldiers before the launch of his alleged deportation plan implied a familiarity with the Purim narrative he consciously sees himself reenacting. Likewise, it is my contention that Bova's representation (immediately after the collapse of the USSR) of Churchill's fictional preemptive assassination of Stalin on the eve of the black years of Soviet Jewry constitutes a similar reworking of the Purim plot in a Soviet context, even if Purim and Soviet Jews are not the specific focus of the narrative. In the novel, Stalin and Hitler are implicitly linked, as Hitler is killed in his bunker while Stalin is assassinated. While the explanation in the novel for this is that they both pose equal threats to Western democracy, other elements in the work suggest that the threat Stalin poses to Soviet Jews is an equal consideration, as Churchill describes the Soviet menace replacing the defeated



Nazi foe and Stalin's potential triumph ultimately exceeding Hitler's.<sup>134</sup> Stalin dies on the cusp of declaring war against the other Allied powers and purging the Politburo, much as his death on Purim allegedly thwarted a similar impending attack on his inner cabinet as well as his Jewish deportation plan. Stalin is assassinated by a covert plan of Churchill's invention, which literalizes the fictional Doctors' Plot fabricated by Stalin, where Soviet Jews were covert British and American agents attempting to assassinate Soviet leaders like himself. While the Soviet traitor that kills Stalin in the novel is a non-Jew (Grigori Gagarin, brother of the cosmonaut Yuri), Bova's appropriation and inversion of Stalinist antisemitic conspiracies foreshadows similar plot devices in the subsequent Purim-Stalin revenge novels. Furthermore, Gagarin, like the protagonists of *The Yid*, kills Stalin both to both take revenge for the dictator's victims and to prevent more murder at his command; in this case, it is Gagarin's brother, who he thinks will die as a conscript in Stalin's inevitable coming war with the other Allied powers if the tyrant is not assassinated. Gagarin also hides his ability to speak foreign languages, thereby anticipating the impending anti-cosmopolitan campaign that became a thinly veiled excuse for removing Jews from positions of cultural and political influence. And in having Stalin killed rather than dying from a stroke, Bova perpetuates the revenge element of the post-Soviet Purim-Stalin texts by representing his death in line with the morphological elements of a Purim spiel.

While the novel hardly mentions Soviet Jews, it does focus on the liberation of European Jews from Nazi concentration camps. It is my contention that, much as they do in Potok's "The Trope Teacher," these Holocaust survivors could stand in for Soviet Jews here, foreshadowing the total liberation of the latter, which could not take place until the USSR's collapse and is thus

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<sup>134</sup> Beria is also explicitly compared to Himmler and his department of internal affairs to the SS. He is the first to declare Stalin's death but is soon killed by the army, just as he is in the Purim-Stalin texts.

still premature within the novel's timeline. Accordingly, the Holocaust survivors are described as lacking the strength to celebrate their liberation,<sup>135</sup> implicitly referencing Soviet Jewry's partial liberation after Stalin's death, which they could only fully celebrate after communism's demise. Similarly, as with the protagonist of "The Trope Teacher," one of the novel's protagonists is a Jewish American soldier who consciously takes revenge against the Nazis after discovering the concentration camps by first killing German soldiers and then mutilating Hitler's dead body. This ritual humiliation of Hitler's corpse, like that of Haman's effigy in traditional Purim celebrations, is akin to the similar mutilation of Beria's body during and after his execution in many of the Purim-Stalin works, most explicitly in *The Death of Stalin*. In this novel, the Nazis ultimately recognize that the Jews will have their revenge on them vis-a-vis the camps, whose discovery will lead to the Nazis' utter destruction. Though they are defeated by the Allied powers, Hitler and his Amalekite henchmen see their downfall at the hand of the Jews in the same kind of ironic realization of the Nazis' global Jewish conspiracy theory as Stalin's invented Doctors' Plot in *The Yid*. Hitler even recognizes the cyclical nature of history in the Nazis' supposed demise at Jewish hands. *Triumph* is thus a transitional Purim-Stalin novel in that it understands that the USSR's demise is the ultimate fulfillment of the liberation promised but not delivered by Stalin's death to Soviet Jewry without explicitly representing these events as a recurrence of the Purim narrative. Nevertheless, Bova understood that the Soviet Union's collapse was the final revenge of the survivors of Stalin's terror and their descendants, a realization he dramatized by taking fictional revenge against the tyrant the same way the Purim-Stalin authors would soon do.

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<sup>135</sup> This is a common theme in testimonies of Holocaust survivors from many different countries.

Chaim Potok's *The War Doctor*

Chaim Potok's final novel was the tripartite work, *Old Men at Midnight* (2001), where three men relate their experiences of the Holocaust and Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaign to a narrator, Ilana Davita. The first section, "The Ark Builder," is about a Holocaust survivor; the second, "The War Doctor," is about the opposing experiences of two Soviet Jews during the Doctors' Plot; and the last, "The Trope Teacher," is about an American Jewish scholar's revenge against the Nazis during his military service in World War II. All of these works are about retrieving Jewish memory, as the narrator serves as an impetus and conduit for these men to speak about the roles they played in two of the most important events of twentieth century Jewish history. The novel itself reflects the narrative arc of the Purim-Stalin story, from suffering at the hands of Amalek (Hitler and Stalin in the first two stories) to liberation from their tyranny in America and revenge against the Amalekites in the final story.

In "The War Doctor," the narrator, Ilana, is a young woman doing her PhD dissertation on Babel's *The Red Cavalry*. Her parents were "very active in the communist cause" (73) until breaking with the party because of the Hitler-Stalin (i.e. Molotov-Ribbentrop) pact. But they were Stalinists before that, and her father died trying "to save a nun during the German bombing of Guernica" in the Spanish Civil War (72). He was the kind of new Jewish warrior depicted by Babel in *The Red Cavalry* that we also found in *The Testament*, whose Soviet Jewish protagonist also fought for such universal justice against the fascists in the same war. She meets another new-style Jewish warrior in Leon Shertov, a former KGB interrogation officer that defected from the USSR in 1955. Though he has never written anything, Leon tells Ilana that there are stories he could tell about his Red Cavalry, "But I would never put anything in writing" (74). Ilana responds, "Then your stories will die with you," to which Leon replies, "Who needs stories of

yet another Jew?” But Ilana tells him, “I need them. Without stories there is nothing. Stories are the world’s memory. The past is erased without stories” (74). Ilana, like Wiesel and Potok, becomes the channel through which this former Soviet Jew of silence can tell his story about his experience of Stalinist antisemitism. Like the other Soviet Jewish protagonists in this section, Leon can only tell his story once he has left the USSR and its post-Stalinist antisemitism for good. Also, like the narrator in *The Testament*, Ilana is a Western Jewish storyteller that has to convince a former Soviet Jew of silence to tell his own story. Leon tells Ilana, “I had not wanted to write these, but hearing your words made me change my mind. These are the first stories, and are true to the best of my ability to recapture things” (74). We see here the transition from Western Jews telling the stories of Soviet Jews to the latter telling their stories themselves, as we will see with the post-Soviet Jewish writers in the coming chapters. Like Leon, they will try to “recapture” these events, retelling them using the Purim spiel model to represent Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan as one where Jews are increasingly defiant warriors taking revenge against their oppressors, not merely victims.

The narrative structure here is cyclical, as with the other Western representations of Stalin’s alleged Jewish deportation plan in this section. The story is told from a place of liberation, when the protagonist has returned to Jewish history by escaping the USSR, about how Soviet Jews fell out of Jewish cyclical time in the USSR before returning to it after emigration. The end of the Soviet Union has also provided a finality to this cycle that was still tentative in Wiesel’s works, when Jews continued to suffer under Soviet oppression. As with the other protagonist in the section, Leon grew up in a religious home in Ukraine. Born “Kalman son of Levi Yitzchok Sharfstein” (92), he tried to hide his Jewish identity when he was conscripted into the Russian Imperial Army during World War I, a process that continued through the Soviet

period. Like the autobiographical protagonist of Babel's *The Red Cavalry*, Kalman becomes a Jewish warrior killing Germans and eventually even leading a platoon, where some of his men call him "a Yid" (79), before eventually joining the communist cause. Wounded by his own (Russian) soldiers, he is treated in Petrograd by an assimilated Jewish doctor, Rubinov, to whom he passes on his Jewish heritage by teaching him Hebrew so that Rubinov can read a book of Jewish psalms left behind by another Jewish soldier. With the Civil War now underway and the Whites approaching, the Jewish doctor and a Ukrainian nurse who had Jewish friends in her village help Leon return home to Ukraine. Like Grekova, and a Russian doctor later in the story, this nurse is a philosemitic exception that proves the rule of Russian antisemitism, as well as a stand-in for the non-Jewish Soviet dissidents and activists that supported the Soviet Jewry Movement.

Rubinov acquires identity papers for Kalman, whom he tells to respond with silence if questioned about them, beginning the silent tenure of his experience as a Soviet Jew, when he must hide his name and increasingly abandon his Jewish identity and heritage. When he begins working for the Soviet secret police, he officially changes his name because of how his own Jewish name would sound among peasants and foreign diplomats, like Solomon Slepak and others had in real life. Like Solomon, Leon also works for TASS at one point. "The War Doctor" is like the fictional counterpart to *The Gates of November*, where, instead of persisting in his Bolshevism, Solomon sees the error of his ways after Stalin's death and returns to his Jewish roots, like the other members of the fathers' generation in this chapter. Seeing Lenin's mummy, Leon thinks, "I could not figure out why he had been mummified, why they had made a holy relic of him - filled him with alcohol...to preserve him as a sacred object - when everywhere we were knocking down churches" (108). Still close enough to his early Jewish beliefs to see the

birth of communism as a new religion, he will eventually join it before abandoning it as a result of seeing its underlying antisemitism during the Doctors' Plot. In the lead-up to the Nazi invasion, Leon dreams that he had stepped "into a world of pure silence. Not Russian silence, which is the silence of terror... Rather, the silence that was the absence of all light and sound, the silence of an emptied globe, a planet without people, without life, without air, a world of naked rock and dormant sand distantly seen by indifferent stars" (117). This is the absolute silence of the coming Holocaust, which is akin to the Russian silence of terror, but deeper and more absolute. Nevertheless, we see here the connection between Hitler and Stalin as the new Amalekites, influencing each other until Stalin is defeated on Purim while attempting to finish what Hitler had started in the Holocaust with his own alleged Jewish deportation plan. It is worth noting that during the campaign against the JAC, the arrest of all of its members "meant nothing" to Leon, as he has totally lost his Jewish identity by this point: "I am not a Jew, I am a Communist" (132). Unlike Ehrenburg and Grossman, neither Hitler nor the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign had returned his Jewish identity to him. This only occurs as a result of the Doctors' Plot, which Leon discovers is meant to unleash Stalin's Jewish deportation plan.

Leon first learns about the deportation plan from one of the doctors, Dr. Koriavin, who he interrogates in the run-up to the official revelation of the Doctors' Plot in the Soviet press. Leon finds it strange that Dr. Koriavin, like the nurse during the Civil War and real-life figures like Grekova and Andrei Sakharov, is a Russian worried about antisemitism. Koriavin, foreshadowing the forthcoming Soviet dissident movement, opposes Stalin's regime and its virulent antisemitism because he believes that "in 20 years one of my grandchildren can sit where I'm sitting now and be put through another such experience" (136). Speaking for Potok, Koriavin recognizes the cyclical nature of both Russian antisemitism and Stalinism, which would

return after the relative liberalization of the Thaw period. Koriavin tells Leon that he believes Stalin will do away with all of the Jews and “finish what Hitler started...through deportation”: “He has already deported more than half a dozen nationalities. He will deport all of you too... A hue and cry throughout the country over the diabolical Jewish doctors, and then a mass deportation of all the Jews...with the support of the entire Soviet people” (138). Like the memoirist and real-life victim of the Doctors’ Plot, Yakov Rapoport, Koriavin thinks Stalin is a delusional paranoiac who sees conspiracies everywhere because he refuses to take the medicines prescribed for him. Rubinov, who “treated the arm of Comrade Stalin” (140), becomes one of the victims of the Doctors’ Plot. Potok thus reflects a school of thought about Stalin’s antisemitic campaigns, which is that it combined his paranoias about both Jews and doctors, whose advice and efforts to treat his failing health he constantly ignored and, according to this theory, came to resent. But the Doctors’ Plot, like the earlier attack on the JAC, was also a cover for a wider series of antisemitic campaigns encompassing many sections of Soviet society. Leon’s Jewish colleagues also start disappearing, a reflection of Stalin’s effort to remove Jews from the security apparatus, where they had been heavily represented since the formation of the USSR.

