

## Forum

### **Retrospective: Jonathan Brent and Vladimir P. Naumov's *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot against the Jewish Doctors, 1948-1953, Ten Years Later.*<sup>1</sup>**

***Bodie A. Ashton - The University of Adelaide.***

THE FACT THAT Joseph Stalin should be considered one of the great, terrible criminals of the Twentieth Century is self-evident but nonetheless bears repeating. It takes little imagination to point to those calamities that befell the Soviet Union during the Stalin years, and see behind them his shadowy hand. The question that has dominated the historiography in recent decades, however, has been 'how.' In what manner did Stalin perpetrate his crimes? Did that shadowy hand wield a revolver, or the strings of puppets, either directly or indirectly doing Stalin's bidding?

It was with no small excitement, therefore, that, in 2003, Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov published *Stalin's Last Crime*, a book that has stood alone in its field, virtually unchallenged by scholars of Soviet history, for a decade. The subject - the so-called Doctors' Plot of the late 1940s and early 1950s - has not received the attention that such a mysterious yet pivotal sequence of events should have; both historians remind us with their introductory remarks that Churchill noted to Eisenhower in 1953 that the "doctor story [...] must cut very deeply into the communist heart and structure" (p.1).

---

<sup>1</sup> Originally published in New York by Harper Collins in 2003. The version of the text used for the purpose of this review is as follows: *Jonathan Brent and Vladimir P. Naumov, Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot against the Jewish Doctors, 1948-1953* (New York: Perennial, 2004.)

The first third of the book is devoted to the death of Andrei Zhdanov, the leading Communist Party official, which Brent and Naumov see as the catalyst for all to come. This opening drama reads like an intricate murder mystery, worthy of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Zhdanov, having suffered a collapse, was sent to recuperate under the care of Kremlin Hospital doctors at the health centre at Valdai, on 13 July 1948. By 31 August, he was dead, the victim of a massive heart attack. What makes the Zhdanov case remarkable was not that Zhdanov died, since Soviet medicine, in spite of the propaganda, always lagged behind its Western counterparts, and Zhdanov had a history of poor cardiac health. However, the security services had been warned, at least a week before the death, that Zhdanov's treatment at Valdai was insufficient and liable to lead to disaster. These concerns were raised by Lidia Timashuk, an electrocardiogram technician and, unbeknownst to her colleagues, an agent of the state's domestic security organ, the MGB. Timashuk's warnings, both to the Kremlin bodyguard and to her handler at the MGB, were hushed up in 1948, but they became central to the case that would ultimately be brought against the doctors in the early 1950s.

In the intervening years, Stalin followed the pattern of terror that had served him in the past. The Leningrad wing of the Party, which had been overseen by Zhdanov before his death at Valdai, became the focal point of mass arrests and executions after January 1949. These purges, which became known as the Leningrad Affair, cost the lives of Central Committee member Alexei Kuznetsov and the eminent economist Nikolai Voznesensky, among many hundreds of others. In 1951, Viktor Abakumov, the head of the MGB, was denounced by one of his underlings, the interrogator Ryumin, and accused of involvement in a plot to kill leading communists; Abakumov would eventually be shot in 1954. In 1952 the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, which had organised Jewish resistance to the Nazis during the Great Patriotic War, was accused of "anti-Soviet" activities, its leading members placed on trial and sentenced to death or the gulag. Throughout these years, and increasing in desperate fervour until March 1953, the official and semiofficial agitation against those in the medical profession who had apparently conspired with Abakumov to kill off the leadership reached a fever pitch, but

died with Stalin; by August 1953, Pravda had acknowledged that the reasons for a purge had now passed, and the affair quietly disappeared from public view.

These events, the authors claim, cannot be unconnected. After all, who is Stalin, Breaker of Nations, but history's Professor Moriarty? Timashuk's warnings, according to this reading, were ignored precisely because Stalin wanted Zhdanov to perish during his "health cure." Indeed, the signs were there that Zhdanov's influence was waning. As early as 1942, he had been criticised for his organisation of the defence and survival of Leningrad during its 900-day siege, which had arguably saved the city but had undermined the central power of directives from Moscow (p.71). After the war, Zhdanov began his rise to prominence, but this was interrupted in 1947 by the actions of his son, Yuri. The younger Zhdanov, a prominent scientist, delivered a speech criticising the work of the charlatan botanist Trofim Lysenko, who happened to be the favourite of Stalin. Enraged at this attack on Lysenko, Stalin promised to "punish the guilty in exemplary fashion" (p.78). Other indications tell us that Zhdanov had lost the favour of his friend and boss. Despite requesting that his health cure be spent in the south, Zhdanov was sent to the colder north. While there, his position on the Central Committee was subsumed by Georgi Malenkov, his bitter rival. More to the point, on 7 August Pravda published an open letter from the younger Zhdanov, apologising for his "whole series of serious errors" in criticising Lysenko. At this point, Andrei Zhdanov's custodial care seemed to take a turn for the worse. The letter was a plea for mercy by Yuri, but it was also a coded signal to his father's doctors-cum-murderers. "[T]hey took a series of negative steps that demonstrated that they had understood their assignment", Brent and Naumov tell us (p.85), and by the end of the month Zhdanov was dead, and the one doctor - Timashuk - who had sounded the alarm about the "incorrect" treatment "without any lawful grounds" had been ignored by Stalin precisely because this incorrect treatment was Stalin's intent in the first place.

