Fourteen Convicted, Three Million Condemned:
The Slansky Affair and the Reconstitution of Jewish Identities After the Holocaust

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Abstract
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In this study, I examine how Jews in the United States, Western Europe, and Israel reacted to the Slansky Affair, the Doctors’ Plot, and the general wave of overt Soviet antisemitism which took shape in late 1952 until Stalin’s death in early March 1953. I explore how the Holocaust, the creation of a Jewish state, and the Cold War affected Jewish conceptions of antisemitism as well as the nature and character of Jewish collective action on both the global and the domestic stage. After investigating the ways in which Jews understood and reacted to the trial culturally, religiously, organizationally, nationally, and politically, I assert that in the early 1950s, Jews were in a process of redefinition. The role of Israel in diasporic Jewish affairs, the relationship between Jews and the Left, the position of Jews in the Cold War, and the nature and character of Jewish central leadership figured prominently in the lives of individual Jews and Jewish communities in the years immediately following the end of the Second World War. This is not an investigation of the Slansky Trial itself. Rather, through examining how Jews understood and made sense of the Trial, I construct a narrative of Jewish identity politics in the early 1950s.
Dedication

To the memory of my father, Norman C. Blumenthal.  
Your love and support continue to sustain me as much in death as they did in life.
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Introduction

On November 20, 1952, a trial opened in Prague. Communist Czechoslovakia charged fourteen men with crimes of espionage, sabotage, and high treason against the state. All fourteen defendants were members of the Communist Party, had held positions in the state bureaucracy, and, more generally, had played important roles in the establishment of communism in post-WWII Czechoslovakia. Only one week later, on November 27, all fourteen defendants were pronounced guilty as charged. On December 3, eleven of the convicted were hanged; the remaining three began life sentences.

Named for its most prominent defendant – Rudolf Slansky, former General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party – the Slansky Affair was, at first glance, unremarkable. The trial was in every respect a Soviet-style show trial par excellence. Similar trials had already taken place in Bulgaria and Hungary. The Slansky Trial seemed to be part of a chain of Soviet-style purges taking place in the newly established satellite countries of East/Central Europe. The public purge of Rudolf Slansky and his co-defendants closely followed the norms of Soviet justice established during the Great Purges of the late 1930s. All fourteen defendants willingly confessed their guilt before the judge, the courtroom, and the whole of the Czechoslovak people. The trial had been scripted from beginning to end. Every word uttered by the defense, the prosecution, and the defendants themselves had been carefully memorized and well-rehearsed. The guilty verdict was a foregone conclusion and had been established at the time of the defendants’ arrests if not before. The trial was a theatrical production to be envied, if for nothing else, for its flawless execution.

Like all previous victims of Soviet purge proceedings, the Slansky defendants were accused of every manner of ideological deviation available within the Soviet criminal lexicon. They were charged as Titoists, and following in Tito’s footsteps, admitted to having attempted to sever Czechoslovakia from the newly formed Soviet bloc. They confessed to holding Trotskyist convictions and generally having sold out to the West. It was not these charges, completely fabricated though they were, that marked the Slansky Affair as noteworthy and the focal point of this study. Eleven of the fourteen defendants were of “Jewish origin,” a term devised by Czech and Soviet authorities and which followed the names of the eleven Jewish defendants in all official rosters and throughout the trial.

The “Jewishness” of the majority of the defendants was not alone what transformed a seemingly internal Soviet affair into one of global significance. Jews had appeared in the Soviet purges of the late 1930s, and this reality had not, at the time, sounded the alarm within Jewish communities that Soviet Jewry, as a whole, was in peril. Jews held important posts in the new regimes of communist East/Central Europe. If treason was to be found at the highest levels of the government, then it is not wholly unreasonable to presume that Jews would be disproportionately represented among the accused by dint of their general prominence in the Party and the government bureaucracy. What rendered the Slansky Affair distinct and novel was that the defendants were tried and convicted as Jews, an interpretation denied by communist authorities, but, given the language used during the trial proceedings, readily accepted by Jews and non-Jews alike in the non-communist world.
In addition to the anticipated charges of Titoism and Trotskyism, the Slansky defendants were charged as irredeemable Zionists and bourgeois nationalists. They confessed to having organized a Zionist-led conspiracy, under the jurisdiction of American, British, and Israeli authorities, to undermine the Czech economy and ultimately to restore capitalism within Czechoslovakia and the Soviet bloc as a whole. The defendants were presented as internationalist Jews who, in the final analysis, valued their allegiance to other Jews above all else. The prosecution argued that the defendants had all been raised in bourgeois environments and had from an early age been instilled with the false claims of Zionism. Their crimes were deemed inevitable. The Jewishness of the defendants was presented as an impediment to true communist belief, and Slansky and his co-conspirators could not help but follow their “Jewish” natures.

That Zionism was condemned throughout the trial as a bourgeois ideology, capitalist in extraction and oppressive in its practice, was not surprising. Lenin, well before the Bolshevik Revolution, had deemed all forms of Jewish nationalism, whether Bundist or Zionist, as vestiges of a capitalist system that would be unnecessary in the revolutionary world to come. In 1903, Lenin wrote, "the idea of a separate Jewish people is politically reactionary and scientifically untenable."¹ Stalin reiterated this assertion in his refusal to acknowledge the existence of a “Jewish nation,” arguing that the Jewish people lacked the main characteristics that constituted nationhood – i.e. a territory, a single language, and a type of cultural and psychological uniformity among its members. To be sure, the “national question” within Soviet society was historically complex and evolved throughout the duration of the Soviet experiment. The Soviet regime acknowledged the existence of a “Jewish nationality,” while simultaneously denying the existence of a “Jewish nation.” Jews were, as such, a national minority, entitled to some measure of protection, but lacked the characteristics of large nations such as the Russians, Poles, and Ukrainians.

