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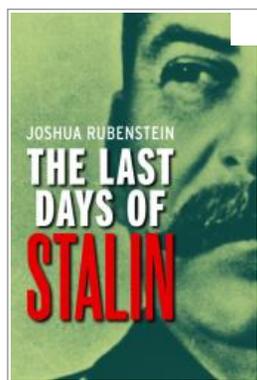
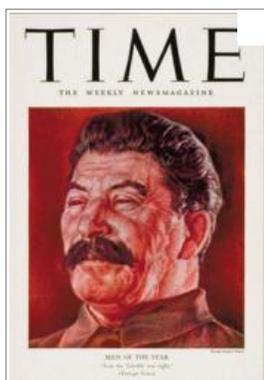
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## Stalin's end, the future of Soviet Jewry

By Brett M. Rhyne  
Advocate staff



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**BROOKLINE** – Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin died at 74 on March 5, 1953, following a massive stroke five days earlier. His demise was timely for the Jews of the Soviet Union, just as his geopolitical machinations while alive were timely for the fledgling State of Israel.

In his new book, "The Last Days of Stalin," local Jewish author Joshua Rubenstein tells a gripping tale of the year around Stalin's death, including revealing previously unknown details of the trial of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and Stalin's version of the Final Solution, the Doctors' Plot.

In an exclusive interview with The Jewish Advocate, the associate at the Davis Center at Harvard University and former regional director of Amnesty International discussed what Stalin's life and death meant for Russian Jewry, David Ben-Gurion's Israel and Jews around the world.

"The book begins in the fall of 1952 at the Ninth Party Congress in Moscow," Rubenstein says. "It goes into some detail about the Doctors' Plot of January 1953 and the alleged plan — here, he emphasizes alleged — "which was to be the culmination of the Doctors' Plot, the deportation of Soviet Jews to Siberia. Many Jews believe there was such a plot. I express reasons to be skeptical about it. I'm not soft on Stalin, but no one can point to facts.

"The book ends with the execution of Laventi Beria," Stalin's primary security chief after 1938, he continues. "He was a very capable administrator, aside from being a loathsome guy. He was executed in September 1953, and thus ends Stalin's terror. Whatever else we want to say about the Soviet Union after Stalin, it was no longer a regime dependent on widespread, arbitrary terror to sustain itself in power."

"The book begins happily — Stalin dies — and it ends happily, with Beria's execution," Rubenstein says drily.

"THE DOCTORS' PLOT is the culminating episode in a series of anti-Jewish measures that had really begun during the war in 1943, after the victory at Stalingrad,"

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<b>SPRINGFIELD</b>	<b>7:52</b>
<b>WORCESTER</b>	<b>7:58</b>
<b>PORTLAND, MAINE</b>	<b>7:54</b>
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Rubenstein will be reading from his new book, "The Last Days of Stalin," at the Harvard Bookstore on May 20 and at the Brookline Booksmith on May 25.

Rubenstein says.

"Stalin begins to purge Jews from cultural institutions, from newspaper editorial boards, from scientific institutions. Then after the war, with the Cold War heating up, the loyalty of Soviet Jews came into question. In the war against Nazi Germany, there was no question that Jews would be loyal to Stalin and the Kremlin. In the war against America, that wasn't so clear.

"Secondly, Israel is established," he continues. "When Golda Meir led the Israeli diplomatic delegation to Moscow in September 1948, she was greeted by enormous crowds, who would walk with her from her hotel to the central synagogue. This happened on Shabbat, this happened on Rosh Hashanah, it happened on Yom Kippur, repeatedly. Well, this is a very emotional thing for Golda Meir and her Israeli colleagues, but they also understood that it was provocative, and that the Jews of Moscow were forgetting where they were living. This is not Tel Aviv, this is not Paris, this is Stalin's kingdom.

"This led to a number of measures against the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and its leaders, who were held responsible for these demonstrations," he says.

Jewish Bund leaders had formed the committee in 1941, and it was reformed on Stalin's order in April 1942, with the official support of the Soviet authorities. It was designed to influence international public opinion and organize political and material support for the Soviet fight against Nazi Germany, particularly from the West.

"There was the Anti-Cosmopolitan Campaign in January 1949 against Jews in Soviet culture," Rubenstein says. "That was very explicitly anti-Jewish. Then there was the trial of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the spring and summer of 1952: that was secret, there was nothing in the Soviet press about it, or about the executions on April 12, the 'Night of the Murdered Poets.' Thirteen were executed from that group of 15 defendants, and only five were Yiddish writers and poets."