After Koriavin’s warning, the newspapers announce the Doctors’ Plot and begin calling Jewish doctors “child murderers” in an echo of the millennia-old blood libel that found expression during the Imperial period in the Beilis Affair. What follows is a concise enumeration of the same salient elements of the alleged deportation plan presented earlier by Potok in *The Gates of November*. Leon hears rumors about the *Pravda* letter affair, “an appeal to comrade Stalin to save the obstinate and unruly Jews of the Soviet Union from the deserved wrath of the Soviet people by shipping them all to a distant region of the Motherland where they could dwell in peace and learn to become proper Soviet citizens” (145). In the rail yards, Leon sees silent and

sealed freight trains lining the side tracks for miles. A fellow NKVD agent tells Leon about camps “being constructed in the desert region of Kazakhstan - a vast flat lunar wasteland - and all along the rail line to distant Birobidzhan” that are “all waiting for the Jews” (147). These camps are presented as if they exist on a different world, the realm not of reality but science fiction, reflecting how fantastical the deportation plan seemed in retrospect (but not if one considers the similar fates already suffered by so many social and ethnic groups under Stalin). This fellow NKVD agent tells Leon that this does not include him, because “You’re one of us” (147). Leon has become so assimilated that even his colleagues no longer consider him a Jew, merely a Soviet. In his apartment building, Leon finds “a new list for the local police of the Jewish families in the building” (147). His name is not on the list. Like Hadassah masquerading as Esther, Kalman has so successfully disguised himself as Leon that he has escaped official notice to become one of the most powerful figures in the country, “the right arm of General Razumkov, himself the right arm of the possible future boss” (158). As we will see, he is saved so that he can bear witness after emigrating for those who can no longer speak for themselves because they are either in the grave or still in Soviet captivity.

When Leon meets Rubinov again as his interrogator, their roles have reversed from their previous meeting. Now, Rubinov speaks Hebrew and Leon has become a fully assimilated Soviet Jew. Whereas Leon recited Hebrew prayers in his sleep when he was under Rubinov’s care, it is now the latter who does so. Leon has become so removed from his Jewish heritage that it takes him a moment to realize that Rubinov is reciting a Psalm: “O God, do not be silent; do not look aloof; do not be quiet, O God” (149), Rubinov murmurs in Hebrew. Both Leon and Rubinov embody the cyclical nature of the Soviet Jewish experience, albeit in reverse. Nevertheless, they end up in the same place, both returning to their Jewish roots, one just before death as a result of



Stalin's antisemitism and the other in the freedom of emigration. Like Wiesel, Potok also invokes the silence of God, who had seemingly turned his back on the Jews, first during the Holocaust and now under this new Amalekite oppression. However, God's silence also marks the story as belonging to the Purim spiel genre, as the Book of Esther is one of only two books in the Tanakh not to mention God. This is further reflected in Leon hearing phantom midnight knocks at his door, which opens on to "a dense blue-black void" (151). By February of 1953, the atmosphere was "thick with fear and silence" (152) and on March 1st, there was no mention in *Pravda* of "doctor-poisoners" for the first time in months. Instead, "Murmurous voices filled the air and" Leon felt his "flesh crawling": "I looked quickly around and saw I was alone" (152). The government's official silence regarding the Doctors' Plot is juxtaposed with voices in the air spreading rumors of Stalin's alleged forthcoming deportation of Soviet Jews. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, "Stalin croaked" (153). Leon recalls, "A great gulf of terror opened before me. Stalin is dead!... Then, slowly, came composure. And a soaring elation. *Stalin was dead!*" (153) He was experiencing the fear and elation of a Purim spiel, where the terror in the beginning stemming from Haman's genocidal plans is followed by the celebration at the end over his death and the Jews' liberation. However, like Kostya in *Fresh Legend*, Rubinov died at the same time as Stalin, before he could be released. Leon recalls,

In the weeks that followed I found that he had entered me and become a permanent dweller in my memory. It was as if memory were a large hotel and he resided in one of its better rooms. He would emerge often and I would see him not as he was in his prison cell but as he had been in Petrograd during the war: a tall, trim man with a kind face... My memories of Doctor Pavel Rubinov would not fade. I see and hear him often to this day (154).

Leon, like the protagonists in Wiesel's novels, has become a vehicle for the voices of the dead, telling their stories and bearing witness in their stead. Like the rumors surrounding the alleged deportation plan, rumors surrounding Stalin's death would eventually become a part of Purim-Stalin. For example, it was rumored that the normally submissive members of the Politburo/Presidium "had strongly and unexpectedly opposed his plan to deport the Jews, and he became so enraged his eyes rolled and he collapsed" (154). Here, they play the role of Esther/Mordecai, rather than Amalekites assisting Haman-Stalin, an ambivalence reflected in later examples of the genre. The Kremlin doctors that could have saved Stalin were in prison, so the remaining second-rate doctors could not save him, an ironic development that will play a role in the humorous examples of the Purim-Stalin genre. Another rumor expressed here is that Beria celebrated upon hearing of Stalin's death: "Our Minister, we were told, did a little dance around his body. "We are free!" he cackled. "The tyrant is dead! Rejoice!" (155) This is the same kind of celebration that characterizes the endings of Purim spiels and will be included in *The Death of Stalin*.

Potok circles back at the end of the story to the theme of silence and its relationship to memory introduced by Wiesel. As Yakov Rapoport, the only survivor of the Doctors' Plot still alive by the time of glasnost, confirmed in his memoir *The Doctors' Plot of 1953*, Leon asserts that the "arrested doctors were ordered to speak to no one about their time with us and were sent home" (156). Rapoport's memoir was only published in the USSR in 1988, thirty-five years after Stalin's death, a period during which "he kept silent, he kept waiting, and he kept remembering."<sup>136</sup> Just as Leon could only reveal his story after emigrating, Rapoport could only

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<sup>136</sup> Felicity Barringer, "Soviet Survivor Relives 'Doctors' Plot'," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, May 13, 1988), <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/05/13/world/soviet-survivor-relives-doctors-plot.html>.

do so during the final years of the USSR, when the authorities finally began to tentatively allow more open discussions about Stalin's crimes. One can argue that it was precisely such open discussions and revelations about the Soviet government's heretofore concealed past that led to its collapse. And while Leon "tells" his story in 1955, this is another case of temporal displacement, as he could only really tell his story, at least one that included such a thorough representation of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan, after Jews were no longer experiencing official discrimination at the hands of the Soviet Government during the last years of the country's existence and, really, only after its collapse.

Like Rapoport, Rubinov was a victim of Stalin's campaign, whereas Leon was one of the dictator's "slavish" Jewish collaborators. At the end of his testimony, Leon apologizes to his victims and says about his apology that

it would not surprise me if it cannot enter the hearts of those who suffered at my hands.

All of the anguish I caused others in my zealous protection of that once splendid dream;

all of the emptying of hope and civilization I inflicted upon those who stood before me...

for all those deeds and a great many more, I uttered, as I stepped into freedom, a Russian

word, "Proschay," which means "Good-bye forever." And also means "Forgive me"

(159).

Leon's journey has come full circle, from practicing Jew to a KGB interrogator to a Jew once again beyond Soviet borders. As a result of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan, he has synthesized the role of Jewish victim and Soviet-Jewish collaborator, as the latter has been subsumed by the former now that Stalin's reign has revealed that Jews could never truly be Soviets. It is my contention that this is also Potok's way of finally resolving the conflict between the USSR's Jewish supporters and detractors abroad, particularly in the US. The conflict, Potok

argues through Leon's testimony, is over, and history has shown Jews, both in the USSR and elsewhere, that those who supported the USSR were on the wrong side of Jewish history.

The next (and final) story in the novel, "The Trope Teacher," is about a military historian writing his memoirs. He recalls as a boy giving his bar mitzvah sermon about "the war waged by Amalek against the fleeing Israelite slaves": "we remember forever the biblical Amalekites who attacked Israelites during the exodus from Egypt" (182). Though Potok does not explicitly mention Purim in "The War Doctor," in relation to Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan or otherwise, we already saw him do so in *The Gates of November*. Here, he follows his representation of Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaign with a discussion of Amalek and how the Jews "remember forever" the Amalekites' attack against the Israelites. As in the Tanakh, Potok links the Exodus and Purim stories through the Amalekites, a rhetorical connection that allows him (and subsequent writers on the subject) to connect the modern exodus of Soviet Jews from the USSR with Stalin's Haman-like attacks on Soviet Jewry. In this story, Potok builds on the by-now established metaphorical link between the Nazis and Bolsheviks as modern Amalekites to implicitly connect the German-Jewish and Soviet-Jewish experiences. Here, the protagonist's father fought against the US during World War I for the Austro-Hungarian Empire at a time when "German Jews considered themselves good Germans; they wanted nothing else; they volunteered for service in the World War, were deeply grateful and proud of their recently given civil rights" (237). Part of the fathers' generation, he fought for America's enemy until his country turned against their Jews, as had been the case with Leon in the previous story. Like Leon, he too left his country for the US once he realized that it was no longer possible to be Jewish in a country that embraced the chauvinist policy of socialism in one country. We see here the first explicit example thus far of the sons' generation taking revenge on behalf of the fathers'

generation against their antisemitic enemies for betraying their fathers' trust in their universalist ideologies. The son, an American that has returned to the Jewish roots of his ancestors after his family emigrated, enacts the vengeance that his father could not by killing a Nazi concentration camp guard during World War II. Before doing so, he tells the guard that his Yiddish is "New York German" and that he is "one of those you were killing!" (263) Subsequently, he has hallucinations where he is "shooting the German guard over and over again" and "killing the other guards": "then I was running through the camp chanting at the top of my lungs the trope to the biblical account about the attack of the Amalekites" (264). Having achieved symbolic revenge by killing one guard, he fantasizes about completing the process by killing all of the other guards while consciously realizing that he is enacting the Jews' eternal vengeance against the Amalekites. He gets the revenge that both Leon and his father could not against their modern Amalekite enemies. Though Potok does not explicitly link this revenge with Purim-Stalin, its rhetorical connection in *Old Men at Midnight* laid the foundation for the inclusion of revenge as the final element of the Purim story that enabled the complete identification between the Purim story and Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan in subsequent post-Soviet novels.

Writing on behalf of Soviet Jews during and after the Soviet era, Potok and Wiesel were writers of Jewish redemption that used literature to return Soviet Jewry to millennia of Jewish history after they fell out of it in the wake of the Russian Revolution. In discussing *Old Men at Midnight*, Potok referenced the Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim, who wrote that in the wake of the Holocaust, the Jew had one of two choices: he could either take the redemptive or non-redemptive step. The redemptive step did not necessarily mean a religious stance, but merely an "ethical stance" that entailed a "commitment to the past" (284). The alternative was "to say that Hitler succeeded, that everyone really died for nothing" (284). This was also the case

for Soviet Jewish survivors of Stalin. Potok and Wiesel modeled a behavior for Soviet Jews in their works that reflected the reality of their slow return to Judaism while simultaneously providing them with the narrative models of Jewish history through which they could retrospectively make sense of their suffering under Stalin and his henchmen. In that sense, the works of this chapter were both inspirational and aspirational, reflecting the authors' hope that Soviet Jews would take the redemptive step of committing to their Jewish past to thwart the Soviet effort to erase Russian Jewish history, thereby giving meaning to the sacrifice of Stalin's Jewish victims. As we will see in the subsequent chapters, the post-Soviet Jewish writers of the sons' generation that returned to Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan in their works were taking precisely this redemptive step, committing to the Jewish past to enact symbolic revenge against the Soviet oppressors of their fathers' generation.