Communist doctrine held that the experience of antisemitism played a crucial role in feelings of Jewish national self-identification. As a result, in a truly communist society, where antisemitism would inevitably be eliminated, Jews would lose one of the critical realities that bound them together. Zionism, as such, was viewed as a distraction from the true struggle between the ruling and oppressed classes, a way to divide the proletariat, and fill them with false senses of loyalty to their bourgeois masters. Zionists, as well as many nationalist groups, had been widely persecuted in the late 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union and, as a result, Zionism had been largely driven entirely from Soviet Jewish life. Though some Zionist activity was permitted during the NEP period, from the late 1920s on, Zionism became a punishable offense and remained so throughout the whole of the Soviet experience.

When Zionism emerged as one of the most prominent crimes levied against Slansky and his thirteen co-defendants (even the three non-Jewish defendants did not escape the charge of Zionism), Jews, across the globe and across a spectrum of national, political, religious, and socioeconomic affiliations took immediate notice of the juridical play taking place in Prague. The condemnation of Zionism, though lamentable, was not what alarmed Jews in the United States, Western Europe, and Israel. Soviet hostility toward Zionism was no secret among Jews

in the non-communist world. Rudolf Slansky and his alleged co-conspirators, however, were by no measure Zionists. Though a few of the defendants might have participated in Zionist youth movements as children and young adults, they were first and foremost communists. They were men who had disavowed their ties to the Jewish community and had adopted communism as their new faith. In so far as they believed a Jewish question existed, they sought its answer not in Zionism, but in the classless world promised by Marxism. Not a few of the defendants were known, as many zealous Jewish communists had shown themselves to be, fervent opponents of Zionism and attempted to greatly limit the emigration of Jews from the Soviet Bloc to Palestine. They were, in many instances, less sympathetic to the Zionist cause than their non-Jewish counterparts within the Communist Party.

Notwithstanding, the Slansky defendants were all accused and found guilty of engaging in a Zionist conspiracy to end socialism in Czechoslovakia through means of economic sabotage, funded and orchestrated by the U.S., Britain, and their formidable lackey, the new State of Israel. Jews in the non-Soviet world (and most likely in the Soviet world itself) came to see the crime at hand as neither treason nor conspiracy, but Jewishness itself. If the Slansky defendants were noted for their indifference and in many cases, outright opposition to Zionism, then what bound them together was not an ideological conviction but, as a number of Jews feared, a Nazi-like racial or ethnic origin as Jews. The dust from the crematoria had hardly begun to settle when the Slansky Trial came to light. Jews obviously feared the worst for the welfare and safety of their co-religionists in the East. Few Jews expressed any real sympathy for the Slansky defendants. They were seen as victims of the very system they had helped to create. It was rather the lives of the approximately three million Jews in the lands behind the Iron Curtain that drew the attention of Jews as it had not done since the days of Hitler.

On January 13, 1953, the Soviet Union itself announced that it had uncovered a plot by a so called “gang” of doctors to commit acts of medical murder. If Jews had held any hope that the Slansky Affair was an isolated incident – to be contained within the boundaries of the Czechoslovak Communist Republic – their hopes were surely dashed by the announcement of the alleged “Doctors’ Plot.” Of the nine doctors implicated in the Pravda article, six were of “Jewish descent.” Like the Slansky defendants, the Moscow doctors, as they came to be known, were accused of participating in a Zionist-led conspiracy, directed from America and Britain to destabilize communism in the Soviet world. Rather than acts of economic sabotage, the Jewish doctors sought to carry out their nefarious plan by means of medical murder. These individuals had in their care high ranking Soviet officials and stood accused of purposely misdiagnosing important Soviet leaders in the hopes of gradually eliminating some of the Soviet Union’s most promising leaders. The doctors were said to have killed Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin’s presumed successor, in 1948 as well as several other leading Soviet luminaries, among them Alexander

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3 At the time, it was estimated that approximately 2.5 million Jews lived in the Soviet Union and approximately 500,000 lived in the countries of the Soviet Bloc.
Shcherbakov, one of the founders of the Soviet Writers Union. While Israel itself was not mentioned in the charges levied against the Doctors, the Moscow physicians nevertheless stood accused of serving as Zionist agents, acting on behalf of the directives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, a philanthropic organization that had not operated in the Soviet Union since the late 1930s. Anti-Jewish activity had taken place in the Soviet Union prior to the Doctors’ Plot, but such activity had been conducted with a degree of subtlety and secrecy. The Case of the Moscow Doctors was announced with much fan fare and seemed to be far more blatant than previous manifestations of Soviet antisemitism. With the announcement of the Doctors’ Plot, fears turned into stark reality, and Jews believed that their Soviet co-religionists faced imminent danger.4

The trial of Rudolf Slansky and his co-defendants opened on November 20, 1952; its genesis, however, can be traced to the years immediately following the end of the Second World War, and as some scholars have argued, to the war years and possibly to the very nature of communism itself.5 Though the focus of this study is how Jews in the non-communist world made sense of the events taking place in the lands behind the Iron Curtain. The Slansky Affair, Doctors’ Plot, and the general wave of Soviet antisemitism of Stalin’s final months were the result of a complex array of intersecting historical realities and a multitude of agents acting sometimes in concert, but often independently throughout the Soviet Union, the Soviet satellites of East/Central Europe, Israel, the United States, and elsewhere. Shocked though they were by the news emanating from Prague and Moscow, Jews had a long and complex history with Marxism, the Soviet Union, and with the Czech and Slovak lands.