Rubenstein has previously written about this in "Stalin's Secret Pogrom," a National Jewish Book Award winner.

"The announcement of the Doctors' Plot was a very widely publicized event on Jan. 13, 1953," he says. "That led to a tsunami of propaganda for the next five weeks against the Joint Distribution Committee. It was accused of being in league with not only American imperialism and the Zionist conspirators, but Soviet Jewish doctors, to carry out espionage, to compromise the security of the Soviet Union, and to apply their medical skills in a malicious way to kill Soviet leaders.

"This created a tremendous atmosphere of dread in the country, in the hospitals, in the clinics," he continues. "There were broader bad feelings, not just against Soviet Jewish doctors, but Jews in general. There were many rumors that this was all going to culminate in the public execution of the doctors and the deportation of Jews.

"But the doctors were never brought to trial," he continues. "They were not executed. Two of the doctors who were named as conspirators died, but one died during interrogation in 1951, and another died of cancer before January 1953. Yet in January 1953, they're being accused of being among the conspirators. So why were two dead doctors among those accused? No one has ever given an explanation."

"The Soviet Union is a land of unlimited impossibilities, as we like to say," Rubenstein notes. "Some things we will just never understand. The fact is, Stalin died on March 5, so whatever may have been in the works came to an end. He did have his stroke on Purim, March 1, 1953, which is a coincidence we celebrate.

"A month later, on April 4 and again on April 6," he says, "the Soviet press carried articles that the doctors are being released; that the whole plot was a fabrication; that it was a provocation by adventurers in the Soviet security services against this 'third nationalist antagonism' — they didn't use the word 'Jew,' but everyone understood what the meaning was. The doctors were released, those who had survived, and that was the end of the Doctors' Plot."

HOW DID STALIN'S DEATH affect Jews in the Soviet Union?

"Firstly, the sword of Damocles had been lifted; whatever was being planned because of the Doctor's Plot came to an end," Rubenstein says.

"Secondly, the regime, at least publicly, moved away from the kind of ugly propaganda that had so marked the last months of Stalin's life," he continues. "So in that sense, they could breathe a deep sense of relief. Although the regime still embarked on many ugly things, nothing approaches the kind of propaganda that we saw in January and February of 1953."

"The unfortunate thing," he says, "is that, gradually, people came to understand what happened to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and the realization that their future in the Soviet Union would be limited."

In 1948, STALIN'S Soviet Union was the first country to recognize Israel, Rubenstein notes. "It also arranged for arms to be sent to Israel via Czechoslovakia during the spring and summer of 1948.

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"Why?" he asks. "Stalin wanted to get the British out of the Middle East, so he wanted to see an end to the mandate. Secondly, the Israeli founders were East European socialists. There was a sense that maybe Israel would be neutral, even sympathetic toward to the Soviet bloc. This idea, Stalin quickly understood, was wrong.

"Ben-Gurion tried to stay neutral in the Cold War," he continues. "He had his own pragmatic view. He was not getting arms from the United States, and Israel was a small, vulnerable country, so why pick sides? He had no ideological sympathy; it was strictly, 'This is a big state, we need their support in international forums, there are millions of Jews still living there, it's best to have contact with them, so why provoke Soviet enmity?'

"Finally," he says, "[Soviet U.N. Ambassador Andrei] Gromyko made two very explicit pro-Zionist speeches in the United Nations in the months leading up to the partition plan that was voted on Nov. 29, 1947. This was a famous vote where the General Assembly voted to accept the partition of Palestine into three areas: a Jewish state; a Palestinian state; and Jerusalem, which would be a neutral territory. This was the U.N. endorsing the establishment of a Jewish state, and the end of the mandate.

"The Soviet Union and its allies had a number of votes among the 55 or 56 countries in the U.N. voting, which made a big difference. Then, when Israel was established on May 14, it was the Soviet Union who first recognized the state, before [U.S. President Harry] Truman."

"ABBA EBAN was the Israeli ambassador to the U.N. at the time of Stalin's death in 1953. He was under pressure from Jews in New York to take a much tougher line on the Doctors' Plot. But Ben-Gurion wanted to be more cautious. He said to Eban, 'This is the Soviet Union. Who are we? Let's try to be cautious. Just listen politely to what both sides are saying.'"

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