

ARTICLE

# Fall of a New Soviet-Jewish Person: The Unmasking of Anti-Antisemite Aleksandr Litinskii, aka American Spy Big Boss

Seth Bernstein 

University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, United States  
[sethbernstein@ufl.edu](mailto:sethbernstein@ufl.edu)

The paper examines the unmaking of an exemplary individual in Stalin's Soviet Union, a New Soviet Person, caught in the anti-Jewish campaign of Stalin's last years, often remembered for the notorious Doctors' Plot. Aleksandr Litinskii was a Soviet true believer, a veteran of the Second World War, and a Jew whose father died in the Holocaust. When confronted with the anti-Jewish campaign, he was not disillusioned but decided to save the Soviet project through an elaborate attempt at reverse psychology. He posed in letters as an American spy bent on undermining the Soviet Union through antisemitism. Evidence from this bizarre case, collected from police archives that Ukraine declassified after the Maidan Revolution and from Litinskii's memoir, suggests new insights into Soviet Jewish experiences and into the legacy of persecution among Eastern Europeans who supported the regimes that repressed them.

Strange letters in code arrived from Kharkiv to mailboxes in Moscow at the end of 1950. Officers at the Ministry of State Security, the MGB, intercepted the letters and broke the easy code. One letter purported to be from a spy called 'Small Boss' (*Smol Boss*), who directed the recipient to another mailbox where they would find a letter from the American agent 'Big Boss'. MGB officers found that letter, whose supposed American spy author wanted to incite Soviet leaders and people to make it as bad for Jews as 'when Adolf came to power in Germany'. Big Boss was not a principled hater of Jews but asserted that rampant antisemitism would undermine the Soviet Union from within and destroy its standing in the world.<sup>1</sup>

More than two years later, on 7 March 1953, MGB officers in Kharkiv arrested Aleksandr Borisovich Litinskii, a politically engaged instructor in the city's institute for agricultural technology and a Red Army veteran who had been wounded as an officer in the Great Patriotic War. Investigators asserted he had written the Big Boss letter and another pseudonymous letter to the Soviet politician Viacheslav Molotov, and Litinskii soon confessed that they were his. This article uses the Litinskii investigation as a case study to explore the relationship of Soviet-Jewish supporters of Stalin's rule to the Soviet state amid increasing official antisemitism (Figure 1).

The records of investigations and trials under Eastern European authoritarian regimes present problems and opportunities. Police investigations, and state archives overall, tend to accentuate the extraordinary, and certainly the bizarre case of Litinskii-Big Boss falls into that category.

<sup>1</sup> The major source for this paper is the police file of Aleksandr Borisovich Litinskii, held at the Archive of the Administration of the Security Service of Ukraine (Arkhiv Upravlinnia Sluzhby Bezpeky Ukrainy Khar'kivs'koi Oblasti) file (sprava) 033775. Going forward, I will call it the Arrest File and give the location of the document within the file. In this case, Arrest File, unnumbered packet with documents (Big Boss Letter).

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Figure 1. Police photograph of Aleksandr Litinskii, from Arrest File 9 (arrest form of 7 March 1953; 9ob.).

Infamously, Stalinist investigators twisted innocuous events into crimes and falsified information using coercion. Like the inquisitors who interrogated the miller Menocchio, Soviet investigators were also obsessed with beliefs and everyday behaviour, and recorded evidence in extraordinary detail.<sup>2</sup> Through hundreds or thousands of pages of interrogations, trials, appeals, and auxiliary documents, Soviet investigators created a biography of the accused that they hoped would show the socio-political source of anti-Soviet crime. By carefully reading against imposed political interpretations, historians can extract social biographies, in-depth profiles that reveal broader dynamics under socialism.<sup>3</sup>

The potential to recreate the experiences of Jewish victims of Stalinism like Litinskii is notable for several reasons. In the late 1940s, Stalin initiated an anti-Jewish campaign that saw Jews denied employment, closures of Jewish cultural institutions, and thousands of arrests and dozens of executions in the Soviet Union and Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> Many of the campaign's victims were prominent officials, artists, and professionals, such as in the infamous Doctors' Plot in 1953. That case involved the arrest of (mostly) Jewish physicians, accused of invented crimes backed by confessions wrought from arrestees and witnesses with coercion. When Stalin's successors reversed the Doctors' Plot, the affair became a symbol of the turn in Soviet politics away from torture and mass repression. Historians have found and published materials from this and other well-known cases, and access to major investigations has skewed understandings of the anti-Jewish campaign. The

<sup>2</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, translated by John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi (London: Routledge, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Such an approach has been fruitfully applied in autobiographies by scholars who worked in Eastern Bloc states and subsequently received access to their police files. See Timothy Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History* (New York: Random House, 1997); Katherine Verdery, *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Gennadii Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina* [Secret politics of Stalin], vol. 2: *Na fone Kholodnoi voiny* [Against the backdrop of the Cold War] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2015), 317–31.

fabricated charges against the most prominent Jewish arrestees were a means to arrest people who were targeted primarily because of their socio-political status.<sup>5</sup> Litinskii's case was different because he, like most Jewish arrestees in 1953, was not a figure of national or even local prominence. Moreover, whether or not Litinskii's actions should have been a crime is questionable, but police indicted him because of a real incident, in this case his sending of the pseudonymous letters.<sup>6</sup>

There are non-elite sources about Soviet-Jewish reactions to repression in 1953, but most come from memoirs and oral histories recorded decades after the fact.<sup>7</sup> These retrospective documents can convey knowledge of events that was not evident at the time, and their authors can arrive at insights after a period of reflection. However, the passing of time can also skew memories as respondents attempt to fit their experiences into recognisable historical frameworks, eliding aspects that cut against those narratives. Based on memoirs and archival evidence from party institutions, historians have generally seen the Jewish reaction to anti-Jewish repression as victimhood or limited resistance on a local level (e.g. fighting to keep one's job or to avoid the expulsion of Jews from an institute).<sup>8</sup> Indeed the second major source for this paper is Litinskii's own memoir, composed in the late 1990s. Writing half in verse, Litinskii asserted that he was victimised for having conversations at work about the anti-Jewish campaign and for being naïve enough to write to Stalin to inform the leader about antisemitism among Kharkiv administrators.<sup>9</sup> Litinskii's police file shows a different side of the Jewish reaction to Stalinist anti-Jewish repression, though. The Big Boss letter was a more vigorous and provocative response to the campaign than is represented elsewhere in the scholarship.