Though recent scholarship, by Kevin McDermott, regarding antisemitism in the Czech and Slovak lands reveals that the Czechs were probably more antisemitic than previously believed to be, the Czechs stood apart from their Slavic brothers (and perhaps all other European nations) in several key respects when it came to the Jews.6 As Hillel Kieval has written, “In the context of interwar East Central Europe, Czechoslovakia's concessions to Jewish nationalism were, in fact, unprecedented.”7 When the first Czechoslovak Republic came into being in 1918, following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Jews were recognized as a distinct national entity and were permitted to mark Jewish as their nationality of choice on the official state census. Though many Jews continued to mark German, Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak as their nationality, the recognition by a state of the existence of a Jewish nation and of

4 Unlike the Slansky Affair, the Doctors’ Plot was never brought to trial. The Moscow Doctors were exonerated and freed in early April 1953, shortly after Stalin’s death. For this reason, I focus more heavily on the fall out of the Slansky Trial, though the Doctors’ Plot is an important component of the story.
5 In his work, The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation, Bradley Abrams has argued that many of the changes which led to the rise of Stalinism in post-war Czechoslovakia, began during the war years, under Nazi occupation, and in the dislocation which followed immediately after the close of WWII. See Bradley Abrams, The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2004).
6 I will hereafter refer to the relationship between Jews and Czechs, despite the existence of a joint Czechoslovak state. The relationship between Jews and Slovaks has a somewhat different history than that between Czechs and Jews. Since Czechs were seen as the dominant national group in the pre and post-war Czechoslovak state, I will refer to Czechs alone.
the right of members of that nation to self-identify as such was indeed truly remarkable and without precedent.

The decision to formally acknowledge Jewish nationhood derived in part from the strong belief of important Czech leaders in the right to national self-determination as well as the desire on the part of Czech officials to weaken the influence of Germans in the new Czechoslovak Republic. Many Jews were German speakers and associated more with German culture than with Czech. In giving Jews the choice to identify themselves as Jewish, Czech leaders hoped to weaken the representation and influence of Germans in official state matters. The recognition of a Jewish nation by the first Czechoslovak Republic did not necessarily signify that the Czechs were free of antisemitism. Indeed, while permitting Jews to declare “Jewish” as their chosen nationality, Czechs could simultaneously discourage Jews from becoming “Czech.” Similarly, despite the reality that the new state acknowledged Jewish nationhood, many Czechs continued to associate Jews with the large German minority in the new state. In spite of the reality of Czech antisemitism, Jews, during the first Czechoslovak Republic, enjoyed a privilege unavailable to the rest of European Jewry. While they might have encountered antisemitism in their everyday lives, violence against Jews in Czechoslovakia was sparse until the Nazi takeover. The Czechs were perhaps not as exceptional as previously believed, but certain aspects of the Czech experience rendered conditions favorable for Jews. As Kevin McDermott has written of the first Czechoslovak state, “The assimilation of Czechoslovak Jewry, the secularization of Czech society, and particularly the fulfilled national ambitions of Czechoslovak statehood account for this accommodating response.”

Jews seemed to have deeply imbibed the notion of Czech exceptionalism. Founding father of the first Czechoslovak Republic, Tomas G. Masaryk, was generally viewed as a “friend” of the Jews and proclaimed to be among the most enlightened of Europe’s post-WWI leaders. Given the reality that Jews tended to view the Czechs as different from other peoples of East/Central Europe regarding the “Jewish question,” news of the Slansky Trial was met with an overwhelming sentiment of disbelief. In fact, throughout a host of Jewish periodicals, authors declared repeatedly that the Czech people could not be blamed for the events taking place in Prague. They, more often than not, attributed the antisemitic show trial to the Czechoslovak Communist Party and the Soviet Union. Several Jewish writers remarked that the Czechs were victims of the same totalitarian rule which undoubtedly lay at the root of the purge of Slansky and his supposed co-conspirators. Sympathy for the Czech people was by no means universal among Jewish communities, but Jewish sources consistently pointed an accusing finger at Stalin and the Soviet leadership in Moscow when assigning blame for the outbreak of overt antisemitic behavior in post-WWII Czechoslovakia.

Despite the convictions held by some segments of world Jewry that the Czechs were not to blame for the Slansky Trial, the wave of popular antisemitism which abounded throughout Czechoslovakia following the announcement of the guilty verdict is evident. In his investigation of reports gathered by the Czech Secret Police concerning the reaction of Czechs to the trial, Kevin McDermott has written, “Internal party and secret police documents demonstrate all too depressingly that Slansky’s arrest and trial were accompanied by pervasive, unpleasant, and

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boorish outpourings of anti-Jewish invective.”

McDermott cites numerous reports of antisemitic outbursts by the Czech population at large following the trial of Slansky. These antisemitic expressions ranged in intensity from more traditional characterizations of Jews as lazy and unwilling to work as hard as their non-Jewish counterparts to calls for expulsion of the Jews from Czechoslovakia. It is important to note that at the time of the Slansky Affair, there were approximately 15,000-18,000 Jews living in Czechoslovakia, less than one-tenth of the pre-Holocaust number. Despite the small percentage of Jews in communist Czechoslovakia, antisemitic sentiments were highly manifest in the weeks and months following the Slansky Affair.