#### Neville Frankel's *On the Sickle's Edge*

Neville D. Frankel was born in South Africa and raised in the United States, but his family originally came from the former USSR. *On the Sickle's Edge* (2016) is a multigenerational chronicle of a fictional Latvian-Jewish family (based on Frankel's own) from the time of the Russian Empire to the post-Soviet era. The novel begins during the last days of the Russian Empire, when a young shtetl Jew named Isaak Shtein is forcibly conscripted into the Imperial Army, leaving behind his wife and children. The recruiter for the Russian army is described as being a shabby looking fellow, despite officially representing the glory of the czar and the empire. Immediately, this description lays the groundwork for the novel as a form of psychological revenge in response to multigenerational Jewish trauma. The recruiter becomes a stand-in for the decay, squalor, and inhumanity of the supposedly glorious empire. Once in the army, Isaak cuts his Russian officer's throat at the first opportunity, while the latter is relieving

himself with his pants around his ankles. In killing his commanding officer, a proxy for the Czar, Isaak now takes physical revenge against his Russian oppressors on behalf of his fellow Jews. What begins as symbolic revenge with the description of the army recruiter's pathetic state quickly manifests into actual violence. This individual act of revenge soon blends in with and becomes indistinguishable from wider Jewish self-defense, as Isaak's fellow Jewish recruits take up arms to defend themselves from antisemitic villagers as they make their way to Odessa soon after.<sup>137</sup> Reunited, Isaak and his family escape to South Africa, just as the empire descends into revolution and collapse. These early acts of retribution/self-defense against the empire foreshadow the Purim-style revenge that Isaak's great-grandchildren will later exact against the czar's Soviet successors during the USSR's own demise. Just as Isaak eliminates an imperial agent that threatens his family's survival, his descendants will kill a KGB agent doing exactly the same in an act of both revenge and self-defense in the name of Jewish continuity. It also sets up the theme of ultimate victory in the face of antisemitic oppression after Jewish revenge is achieved with the punishment of their enemies. In explicitly connecting Russian and Soviet oppression of its Jews to both empires' downfalls, Frankel emphasizes the linked and cyclical nature of antisemitic oppression and imperial collapse, a lesson imparted to Jews for millennia by their annual Purim celebrations.

Isaak's return to his family from the army under the Czar foreshadows similarly miraculous family reunions for Soviet Jews, first after Stalin's death and later with the USSR's demise. This cycle embodies the link between imperial and Soviet experience and memory for post-Soviet Jews, whose liberation in immigration to Israel and the West mirrored that of their

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<sup>137</sup> This is reminiscent of Zev Jabotinsky, the father of Revisionist Zionism, who helped organize Jewish self-defense units in his native Odessa in the wake of the 1903 Kishinev pogrom.

coreligionists from the early years of the twentieth century, with whom they reconnected in returning to the Jewish life forbidden them in the USSR. The immigration of Isaak and his family to South Africa introduces the Exodus theme in the book, a prerequisite for viewing the Soviet Jewish experience as a recurrence of the Purim narrative (as we have seen in other Purim-Stalin texts), while his eventual return with his daughter to the USSR emphasizes the cyclical nature of these narratives in Jewish history. The Tanakh and Purim teaches Jews to fight Amalek in every generation, causing Jews to see Amalek in their lifetime, find him in memories of past trauma, and anticipate his future return. While barely mentioning Stalin's alleged deportation plan, this is nevertheless a Purim-Stalin text, and the novel's narrative components display the genre's intertextual and hermeneutical quality. The description of Jewish families during World War I being branded as German traitors and spies by the Russian government, then being separated and sealed in cattle cars while suffering abuse from Russian soldiers on their way to an unknown destination, implicitly connects this pre-Soviet Jewish experience with that of subsequent generations that endured similar tribulations during the interwar Soviet purges, wartime Nazi extermination, and postwar cultural decimation that culminated with the rumors of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan. Isaak and his family are forcibly resettled along with other Latvian Jews in the east: Moscow. Frankel cannot help but see the past through the lens of subsequent events and vice-versa. His description of these pre-Soviet Jews sleeping in barns like cattle and being transported in cattle cars during a forced population transfer is no doubt influenced by Nazi categorizations of Jews as being subhuman and later Holocaust imagery, with both events inspiring the nature of the rumors surrounding Stalin's Jewish deportation plan. Their helplessness at the hands of their oppressors sets up a dichotomy with Isaak's actions of self-defense and vengeance, which is later recapitulated when his great-grandchildren stand up to



their own Soviet oppressors after decades of cowed submission and become active agents in their own fate, resulting ultimately in their own emigration from the same lands as their great-grandfather. This cyclical nature of Jewish time is further emphasized by the subsequent clandestine meetings in Moscow between local Jews and the newly arrived Jewish refugees, fresh off their cattle cars, which will be echoed in the refusenik meetings with Jewish foreigners in the same place later in the novel, something we have already seen in *The Gates of November*. Finally, these Jewish refugees experience yet another antisemitic pogrom once they are in Moscow, foreshadowing a similar pogrom allegedly planned to coincide with the hanging of the “doctor-poisoners” of the Doctors’ Plot.

Without overtly mentioning Purim, Frankel lays out a Purim narrative that includes many of the themes shared by the Megillah and the other Purim-Stalin texts in this dissertation. One primary example is the concealment of Jewish identity beneath pseudonyms and adoption of the practices of the majority population. Just as Mordecai convinces Hadassah to hide her true Jewish identity by adopting the pseudonym Esther and forsaking halakhic practices for those of the Persian court, Isaak’s second wife, Esther, persuades him to change their family name and adopt Russian cultural practices to appear less Jewish. For the biblical Esther, being Jewish would have meant having certain disadvantages in the Persian court, and concealing her identity “from the king, the eunuchs, and her rivals required extraordinary adroitness,”<sup>138</sup> as it does for Isaak and his family in the new Soviet state. This assimilation is successful for a time, so much indeed that the family is spared being caught up in Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaigns, like the biblical Esther was from Haman’s genocidal plot because of her own successful assimilation. Isaak dies during an “influenza epidemic” in April 1953, a month after Stalin’s death, when all

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<sup>138</sup> T. Witton Davies, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* (New York: H. Frowde, Oxford University Press, 1909), 318.

charges stemming from the Doctors' Plot were dropped. Having abandoned and hid their Jewish roots and legally no longer Jews, the family escaped the antisemitic campaigns that raged around them. However, Isaak's death so soon after the Doctors' Plot, like Kostya's in *Fresh Legend*, shows that Stalin's antisemitism still managed to destroy many Jewish lives not directly murdered during the Black Years of Soviet Jewry. Though the family managed to conceal its Jewish identity almost until the end of the Soviet period, this Jewish erasure neither fully protected them from state violence nor solved the Jewish Question for the government. Isaak's daughter Lena conceals her Jewish identity under the guise of a Russian proletariat, but her Russian husband nevertheless succumbs to Stalin's Great Purge, while her own daughter dies as a result of a workplace accident, a victim of state negligence rather than malice. Lena is left to raise her granddaughter Darya alone, concealing her Jewish identity from her to protect her from post-Stalinist state antisemitism until the girl becomes a woman. Frankel mentions in passing the rumors of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan but does not say whether such a plan truly existed or not, only that many in the Kremlin believed in its existence and that Stalin was a master of such ethnic cleansing. The Doctors' Plot is only mentioned in the novel retrospectively by Darya. In school, Darya is taught that the Doctors' Plot was a real Jewish conspiracy to assassinate high-level Soviet leaders, not something fabricated by the state, and that Jewish patients in hospitals at the time recovered while non-Jewish patients died. "In the...twentieth century Jews were widely perceived as more pernicious when their identity was less obvious - a judgment with which Haman himself would certainly have concurred" (Horowitz 2006, 35). The Doctors' Plot revealed that Jewish identities were never fully disguised beneath their Russian facades, particularly when the state required scapegoats, as even the Shteins were eventually revealed as Jews by the state during the USSR's final crisis after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

As a child in the Young Pioneers, Darya thinks she is Russian and therefore a good person, being proud of what she believes is her pure Russian peasant blood. A product of the Russification propaganda underpinning the Stalinist doctrine of socialism in one country, Darya sees Russians as the chosen race. Lena only reveals to Darya that she is Jewish after she gets her first period and thus enters adulthood. Despite herself earlier abandoning Judaism, Lena clandestinely returns to her religious roots by dunking Darya in the water of a public bathhouse after her first period in a simulation of a ritual mikvah cleansing. Darya now understands that, as a Jew, she won't be able to be a part of the so-called "People's State." She sees that Jews are reviled and not admitted to the best professions and schools. She even contemplates killing her grandmother to ensure that her Jewish identity remains a secret, quickly understanding that lying about being Jewish is a necessary form of survival. As Darya's curiosity in Judaism increases, her faith in the Soviet system wanes in proportion. As secret Jews, like the biblical Esther, the story's female protagonists will only reveal themselves as such at novel's end in order to vanquish their Soviet Amalekite enemy. One of the family heirlooms, passed down by Isaak, is a Jewish shabbat kit, which Lena keeps hidden inside a matryoshka. A prewar Jewish artefact hidden inside a kitschy Soviet-era Russian souvenir, it becomes a synecdoche for Soviet Jewish identity. Accordingly, Lena and Darya do not know what the object signifies, only discovering its religious significance abroad after taking it to a rabbi in Italy, the first time either of them has ever been to a synagogue. Only beyond the USSR's physical and temporal borders can Soviet Jews make meaning of their Soviet existence, via a Jewish lens. Like the shabbat kit, they too ultimately reveal and come to understand the Jewish identity that has been hiding beneath their Russian exterior.

Following the tradition introduced by Grossman and thoroughly established by the time of the novel's publication, Frankel explores the shared antisemitic underpinnings of Nazism and Stalinism that make them both Amalekite ideologies when filtered through a Jewish lens. He emphasizes that the gas vans used by the Soviet regime against those it deemed enemies of the people during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s were later adopted by the Nazis, with the interwar Soviet ethnic cleansings being precursors to and inspirations for the Holocaust, of which Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns were a logical extension. Before his death during the Great Purge, Lena's husband tells her that Stalin concealed his crimes and that eventually they would come out, which would necessitate the history of the period to be rewritten after several generations. While that history has now largely been rewritten, the concealment and rewriting of the events surrounding Stalin's death and the Doctors' Plot continues. Though Stalin dies, Lena and Darya continue to live under the rule of his Amalekite henchmen and successors. This is personified by Grigory, Darya's Russian husband, who later reveals himself to be an undercover KGB agent and the story's Haman figure threatening to destroy Darya's family. Not yet knowing Darya's Jewish identity, Grigory uses her to spy on dissidents. For Frankel, Dasha's Judaism becomes synonymous with her association with the dissident movement and western Jews like her American cousin Steven, who meets her after traveling to the USSR to find the relatives he suddenly discovers after reconnecting with his own familial and religious heritage. Dasha's cousin Kolya sees the dissidents as being akin to the communists who overthrew the Czar, initiating another cycle of self-defense in response to Russian state antisemitism. Grigory, a sexual predator and homicidal sadist that murdered his own stepfather, seduces Kolya just as he did Dasha. A bisexual pedophile, Grigory's sexual coercion of the two cousins is as metaphor for the forced cooption of Soviet Jews into the Bolshevik system. His ultimate failure to do so as a

result of Dasha and Steven's violent revenge for his vicious deeds represents the failure of Haman-Stalin's alleged genocidal plan to solve the Soviet Jewish question by deporting all of his empire's men, women, and children to the frozen east.