Litinskii as an arrestee is an interesting figure because he was a 'New Soviet Person', an ideal type whose beliefs and actions were a product of their upbringing under socialism. Since the 1990s, scholars have examined how Eastern Europeans understood Soviet-style socialism as a system in which they were active participants.<sup>10</sup> In arguably the most prominent example from this literature, historian Jochen Hellbeck explores how people strove to perfect themselves as subjects of the Soviet state through their diaries. Litinskii's case file provides another source to explore such a person. He was a university-educated family man in a stable marriage who served in the Red Army and held the kinds of technical positions that presaged a successful career. He was an exemplar of 'cultured behaviour', a set of norms and practices that defined a good Soviet person.<sup>11</sup> He played chess, wrote poetry, and strove for self-improvement in after work courses. He did morning calisthenics daily from the age of sixteen, continuing even in the Kharkiv jail and the Gulag, despite the prohibition of the guards.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot Against the Jewish Doctors, 1948–1953* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004); Joshua Rubenstein, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Seth Bernstein, 'Unfinished Business: Stalinist Anti-Jewish Investigations before and after the Death of Stalin', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 25, no. 1 (2024): 35–59.

<sup>7</sup> Anna Shternshis, *When Sonia Met Boris: An Oral History of Jewish Life under Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 159–74.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Benjamin Tromly, *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia: Universities and Intellectual Life under Stalin and Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 92–101.

<sup>9</sup> A. B. Litinskii, *Zhitia ne sviatykh (o sud'bakh chelovecheskikh)* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2001), 34. Hereafter, Litinskii Memoir.

<sup>10</sup> The literature on subjectivity in the Soviet Union and in socialist Eastern Europe is vast. See Anna Krylova, 'The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies', *Kritika: New Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (2000): 1–28; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000). See the edited volume in Russian on post-Stalinist subjectivities: Anatoly Pinsky, ed., *Posle Stalina: pozdnesovetskaia sub"ektivnost' (1953–1985)* [After Stalin: Late Soviet Subjectivity (1953–1985)] (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2018). For these issues in the Polish context, see Katherine Lebow, *Unfinished Utopia: Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society, 1949–1956* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 23.

<sup>11</sup> David Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 35.

As a veteran and an observer of Soviet official cultural norms, Litinskii was a bulwark of Stalin's regime.<sup>13</sup>

Litinskii also accepted and internalised Soviet aspirations for equality among national groups. This understanding was perhaps more pronounced among Soviet Jews. Scholars like Oleg Budnitskii, Brendan McGeever and others show that the Bolshevik Party's relationship with Jews during and after the Russian Civil War produced significant conflicts.<sup>14</sup> Despite Bolshevik attacks on Jews as supposed economic opponents, Elissa Bemporad asserts that Jews often believed central Soviet authorities to be a benevolent force in taming antisemitism in politics and society.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, as Yuri Slezkine argues, for some Jews of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, identification with the revolutionary movement and Soviet state could be a kind of assimilation.<sup>16</sup> Litinskii accepted his nationality as Jewish and had many Jewish friends, but he was not religious, apparently spoke Russian as his first language, and seems to have identified most strongly as a Soviet person. Rather than a manifestation of his anti-Soviet beliefs, the Big Boss letter was a sign of Litinskii's attachment to Soviet frameworks. The letters were products of the dissonance between Litinskii's understanding of himself as a Soviet person and a political culture that marginalised him for his Jewish nationality. Litinskii did not betray Soviet power but engaged in a desperate deception that he hoped would save the Soviet Union that he knew, one that would fulfil its promise to him and other Jewish Soviets.

### The Creation of a Soviet-Jewish Striver

Litinskii was born in 1914 on the eve of the Russian Revolution. His father, Boris Litinskii, was an accountant drafted into the Tsarist army just months before his son was born. After capture by the Austro-Hungarian Army, Boris escaped a prisoner of war camp and returned to his hometown of Huliaipole. Later he moved to Kharkiv to work as a bookkeeper. Aleksandr Litinskii's mother died from a blood infection in 1919, and subsequently he moved to Kharkiv with his father and his stepmother. Litinskii described his family as having ties to revolutionary movements. Huliaipole was the stronghold of the Ukrainian anarchist revolutionary Nestor Makhno, and Litinskii asserted that the movement had influenced the thinking of his aunts, uncles, and cousins. Some faced arrest in the 1930s on charges of supporting anarchists. Boris Litinskii, however, 'professed revolutionary (non-anarchist) beliefs' and transmitted them to his son.<sup>17</sup>

His schooling came at a time of transformation. Kharkiv was the capital of Soviet Ukraine until 1934. Although its residents primarily spoke Russian, the republic's government presided over indigenisation efforts that attempted to increase the use of the Ukrainian language and the presence of ethnic Ukrainians in government.<sup>18</sup> Litinskii went to a Ukrainian-language public school where all official activities were in Ukrainian but most unofficial interactions were in Russian. It is unclear whether he spoke Yiddish or Hebrew with his father, but Litinskii seems to have preferred Slavic languages. He entered the Institute for the Mechanization of Agriculture in 1933. His initiation to the institute must have been a shock. Stalin's regime had begun the forced collectivisation of the countryside at the end of 1929. In 1932–3 the combination of large and inflexible grain requisitions and a poor

<sup>13</sup> Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941–1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Vera Sandomirsky Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> Oleg Budnitskii, *Russian Jews between the Reds and the Whites, 1917–1920* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Brendan McGeever, *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). See also Andrew Sloin, *The Jewish Revolution in Belorussia: Economy, Race, and Bolshevik Power* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Elissa Bemporad, *Legacy of Blood: Jews, Pogroms, and Ritual Murder in the Lands of the Soviets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 236–42.

<sup>17</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 5–11, 15–16.

<sup>18</sup> See Markian Dobczansky, 'From Soviet Heartland to Ukrainian Borderland: Searching for Identity in Kharkiv, 1943–2004' (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2016), 89.

harvest led to a famine that contributed to the deaths of millions in Ukraine. Litinskii's institute mobilised him and other students to the countryside to assist in the requisitions, giving him firsthand knowledge of the starvation that unfolded. The incident remained in his memory and later inspired a poem that appeared in his memoir.<sup>19</sup>

As a newly minted agricultural engineer, Litinskii received a placement at a Machine-Tractor Station (MTS) near Dzhambul in Kazakhstan (today's Taraz). The MTSs were bases that held mechanised agricultural equipment and serviced collective farms in a process that extracted grain from the countryside. They were the outposts of central rule whose workers were among the few representatives of Soviet authority in rural areas. When Litinskii reflected on his identity later, in a judicial appeal, he wrote, 'I was raised in the spirit of internationalism under Soviet rule and before the war forgot that I was Jewish. I had friends who were Ukrainian, Russian, Jewish.'<sup>20</sup> Tellingly, Litinskii did not mention the Kazakh inhabitants in the area surrounding the MTS. His amalgamation of Ukrainians, Russians, and Jews and omission of others implied a sense of shared belonging to the same family of Soviet culture. Despite the coercive policies of the 1930s he witnessed and implemented, he still identified strongly with the goals of the Soviet state.