The favorable reception by many Czechs of the antisemitic character of the Slansky Trial begs the question of upon whom can responsibility be placed for the Prague political purges. Even at the time of the trial, few individuals doubted that Stalin and the top leadership of the Soviet Union had a pronounced hand in encouraging if not outright mandating the trial’s anti-Zionist and antisemitic character. Soviet “advisors” were sent to Prague in the months leading up to the trial to “direct” the defendant investigations. These Soviet personnel seemed to have played a significant role in the manner in which the investigation was performed and in the antisemitic language employed frequently by the Czech interrogators. However, as McDermott has written:

[I]t would appear that there was a mutually reinforcing relationship between the Party-sponsored "anti-Zionist" campaigns from the late 1940s onwards and preexisting forms of popular antisemitism, exacerbated by wartime experiences. Each tended to strengthen the other. To this extent, the reality of antisemitic prejudice was not incompatible with KSC aims. Indeed, anti-Jewish sentiment was so widespread that it may even have forged a kind of "national unity" and thus represented a useful, if dangerous and necessarily camouflaged, tool for propagandists to promote social cohesion and regime-affirming attitudes.

In this view, Soviet authorities may have heavily influenced the antisemitic character of the Slansky Affair, but Czech leaders recognized that the trial’s anti-Jewish motif might serve them as well.

Given the Doctors’ Plot which would follow not two months after Slansky’s execution, Stalin’s personal stamp is also plain to see. The close chronological proximity of the Slansky Trial and Case of the Moscow Doctors was by no means coincidental. They were both significant aspects of an ever-intensifying anti-Jewish campaign, believed to be lead in large part by Stalin himself in the late 1940s until his death on March 5, 1953. However, as Kevin McDermott has written:

Even if we accept that the purges were initiated and coordinated in Moscow, they often fell on fertile soil, were adapted for domestic purposes, and were not always amenable to tight party control "from above" [. . .]. They could be, and were, used to "solve" elite power struggles and personal rivalries; target class, ideological, and, in some instances,

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9 McDermott, 851.
11 McDermott, 854.
ethnic "enemies"; identify scapegoats for the gross material hardships; act as propaganda and educative tools for the masses; and ultimately bolster the legitimacy of the infant communist regime. In short, repression was closely related to the new rulers' intense drive to "construct socialism," as they understood it.12

If scholarship has only recently demonstrated the widespread character of Czech antisemitism following the Slansky Trial, evidence of antisemitism among some of the party elite, the interrogators of Slansky and his co-defendants chief among these, is well-documented. In their memoirs, Artur London and Eugen Loebl, two of the Slansky defendants sentenced to life imprisonment, remarked on the distinctly antisemitic character of the interrogations which they endured in the months leading up to the trial. London exclaimed, “Soon after my arrest, when I was confronted by a virulent, Nazi-type of antisemitism, I thought it was limited to a few individuals. The Security Services couldn't be expected to recruit saints for such a dirty job. But I now realized that even if this mentality only appeared sporadically during the interrogations, it was nevertheless a systematic line.”13 Both Loebl and London expressed their initial shock at the rampant antisemitism employed throughout their interrogations. Loebl wrote:

It goes without saying that it hurt me to hear my interrogator making anti-Semitic remarks, which were obviously contrary to the entire ideology of the Communist Party. I argued with myself that, after the war, with the party evolved from a small, select group of enthusiasts into a mass organization with a membership of almost one and a half million, it was natural that many of the people who were joining would have very different motivations from those of us who joined when the party was fighting against a powerful capitalist establishment. [. . .][T]here were numerous discussions within the party about this dilution of ideals and the influx of so many new members not imbued with the Party ideology. I myself thought that the years of Nazi domination during the war had imprinted a certain residue of Nazi ideology on the minds of the Czech and Slovak people.14

Following a particularly virulent antisemitic tirade by one of his interrogators, London recalled:

These words were uttered by a man who wore the Party badge in his buttonhole, before three other men, in uniform, who tacitly agreed. What did this anti-Semitism, this pogrom spirit, have in common with Marx, Lenin and the Party? This was the first time in my adult life that I was insulted because I was a Jew and was held to be a criminal because of my race, and that by a man from the State Security of a socialist country, a member of the Communist Party. Was it possible that the mentality of the SS had arisen in our own ranks? This was the mentality of the men who shot my brother Jean in 1941, who deported my mother, my sister Juliette and her husband, and dozens of members of my family to Auschwitz and sent them to the gas chamber. I had concealed my race from the Nazis, should I do the same thing in my own socialist country?15

12 McDermott, 845-6.
15 London, 38.
Both London and Loebl provide ample examples of the antisemitic nature of their interrogations. The following accounts are but a few from their personal recollections. In one of his earlier interrogation sessions, London recalls the words of one Comrade Smola. “We’ll get rid of you and your filthy race! [declared Smola] You’re all the same! Not everything Hitler did was right, but he destroyed the Jews, and he was right about that. Too many of you escaped the gas chamber. We’ll finish what he started.”\textsuperscript{16} In another instance, London’s interrogator exclaimed, “The mere fact that you, a Jew, returned alive, [from WWII and the Holocaust] is sufficient proof of your guilt and therefore proves us right.”\textsuperscript{17}

During one of Loebl’s sessions, led by Comrade Likhachev, one of the Russian advisors sent to Prague, the Soviet interrogator vehemently declared, “You are not a communist, and you are not a Czechoslovak. You are a dirty Jew, that's what you are. Israel is your only real fatherland, and you have sold out socialism to your bosses, the Zionist, imperialist leaders of world Jewry. Let me tell you: the time is approaching fast when we'll have to exterminate all your kind.”\textsuperscript{18}