In the Megillah, "Esther is conscious of the battle of wits between herself and Haman" (Carruthers 2008, 216). Esther was an orphan who pleased Hegai, a servant of the king, who helped advance her to the best position in Ahasuerus's court. Likewise, Darya is an orphan raised by her grandmother who catches the eye of a government agent, who uses his official power to greatly improve her life. Darya too engages in an increasingly dangerous game of deception and espionage against Grigory, whose death at Steven's hands coincides with the downfall of the USSR. This act becomes one of revenge on behalf of all Soviet Jewry against their Soviet oppressors, with Steven playing the part of Mordecai to Grigory's Haman. Like Stalin in other Purim-Stalin texts, Grigory is at once Ahasuerus and Haman, the ruler that promises to improve the life of his Jews and the murderer that subsequently tries to kill them. As with the other works in this chapter, the familial ties between Steven and Lena are here used ironically by Frankel to make real Stalin's unfounded accusations about a global Jewish conspiracy undermining the USSR. Soviet propaganda claimed that Soviet Jews, as inherently "rootless cosmopolitans," were working with Americans to overthrow the USSR, which is here literalized into an actual plot against a KGB officer involving a Soviet Jew and her distant Jewish American Jewish relative, who is working with American intelligence services. After killing Grigory, Dasha becomes Steven's wife. This consequent love affair between Steven and Dasha reflects both the ambiguous relationship between Mordecai and Esther in the Megillah (according to later Jewish commentaries) and the final morphological element in Propp's schema of the folktale. After

Grigory-Haman is punished, the hero Steven-Mordecai marries the princess, Darya-Esther, to bring the tale to its conclusion.

The novel's narrative arc follows the Shteins from being open but oppressed Jews in the Russian Empire to hiding their Jewish identity in the USSR and finally proudly displaying it in America. At a dissident meeting in the USSR, the speakers have to rely on their memory and hearsay to speak of Stalin's crimes because they don't yet have access to the past. Frankel describes the posthumous rehabilitations of the victims of Stalin's purges as the Soviet state recognizing itself as a murderous thug. This thug must be punished before the Jews can return to the Judaism of their forebears. The sons' generation teaches the fathers' generation about the Jewish traditions of the grandparents' generation, as Darya does with Lena (as her surrogate parent) vis-a-vis Isaak's shabbat kit. Darya must first leave the dead lands of the USSR for the land of the living in the West to rediscover her Judaism and fully understand her own history for the first time. The Italian Rabbi who helps Darya discover her roots does so for many other Soviet Jewish refugees on their way to Israel or the West with similar questions about their heritage. Frankel recognizes that the act of retelling this story of his Soviet Jewish family heritage helps to process unprocessed memories, such as those stemming from the doubt and uncertainty surrounding Stalin's alleged deportation plan. Fiction thus becomes a form of mourning, releasing oneself from the burden of the past, with its unprocessed grief, by recognizing it as part of the larger cycle of Jewish history. It is also a way to honor those who cannot tell their stories because they are gone, as Frankel, like Wiesel before him, recognizes that storytelling is a form of remembering, bearing witness, and speaking for the dead. *On the Sickle's Edge* is a story of the survivors of Stalin's antisemitic terror. But this retelling can only happen after the USSR's collapse as a punishment for the Soviets' Amalekite oppression of its

Jews, who only then are finally and fully liberated. Isaak's shabbat kit can only be fully restored after Darya discovers that Steven had its final missing piece in America. Though she wants to discard the kit to free herself from the past, Steven recognizes that it symbolizes their heritage, which is the key to understanding their identity as post-Soviet Jews.

### Paul Goldberg's *The Yid*

Paul Goldberg was born in the USSR six years after Stalin's death and immigrated to the United States with his family in 1973 when he was fourteen. *The Yid*, his first novel, came out in 2016. It presents a fictionalized account of Stalin's alleged plan to deport Soviet Jews to the eastern USSR on the eve of his death at the height of the Doctors' Plot. The novel follows a ragtag group of Soviet Jews, one African American, and a young woman orphaned by Stalin's purges as they try to thwart Stalin's attempt to put the deportation plan into action. The group is led by Solomon Shimonovich Levinson, the Mordecai of this Purim spiel, a former actor in the Moscow State Jewish Theatre (GOSET) that was closed after the war on Stalin's orders and Commander in the Red Army during the Civil War before that. He is joined by fellow Jews Kogan, one of Moscow's finest surgeons and a former machine-gunner in Levinson's Red Army unit, and Rabinovich, a pharmacist, former member of the Bund (the Jewish Socialist Party quickly outlawed by the Bolsheviks after the formation of the USSR), and Red Army veteran of the Civil War. These two characters directly link the story to the Doctors' Plot, while Rabinovich as a former Bundist serves as a chain connecting the USSR's early attack on Soviet Jewish sovereignty to Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns. Joining them is Friederich Lewis, an African American engineer who feels solidarity "with the Jewish working masses" and learned Yiddish to be able to say "*fuck you* to both Jim Crow and the Black Hundreds" (36), the pre-Soviet antisemitic nationalist organization. Lewis embodies the uniquely multicultural nature of

Purim-Stalin and the antifascism that united Soviet-era Jews and blacks in what many of them perceived as the common threat of anti-black racism and antisemitism. Lewis came to the USSR to escape American racism because, like many Jews, he saw communism as its antidote, only to be disillusioned by Stalin's various population transfers and ethnic cleansings.<sup>139</sup> In making Lewis an honorary Jewish warrior fighting Stalin, Goldberg reminds the reader of the internationalism that Stalin's policy of "socialism in one country" targeted with its campaign against "rootless cosmopolitans," which primarily affected Jews but attacked other internationalists (e.g. Veselovskiyists) as well. The last member to join these resistance fighters is Kima Petrova, a young woman bent on vengeance for Stalin's crimes against her family. Transformed from an orphan into a queen of this band of assassins, she takes on the role of Queen Esther for a day in this deadly Purim spiel performance.

From their inception, Purim spielers paraded from house to house and through the streets of their communities, performing songs and theatrical skits in private homes and public streets that often emphasized revenge against Haman, "in view of the fact that Hamans were never lacking in Jewish life in every generation"; one such song even called for celebrating Purim every day in light of these every-present Hamans (Binder 1949, 218). Purim spiels thus enacted "the mythic content of the Purim ritual of abusing Haman" (Belkin 2009, 22). In some accounts, the spielers were encouraged not to stay too long in any one place and move along as quickly as possible, almost like they were committing a crime and had to flee the scene as quickly as possible in order to avoid capture, like the resistance fighters in *The Yid*, who leave a trail of dead bodies in their wake while trying to outmaneuver Soviet security forces and antisemitic thugs. In these domestic performances, the actors turned everyday household objects into the

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<sup>139</sup> Lewis is specifically meant to invoke Paul Robeson.



props and weapons of the Purim spiel, encouraging their Jewish spectators to join in the performance while using their own household objects as tools of imaginary resistance. Rooms in the house were transformed into the different locations of the ancient stories enacted there, breaking down the separation of time and space between the Jewish past and present. This “fluidity between pretense and life, acting and non-acting” (Belkin 2009, 22) encouraged spectators to see the line between those dichotomies as eminently permeable. Since the actors were community members, spectators saw their friends and neighbors engaging in mythical, heroic acts from ancient Jewish history. As these “two worlds, the real and the artistic, merged” (Belkin 2009, 23), with the actors and spectators gradually dissolving into one body throughout the performance and coming together completely after its conclusion, communal solidarity was reinforced by this shared act and experience of mythical vengeance against a former but eternal enemy. Purim spiels thus created “a blurred space that brought the spectators into the dramatic process, merging the festival ritual and theatrical ritual into a single holiday catharsis” (Belkin 2009, 24).

As late as the 1920’s, hundreds of these troupes, usually consisting of five to twelve members, went from house to house performing Purim spiels throughout central Europe and even parts of the western Soviet Union. The rebel band in *The Yid* can be seen as a variant of such a troupe, going to the Kremlin to enact the ultimate Purim spiel revenge on Stalin-Haman. Such troupes only performed around the time of Purim, accounting in symbolic terms for why Levinson’s troupe would be performing their lethal Purim spiel at precisely this time. The authors and performers of the spiels performed through the centuries were often anonymous amateurs, like the novel’s motley troupe of the nonprofessional Jewish actors who bring the Purim story to life under the leadership of Levinson, the performance’s author, director and

leading man. In one sense, because they are not allowed to “play” the annual Purim spiel as a result of the regime’s ban on Jewish culture, Levinson’s troupe resort to acting it out in deadly earnest. This speaks to the theory mentioned earlier that the carnivalesque humor embodied in Purim celebrations like the spiel serves as a social safety valve that allows for the safe release of sociopolitical tensions. *The Yid* is an example of the opposing results stemming from the existence of such a safety valve versus its foreclosure. In the novel’s Soviet setting, foreclosure erupts in violence, which, though fictional, reflects the anti-government sentiments that eventually toppled the regime; in the US, where the safety valve is encouraged, the holiday’s potentially disruptive energy is channeled into fiction and staged (rather than literal) acts of political revenge. In order “to understand how [the Book of] Esther has been meaningful, it is necessary to divorce meaning from a cold abstraction and instead to recognize the dynamic process of the performativity of the text” (Carruthers 2008, 4). Ahusueruspiels, as stagings of the Purim story, are about resisting state power and oppression from below. In their earliest iterations, Purim spiels came into existence at least in part as expressions of resentment against local Jewish clerical elite, be it in the form of Yeshiva students mocking their teachers or folk artists carving out culture power for themselves in the community in opposition to their rabbis through the artistic autonomy provided by the opportunity to perform the spiel in public. It is no coincidence that rabbis often discouraged the performance of these spiels and long held out against the creation of Jewish theater in general. Likewise, some of these communities’ non-Jewish neighbors and overlords forbade public Purim celebrations because they (rightly or wrongly) perceived them to be directed at least in part against themselves, not simply the Jews’ ancient enemies. Ahusueruspiels in particular thus have a built-in dynamic of illuminating and

addressing sociopolitical inequality, employed by authors like Goldberg for centuries to make sense of personal and communal oppression.

Goldberg divides the novel into three “Acts,” with much of the dialogue written as it would be in a play rather than a novel. The protagonists are described in theatrical terms throughout, as *actors* in an *ensemble* bringing a *plot* to life that will culminate in a *finale* involving Stalin’s murder. Levinson is literally an actor, from the state Jewish theater no less, who has performed in countless productions of plays dramatizing Jewish resistance, mostly notably GOSET’s 1938 production of *Bar-Kokhba* about the eponymous leader’s revolt against the Roman Empire. As mentioned earlier, Purim spiels dramatized many stories from the Tanakh as well as Jewish history, including the Bar-Kokhba rebellion.<sup>140</sup> The protagonists of *The Yid* are painted as a troupe of disguised amateurs led by a professional actor through the homes and streets of Moscow and its suburbs while enacting a tale of Jewish vengeance modeled on stories from the Purim spiel repertoire. Furthermore, as Goldberg himself noted,

The production of *Kinig Lir*, the story of a king gone mad, is the historical backdrop of *The Yid*: the story of a king making a deadly error was playing out against the backdrop of the Moscow Trials, with their theatrical accusations, scripted confessions and, of course, executions. (Argument can also be made that Lear is a Jewish story. Who is Lear but a royal Tevye, an old fool with strong-willed daughters?)<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Oksana Sikorska, “Gimpel’s Theatre in Lviv: Its Role in the Jewish Community’s Life and Its Place in the City’s Cultural Space,” Lviv Interactive (Center for Urban History of East Central Europe, May 22, 2014), [https://lia.lvivcenter.org/en/themes/?ci\\_themeid=86](https://lia.lvivcenter.org/en/themes/?ci_themeid=86).

<sup>141</sup> Paul Goldberg, “Lear’s Warning,” Jewish Book Council, February 12, 2019, <https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/pb-daily/lears-warning>.