The Second World War strengthened his connection to Soviet rule. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, millions of people were mobilised into Red Army service as Soviet forces desperately tried to hold back the Wehrmacht. Litinskii was twenty-seven and a reserve officer, but he was also a specialist in agricultural technology with a higher education. Although the Red Army mobilised millions of men and hundreds of thousands of women, the Soviet government exempted highly qualified specialists like Litinskii from conscription. Litinskii recalled that even in 1942, when government orders made him eligible for conscription, he remained at his post. He wrote of his deferral defensively, 'They just wouldn't take me to the army, "Work, you're more necessary in the rear!"'<sup>21</sup> In the meantime, he met his wife-to-be, Rakhil, a medical student whose institute had gone into evacuation in Central Asia. At last, in 1943, the army drafted Litinskii for training at an infantry academy in Almaty. Following a year of preparation, Litinskii received a commission as an infantry officer and was sent to the front. After approximately a month of fighting in East Prussia, he suffered a wound and, after recovery, served in a reserve unit in the Urals.<sup>22</sup>

As was the case for so many people in the Soviet Union, the war added another layer of civic identity for Litinskii. A person's actions during the epoch-defining period of war shaped their status as Soviet people for the rest of their lives. Those who lived under German occupation or worked as forced labourers in Germany faced scrutiny.<sup>23</sup> Had Litinskii remained in Kazakhstan as a worker at the MTS, his fellow Soviets might have sneered that he had fought on the 'Tashkent front', a charge of cowardice that often had antisemitic overtones. Instead, Litinskii's biography entitled him to status and privileges. He wrote about the mentality of veterans in an autobiographical poem in 1988, 'We returned from the front to have an effect, "Everyone will treat *frontoviki* with respect!"'<sup>24</sup>

After the war, the Litinskis hoped for advancement. The first job placement of many Soviet university graduates was involuntary but after a few years of service in a distant or undesirable locale, they might attempt a transfer to a more attractive position. In the case of the Litinskis, the couple first attempted to move to Moscow after demobilisation but were unable to find an apartment in the capital. They instead settled in Litinskii's hometown of Kharkiv, where Rakhil took a job as a paediatrician at a hospital and Aleksandr returned to his alma mater as an instructor.<sup>25</sup> He hoped to move ahead in the institute and complete a graduate (candidate) degree. For this reason, he learned English and

<sup>19</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 24–26.

<sup>20</sup> Arrest File, 325 (Litinskii Cassation Appeal from 20 May 1953; 325–26).

<sup>21</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Arrest File, 80–81 (Interrogation of Litinskii A.B. from 17 March 1953; 80–95).

<sup>23</sup> Franziska Exeler, *Ghosts of War: Nazi Occupation and Its Aftermath in Soviet Belarus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

<sup>24</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 40.

<sup>25</sup> Arrest File, 200–201 (Interrogation of Litinskii R.M. from 30 March 1953; 200–208).



passed a required exam for the programme. Out of belief or ambition, he also was an active participant in political education. He was the secretary of several reading groups at his workplace and finished a political education course at a night school. Litinskii was a striver who adhered to the rules of social promotion in the Soviet Union and probably believed in their righteousness.<sup>26</sup>

The war not only bolstered Litinskii's sense of Sovietness but also his Jewish identification. His father and stepmother had remained in Kharkiv when the Germans invaded Soviet Ukraine. The district office of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) mobilised Boris Litinskii, age fifty-five, into a labour unit sent to build fortifications. Although Boris Litinskii's body was never found, members of his unit told his wife that the Germans captured the workers and shot those identified as communists and Jews, including Litinskii, on the spot.<sup>27</sup> Aleksandr Litinskii's experience of the Holocaust was like that of other Sovietised Jews. Viktor Shtrum, the hero of Vasilii Grossman's *Life and Fate*, learned that his mother died at the hands of the Germans in occupied territory in an episode based on Grossman's own experience of the loss of his mother. Shtrum, Grossman, and Litinskii had a tenuous relationship to their Jewishness, but the death of their loved ones because they were Jewish highlighted their own identity and the shared fate of Jewish people in the face of antisemitism.<sup>28</sup>

Stalinist anti-Jewish policies in the postwar period also reinforced a sense of Jewish identity. After the Second World War, Stalin's regime launched a campaign against foreign elements, the so-called *zhdanovshchina*, named after its mouthpiece, the Communist Party Central Committee secretary Andrei Zhdanov. Although the *zhdanovshchina* attacked the general liberalism of cultural politics during the war, it also targeted Jews as those with especially strong ties to foreigners. The foundation of Israel in 1948 marked an intensification of the campaign. Since the 1930s, Soviet authorities had used arrest and deportation against nationalities with titular homelands beyond the Soviet Union (e.g. ethnic Germans) who supposedly posed a threat to Soviet security. Now Soviet leaders saw Jews as a similar danger. In the press, articles decried 'rootless cosmopolitans', people who had no loyalty to the Soviet motherland but only to their narrow interests. These articles did not attack Jews openly, because overt antisemitism would have contradicted the tradition of Bolshevik anti-antisemitism that had been a signal difference from Tsarist antisemitism. Moreover, even as public pronouncements preferred to highlight the shared suffering of all Soviet citizens, officials and people knew well that the Germans had targeted Jews for mass murder, and a Soviet campaign against Jews as a group would have raised distasteful comparisons with the Nazis.<sup>29</sup> Instead, they attached the 'cosmopolitan' euphemism to names that were unmistakably Jewish and shuttered Jewish cultural institutions like Yiddish theatres. Discrimination against Jews was not universal, but these signals encouraged workplaces to scrutinise Jewish employees and for the party to limit admission of Jewish members.<sup>30</sup>

Kharkiv's experience of the 'anti-cosmopolitan' campaign was as impactful as anywhere. As Markian Dobczansky points out, the Germans killed most of the Jews who had remained in occupied Kharkiv. Almost all postwar Jewish residents had spent the war in evacuation or in the army, meaning that they were generally younger and more aligned with the Soviet regime. In contrast, Kharkiv's Slavic residents could have lived through the German occupation, raising uncomfortable questions about their loyalties.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the city experienced postwar indigenisation, which in Kharkiv meant that party and state institutions were supposed to give preference to ethnic Ukrainians and Russians over other nationalities in hiring. The firing of supposed cosmopolitans led to rapid changes

<sup>26</sup> Arrest File, 284 (Character Reference). Litinskii Memoir, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Arrest File, 86; 210 (Interrogation of Ogorinskaia S.L. from 31 March 1953; 209–216).

<sup>28</sup> Slezkine, *Jewish Century*, 288–89.

<sup>29</sup> Irina Makhalova, "What Do You Know about the Crimes against People of Jewish Nationality?": Soviet Responses to the Crimes against Jews in Crimea,' unpublished working paper.