The widespread employment of antisemitic language throughout the defendant interrogations and the trial itself as well as the broad reception of this antisemitism by the Czech population at large, lamentable as it is, could most likely have taken place in the other satellite states of East/Central Europe. One could easily argue that Poland would have been a far more appropriate and fertile setting for the type of virulent antisemitism displayed throughout the experience of the trial. The question then arises, why did such a trial take place in Czechoslovakia. Just as it is difficult to isolate the trial as specifically Soviet or Czech instigated, it is similarly challenging to offer any single reason for the choice of Czechoslovakia for one of the most blatant acts of post-Holocaust state-sponsored antisemitism. It can be argued that Stalin focused his attention on Czechoslovakia for the very reason that, unlike Poland, Hungary, and East Germany, Czechoslovakia had experienced a relatively democratic society before World War II. As such, it was necessary to demonstrate the absolute nature of communist rule to ensure that the Czech people did not begin to yearn for their pre-war days as a relatively free and liberal parliamentary democracy. This line of reasoning held particular relevance in light of the recent severance of Tito’s Yugoslavia from the Soviet camp. In 1968, during the reformist regime of Alexander Dubcek, a commission was appointed to review the Slansky Trial as part of the government’s attempt to create “Socialism with a human face.” The report declared, “In January 1951 Czechoslovakia was named by some of the top men in the socialist world as the weakest link in the community of People’s Democracies. Simultaneously they stressed her special position as an industrially advanced and strategically important country. And so, seeing her both as a key member of the community and as its weakest link, and possessed as they were by a belief in imminent war, they were, inevitably, obsessed by the aim of raising Czechoslovakia to a level that would really safeguard her key role.”\textsuperscript{19} Others have argued still that the trial took place in Czechoslovakia because of the extensive degree to which the Czech Communist Party was completely Stalinized. Other satellite regimes, contends this

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textsuperscript{16} & London, 38. \\
\textsuperscript{17} & London, 121. \\
\textsuperscript{18} & Loebl, 62. \\
\end{tabular}
line of reasoning, would not have permitted such a large and public purge of its top party leadership. In the final analysis, it is likely that these and possibly other factors contributed to the location of the most thorough purge of a satellite Communist Party to take place after the Second World War.

Another critical factor must be taken into account when considering the motives behind the Slansky Affair and the wave of Soviet antisemitism which prevailed throughout the early months of 1953. In 1948, even before the Communist coup in February of that year, the Czechoslovak government sold large quantities of weapons and provided significant military aid to the Haganah (Israel's pre-state defense organization). In addition to the sale of much needed weapons, the Czech state provided military training to Israeli soldiers, and there even existed a small battalion of Czechs among Israeli forces.\(^{20}\) The sale of military arms to the Haganah was carried out in relative secret, and great care had to be taken in the transfer of the large supply of weapons from Czechoslovakia to Mandatory Palestine. Without the sale of Czech arms to Israeli defense forces, it is likely that the fledgling State of Israel might not have been able to withstand Arab attacks in 1948 or would have encountered far more difficulties in obtaining a necessary victory. The role that the Czechoslovak state played in securing an Israeli victory following its creation in May 1948 only served to contribute to the feelings of friendship felt by Jews toward the Czech people. However, as Uri Bialer has written in his exhaustive study of Israeli foreign policy in the late 1940s and early 1950s, “Needless to say, the Czechs were hardly philanthropists. They demanded that all payments be in American dollars; they enforced a strict schedule of payments; the deals enabled them to dispose of obsolete weapons; and the sales were for a fixed period of time. But all this does not detract from the benefits which Israel reaped.”\(^{21}\)

As Bialer also points out, “it is inconceivable that such large quantities of arms left Czechoslovakia without Soviet knowledge and approval.”\(^{22}\) To what extent the Soviets directed the sale of Czech arms to Israeli entities is difficult to say. However, it is highly unlikely, given Moscow’s close monitoring of its satellites, that the sale of large quantities of weapons by the Czechs to Israeli defense forces occurred without direct Soviet approval. Indeed, when relations between the Soviet Union and Israel began to deteriorate in 1949, the sale of Czech arms to Israel concurrently ceased. It is therefore likely that the large scale sale of Czech arms to Israel played its part in the outbreak of the Slansky Affair. Because of the Czech-Israeli arms agreement, it could be shown that top figures in the Czechoslovak state had close interactions with Israeli authorities. Even though these relations were sanctioned and encouraged at the time, the prosecution could provide “facts” with some degree of accuracy linking the Slansky defendants to the State of Israel.

The Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot were as much the result of internal Soviet affairs as they were a function of Soviet and satellite foreign policy. In his study of the so-called “Black Years” of Soviet Jewry, author Jehoshua Gilboa has written, “The anti-Jewish campaign waged in the Soviet Union in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s, despite its specific character and form,


\(^{22}\) Bialer, 179.
was closely bound up with the general development of Soviet foreign relations and internal events after the war.”

The foreign policy of Israel as well as general Cold War trends similarly converged with Soviet domestic and exogenous realities to produce both the surprising support by the Soviet Union of the partition of Palestine as well as the increasingly unstable and unpredictable situation of Soviet and satellite Jewry.

Indeed, one of the most challenging realities of the deteriorating position of Soviet Jewry in the years following the Holocaust is that it coincided with official Soviet support of the creation of a Jewish state. Considering the Soviet Union’s well-established hostility toward Zionism, Soviet support of the partition of Palestine in 1948 came as a surprise to Jews and non-Jews alike. That the Soviet Union had reversed its position regarding Jewish nationality seemed unlikely, and Jews struggled to understand the motives behind the Soviet decision to support the creation of a Jewish state. As Yaacov Ro’i has written in his analysis of Soviet-Israel relations, “the fundamental transformation in Soviet policy on the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine did not carry with it any change in the traditional attitude to socialist Zionism.”