Like Purim spiels and celebrations for millennia, Shakespeare's plays in their own time were seen as potentially seditious. *Richard II* was performed at the request of the supporters of the Earl of Essex on the eve of a planned rebellion against Queen Elizabeth in the hopes that "it would convince the public of the righteousness of their cause and bring events 'from the stage to the state'."<sup>142</sup> A Soviet-American Jew, Goldberg sees Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan as not only a modern-Purim spiel, but one that brought the rebellion in *Kinig Lir*, itself a Jewish retelling of an English tale, from the GOSET stage to the Bolshevik state. This multicultural synthesis speaks to the theory of historical poetics outlined earlier, which argues that crises cause people and artists to filter their new experiences through old forms to make sense of their trauma. Jews, having witnessed and acted out the murder of a genocidal tyrant for millennia through their Purim celebrations and spiels, were quick to realize that Stalin's death at the height of the Doctors' Plot amid rumors of mass Jewish deportation was a recurrence of that ancient story in a new setting. Unable to represent the events themselves under Stalin's heirs, they had to wait until emigration and political liberation to give form to stories whispered behind closed doors for decades. The result was Purim-Stalin texts like *The Yid*, where new-old Soviet Jewish warrior-actors enact a Purim spiel and thereby provide an outlet for the revenge fantasy that had been simmering for at least a generation of continued Soviet oppression. Moreover, Goldberg, like Rashin and other previous Purim-Stalin writers, suspects that Stalin and his henchmen understood the inherently theatrical nature of their elaborate production of the events surrounding the Doctors' Plot. Stalin was an avid theatergoer and an expert at stage managing the various purges and population transfer that characterized his reign. Viewing these actions

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<sup>142</sup> Ellen Castelow, "Shakespeare, His Play *Richard II* and Rebellion," Historic UK, accessed April 26, 2021, <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Shakespeare-Richard-II-Rebellion/>.

through the lens of Purim, these Purim-Stalin texts cannot help but see similarities between Stalin's failure to carry out his final political staging, an ethnic cleansing of the Soviet Jews, and Haman's inability to do the same to the Persian Jews. Noting this failure, Goldberg explains it through recourse to Purim, attributing it to the revenge of Soviet Jews, who acted in self-defense to turn the tables on Stalin by meting out the punishment he had intended for them.

This role-reversal is crucial to both the Purim narrative and the festival spirit it embodies. The novel's title itself expresses this carnivalesque sense of reversing high and low. *Yid*, or *жид* (*zhid*) in Russian, was a pejorative for "Jew" in the Soviet era, as it continues to be now. Giving this novel about Soviet Jewish trauma this pejorative title immediately takes the reader into what Bakhtin called the festive laughter that "is at once both mocking, cursing, and shaming laughter (shaming death as it departs, winter, the old year) and joyful, exuberant, and welcoming (rebirth, spring, fresh vegetation, the new year)." Goldberg thus links this festive laughter with "the material-corporeal generative principle (profanity)" to simultaneously represent the former lower status of the novel's Soviet Jews and reclaim this pejorative term as one of power symbolizing a once subjugated people's ascendance to a position where they can now use it with pride when referring to themselves. One critic noted that, "If you are inclined to be charitable, you will take "The Yid" for the frolic it wants to be, and not worry too much about how something can be horrific and hilarious at the same time."<sup>143</sup> A survivor of the Doctors' Plot similarly objected to Goldberg "writing a comedy about tragic events."<sup>144</sup> But Purim spiels and the holiday's other rowdy traditions have shown us precisely this for centuries, that laughter is mandatory in the face

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<sup>143</sup> Zachary Lazar, "'The Yid,' by Paul Goldberg," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, February 19, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/21/books/review/the-yid-by-paul-goldberg.html>.

<sup>144</sup> Paul Goldberg, "We Don't Get to Choose Our Material," *Jewish Book Council*, February 12, 2019, <https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/pb-daily/we-dont-get-to-choose-our-material>.

of horror, at least when it has been overcome. This mix of horror and hilarity is especially visible in the genre's vaudevillian Purim spiel dialogues, like the kind we saw earlier in *The Red Monarch* between Stalin and Beria. Having just killed several antisemitic government agents and street thugs, Levinson tells Kogan a joke: "Two Jews meet at the *kolkhoz* market. 'Have you heard, Levinson and Kogan have formed an underground counterrevolutionary *organizatsiye*...' 'You don't say!'" Here, the joke's setup seamlessly transitions into a theatrical dialogue between the novel's protagonists:

KIMA: How does your joke end?

LEVINSON: I don't know yet.

LEWIS: It may not be a joke.

KIMA: What can I do to make it real?...

LEVINSON: ... I need red cloth.

LEWIS: What for? Don't tell me there are costumes. (222)

Goldberg's characters self-consciously reflect on being in a Purim spiel, whose deadly serious humor is made real by their actualization of its jokes. Like Purim spiels before them, Soviet anecdotes expressed Jewish resistance to state oppression through a dark humor that reflected both their bleak surroundings and an underlying hope of future salvation. Here, the anecdote's seamless transition into a Purim spiel scene reflects how the latter dissolves reality and playacting, so that what begins as a joke about Jewish resistance instantly transforms into its actualization via theatricalization, costumes and all. Goldberg understands that Yiddish plays like *Bar-Kokhba* and underground jokes like this captured Soviet Jewry's Purim-inspired hope of overthrowing their oppressors by becoming the warriors they pretended to be in such generic successors to the Purim spiel. It is telling that a description of bloody Jewish revenge

immediately follows this Purim spiel dialogue: “In the shed, Klima puts Tarzan’s shattered head inside a noose.” Having put themselves directly into a Purim spiel, they are already hanging Haman-Stalin’s vanquished henchmen (i.e. Tarzan and Kent, two antisemitic thugs that had just tried to kill some Jewish bystanders to acquire their mythical riches), even though Stalin is still alive. Later, Kogan tells Levinson that they kill for laughs, a tacit acknowledgment that they are in a Purim spiel, killing their enemies for the laughter of their audience to both entertain them and give them the satisfaction of seeing Jewish vengeance carried out.

Describing an Ahusueruspiel staged in a children’s theater in Leningrad in the 1920s, Beregovsky noted that the actor playing Haman was very tall and the one playing Mordecai significantly smaller, which reminded him of the Goliath-spiel variant of the Purim spiel. Commander Osip Abramovich Levinson, the Jewish protagonist of Aleksandr Fadeyev’s 1927 novel *The Rout (Pazpom)*, is described as being notably smaller than the Red Army soldiers he leads as their commander during the Civil War. While Beregovsky explicitly notes the David v. Goliath intertextuality in the Ahusueruspiel, such intertextuality for Fadeyev, an ethnic Russian and Red Army veteran of the Civil War, is likely subconscious. The real life Jewish Red Army commander Joseph Maksimovich Pevzner at least partially inspired Fadeyev’s depiction of Levinson, who is a model for both the heroic Jewish warriors of early Soviet fiction and the later Purim-Stalin revenge novels. Levinson’s troops are a multinational unit reflecting the internationalism of the early CPSU,<sup>145</sup> but the novel also captures the USSR’s ambivalent attitude toward Jews even at this stage. Levinson’s Russian orderly, Morozka, thinks that “All Jews are scoundrels!” (3), while a Russian peasant calls him “A righteous man, the Yid!” (63).

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<sup>145</sup> It is worth noting that the Jewish Yakov Sverdlov was the chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Bolshevik Party from 1917 to 1919 and thus can be regarded as the Soviet Union’s first head of state.

This ambivalence runs through the novel, as his troops alternately blame Levinson for their failures and praise him for their successes throughout. He is a convenient scapegoat when one is required. Levinson appears to be a successfully assimilated Soviet Jew, being both the smartest man in his partisan band and their respected leader, who tells obscene stories with the best of them. He is also described as being the only one still able to laugh at their time of greatest danger. Yet, for all that, they still see him as “the Yid.” Levinson became a communist warrior in conscious rebuke of his father, a petty bourgeois secondhand furniture salesman of whom he is ashamed. In the generational schema outlined earlier, Levinson’s father belongs to the grandfathers’ generation of religious pre-Soviet Jews, while he belongs to the fathers’ generation of communist warriors that joined the Bolsheviks to fight Russian antisemitism before their “cosmopolitan internationalism” was betrayed by Stalin’s Russophilic policy of “socialism in one country.” Accordingly, Levinson “had crushed in himself everything that he had inherited from past generations brought up” on Judaism’s “lying tales” (207). Levinson’s children, waiting for him at home, will experience this betrayal and likely become anti-Soviet dissidents, whose own children will belong to the generation of post-Soviet Jews that would recognize Purim-Stalin. A product of the first decade of “romantic revolutionary” communism, Levinson is the new Soviet man whose ideals and upright behavior still make room for the doubts that will soon be eradicated by the official mandates of Socialist Realism. There is a leniency in him that would be denounced in Stalinist fiction, reflecting the same kind of humanism that made Pasternak’s and Grossman’s later works unpublishable in the USSR.

Goldberg acknowledged that he modeled his Levinson on Fadeyev’s, making *The Yid* a kind of unofficial, post-Soviet sequel to *The Rout*. Goldberg’s protagonist, Solomon Levinson, is



an actor once employed at the Moscow State Jewish Theater. Friends call Levinson *der komandir*, the commander. As a young man in 1918 he led a band of Red partisans who fought against the White Guard and the Czech legionnaires and the United States Marines alongside the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Levinson became a formidable swordsman in the civil war. His mastery of smallswords and stagecraft make him deadlier still.<sup>146</sup>

Goldberg synthesized Fadeyev's romantic communist revolutionary with post-Stalin dissident refuseniks to make Levinson an amalgamation of pre-Soviet and Soviet identities that characterize many post-Soviet Jews: militant, cosmopolitan, and proud of their Jewish identities. At the end of *The Rout*, Levinson just barely leads his communist warriors out of an ambush planned for them by white Cossacks, though much of his unit is decimated. In *The Yid*, Levinson leads his band of Jewish former red army soldiers and their multiethnic allies out of a rout planned for Soviet Jews by the CPSU. The Soviets have taken the place of the white Cossacks in the perpetual cycle of Jewish suffering, survival and victory. Fadeyev's troops survive a Cossack rout only for their Bolshevik cause to win later, as his readers would have known, just as Goldberg's Jews survive Stalin's final postwar antisemitic campaign to achieve total liberation with the USSR's collapse decades later, as his readers would recognize. Beregovsky noted the carnivalesque nature of Haman's hanging in the 1920's Ahusueruspiel he witnessed in Leningrad, the climax of the Book of Esther and the Purim holiday that emphasizes the Jewish revenge and cosmic justice at the heart of the story. Though Fadeyev's Levinson does not see his enemies punished at the end of *The Rout*, since their antisemitism will soon be replaced by the Soviets', Goldberg's Levinson himself punishes Stalin, retrospectively enacting the revenge desired by Soviet Jews against their Bolshevik oppressors for at least half a century.

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<sup>146</sup> Paul Goldberg, "Lear's Warning."