<sup>30</sup> Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina*, vol. 2, 317–331. In Sovietising areas, the need for loyal specialists blunted the anti-semitic campaign. See Diana Dumitru, 'Jewish Social Mobility under Late Stalinism: A View from the Newly Sovietizing Periphery,' *Slavic Review* 78, no. 4 (2019): 986–1008.

<sup>31</sup> Dobczansky, 'From Soviet Heartland to Ukrainian Borderland,' 111.

in spheres where Jews had played a prominent role. At Kharkiv University, the number of Jews on the party committee fell from 114 members (approximately 30 per cent) in December 1950 to 79 members (approximately 20 per cent) in July 1952.<sup>32</sup>

The large majority of Jews in Kharkiv were not fired or repressed, but presumably most knew of such incidents or feared them. A friend of Litinskii's from university described how at the Khoroshevskii vehicle parts factory, six workers had balked when the administration had made the common and much-resented request that they go to local collective farms to help with the harvest. Two of the protesting workers were Russians who kept their positions. The four Jewish protesters lost theirs. At Rakhil Litinskaia's clinic, two of her bosses, both Jews, had been fired for 'technical errors'.<sup>33</sup> At Litinskii's institute, a Jewish colleague said that hardly any Jewish students were being admitted and confessed that he feared he would be fired.<sup>34</sup> In Litinskii's apartment complex, he learned that neighbourhood children had been harassing his son because he was Jewish.<sup>35</sup>

The people around Litinskii connected these incidents to the broader campaign of antisemitism and the possibility of a mass campaign against Jews in the future. Litinskii reported a Jewish acquaintance from political classes, Galina Kochevrina, as telling him, 'You look at the newspapers. There are only Jewish last names among the cosmopolitans. You know that this fate awaits all Jews.' In 1952 Kochevrina asked Litinskii if he could recommend a topic for her to develop a speech for her political education class. Party Secretary Georgii Malenkov had recently delivered the main address at the Nineteenth Congress of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and Litinskii thought it would be natural to recount it. Kochevrina balked at the suggestion. Although evidence would later show that Stalin was the main force behind the anti-Jewish campaign, Malenkov had a visible role in its implementation, and Kochevrina was among many at the time who assumed he was responsible overall.<sup>36</sup> There were other reactions to the campaign among the Jews in Litinskii's orbit. Kochevrina's father had overheard their discussions and urged them to stop talking about the matter, apparently out of fear. Others accepted the essential basis for the campaign. Liubov' Sher, an English teacher at Litinskii's institute, listened to his criticisms of official antisemitism and responded that Jews had been fired because of clannishness, that they only hired relatives and friends.<sup>37</sup>

The scope and nature of Litinskii's relationships with Jewish and non-Jewish acquaintances are difficult to assess. His arrest file is where most of the data about these interactions appear, and the investigators were primarily interested in implicating other Jews as Litinskii's co-conspirators. It is clear, however, that Litinskii had many encounters with non-Jewish colleagues and students. A reference at work from his supervisor and colleagues at the institute described his rapport with students as good.<sup>38</sup> Relations with colleagues, however, became tense because of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign. Litinskii in his memoir recalled how the head of the department of Marxism-Leninism and a member of the party leadership of the university identified him as a potential candidate for membership. The only possible circumstance she foresaw that could prevent his joining the party was if he had lived under German occupation. Litinskii told her, 'If I had remained [under occupation], I wouldn't be alive.' The Marxism-Leninism instructor responded to the news that he was Jewish by saying, 'It can't be! You don't look like that at all.' She did not raise the subject with him again.<sup>39</sup>

Litinskii had conversations about the anti-Jewish turn with at least two Slavic colleagues, seemingly at his instigation. Both suggested that Litinskii was twisting the facts in a way that could be construed as 'Jewish nationalism'. When Litinskii told one, Valentin Sinitsyn, about the harassment of his son,

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>33</sup> Arrest File, 50 (Interrogation of Litinskii A.B. from 10 March 1953; 49–51).

<sup>34</sup> Arrest File, 150 (Interrogation of Litinskii A.B. from 27 March 1953; 150–52).

<sup>35</sup> Arrest File, 50, 62–66 (Interrogation of Litinskii A.B. from 12 March 1953; 62–70), 220–224 (Interrogation of Sinitsyn V.I. from 7 April 1953; 220–224).

<sup>36</sup> Arrest File, 108; 131–32 (Interrogation of Litinskii A.B. from 26 March 1953; 129–33).

<sup>37</sup> Arrest File, 108–109; 232–33 (Judicial Confrontation between Litinskii A.B. and Sher L.I. from 9 April 1953; 228–34).

<sup>38</sup> Arrest File, 284.

<sup>39</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 82.

Sinitsyn responded with sympathy but also with the suggestion that it was a private issue that could be resolved with the parents of the children or the local party organisation.<sup>40</sup> Why did Litinskii raise these issues with his non-Jewish colleagues? It seems clear that he had an irrepressible sense of indignation. Yet these discussions must also have reflected a degree of trust between coworkers, for having unguarded discussions of politicised issues in Stalin's Soviet Union was dangerous.<sup>41</sup> Litinskii's interactions with his non-Jewish colleagues at once demonstrated his sense of closeness to them but also the increasing barriers between Jews and non-Jews that the anti-cosmopolitan campaign produced.

In spite of the campaign, Litinskii still viewed himself as a Soviet person. He related to interrogators a conversation he had in October 1952 with a Jewish architect and writer named Iakov Livshits, who was working with Litinskii's institute on an exhibition. Livshits asked Litinskii if he had noticed the lack of trust that Jews were shown in the recent years. The discussion turned to the 1948 visit of Golda Meerson (later Meir), the Israeli ambassador to the Soviet Union, which had generated enthusiastic reactions from many Soviet Jews. Rumours spread that Meerson had received a list of Jews who wished to emigrate to Israel, all of whom were then repressed. Livshits asked, 'What if someone offered you the chance to go to Israel?' Litinskii claimed to have told Livshits that he had no interest in emigrating.<sup>42</sup> This story reflected positively on Litinskii during an interrogation, but it was also probably true. Although it became possible for Jews to emigrate to Israel from the late 1960s, Litinskii remained in the Soviet Union. He and his family had a comfortable life in Kharkiv. He had grown up with Soviet power, had benefited from post-revolutionary social mobility, had shed blood for the country. German genocide and postwar antisemitism had made him more aware that he was Jewish, but he remained a patriot and a believer in the Soviet state. Stalin's regime offered outstanding people like Litinskii rewards for their loyalty. Why should it matter that he was Jewish?