Far from a change in its attitude toward Zionism, declares Ro’i,

Soviet support for partition was not the result of any rational, let alone emotional, obligation toward the establishment of a Jewish state per se. [...] The Soviet aim was first and foremost the termination of the British Mandate over Palestine and the evacuation of British forces and bases from the country. The second purpose was to ensure that the U.S.S.R. would have as strong a position as the other powers in the new equilibrium that would necessarily arise from the change in Palestine's status.

Another peculiar feature of Soviet-Israel relations in the early years of the Jewish state was Soviet tolerance of Israeli “neutrality.” In the first years of Israeli statehood, the Israeli government pledged a foreign policy of neutrality or better put of non-alignment with either the West or the East. “Pressing diplomatic, military and demographic circumstances [writes Bialer] dictated that Israel follow a global policy of ‘knocking on any door’.” As Bialer has written, Israeli neutrality was in many respects ill-defined. For some it meant equal friendship with the dominant powers of the world. For others, it meant remaining independent and equally distant from these same powers. In spite of the various ways in which Israelis understood the alleged neutrality of its government in foreign affairs, it is rather remarkable that the Soviets, bent as they were upon dividing the world into pro and anti-Soviet camps, supported, even if only for a limited amount of time, a state that proclaimed its neutrality in the struggle between East and West.

Some have argued that the patience which Soviet authorities initially expressed toward Israeli non-alignment stemmed in part from a belief that Israel might become a type of Soviet outpost in the Middle East. Many sections of Israeli society were highly sympathetic to the Soviet regime and held deep socialist convictions. Indeed, Mapam, one of Israel’s most important political parties in its early years, viewed itself as an integral part of the revolutionary

25 Ro’i, 96-7.
26 Bialer, 2.
27 Bialer, 17.
world of socialism and sought to foster close relations with the Soviet Union. However, as several scholars have argued, it seems highly unlikely that Soviet leaders believed in the proposition of an Israeli Peoples’ Democracy. As Ro’i has written, “there is no ground for assuming that the support accorded to the State of Israel in a variety of fields at the time of its establishment and in the first period of its existence emanated from any presumption that a left-oriented state was in the making.” If this were the case, argues Ro’i, Soviet support of Israel would have begun to decline in the wake of the first Israeli elections in which Mapai, Israel’s Social Democratic Party, and not the Communists or even Mapam, gained a majority of the votes. Additionally, the Soviets had to realize that the new Israeli state needed financial support above all else. If the new Jewish state were to maintain any type of real “neutrality,” then this financial assistance would have to come from both the West as well as the East. Considering the Soviet Union’s weak fiscal situation in the years following WWII, assistance to Israel was virtually impossible. The new state had no choice but to seek financial aid where it could, and this ultimately meant the U.S. and the western powers. Because of its inability and perhaps unwillingness to support the new State of Israel financially, The Soviet Union helped to seriously disable the ideal of Israeli non-alignment in its early years of existence.

To be sure, Israel’s growing alliance with the West was not viewed favorably by Soviet authorities. It is important to note that in the early 1950s, Israel’s position as steadfast ally of the United States, and perhaps more importantly, the stance of the United States as unwavering ally and friend of Israel was by no means an uncontested reality of international relations. The United States sought to court Arab populations, recently declared independent of British rule, and in many cases, Israel proved to be an impediment to American goals in this respect. That the United States would unambiguously support Israel had, at this early stage in the Jewish state’s history, not yet been established. Notwithstanding, Israel began to gradually shed its cloak of neutrality in favor of alliances with the United States. It did so cautiously with the understanding that a large section of world Jewry still lived in the lands behind the Iron Curtain. If it was to have any contact whatsoever with this important but largely inaccessible Jewish population, it had to maintain to a certain degree some type of independence in the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Israel’s increasing dependence, both military and financial, on the West undoubtedly influenced the cooling of relations between itself and the Soviet Union. Some have argued that the solidification of Israel’s position in the Western camp contributed heavily to the outbreak of anti-Jewish policies in the Soviet Union. However, it is more likely that the specific internal conditions prevailing in the Soviet Union in the years following WWII contributed in large measure to the deteriorating position of Soviet Jewry and that these domestic realities in turn influenced Soviet policies regarding Israel.

As Jehoshua Gilboa has written, “Herein lay one of the paradoxes of postwar Stalinism, in that it set out to intensify the isolation of the Soviet citizens from the outside world just at a time when their country had actually become a world power. [. . .] It was just at the time when it appeared as though the doctrine of ‘Socialism in One Country’ was dying out in the face of the new international political reality, that Stalinism looked askance at any manifestation of

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28 Ro’i, 279-80.
29 Ro’i, 206-7.
affinity or contact with the outside world. It seemed that Stalin continued to believe in the possibility of exerting Soviet influence over the world, while keeping the Soviet Union immune to outside influences.”

Following the end of the Second World War, Soviet authorities launched a large scale campaign to rid Soviet society of all western, and therefore inherently non-communist, influences. During the war, Soviet attitudes toward the West had been greatly relaxed. The West was an ally in the great struggle to defeat Hitler. Numerous Soviet soldiers had come into direct contact with their western counterparts and had returned to the Soviet Union with firsthand knowledge of the West. In order to purge Soviet society of all western influences and to make it absolutely clear to the Soviet citizenry that the West was not to be envied, Soviet authorities launched a campaign of wholesale terror and repression. Soldiers who had valiantly served during the war years were unceremoniously sent to labor camps and likely never to be seen again. The Russian people were upheld as the greatest civilization in recorded history. Every manner of modern innovation was attributed to the Russian people regardless of its veracity.