Like other Purim-Stalin works, this novel places Stalin's alleged deportation plan in the broader context of millennia of Jewish history. In addition to its implicit comparison to Purim, Goldberg explicitly compares his protagonists' plan of Jewish revenge/self-defense to the second century Bar Kokhba revolt against the Roman Empire. The novel's epigraph quotes the eponymous hero from GOSSET's 1938 production of *Bar-Kokhba*, "a thinly veiled Zionist extravaganza about strong Jews" (25): "A slave who wields a dagger is not a slave!" Opening with this bold call to arms in the name of Jewish self-defense, Goldberg references a Soviet Yiddish play staged in response to a contemporaneous Nazi threat, implied to be that generation's Amalek, to refer to Stalin's replacement of Hitler as Soviet Jewry's new Amalek merely a decade later. In a post-Soviet context reflecting the identification of former Soviet Jews with the military success of Israel, where many of them now reside, Goldberg paints his proto-refuseniks as Jewish warriors that take charge of their fate, as Mordecai and Bar Kokhba did before them. This image of the old-new Jewish warrior was bolstered in particular by Israel's success in its War of Independence and 1967 Six-Day War against the USSR's Arab allies, who fought alongside Soviet soldiers in a series of wars of extermination against Israel.<sup>147</sup> The novel's Jewish warriors also mirror and build upon the Jewish revolutionaries, soldiers, gangsters and commissars of early Soviet history and fiction (e.g. Trotsky, Levinson in *The Rout*, and the Jewish soldiers and gangsters of Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry* and *Odessa Tales*, respectively). Like other Purim-Stalin works, *The Yid* also reflects the sense of betrayal felt by Soviet Jews regarding the Bolshevik revolution, since many of them directly helped overthrow the Russian Empire and build communism, only for the revolution to turn on and try to eliminate them in

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<sup>147</sup> See Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *The Soviet-Israeli War 1967-1973: the USSR's Military Intervention in the Egyptian-Israeli Conflict* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2017).

turn. Goldberg transforms this helplessness of Soviet Jews in the face of Stalin's antisemitic campaigns into righteous revenge by placing their trauma into a Purim narrative, as Jews have done for centuries through inserting their personal experiences into "great" Jewish time. Goldberg asserts that Stalin "was preparing to solve Russia's Jewish Question definitively" with his own "holocaust" the morning he collapsed on 1 March 1953 before dying on March 5th, the day "his pogrom was scheduled to begin" (1). His Stalin sees the deportation plan as being the biggest pogrom of all time, a hundred times worse than Kristallnacht. For Goldberg and other post-Soviet Jews returning to cyclical Jewish time after the USSR's collapse, the alleged plan has become another iteration of the recurrent antisemitic violence prophesied by God's commandment to remember Amalek, as personified in the Purim story and its annual commemoration.

However, this is a righteous revenge aimed only at the Soviet Jews' tormentors, in contrast with the materialism underlying the antisemitic violence of Soviet oppressors in the revenge novels. In *The Yid*, Stalinist antisemitic thugs like Kent and Tarzan, who think "that Jews sit on sacks of money and use diamonds in secret prayer rituals" (94), use the state's attack on Soviet Jewry to pursue their own enrichment by murdering innocent Jews to take their supposed secret wealth. The Megillah expressly notes "the limits the Jews place on their attack" against their enemies, "commending them for not taking plunder" (Carruthers 2008, 261). Goldberg's "team of Yiddish-speaking jokester-superheroes...make it their mission to avenge countless acts of anti-Semitism, both real and anticipated,"<sup>148</sup> by modeling themselves on

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<sup>148</sup> Janet Maslin, "Review: 'The Yid,' Paul Goldberg's First Novel, Taunts Stalin," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, January 20, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/books/review-the-yid-paul-goldbergs-first-novel-taunts-stalin.html>.

Mordecai, Esther, and other Purim spiel heroes in fulfillment of God's holy commandment to fight Amalek in every generation. Lieutenant Sadykov, the NKVD officer charged with arresting Levinson in the novel's opening chapter, expects him to be the "clichéd Jew that Russian propaganda has made so familiar,"<sup>149</sup> a helpless old man from the "Tashkent front."

Most fiction and nonfiction accounts of Stalin-era arrests go like this: The secret police come in the night and take the accused away in a Black Maria, to never be seen again.

The neighbors sit by quietly, pretending not to have heard a thing. Mr. Goldberg amends this with a very American sensibility, replacing fear and submission with Tarantino-esque swagger.<sup>150</sup>

Sadykov, to his surprise, finds in Levinson a retired soldier that easily kills him and his fellow NKVD officers. This "American sensibility" also reflects the old-new Jewish warriors of Purim-Stalin that synthesize the martial prowess of their models in the Tanakh, Red Army, IDF and JDL. Goldberg's grandfather, Moisey Semyonovich Rabinovich, fought in the Civil War, a Soviet Jewish warrior of the grandfathers' generation like the novel's male Jewish protagonists. Goldberg recounts how, for his entertainment, "he made up stories of fighting Nazis in the woods of Belarus and marching to Berlin, even blasting through the walls of Hitler's bunker. These tales were all fictional, but all these years later I remember them better than his true stories."<sup>151</sup> *The Yid* similarly "allows for the possibility of resistance instead of resignation in the face of tyranny."<sup>152</sup> If one imagines Stalin's deportation plot as a kind of Purim spiel, then it

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Anya Ulinich, "Getting Even With Stalin," *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, February 12, 2016), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/getting-even-with-stalin-1455311474>.

<sup>151</sup> Paul Goldberg, "We Don't Get to Choose Our Material."

<sup>152</sup> Anya Ulinich, "Getting Even With Stalin."

must conclude with revenge against Haman and his Amalekite henchmen and Jewish liberation. While Goldberg never explicitly references Purim in the novel, the story's reworking of real-life Jewish survival in the face of possible annihilation into one of Jews heroically triumphing over their enemies marks the full transition in Soviet Jewish consciousness of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan into their own special Purim.

### Purim-Stalin Revenge Without Jews: *The Death of Stalin*

*The Death of Stalin*, a 2012 French graphic novel adapted into a 2017 British film, is a non-Jewish representation of the days surrounding Stalin's death that internalized previous Purim spiel treatments of the subject without explicitly linking his death to Purim itself, thereby precluding the possibility of depicting the alleged Jewish deportation plan. With the historical record still ambiguous, Purim-Stalin's post-Soviet creators often filled in the blanks with dark, ribald, carnivalesque humor reminiscent of Purim spiels as a way of coping with the horror of the undisputed facts of Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns. *The Death of Stalin*, both the graphic novel (2012) and its film adaptation (2017), hews closely to the established timeline of Stalin's final days while taking some chronological liberties. However, nothing is invented - events are merely condensed and rearranged to fit the story's compressed narrative, which, like *Khrustalyov, My Car!* and *The Yid*, take place over the few days surrounding Stalin's death.<sup>153</sup> Despite this overall fidelity to the historical record, the film was banned in Russia and several

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<sup>153</sup> For example, Maria Yudina, the piano player in the opening scene who later reappears at Stalin's funeral, wrote her note to Stalin in either 1944 or 1948, according to different accounts of the story, but certainly not in 1953, as she does here. Beria is executed immediately after Stalin's funeral in the story, where in reality his arrest and execution occurred several months later.

other post-Soviet countries, where it was described as a “western plot to destabilise Russia,”<sup>154</sup> language eerily similar to that used by contemporaneous Soviet newspapers to describe the fabricated Doctors’ Plot. The film makes no distinction between Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaigns and his other purges, entirely subsuming the former within the latter. An early scene shows Stalin and Beria discussing whom to arrest as part of the latest round in what the introductory sequence calls the dictator’s “Great Terror.” However, as with *Khrustalyov, My Car!*, there are subtle references throughout to the specifically Jewish nature of this round of persecutions. The list of victims discussed by Stalin and Beria starts with the author “Shteyman” and his wife, an obviously Jewish name that serves to hint at the antisemitic nature of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign. This scene’s witty banter at the expense of the duo’s innocent victims establishes the film’s comedy of terror seen in other Purim-Stalin works. It continues *The Red Monarch*’s vaudevillian humor, an outgrowth of Purim spiels and subsequent Yiddish theater, whose mix of lowbrow hijinks and highbrow wordplay is mirrored in the film’s various comedy duos. Khrushchev refers to Beria and Malenkov as “Abbot and Costello” and calls Bulganin and Mikoyan “two clowns” with one joke between them. Beria calls Malenkov’s girdle a “corset,” a nod to the kind of cross-gender, transvestite humor popular in early, male-dominated Purim spiels. Beria and Zhukov play their own cruel pranks later on, jokingly threatening people with arrest and death after the film’s Purim-like reversal of fortune sees Haman-Stalin and his henchman Beria replaced by Khrushchev’s “Thaw” regime.

Just as Ahasuerus and Haman drank and feasted together after the king signed his viceroy’s antisemitic edict, Stalin and his Central Committee celebrate this latest purge by

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<sup>154</sup> Marc Bennetts, “Russia Considers Ban on Armando Iannucci’s Film *The Death of Stalin*,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, September 20, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/20/russia-considers-ban-armando-iannucci-film-death-of-stalin>.

gathering for a night of drunken feasting and entertainment at his dacha. This gormandizing and merriment, replete with many jokes about death and the purges themselves, takes place in the warm luxury of the tyrant's palace, which is juxtaposed with the cold winter night beyond the dacha's walls. After the Central Committee leaves and Stalin suffers a stroke, the cold streets of wintry, urban Moscow are juxtaposed with Stalin's rural dacha, where there is no sign of winter and everything is blooming as if it was already spring. Like medieval representations of Lent as a gaunt, wintry figure and carnival as a robust embodiment of spring, this juxtaposition highlights Stalin's death as a transitional moment between the seasons in both literal and symbolic terms. The dacha, whose occupants are the first to know of Stalin's death, are the first to experience the first thaw of spring, while the rest of the country still believe they are in the middle of the winter of Stalin's discontent. However, this is soon revealed to be a false spring, as the workers at Stalin's dacha are immediately murdered by Beria's NKVD<sup>155</sup> after the dictator's death. This includes his many lookalikes in what may be a possible nod to Gelovani (the actor who played Stalin on stage and screen) in *The Red Monarch*. During Stalin's funeral, the NKVD kills many more civilians when they try to pay their respects to their dead leader, as Stalin continues to kill the innocent even after his death. This continuity between the bloodshed of the Stalin regime and his successors is emphasized when Malenkov, the new acting General Secretary, tries to recreate a famous photo of Stalin with a little girl as propaganda to support his legitimacy. However, the little girl is judged to be too old now, so a replacement is found instead to be her ersatz doppelganger, emphasizing the Thaw as an ambivalent time of simultaneous change and continuity from the previous regime. Khrushchev refers to Malenkov as the "snow king" to

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<sup>155</sup> In reality, the NKVD ceased to exist in 1946, with its duties subsequently divided between the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and Ministry of State Security (MGB).

highlight his perpetuation of Stalin's reign, while the story's many doppelgangers reflect the shadow the dead king continues to cast over his subjects from the tomb.

In an effort to present himself as Ahasuerus (or even Mordecai) and paint Stalin as Haman, Beria in the film keeps Molotov's Jewish wife Polina (arrested in 1948 at height of anti-cosmopolitan campaign) in prison and only releases her after Stalin's death to secure Molotov's support for his attempt to seize the throne. Molotov thought Polina was dead, so their reunion is viewed by both as a miraculous resurrection. Molotov was on Stalin's list to be purged, and only Stalin's death and Beria's intervention saved him and his Jewish wife from death, like the intervention of Mordechai and Ahasuerus against Haman on behalf of the Persian Jews. As in *The Red Monarch*, the couple sings Stalin's praises during their miraculous reunion, even though it was he who had purged her in the first place, a sign that many still perceived Stalin as more Ahasuerus or even Mordechai than Haman after his death. Beria and Malenkov later propose releasing others arrested and deported on Stalin's orders in an effort to cast themselves as Mordecai and Ahasuerus to Stalin's Haman. In this post-Stalin thaw, people seemingly return from the underworld of the Soviet prison system as if resurrected from the dead. But, this being a false thaw, Beria's powers of resurrection have a limit, as even he cannot bring back Stalin's daughter Svetlana's first (Jewish) love from the dead in the film (though in reality he was indeed released from the gulags after Stalin's death). Beria has become the new Stalin, Haman in the role of Ahasuerus pretending to be Mordecai, releasing and pardoning innocent people he himself had earlier arrested and/or murdered. Beria is Stalin's shadow persisting after his death, the remaining half of their deadly comedy duo, and he must be killed for Haman-Stalin to finally die. In the Megillah, Hegai and Shaashagaz sent concubines to Ahasuerus whenever the latter requested. Here, Beria uses the purges as an excuse to rape the female prisoners, as well as the



female kin of the male prisoners in his charge. This includes the wife of a certain “Abramovsky” (son of Abraham), whose Jewishness, like that of the earlier Shteymans, is implied but not explicitly recognized. In this Purim-Stalin spiel, Beria plays many characters from the Ahasuerus-spiel, changing roles throughout, as many early Purim spielers would have done.