Thereafter, Stalin sought to cover his tracks. Zhdanov's death cleared the way for a purging of the Leningrad Party organs,

much as the murder of Sergei Kirov in 1934 had facilitated the Great Terror against the Party as a whole. The doctors who had treated Zhdanov would be denounced, Timashuk's testimonies "discovered", and the state security apparatus would be torn apart, not because of an antisemitic crusade dressed up as a campaign against "rootless cosmopolitanism" or "nationalist agitators" or those "poisoned with bourgeois nationalism", but as an "exercise of [Stalin's] enormous power" (p.5). Thus, our Georgian Moriarty initiated his capricious and murderous plans, and it was only his fortuitous death (perhaps, the historians suggest, at the instigation of Beria) that saved the Soviet Union from another, arbitrary Great Terror.

Brent and Naumov's recounting of their various case studies is impressive, demonstrating mastery of the facts. Zhdanov's cardiac history, for instance, is dissected clinically - much, they might argue, as his doctors should have done if they had actually wished their patient to live - and the various testimonies, minutes, letters, and other accounts by and about the doctors add an authenticity to the account. Yet it is these details that prove to be the book's undoing. Both historians have placed Stalin at the centre of a web of intrigue in which the state apparatus was to be subjected to a terror against itself, driven by itself. So, for example, we have the typical case of the MGB interrogator, Ryumin, interrogating the Jewish doctor, Etinger, in direct contravention of orders from his superior, Abakumov. Ryumin subsequently denounced Abakumov for protecting the elderly, ailing Etinger from charges of being a subversive anti-Soviet terrorist (pp.114-120). Ryumin would ultimately be denounced as well, neatly tidying this circle of conspiracy; Brent and Naumov would suggest that this would remove any direct link to Stalin and his crimes.

Yet where is Stalin in the case of Zhdanov? For Stalin was still human, and his commands and wishes were not communicated via telepathy. Yet this seems to be what Brent and Naumov would have us believe. Both admit that "no directive from Stalin ordering [Zhdanov's] death will ever be found; no record of the conversations among the doctors in Valdai [...] exists, except as they have been reconstructed by witnesses who often had an axe to grind" (p.8). Upon what, then, can these two otherwise conscientious historians

build their case that Zhdanov's doctors "understood their assignment" to allow Zhdanov's death, once his son's open apology to Stalin had been published in Pravda? Even Khrushchev, willing enough to ascribe blame to Stalin, noted that Zhdanov's attending physicians were "the best and most trusted of their profession" (p.66). They were not assassins, nor agents of state security (with the exception of Timashuk, who raised the alarm). Furthermore, the method of setting this "assignment" strains credibility. The reader is expected to believe that the publication of a letter by Yuri Zhdanov in a newspaper with a readership numbering in the tens of millions would be interpreted by a panel of surgeons as a signal to scrimp on the care of Yuri's father, who might or might not die as a result of this less than complete medical attention. To the historians, the Pravda letter told the Valdai doctors to "do what you know is right under the circumstances", and it "played a part in whatever unspoken medical deliberations went forward in the troubled atmosphere of Valdai" (p.85). Yet it is precisely because these deliberations were "unspoken" that we simply cannot jump to such conclusions, since neither Brent nor Naumov can offer any evidence that such deliberations even occurred. So many of the linchpins of the book's arguments are based upon supposition and guesswork, in fact, that they become functionally meaningless. "The Plot was roughly diamond-shaped", we are told, in one of the more prosaic passages. "There was never a straight line from Stalin to his enemy" (p. 333). The trouble is in finding any line between Stalin and his enemy. An essential aspect of the purging of the MGB, for instance, was the removal of Abakumov, and to this end the historians charge that "to get Abakumov, Stalin employed Ryumin" (p.333). The choice of words is unfortunate, since it implies that Ryumin was part of Stalin's plans. He was not; Ryumin, in fact, had denounced Abakumov because he had been reprimanded and, having once before been denounced, the interrogator felt a pressing, urgent, but personal need to cast doubt on his accuser (pp.113-118). If this grand conspiracy was to work, its success relied upon discrediting Abakumov, and this was accomplished through the individual machinations of one of his underlings, not through the actions of Stalin himself.

In the final analysis, the connection between Stalin and the actions detailed in this volume is often so obscure as to not be evident at all. The historians may treat this as evidence of the extraordinary secrecy and cleverness of this Machiavellian schemer. In attempting to prove this, though, they have ascribed powers to Stalin that are not supported by their impressive source material. Instead of Stalin's plans being laid bare by this modern Holmes-and-Watson duo, the plot becomes so convoluted, so complex, so dependent on contingencies that Stalin could not possibly have influenced, that he is painted less as a Georgian Moriarty and more like the infernal Woland of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, possessing magical abilities to bend reality. In the absence of a pistol-toting feline offsider, however, we must conclude that Brent and Naumov, regardless of their skills as researchers, have stumbled into the realm of speculative fiction. Or, perhaps more fittingly, they have fallen into the pattern of evidence practiced by Ryumin, who once told a prisoner: "Tell us everything, and we ourselves will decide what is true" (p. 191). As is so often the curse of Soviet history, what to the historians seems true does not always correspond with what is likely.

---

### **About the Author**

Bodie Ashton is a PhD student at the University of Adelaide. He is a Modern European historian with a specific focus on Germany in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His interests and expertise extend to Austria and Russia. His work is largely a history of political and social movements, but he is also interested in economic and military histories.