It is within this environment of repression and terror and the systematic purge of western elements from Soviet society that we must understand the rapidly deteriorating position of post-war Soviet Jewry. Consistent with its policy of relaxation toward the West during the war years, Soviet authorities sanctioned the creation of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC). Along with other Soviet groups, such as the All Slav Committee, Committees of Soviet Women, and Soviet Youth, the JAC was to rally support for the war effort by appealing to Jews both in and outside of the Soviet Union. With Solomon Mikhoels, Soviet actor and Artistic Director of the Moscow State Jewish Theater, at its head, the JAC was sent abroad to raise money among foreign Jewish communities for the Soviet war effort. Toward this end, Mikhoels traveled throughout the United States as well as Britain where he met with Jewish leaders and Jewish communities and attended mass rallies all designed to rouse Jewish support for the war effort in general and the Soviet Union in particular. Mikhoels was met with great enthusiasm as he encountered a host of Jewish communities in the United States. He was welcomed as a representative of Soviet Jewry, a population long since cut off from the main body of world Jewry. His mission, in so far as it was defined at the time, was a success.

Unlike the All Slav Committee and organizations of Soviet Women, Youth, and Scientists, the creation of the JAC carried with it a partial reversal in Soviet attitudes toward its Jewish population. Jews, as was the case with many other national minorities, were extremely limited in the ways in which they could express their national culture. Though a group of Yiddish writers and other cultural figures gained real prominence in Soviet life, their work, as was the work of all Soviet artists, had to follow officially sanctioned guidelines. A Jewish socialist Republic (Birobidzhan) had been created in the Far East, but it had failed to attract any significant portion of Soviet Jewry. Most Soviet Jews had been compelled along a path of assimilation into the larger Russian and Soviet society. Soviet ideology contended that the Jews held nothing in common with Jews in other lands. Their connection to world Jewry existed in so far as all Jews were the product of bourgeois capitalist antisemitism. In the Soviet Union, however, where all vestiges of antisemitism had been supposedly “eliminated,” Jews no longer

30 Gilboa, 151.
31 Gilboa, 42-3.
needed to cling to their Jewishness. The creation of the JAC, in essence, brought about a partial reversal in decades of Soviet thought concerning the Jewish Question.

The establishment of the JAC [Gilboa has written] marked a sensational reversal of internal policy. For the first time since the Jewish Sections of the Communist Party were dissolved in 1930, Soviet Jewry was accorded some kind of organizational framework. The very formation of a specifically Jewish body and the recognition of its professed aims were tantamount to an official avowal of withdrawal from the established doctrine that Jewish unity did not extend beyond territorial boundaries; on the contrary, they implied that Jewish extraterritorialism was not inconsistent with the unity of the Jewish people.  

Indeed, Soviet Jewry came to see the JAC as an officially sanctioned Jewish entity within Soviet society. Along with the general atmosphere of cultural relaxation which prevailed during the war, Jews engaged in what they believed to be expressions of “Jewishness” that were in keeping with Soviet directives from above. They continued to do so following the war. As Gilboa notes, “The permissive attitude towards manifestations of Jewish nationalism during the war had come to be regarded as the natural order of things, and the Jewish writers and leaders, psychologically unprepared for the reversal to the previous order, continued to act and express themselves accordingly by dint of inertia. Many of them doubtlessly found it hard to tear themselves away from the ‘Golden Age’ when what had been demanded of them virtually coincided with their inmost feelings.”

The surprising Soviet support for the partition of Palestine further signaled to Jews that a change of policy toward Jewish nationality had taken place at the highest levels of the Soviet state apparatus.

When Mikhoels died in 1948, supposedly as the result of a tragic car accident, he was given a lavish state funeral and praised as a paragon of Soviet culture by important Soviet officials. His body was restored by the same specialist who had preserved Lenin’s body. He was afforded every manner of Soviet honor. As mourners filed past his coffin, little did they know that the head of the JAC and one of the most talented actors and cultural figures in the Soviet Union had been murdered by the very state which had then organized his highly public and venerable farewell. It is therefore not surprising that Soviet Jews were wholly unprepared for the systematic obliteration of all expressions of Soviet Jewish culture by the state which began to take shape in the late 1940s with the arrest of JAC leaders and well-known Jewish writers and cultural figures and climaxd with the Doctors’ Plot in January 1953.

Another episode served to complicate and exemplify the position of Jews in the Soviet Union. In 1948, an Israeli embassy opened in Moscow. In that same year, Golda Meir (then Meirson) arrived in the Soviet Union as Israeli ambassador. On her initial visit during the holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur 1948, Meir was met with a level of enthusiasm by Soviet Jewry that belied that population’s supposed assimilation into Soviet society at large.

32 Gilboa, 42-3.
33 Gilboa, 78.
34 Before the Slansky Affair commenced, a trial of dozens of well-known Jewish intellectual and cultural figures took place in the Soviet Union in June 1952. The trial of the Jewish writers was conducted in secret, and their fate was not revealed until 1956 in Khrushchev’s Secret Speech. For the reason that Jews in the non-communist world did not have knowledge of the writers’ trial, I do not include it as part of the wave of Soviet antisemitism of this time period.
the days when she visited the synagogue in Moscow, thousands of Jews flocked to hear the Israeli ambassador or to catch a glimpse of her as she entered and left the synagogue’s premises. Such a spontaneous gathering within Soviet society was truly unthinkable and unprecedented. It was clear from her visit that Soviet Jews who had likely never been to a synagogue in their lives, knew virtually nothing of Jewish culture either secular or religious, and who had no familiarity with any Jewish language, felt some type of connection to their Jewishness and to the new Jewish state.