Esther cunningly reveals her true Jewish identity to Ahasuerus in order to thwart Haman’s plot to kill the Persian Jews on the eve of the campaign. This revelation of the heroine’s secret identity to the king to punish the villain and prevent him from carrying out his purge is mirrored in the film in the pianist Maria Yudina and the secret letter she sends to Stalin. This incident is based on an apocryphal story recounted in Solomon Volkov’s book *Testimony* (1979), which he claimed were Dmitri Shostakovich’s memoirs, a claim some scholars have since disputed. Yudina was born to a Jewish family in the Russian Empire before converting to Christianity shortly after the revolution. In the film, Yudina initially refuses to re-record her recently completed concert to satisfy Stalin, prompting the concert director to call her “Joan of Arc.” If this were an explicitly Jewish rendering of the events, he would be calling here a different heroine, Esther, for standing up to Haman-Stalin in revenge for purging her brother and father. Her revenge takes the form of sending a note to Stalin in his role as Ahasuerus denouncing him for his role as Haman in terrorizing his citizens. Her castigating letter cause the dictator to suffer the stroke that eventually killed him. Like the writers of Purim-Stalin, she uses her words to exact her revenge on Stalin because they are the only means available to her. Calling on God as her witness, in whom she places her faith to execute her act of righteous revenge, Yudina implicitly invokes the Esther story as a shared Judeo-Christian text that has inspired similar acts in believers of both religions for millennia. Furthermore, the film here invokes early post-World War II Soviet films about the Holocaust, which used Christian

symbolism to covertly refer to Jewish victims, whose culture and traditions could not be explicitly represented on Soviet screens. Yudina's note tells the dictator that she wants him to die, causing Stalin to have a laughing fit that causes his stroke. This is quintessential Purim spiel revenge, where humor literally kills Haman. She later plays at Stalin's funeral, where it is revealed that she is Khrushchev's old family friend, marking her as Esther to his Mordecai, the role he plays after Stalin's death as the one who, along with Zhukov (in a possible nod to the Rashins' *Purim-Stalin*), orchestrates Beria's overthrow and execution as the substitute Haman effigy for the already deceased Stalin. The last scene shows Yudina performing for Khrushchev, now the Premier, alive and triumphant after exacting her revenge on Haman-Stalin and causing his death.

Discovering Stalin after his stroke, Malenkov says that the Central Committee should get a doctor for Stalin, but Beria reminds him that they have put away all of the best doctors for treason. Again, we have a reference to the Doctors' Plot without specifically naming it or identifying its antisemitic nature. Lazar Kaganovich, the lone Jew on the committee, reiterates that the best doctors are in either prison or dead. Kaganovich's Judaism is never mentioned. The committee eventually chooses Timashuk, the woman whose accusations of malpractice against the doctors that treated Zhdanov helped lead to the concoction of the Doctors' Plot, to find a doctor for Stalin. Later, Stalin's daughter Svetlana asks if the doctors are going to sing, as if they were in a spiel, while Vasily accuses "New York Zionist queers" of killing his father, another oblique reference to the antisemitic anti-cosmopolitan campaign. In *The Red Monarch*, there was a tentative acknowledgement of the partial liberation afforded to Soviet citizens, especially writers, after Stalin's death. The novel and its film adaptation ended on a dour note, acknowledging that, while emigrants like Krotkov might have found liberty across the Iron

Curtain, Stalin's heirs still ruled the USSR. As a post-Soviet work, *The Death of Stalin* strikes a more optimistic note of total liberation from Stalin and his heirs. In the final scene, we are told that Stalin's successor, Khrushchev, will be overthrown by Brezhnev, with the implication being that, though it will take some time yet, Stalin's death was the beginning of the end for the USSR. For the creators, this is a retrospective optimism foreclosed to Krotkov, sealed here by the triumphant revenge taken by Khrushchev and Zhukov against Beria as Stalin's fellow Georgian doppelganger and final living embodiment of his bloodthirsty reign.

Stalin's last words before his stroke are "fuck, fuck," after which he also soils himself and is found by the Central Committee lying "in a puddle of indignity." Beria says that Stalin smells like a "Baku piss house" and calls him an "old man." As with *Khrustalyov, My Car!*, this comic shaming of the decrepit dictator embodies Purim's festival mocking of the old regime, whose age and decay are emphasized to delegitimize it by tying it to dying winter and thus make way for the new regime connected with the rebirth of spring. This carnivalesque humor of the nether regions exposes Stalin as the sick old man of the *ancien régime*, which his Soviet Empire has now literally become. The members of the Central Committee manipulate his body and mock it like an effigy of Haman, dropping it and knocking it against random objects in classic slapstick fashion. After he is dead, his body is further mutilated by the doctors, to the horror of only Malenkov and Stalin's son Vasily, Haman-Stalin's henchman and son, respectively. At Stalin's funeral, Khrushchev calls the funeral director "slim Hitler," connecting Stalin and Hitler in death and their shared standing as modern Amaleks. Beria is called a "pig for the pot," as the denigrating obscenity of Purim spiel humor is now directed at him as Stalin-Haman's primary henchman. The rest of the Central Committee plot against Beria to kill him as a replacement for the Purim revenge they could only exact metaphorically against Stalin. Forced to decide between

Beria's "death and his revenge" as Haman-Stalin's henchman, Molotov and Kaganovich, with their Jewish connections, join Khrushchev and Zhukov in taking the lead in killing Beria. They announce Beria's crimes and ridicule him to his face, after which he is beaten, ritually shamed by having his pants removed in the lavatory, shot and immediately burned to death like an effigy of Haman in a final act of humiliation. They even insult his corpse, a hint at the place he will hold in Soviet/-Jewish memory and future retellings of this event. Like Haman's henchmen, he is killed after Haman-Stalin, whose son Vasily is punished by being imprisoned.

In Purim-Stalin, the fake plots concocted by the Soviet regime to kill Stalin and others like the Doctors' Plot become real plots that actually succeed in killing them, like the one that kills Beria here. In pre-Soviet times, Jews took out their pent-up rage against their antisemitic oppressors on Haman effigies during Purim that were often made to resemble them. It was considered a Mitzvah to inflict all kinds of torture on such effigies as a form of righteous symbolic revenge against Amalek, which is reflected in the abuse of Beria's burned corpse. For Jews, Haman was "the type of Jew-baiter with whom they were unfortunately too well acquainted, and his undoing represented a prophecy of what they hoped would happen to their own oppressors"; Purim celebrations revolved around Haman's downfall, which led to customs like burning and beating his effigy (Goodman 1949, 321). He who laughs last laughs best, as the proverb says. The film's vengeful laughter and abuse of Stalin's decrepit body and Beria's burned corpse is the final laugh of their victims' descendants, free to mock them now that their Soviet regime has been fully destroyed.

Propp concludes *Morphology of the Folktale* with a quote from Veselovsky, who claimed that when

contemporary narrative literature, with its complicated thematic structure and photographic reproduction of reality, . . . will appear to future generations as distant as antiquity, from prehistoric to medieval times, seems to us at present—when the synthesis of time, that great simplifier, in passing over the complexity of phenomena, reduces them to the magnitude of points receding into the distance, then their lines will merge with those which we are now uncovering when we look back at the poetic traditions of the distant past—and the phenomena of schematism and repetition will then be established across the total expanse (116).

By downplaying the story's Jewish element and thereby severing it from Jewish history and tradition, *The Death of Stalin* does not and cannot represent Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan, opting to universalize Stalin's final purge rather than telling a tale of Jewish salvation as a recurring narrative in Jewish history. Like the Book of Esther before it, Purim-Stalin has moved beyond its Jewish origins to become a universal allegory about the reversal of fortune under tyranny, when those who oppose tyrants avert mass state-sponsored murder by turning the table on their oppressors. Despite eschewing all of the Jewish elements surrounding Stalin's death, the work's poetics nevertheless firmly place it within the schematics of Purim-Stalin, itself a subgenre of a narrative model that has been employed by Jews and non-Jews alike for over two millennia to give hope to the victims of state tyranny and provide meaning for its survivors and their descendants.

## Conclusion

“Closure is a false harmony, a siren song masquerading as a swan song.”<sup>156</sup>

It is written in the Megillah that Ahasuerus reigned over an empire consisting of 127 provinces spanning from India to Ethiopia, thus rivaling the USSR in both size and diversity under Stalin. Like their biblical forebears, Soviet Jews lived a diasporic existence, a tiny minority in a multicultural Empire whose leaders could (and on occasion tried to) eradicate their culture and even existence. But the Purim story is one of Jewish resilience and ultimately triumph, an ambivalent tale of Jewish survival that reflected the complex nature of the lives of its diaspora Jews, some of whom, like their later Soviet counterparts, reached the pinnacle of power while others suffered the worst possible fates. Hadassah changed her name to Esther to hide her Jewish identity and was made Queen of the Empire, a fate that would have spoken to many Soviet Jews, who on the whole experienced a marked improvement in their lives when the Russian Empire became the USSR, where many of them changed their names to better assimilate into the national culture. Like Mordecai, Soviet Jews attained some of the highest posts in the empire: Yakov Sverdlov was the first Chairman of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, Leon Trotsky was the first leader of the Red Army, Genrikh Yagoda served as the head of the NKVD, and Lazar Kaganovich served as the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, among others. Like Esther, their wives (and the Jewish wives of non-Jewish leaders) influenced events at the highest echelons of power. And, of course, Haman’s officially sanctioned effort to overthrow Mordecai and punish Persian Jews en masse is echoed in Stalin’s postwar antisemitic campaign, particularly the suppression of the JAC, the Night of the Murdered Poets, and the Doctors’ Plot. By the time Stalin died on Purim as rumors swirled of

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<sup>156</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Vintage, 2015), 387.

a plan to deport all Soviet Jews to the east, the seeds were sowed for his intended victims and others to see their plight in light of Haman's similarly thwarted attempt to destroy Persian Jewry.

In a letter to President Eisenhower on April 11, 1953, Winston Churchill referred to "the doctor story." Indeed, the Doctors' Plot was precisely that, a story invented by Stalin and his security organs to justify what some observers from that time to the present believed was a plan to solve the Jewish question in the USSR once and for all by deporting Soviet Jews to the Far East. Having reversed the role of victim and victimizer, Stalin invented a Doctors' Plot against Soviet leaders to justify his own plot against Soviet Jewry. Stalin's regime changed history and fabricated plots against itself to dispose of enemies it had itself invented. As some historians put it, whereas "Narratives move linearly in time," "Stalin's plots did not" (Brent and Naumov 2001, 3). But this assertion misses a larger context for Stalin's final pogrom against Soviet Jews: the *longue durée* of "great" Jewish time, where narratives repeated themselves in different epochs and places, recurring in recognizable cycles. While the plots of state mandated socialist realism moved linearly in time, observing the classical unities of action, time and place passed down from Aristotle, Stalin's political plots often seemed to borrow from officially prescribed sources like the Tanakh and other Jewish religious traditions. His Doctors' Plot recycled the narrative of Jewish decimation by a mighty empire found in the holy texts and history of the Jews, annually recited and reenacted in festivals like Purim and its eponymous spiels. As the Doctors' Plot unfolded across the USSR, rumors of a mass Jewish deportation on an undisclosed "Day X" sprang up among Soviet Jews from their folk memories of these Jewish tales and traditions suppressed by the regime, fed by the recent experience of the Holocaust and similar ethnic deportations carried out by the government. With Jewish fear mounting as the Doctors' Plot neared its seemingly inevitable violent denouement, disparate facts and gossip concerning real

and imagined barracks being built in the Far East, cattle cars gathering in metropolitan train depots, and lists of Jews being drawn up in buildings and police precincts combined to create in many Soviet Jews a vague sense that they were again reliving the days of Pharaoh, Amalek, Nebuchadnezzar, Haman, and Hitler. And then, on the day Jews had celebrated their ancient deliverance from Haman for centuries, Stalin suffered a stroke. Days later, he was dead, and the Doctors' Plot along with him.