### A Striver Becomes Big Boss

Despairing of the antisemitic turn in the Soviet Union, Litinskii decided to act. In his memoir, he sarcastically described the actions that would lead to his arrest as the following: 'I had the nerve to talk about my indignation aloud in discussions with acquaintances and even had the audacity (what impudence!) to write "to the top" about how in the localities people were breaking Soviet laws and the Stalin Constitution.' Although the details are vague, Litinskii implies that he wrote to Stalin in the hopes that the leader was unaware of the antisemitic actions that were unfolding in places like Kharkiv. The 640-line poem Litinskii included in his memoir about his arrest and time in the Gulag includes these lines about the case:

Where is equality? We use that word with shame!  
 'Up top, they must not know,' I thought.  
 And so I wrote to the highest name,  
 the name for whom the people fought.  
 They say now, 'It was naïve, absurd  
 to believe that the Chief wasn't forewarned!'  
 But all the people believed in him without a word,  
 the man who treated the millions with scorn.<sup>43</sup>

Under interrogation, Litinskii also admitted that he had written to a 'leader of the party and Soviet state'. Police ordered a search for an anonymous letter among the Kremlin's mail but never found it.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Arrest File, 109.

<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey Hosking, 'Trust and Distrust in the USSR: An Overview,' *The Slavonic and East European Review* 91, no. 1 (2013): 1–25.

<sup>42</sup> Arrest File, 152.

<sup>43</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 34, 40.

<sup>44</sup> Arrest File, 291 (Report from 7 May 1953).



In the Soviet Union (and, indeed, before and after Soviet rule), people wrote to leaders to resolve issues they believed were the fault of local administrators or lower level bureaucracies.<sup>45</sup> Jewish people in particular had seen central authorities as a counterweight to the antisemitism, including in the recent past when the Soviet state had attacked antisemitism during the Second World War as a proxy for Nazism and defeatism.<sup>46</sup> It perhaps seemed to Litinskii and others that Stalin, now in his eighth decade, might have been unaware of the policies of deputies who were governing on his behalf. Moreover, it was not illegal for a citizen to alert the Kremlin about questionable actions, although that citizen risked being charged with writing a false denunciation. From the perspective of 1999, writing to Stalin was foolish, but from the perspective of 1950, it was perhaps understandable.

Litinskii in his memoir writes of no other incidents that led to his arrest, while the police linked him to several letters written under pseudonyms. One, dated 13 September 1950, was signed by someone who identified as a Russian from Kharkiv named N. N. Antropov and was addressed to Viacheslav Molotov, the veteran Soviet statesman. Writing to Molotov with criticisms of antisemitism was a logical choice. The former Soviet foreign minister had been married to Polina Zhemchuzhina, a Bolshevik politician of Jewish origin who was arrested in 1948 after her interactions with Golda Meerson supposedly exposed her divided loyalties. The opaque dynamics of power in the Kremlin allowed rumours to flourish, and the letter's author may have seen Molotov's dismissal as foreign minister in 1949 as a sign that he opposed official antisemitism.

The letter to Molotov criticised the anti-Jewish turn but was also strikingly pro-Soviet. 'Based on references to a directive by c[omrade] Malenkov, Jews are being hounded out of the ministries, higher education, and leadership posts in industry. . . . It is already worse for them than under Tsarism in many cases.' The danger of the campaign was that 'the majority [of Jews] only had their names remaining' as signs of their Jewishness but were previously the most active and loyal Soviet citizens. 'There are activists of the civil war and the latest war [the Second World War] with sons who were not admitted to an institute just because they are "Shapiros" who are not far from an active struggle against the government that made that happen.' Antropov connected this growing antipathy with another widespread rumour of the time, that soon the Soviet Union would find itself in a war with the United States or another capitalist power.<sup>47</sup> The author closed with a threat: 'National antagonism will have consequences in the impending war. Change your policies before it is too late.'<sup>48</sup> It is possible that Litinskii had this letter in mind when he said he wrote 'to the top' in his memoir. If that is the case, the provocative Antropov letter is hardly the innocuous text that the memoir evokes.

The other letters the police linked to Litinskii were the Small Boss cypher and the 'instructions' from Big Boss. Mailed from Kharkiv in late November 1950, they echoed and intensified the themes of the Antropov letter. Big Boss presented himself as an American spymaster working with a network of agents who hoped to undermine the Soviet Union in the advance of a war with Western powers. The chief aim of the network was to increase tensions between nationalities in the Soviet Union, which would undermine the country's international credibility and its internal cohesion. In the instructions, Big Boss described only antisemitic incidents that occurred in Kharkiv but said that there were agents throughout Ukraine. The network was responsible, for example, for an instance when the director of the city mining institute announced publicly that he would not admit Jewish students. Yet such episodes had not done enough damage, according to Big Boss. He argued that the

<sup>45</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Suplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s,' *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (1996): 78–105.

<sup>46</sup> Anna Shternshis, 'Between Life and Death: Why Some Soviet Jews Decided to Leave and Others to Stay in 1941,' *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15, no. 3 (2014): 477–504. Bemporad, *Legacy of Blood*, 2. Arsenii V. Starkov, 'Bo'ba s antisemitizmom v sovetskom tylu v nachal'nyi period Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny, 1941–1942,' *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 48, no. 1 (2021): 3–33.

<sup>47</sup> On such rumours, see Elena Zubkova, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions and Disappointments, 1945–1957* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 83.

<sup>48</sup> Arrest File, packet with documents (Letter to Molotov from 13 September 1950).

network 'should try to make it so that they [Soviet Jews] are ignored and degraded like our negroes'. This goal was achievable through a set of rumours:

- Jews were waiting for an American intervention.
- Jews were American spies.
- Jews had taken over the highest ranking and most profitable positions in the country.
- Jews had not fought in the war but remained in safety at home.
- Jewish doctors were infecting people under the guise of giving vaccinations.

And through a set of actions:

- Jews should be removed from all positions or else ordinary (non-Jewish) people would react negatively.
- Spread the slogans 'Soviets without Jews', 'Socialism without Jews', and 'Communism without Jews'.
- Connect to popular religious beliefs, such as that 'yids killed Christ'.
- Prevent all Jews from being elected to local Soviets.

Writing at the end of 1950, the Big Boss letter compiled not only the most prevalent anti-Jewish rumours and populist justifications for such rumours, but also anticipated the accusations of Jewish medical malfeasance in the Doctors' Plot by two years. The writer asserted that as his followers carried out these orders, they should deny that antisemitic activity was occurring. 'They [the Bolsheviks] always follow the principle: "If our enemy is criticising us, it means we are following the correct policy. If our enemy is praising us, it means we have made a mistake and need to change our course."' He also suggested that his anti-Soviet agents could spread rumours that the anti-Jewish activity was linked to a potential succession crisis in Stalin's old age. Big Boss claimed that he had sent no fewer than 2000 copies to fifty addresses across the Soviet Union, although it seems that only a handful of letters surfaced.<sup>49</sup>

The evidence that Litinskii wrote the letters is convincing. In 1951 an MGB analysis of the handwriting found that the authors of the Big Boss letter and the Antropov letter were the same person. A year later, in December 1952, an MGB handwriting expert concluded that the author was Litinskii.<sup>50</sup> During the investigation, trial, and appeals, Litinskii admitted that he wrote the letters. Only on the first night of the investigation did he deny authorship and the next morning confessed.<sup>51</sup> It is true that Soviet interrogators often used psychological and, under Stalin, physical coercion. Litinskii wrote in his memoir that the interrogators deprived him of sleep, and the time stamps on the interrogation protocols corroborate that claim. During the interrogation when he first confessed to writing the letters, he could not have had more than a few hours of sleep. Nonetheless, Litinskii had other opportunities to assert his innocence. He admitted to writing the letters in his trial and when he petitioned the verdict. In 1990, when the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union overturned his conviction during an automatic review, the court still found that Litinskii had written the letters but had not committed a crime because the letters had not been an attempt to undermine the Soviet Union.<sup>52</sup>

The content of the letters also suggests that Litinskii was the author. The document was the product of a creative mind, but the proposed antisemitic rumours undoubtedly emerged from the slurs that the author had heard. Litinskii's wife was a physician, so it is possible to imagine her telling him about

<sup>49</sup> Arrest File, unnumbered packet with documents (Big Boss Letter).

<sup>50</sup> Arrest File, 252 (Expert Analysis from 31 December 1952; 251–52); 279 (Expert Analysis from 8 September 1952; 279–80).

<sup>51</sup> Arrest File, 21–23 (Interrogation of Litinskii A.B. from 7 March 1953; 21–23); 24 (Interrogation of Litinskii A.B. from 8 March 1953, morning; 24–26).

<sup>52</sup> Arrest File, 308 (Trial Transcript from 16 May 1953; 307–16); 325; 354 (Resolution of the Supreme Court of the USSR from 20 June 1990, 352–54).

patients who refused vaccinations because they feared that Jewish doctors would intentionally harm them. Such an episode would have fit well with contemporaneous incidents, culminating in the Doctors' Plot, that Bemporad sees as echoes of the blood libel.<sup>53</sup> At the least, it shows that the author of the Big Boss letter believed that such rumours had enough currency that Soviet leaders would envision their resonating in society.

Big Boss made statements that would have been odd from anyone other than a Soviet Jew. Discussing the popular rumour of Jewish wartime cowardice, Big Boss advised his spy network to 'cover up the fact that as a proportion Jews were a bigger presence on the front than Russians and other nations, that Russians, Ukrainians, and especially Georgians as a proportion saved themselves in the rear and engaged more in speculation (in Georgia everything was for sale: from a doctoral degree to medals and so on)'. One would be forgiven for wondering why American spy Big Boss so admired Soviet Jews and so disparaged Georgians. Besides such suspicious comments, Big Boss wrote about Soviet political life as only someone raised in the Soviet Union would. The letter said that Jews who protested against state antisemitism would be accused of failing 'to understand the dialectical development of Marxism' because national tensions had been resolved theoretically when '*Marxism and the National Question* [Stalin's pamphlet on the issue] was written in 1913'.<sup>54</sup> The letter's writer was thus probably a Jewish veteran from Kharkiv who had undertaken a significant amount of political training in the Soviet Union. It was someone who believed in national equality under Soviet rule as a revolutionary principle and as a practice that strengthened the country by producing a bulwark of supporters among Jews. If Litinskii was not Big Boss, he was the perfect simulacrum of the pseudonymous author.

The puzzle of Big Boss is less whether Litinskii was the author of the letter than why he does not address the charge in his memoir. Even if he was not Big Boss, the letters were worth mentioning as the main accusation in his case. The closest he comes to acknowledging the charge is when he disparages the uneducated interrogator who accused him of being an American spy and 'singing the songs of Wul Street'.<sup>55</sup> It is hard to imagine that someone would have remembered this error but forgotten the accusation of writing letters under the name of an American spy. If he did forget, the mention of the Big Boss letter in the Supreme Court's review from 1990 would have reminded him later in life. Litinskii perhaps refused to discuss the Big Boss letters because he did not want to explain the false charges and give them credence. But the most likely scenario is that Litinskii's omission was a sign of unease. It was one thing to write to Stalin to alert him to the dangers of antisemitism in Kharkiv. That version of events cast Litinskii as a victim of his trust in the Soviet system, someone who faced repression only because he told truth to power. Admitting to the Big Boss letter would have undermined Litinskii's claims to victimhood. One might admire Litinskii's plan, agree with his complaints about Soviet antisemitism, and see his actions as justified. Still, the Big Boss letter was a provocation. Indeed, Litinskii himself must have understood that writing such letters was grounds for arrest. Why otherwise go to such lengths to hide his identity as their author? And of course, the deception had not worked. The logic of Litinskii's letters had not convinced Stalin or Molotov or anyone else that the anti-Jewish campaign was a mistake. If anything, they reinforced the need to repress Soviet Jews who were capable of such deception, and Litinskii found himself arrested as a result.

### A Striver in the Soviet Underworld

Police arrested Litinskii in March 1953, three months after they connected him with the Antropov and Big Boss letters. Despite the prominent place of the letters in the arrest warrant, the immediate cause of Litinskii's arrest seems to have been a workplace argument during Stalin's final illness or just after his death. On 4 or 5 March 1953, Litinskii and his Russian colleague, Valentin Sinitsyn, resumed a

<sup>53</sup> See Bemporad, *Legacy of Blood*, 136–42.

<sup>54</sup> Arrest File, unnumbered packet with documents.

<sup>55</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 37.

conversation about official antisemitism. Litinskii and Sinitsyn had previously disagreed on the issue in January. Presumably the earlier discussion was inspired by the infamous publication in *Pravda* that announced the case against the Kremlin doctors. In his memoir, Litinskii did not recall this incident, nor did he recall any accusations of medical malpractice that he may have heard in Kharkiv. Instead, he saw his arrest not as transpiring because of his reaction to the Doctors' Plot and his worries about state antisemitism more broadly, but because of an anti-Jewish campaign of fabrication exemplified by the arrest of the doctors.<sup>56</sup>

In March 1953, the men's argument was over the firings of high-profile Jewish figures. Litinskii said that the dismissals were a violation of the Soviet constitution and produced widespread mistrust of Jews. Sinitsyn still disagreed. The role of Stalin's death in the argument is not made explicit in the documents. It is easy to imagine that the spark and subtext of the dispute was Stalin's illness and death and its significance for Soviet politics in the future. Litinskii and Sinitsyn would have been among the millions of Soviet citizens for whom Stalin's death aroused strong reactions. Some saw it as a tragedy, the end of a transformative epoch. Hundreds, possibly more, died in the crush of mourners hoping to bid farewell to Stalin at his funeral. Yet around the country there were many who celebrated Stalin's death. Some did so quietly, but others faced accusations of anti-Soviet agitation for denigrating the deceased leader.<sup>57</sup> Stalin had died, but the transition from Stalinism would take years and would never be complete. At the very least, it seems that when Litinskii and Sinitsyn met at work, Stalin's passing made their emotions run high. Perhaps Sinitsyn provoked Litinskii by expressing sorrow at the dictator's demise. Or perhaps Litinskii asserted that changes were due after Stalin's death.