In the immediate aftermath of Stalin's death, the unspeakable but growing belief among many Soviet Jews in Stalin's alleged plan to deport them to Soviet Asia solidified their sense of themselves as fundamentally *other* within the USSR. This sense of otherness had largely dissipated during the early decades following the Russian Revolution, as exemplified by the sense of betrayal felt by the Jewish characters in the Cold War-era novels of Soviet writers like Ehrenburg, Grossman, Grekova, and Shroyer-Petrov that dealt with the Doctors' Plot and its aftermath. These characters are shocked to find themselves suddenly being singled out as suspicious characters solely on account of their Jewish identities after (and even during) World War II. For the first time, Soviet Jews saw themselves as victims of the communist regime as a collective body, not solely as individuals, merely on account of their religious/ethnic identity. Over the ensuing decades, Soviet Jewry's victimization at the hands of their government, along with their growing identification with coreligionists in Israel, led many of them to defy their government in acts of dissidence that spurred the Movement to Free Soviet Jewry. As fear turned to defiance, many Soviet Jews increasingly embraced their Jewish heritage and identity, as opposed to a merely Soviet one. Such Jewish pride, unseen in the USSR since the early days of the Nazi invasion, grew dramatically in the aftermath of Israel's victory over the regime's Arab allies in the Six-Day War. This pride led to an emigration movement that, while stymied by the



regime for decades, eventually saw millions of Soviet Jews emigrate to Israel and the West. The refuseniks, prisoners of Zion, and average Soviet Jews that defied their government in countless acts both grand and small were the first to manifest the self-defense in service of Jewish sovereignty that would ultimately find fictional expression in the (post-)Soviet Jewish revenge novels, whose authors sought to retrospectively avenge their forebears for their victimization at the hands of Stalin and subsequent Soviet governments. This evolving Soviet Jewish identity was constructed from both within and without, as non-Soviet and non-Jewish writers were also active in representing Stalinist and Soviet antisemitism, giving both Jews and their allies a role in constructing a Soviet Jewish narrative and identity, as had been the case with the Jewish diaspora for millennia.

Only when writers connected the specific circumstances of Soviet Jewish oppression under Stalin with the cyclical nature of time in the Jewish tradition could they make sense of the dictator's alleged Jewish deportation plan. Soviet writers, stuck in the limbo of a post-Stalinist reality where Jews continued to experience systematic discrimination and official censorship that prevented them from writing about Jewish religious and cultural traditions, represented Stalin's death at the height of the Doctors' Plot as a temporary relief from government oppression that they could only hope would lead to sociopolitical equality for Soviet Jews in the future. Meanwhile, writing in the context of the Soviet Jewry Movement, a Western Jew and Holocaust survivor like Wiesel could represent these events in the context of "great" Jewish time, where Purim-Stalin was shown as a cyclical recurrence of past Jewish trauma, a concept echoed by the recent non-Jewish Soviet emigre Krotkov in his own fictional account of Stalin's demise. Potok and Krotkov saw the salvation promised by the tales and traditions of Judaism in emigration from the USSR. Having rediscovered long abandoned and suppressed Jewish traditions in the

final years of the USSR and in emigration, post-Soviet Jewish writers and filmmakers employed the narrative framework and generic components of Purim and its attendant spiels to shape the historically ambiguous events surrounding the Doctors' Plot and Stalin's death into a meaningful representation of those events as a kind of memory work for healing the multigenerational trauma they had precipitated. To give meaning to the Jewish lives destroyed by Stalin, they represented the events surrounding Stalin's death and its aftermath as stemming from Jewish resistance to Soviet tyranny. This reimagining of the historical events, prompted by the generic requirements of the Purim narrative, symbolized the resistance of post-Stalin Jewish dissident movements and, more provocatively, allowed post-Soviet Jews to provide a fictional revenge against the Stalinist oppressors of their parents and grandparents on their behalf after the latter could (or would) not take matters into their own hands.

### Finalizing Grace

“As a journalist, I separate fact from fable. As a novelist, I go through the same process, but keep the fable. You need facts to ground a story; you need fables make it soar.”

-Paul Goldberg<sup>157</sup>

One possible explanation for why Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan has not received more recognition is that attention in the Western press shifted from the legacy of Stalin's antisemitic pogroms to the practical problem of “the exodus of Soviet Jews on the way to Israel” and the West “instead of to Siberia, Kazakhstan, or to the Arctic North” during the final years of the USSR and after its collapse (Winston 2015, 486). The fate of living Jews from the lands of the former USSR eventually supplanted the question of the alleged deportation plan.

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<sup>157</sup> Paul Goldberg, “We Don't Get to Choose Our Material.”

Furthermore, Russia has other “massive wounds that are still not healed, traumas that are not worked through”; with more than twenty million Soviet dead during World War II alone, “Russians’ own enormous losses... render them unempathetic to the Jewish catastrophe” (Gershenson 2013, 217). This makes the subject of Jewish suffering in the USSR a minor caveat in the former Soviet Union, as even post-Soviet films largely avoid the subject of Holocaust survivors and Stalin’s Jewish victims. It remains “a realm of complicated Jewish experiences” almost “untouched by post-Soviet filmmakers” (Gershenson 2013, 225), while remaining largely the purview of memoirists and historians there. By and large, “memory work is still not done in Russia - despite the bombastic war memorials and official rhetoric of glorious [World War II] victory, the country lives in the state of amnesia... The crimes of Stalin’s regime are not atoned for and not memorialized” (Gershenson 2013, 217-8). My conjecture is that living in a country whose populace continues to have largely positive views of Stalin,<sup>158</sup> particularly in recent years, makes it harder for Russian Jewish authors to speak openly about his alleged Jewish deportation plan in fiction (given its historically privileged social status over historical and memoiristic writing in Russian culture) than ex-Soviet Jewish fiction writers in the West. It is almost certainly easier for these, particularly those in America, to write about seeking revenge against their former Soviet oppressors, as they no longer live alongside them. And, unlike those who emigrated to Israel, who do mandatory service in the nation’s armed forces, ex-Soviet Jews in America and elsewhere outside of the former USSR do not have the opportunity to expiate their lingering feelings of helplessness through military service in defense of the world’s sole Jewish

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<sup>158</sup> In a 2019 poll conducted by the independent Moscow-based Levada Center, 70% of Russian respondents said that Stalin “played a positive role for Russia”. U.S. News Staff, “7 In 10 Russians Think Highly of Soviet Dictator Joseph Stalin,” U.S. News & World Report (U.S. News & World Report), accessed August 1, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2019-05-09/stalin-is-more-popular-than-ever-in-russia-survey-shows>.

nation, forcing them to find symbolic outlets (like film and literature) for their multigenerational trauma instead.

The issue of texts is fundamental to many of the works addressed in this dissertation and even the question of the very existence of Stalin's alleged Jewish deportation plan. One of the primary issues in the debate surrounding Stalin's alleged plan to deport Soviet Jews is the lack of textual/archival evidence confirming it. When Etinger asked Bulganin if there were any documents to substantiate his story about the plan's existence, Bulganin replied (rather conveniently) to the effect that Stalin did not give written directives on this issue and in general frequently gave orders in oral form, particularly with members of the Politburo, who he saw us almost every day.<sup>159</sup> Thus, some very important documents

were very thoughtfully not filed for archival storage. Others mysteriously disappeared from the archival files. A significant part of the most important documents and the materials ended up in the archives that are out of reach even today... Moreover, some instructions...were conducted so masterfully that today there is no trace, at least there is no paper trail.<sup>160</sup>

Gershenson wrote about in her research in the Russian state archives that she found that "some files were still classified" and some decisions "left no paper trail whatsoever" (11). Stalin's official postwar pogrom against Soviet Jews involved the destruction, in chronological order, of Jewish practice, names, literature, bodies and, ultimately, any *textual* evidence ordering such destruction. However, as the history of Russian and Soviet literature has shown, manuscripts

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<sup>159</sup> Ia. Ia. Etinger, *Eto nevozmozhno zabyt': Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Ves' mir, 2001), 106.

<sup>160</sup> Valerij I. Fomin, *Kino i Vlast': Sovetskoe Kino: 1965-1985 Gody: Dokumenty, Svidetel'stva, razmysleniia* (Moskva: Materik, 1996), 14. Quoted in and translated by Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe*, 11.

don't burn, and the memory of these events survived in Soviet Jewish memory and their later embodiments in memoirs and fiction, even if texts confirming Stalin's deportation orders did not (if they ever even existed).

Long before Stalin's postwar antisemitic campaigns and the Holocaust that immediately preceded it, a Persian viceroy had tried to destroy his nation's entire Jewish population before being thwarted by the King's Jewish wife and a Jewish official in the royal court. Centuries before that, Amalek had tried to do the same to the Israelites during their exodus from Egypt to Canaan and been similarly thwarted. These events were written down in the Tanakh and commemorated annually by Jews for millennia, influencing the way they understood and represented their own oppression wherever they were. Stalin's nearly successful war on Jewish memory and culture prevented Soviet Jewish writers depicting the events surrounding his death during its immediate aftermath from representing the legend of his alleged Jewish deportation plan because they lacked a narrative model to give it form and meaning. Only a return to the Jewish traditions of their ancestors by later (post-)Soviet writers allowed them to do so by providing them with this necessary model in the form of Purim, as it had previously done for Jews around the world for centuries. This model, with its inherent ideological and narrative structure, allowed them to map their experience onto this ancient formula and represent what had previously been unrepresentable outside of a paradigm that could endow it with meaning.

Historical poetics argues that making sense of an experience, particularly a traumatic one, is contingent on "the totalizing perspective of finalization, the operation whereby one's experience of the world as well as of one's own self are rendered coherent and (if only provisionally) whole" (Kliger 2015, 232). As "the redeeming and ultimately communal agent[s] of finalizing grace" (Kliger 2015, 236), the authors of Purim-Stalin provided precisely such

coherence and (provisional) wholeness to the legend of Stalin's Jewish deportation plan by giving it the conclusion mandated by the formal structure of the Purim genre that was denied to Soviet Jews in the USSR: Jewish revenge against their Soviet oppressors. Bova, Rashin and Goldberg goes so far as to have their avengers murder Stalin themselves, while the others content themselves with having their protagonists kill his (metaphorical) Amalekite henchmen. Purim-inspired spiels and texts have provided such closure to similarly oppressed Jewish communities for at least two millennia. However, some Jewish writers have questioned whether one should or even *can* take revenge for the past. As the Russian Jewish poet Haim Nahman Bialik wrote in his poem "On the Butchery of Beasts" about the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, "And a curse on any that says: avenge this! / Fit revenge for blood from the throat of a child / Satan has not yet compiled."<sup>161</sup> Perhaps the ultimate value of fictional revenge is that it expiates the need to do so in reality, satiating the psychological needs of the victims without perpetuating the actual cycle of violence and retribution. Having wrought symbolic vengeance on Stalin and his Soviet Amalekites, these authors and filmmakers have done their duty to destroy the memory of Amalek placed upon every generation of Jews by Jewish scripture, as noisemakers do when his name is mentioned during Purim rituals. Doing so brings the Purim-Stalin narrative to a conclusion, returning it to Jewish history as a finalized whole while keeping the events that inspired it alive in Soviet-Jewish memory for future generations as they continue to wait for justice for Stalin's victims.

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<sup>161</sup> Haim Nahman Bialik, "Bialik: On the Butchery of Beasts (From Hebrew)," trans. A.Z. Foreman, Poems Found in Translation, accessed August 1, 2021, <https://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2011/02/bialik-on-slaughter-from-hebrew.html>.

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