Following the heated conversation, Sinitsyn submitted a written denunciation of Litinskii to the director of the institute. On 7 March, a member of the institute's administration stormed into Litinskii's department and pointed at him: 'To the deputy director! Now!' The deputy director was in his office with a man who was supposed to drive Litinskii to the municipal headquarters to deal with a matter of unspecified local business. Litinskii followed him to the car, which took him promptly to the local jail where he would spend the next four months.<sup>58</sup> Litinskii was one of the final arrestees of Stalin's anti-Jewish campaign.

Considering that investigators had concluded that Litinskii was the author of the Big Boss letter at the height of the campaign in December 1952, it is unclear why he was not detained earlier. One explanation is that investigators were compiling evidence for a case that might include more arrestees than just Litinskii. In his memoir, Litinskii wrote that the architect and author Livshits had offered to introduce him to fellow writers in the city, since Litinskii apparently had literary ambitions then. Litinskii speculated that Livshits was working for the police and trying to draw him into contact with a broader circle of artists that police would later turn into a case against Jewish intelligentsia in Kharkiv.<sup>59</sup> There is little evidence to support this theory. Livshits does not appear in the file as an informant but as one of the Jewish residents of Kharkiv who warranted additional surveillance.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, Litinskii's assertion that the police hoped to construct a larger case involving him is plausible. The arrest warrant for Litinskii read: 'In essence . . . the "Instructions" [the Big Boss letter] called for Jews to unite to fight against the nationality policies of the Communist Party and Soviet government.'<sup>61</sup> Using this framing, police could have transformed the Big Boss letter into the centre of a

<sup>56</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 36

<sup>57</sup> For instance, see the mournful and celebratory reactions collected by the MGB surveillance reports on popular moods in Haluzevyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Sluzhby Bezpeky Ukrainy (Sectoral State Archive of Security Service of Ukraine), fond [collection] 16, sprava 881, arkush [folio] 43–50, 98–109, 114–18, 142–53, 181–92, 205–16, 262–71.

<sup>58</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 35.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>60</sup> Arrest File, 293 (Resolution about the Separation of Material into Discrete Files). Livshits's name is given in the document as 'Lifshits.'

<sup>61</sup> Arrest File, 4 (Arrest Warrant from 7 March 1953; 3–4).

larger counterrevolutionary conspiracy involving Jews who supposedly agreed with Litinskii and aided him.

The accusation in the warrant meant that much of the investigation aimed to determine Litinskii's motivations for writing the Big Boss letter and to assess the scope of the potential conspiracy. The origin of the letters was at once strange and logical. Litinskii told investigators that he wanted 'the Soviet government to think that enemies were using antisemitism for their [hostile] goals and to take measures against antisemitism'. He used carbon paper to create multiple copies of the Big Boss letter, chose names at random from magazines as recipients, and gave a random local Russian's name on the return address. He explained that he took the cipher from an unnamed work of fiction. It is possible to imagine that it came from a book about the recent war with Germany or perhaps from a work about the socialist underground in pre-revolutionary Russia. Besides this technical borrowing, the plan seems to have been Litinskii's invention alone. Litinskii assumed (correctly) that the encoded letter would give the appearance of secrecy and make authorities devote more attention to determining its authorship. He hoped that the mystery surrounding the Big Boss letter would be so great that it would appear in a report to Soviet leaders. Those leaders, though they would be appalled by the idea that an American spy ring had infiltrated the Soviet Union, would understand the dangers of state antisemitism.<sup>62</sup>

The investigators' initial questioning took the Big Boss letter at face value – that Litinskii really was an agent of American intelligence – either because they were dull or, more plausibly, because they could not admit to the realities of official antisemitism. When Litinskii asserted that the letters had been a warning wrapped in a hoax, investigators asked why he had not simply informed authorities about the antisemitism he had seen. After all, antisemitism and other forms of national discrimination were crimes in the Soviet Union. Litinskii gave the measured response that he was unsure how Soviet officials would have reacted to a direct letter making allegations of antisemitism against officials in Kharkiv. After several weeks of questioning, the investigators accepted Litinskii's explanation and asserted that he had engaged in 'blackmail' against the Soviet Union: officials should privilege Soviet Jews who would otherwise undermine the Soviet Union's position in the world.<sup>63</sup> Still, the bizarre plot was difficult to classify. One argument against the notion that the Antropov and Big Boss letters were police fabrications is that investigators and judicial authorities could hardly wrap their minds around the plot. At Litinskii's trial on 16 May 1953, the judge and his own lawyer asked if he was healthy and if he had seen a neuropathologist. Ultimately the investigator refused to find a charge that covered Litinskii's attempt to scare Soviet authorities and instead claimed in the indictment that he had tried 'to inflame antisemitism against Jewish people artificially to unite them against the Communist Party and Soviet Government'.<sup>64</sup>

By the time of Litinskii's trial, a major shift had begun in Soviet politics. Soon after his arrest, the collective leadership that assumed power publicly reversed the Doctors' Plot. Simultaneously, the leadership issued amnesties to Gulag inmates on non-political sentences, to women, and to political prisoners serving short sentences. These were signs that the post-Stalin leadership was abandoning mass repression that had an immediate impact on hundreds of thousands of Soviet people.

These changes did influence the outcome in Litinskii's case, but not for the arrestee himself. Litinskii was among dozens of Jewish arrestees whose cases began under Stalin but ended after the dictator's death, and who remained in the Gulag for months or years following the release of the Kremlin doctors. These cases tended to be like Litinskii's and involve accusations of 'Jewish nationalism' in the form of protest against antisemitic policies. Outside of Stalin's Soviet Union, the facts of these cases would not rise to the level of a crime – listening to a handful of Voice of Israel broadcasts, complaining about anti-Jewish policies, or even joking about the possible death of Stalin. Nonetheless,

<sup>62</sup> Arrest File, 25–26; 34–35 (Interrogation of Litinskii A.B. from 8 March 1953, evening; 34–36); 79 (Interrogation of Litinskii A.B. from 16 March 1953; 72–79); 101 (Interrogation of Litinskii A.B. from 18 March 1953; 96–105).

<sup>63</sup> Arrest File, 88–92; 166 (Interrogation of Litinskii A.B. from 30 March 1953; 164–68).

<sup>64</sup> Arrest File, 296 (Investigatory Conclusion; 295–98); 311.



police based such investigations on real incidents rather than falsifications. Litinskii's case was more serious than most because of its invocation of American espionage and rumours of war, and the adoption of conspiratorial methods. For that reason, he received a twenty-five-year Gulag term rather than the ten-year sentence that most Jewish arrestees faced. Nonetheless, it appears that no one from his circle was detained despite the efforts of investigators to link his Jewish acquaintances with the letters. Had the campaign continued under Stalin, it is easy to imagine that his acquaintances who had complained about the firing of Jewish workers would have become 'co-conspirators' in the case, charged with counterrevolutionary agitation for informing the ideas that went into Litinskii's letters. The shift in Soviet repressive policies meant that just Litinskii went to the prison camp, and it also meant that he would receive an amnesty three years into his sentence.

Litinskii found the Gulag to be a humbling experience. At a camp at Khalmer-Iu, a coal-mining settlement, he spent six months in hard labour in the mines. Eventually he would be transferred to positions where he completed white-collar work that was nominally the job of civilian employees but was easier to give to prisoners who were often better trained and always worse compensated. In the summer of 1955, he requested and received a transfer to a camp in the northern Urals, Ivdellag, where he worked in his area of training as a mechanic for agricultural machines.<sup>65</sup> His story is similar to that of other Gulag prisoners. His education helped him gain preferential treatment in the camps, as it did for many others.<sup>66</sup> A large part of the memoir discusses his time in the Gulag, in fact a third of the text. Of those pages, roughly half consist of a long discussion of the professional criminals in the Gulag ('thieves in law'), people who seemed to rule over the camp in concert with the guards.<sup>67</sup> The memoir describes the criminal world with an outsider's fascination, the work of a striver turned anthropologist when he entered the Soviet underworld.

Like many Soviet political prisoners and most of the Jewish arrestees of 1953 whose cases are known, Litinskii received an amnesty in 1956 on the wave of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalinism.<sup>68</sup> And as in these other cases, Soviet authorities continued to view Litinskii warily, recognising the accusations against him as valid, although not worthy of a lengthy imprisonment. He returned to Kharkiv, where he received political rehabilitation in 1990 and lived until his death in 2001.

A remarkable aspect of Litinskii's memoir is the lack of space he devotes to his later life. The book ends abruptly upon his release from the Gulag in 1956, although Litinskii began to write the work in the late 1980s and finished it in 1999. Even the brief view he gives of his later life harkens back to his earlier years. The closing words are a poem he read at his eighty-fifth birthday party about his fate between his birth and return to Kharkiv in 1956.<sup>69</sup>

### Conclusion: The Unwritten Memoir of the Soviet Undead Person

Litinskii wrote just a handful of paragraphs about his later years, and his police file contains only a few rehabilitation documents after 1956. It is difficult to know how his life unfolded after his return from forced labour. Why did he only write about his first four decades? As is the case for many people, his early experiences may have made a significant impression on him. The war, his arrest, and his time in the Gulag were dramatic events, and perhaps he saw what followed as less historically significant. Yet many important moments occurred during the last forty years of his life: destalinisation; the overthrow of Khrushchev; the public anti-Zionist campaign under Brezhnev and Jewish attempts to emigrate; the

<sup>65</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 60–61, 67–68, 81.

<sup>66</sup> On the dynamic of educated prisoners seeking non-labour-intensive work in the Gulag as a means of survival, see Golfo Alexopoulos, *Illness and Inhumanity in Stalin's Gulag* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 227–30.

<sup>67</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 64–77.

<sup>68</sup> On amnesty and rehabilitation, see Marc Elie, 'Rehabilitation in the Soviet Union, 1953–1964: A Policy Unachieved,' in *De-Stalinising Eastern Europe: The Rehabilitation of Stalin's Victims after 1953*, eds. Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), 30–36.

<sup>69</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 82–84.

fall of the Soviet Union. His family history, which played a large role in the early part of the memoir, is mostly absent from the final pages. It is almost as if Litinskii's life ended in 1956.

There are limits to what Litinskii's memoir can tell us about his relationship to Soviet rule in his later life. As Samuel Casper argues, Gulag returnees constantly engaged with Soviet authorities as they lobbied for rehabilitation and the restitution of property, each time reinforcing the importance of their relationship with official culture.<sup>70</sup> In Litinskii's case, it is unclear that he cared about rehabilitation. He was offended when KGB officers in 1990 repeated a mistake that the interrogator in 1953 had made and wrote 'Latinskii' on the receipt for his restored property.<sup>71</sup> But petitions for rehabilitation often ended up in investigation dossiers, and Litinskii's file has none, meaning it is possible that he never tried to receive rehabilitation.

Despite the silence about his final decades, Litinskii's memoir says a great deal about how he envisioned his life toward its end. He seems to have modelled his memoir after the conventions of Gulag literature. Litinskii was one of those for whom writing a memoir about Stalinist repression, as the literature scholar Irina Paperno asserts, created a community of memory bound by emphasising links to larger events of this turbulent period. Even people who were not repressed might claim retrospective affinity with this community through memoir-writing.<sup>72</sup> In writing about his early life, his arrest, and his time in the Gulag, Litinskii had frameworks that fit his experiences. In contrast, the narrative models were more limited for the post-Gulag experiences of unrehabilitated people like him. The same genre model also shaped how Litinskii presented his arrest. He attuned his ordeal to the well-known story of outrageous falsification in the Doctors' Plot rather than exploring his own unusual case.

The result was not just silence but a significant divergence from the case file that suggests another interpretation of the fate of repressed and un-rehabilitated Soviet-Jewish strivers. Stalin's antisemitic campaign alarmed Litinskii not only because it threatened him personally, but because it seemed to be a violation of the political order in which he was an active participant. His reaction was not the deferential step of informing Stalin about antisemitism in Kharkiv but the reckless and artful act of inventing a fake antisemitic conspiracy as a pseudonymous American spy. It is possible that Litinskii recovered from the aftermath of his arrest and, like other Soviet Jews, remained engaged in Soviet politics.<sup>73</sup> More likely, however, is that the quixotic attempt to save the Soviet Union from antisemitism ended Litinskii's life as a Soviet striver. It is possible to imagine him resurrected as the undead after the Gulag, still a Soviet New Person but living a shadow existence without the ability to participate fully in public life. The years of struggle, advancement, and hope were over. There was nothing more to write.

<sup>70</sup> Samuel Casper, 'The Bolshevik Afterlife: Posthumous Rehabilitation in the Post-Stalin Soviet Union, 1953–1970' (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2018), 16–17.

<sup>71</sup> Litinskii Memoir, 37.

<sup>72</sup> Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 25.

<sup>73</sup> Gennady Estrakh, 'The Rise of Ilya Yegudin: An Exemplary Jew in Soviet Agriculture,' *East European Jewish Affairs* 51, no. 2–3 (2021): 249–65.