As Zvi Gitelman, scholar of Soviet Jewry, has written, “Perhaps it was this very pride and hope that Israel’s establishment aroused, even among highly acculturated and unquestionably loyal Soviet citizens, that made Stalin and his subordinates doubly alert to the dangers of ‘bourgeois nationalism’ at home. If the calculus of Soviet foreign policy dictated support for Israel, stronger measures against Zionism would have to be taken at home.”35 Whether, in supporting the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, Soviet authorities gave any thought to the reaction of its approximately 2.5 million Jewish citizens, is hard to say. It is difficult to believe that no consideration was given to the manner in which Soviet Jewry would receive the news of a Soviet endorsed Jewish state. Perhaps Soviet leaders truly believed in the complete assimilation of its Jewish population and worried little about a resurgence of Jewish national feeling in the wake of a Soviet supported Jewish state. Notwithstanding, “A large number of Jews saw in the open Soviet support for the establishment of the Jewish State and, from 15 May, for Israel, license to express their own emotional link and even sense of identification with the Yishuv’s national liberation movement.”36

The resurgence in Jewish national feeling aroused by the creation of the JAC and by Soviet support for a Jewish national state in Palestine were seen as a threat by Soviet authorities. Not only did it defy decades of Soviet oppression of any manifestation of Zionist sentiment, but it was in direct violation of the anti-Western and isolationist attitude omnipresent in Soviet society following the end of WWII. In order to swiftly curb any notions by Soviet Jewry that they were permitted to engage in acts of Jewish nationalism, Soviet authorities launched a campaign to rid Soviet society of all “bourgeois nationalist” and “cosmopolitan” influences that had covertly invaded the Soviet Union during the war years. The campaign against bourgeois nationalists and rootless cosmopolitans, though consistent with the general atmosphere of Russian chauvinism in the late 1940s, was directed in large measure against the Jews of the Soviet Union.

As bourgeois nationalists, the Jews were accused of clinging to their petit bourgeois upbringings as merchants, Zionists, and Bundists. They were said to value their loyalties to other Jews above their loyalty to the Soviet fatherland and intentionally set themselves apart from society at large. They were alien to Soviet society and could never truly assimilate Soviet values. In other words, they were not Russian and could never become so despite their fluency in the Russian tongue, their achievements in Russian culture and art, and their apparent devotion to the Soviet state.

36 Ro’i, 187-8.
As “rootless cosmopolitans,” Jews were irredeemable internationalists. They were citizens of the world who had little to do with the everyday working man. They were intellectuals who had forgotten their basic Soviet commitment to the working class. They had connections abroad, most often with other Jews, and like their bourgeois nationalist counterparts were equally alienated from Soviet society as a whole. The rootless cosmopolitan had no language of his or her own, no distinct national identity, no roots in the working class, and above all no distinct national home. This quality of internationalism that had previously rendered them Soviets par excellence now stamped them as dangerous elements within Soviet society.

As Gennadi Kostyrchenko has written of this apparent contradictory situation of the Jews in Soviet Russia:

The Stalinist regime's attitude toward so-called Jewish bourgeois nationalists and "stateless cosmopolitans" reflected its phenomenal hypocrisy and perfidy. The regime exterminated Jewish bourgeois nationalists for their devotion to a national religious idea, to their traditions, to their native culture, to their language, and so forth. And yet the regime persecuted the "stateless cosmopolitans," who for the most part were assimilated Jews, for just the opposite reason; namely, for striving to deny their national identity, and for attempting to dissolve into "the united humanity of the people of the world."37

As Arno Lustiger has written in his account of the JAC, Soviet Jewry would be found guilty regardless of its actions.38 If they shed all vestiges of their national character, as Marxist philosophy intended, then they were out of touch with the people. If they clung to any sense of Jewish national feeling, then they were exhibiting tribal behaviors which similarly alienated them from society at large. “Thus [writes Gilboa] they paid the penalty both for their ‘cosmopolitanism’ and for their ‘nationalism’.”39

Jonathan Frankel has argued that, especially in the case of the Soviet satellite nations, the dual, but contradictory charges of “bourgeois nationalism” and “rootless cosmopolitanism” had practical applications as Soviet authorities sought to consolidate their power in the Eastern Bloc. Despite their relatively small numbers in post-Holocaust East/Central Europe, Jews held leading positions in the satellite governments of post-WWII Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Rumania, and East Germany. Many had been members of the Communist Party for decades and had survived the war in Moscow. They returned to their respective countries of origin to build socialism with the unwavering support of the Soviet regime. “Stalin's postwar regime [wrote Frankel] attained a double purpose. It first used Jewish communists, relying on them as strict ‘internationalists’ to maintain a high degree of loyalty to Moscow. And then it rounded on them, purged them, and foisted on them the blame for the terrible socioeconomic conditions then prevailing.”40

39 Gilboa, 186.
The Soviets were keenly aware that Jews were disproportionately represented in some of the governments of its satellite nations. For many citizens of the Soviet satellites, this must have reinforced the notion that communism was a “Jewish phenomenon,” and thereby contributed to the perception of the new ruling regimes as foreign and alien. Purging Jews from the Communist Parties of East/Central Europe enabled the Soviet regime to at once attribute blame for any failings within the new communist states to outside influences as well as establish, as it were, their “antisemitic credentials.” The antisemitism of the late 1940s and early 1950s was, to some degree, an attempt by the Soviets to detach communism from the widely held perception that it was a “Jewish ideology,” and thereby increase their legitimacy as leaders in the new Soviet Bloc. As Jan T. Gross has argued, the antisemitism of the post-WWII satellites was partly pragmatic as applied by the Soviets. “Given [writes Gross] the wartime experiences of the U.S.S.R., they had come to a full grasp of the fact that the patriotic, indeed the nationalist, sentiments of the population had to be tapped in order to safeguard the rule of the Communist Party. If such sentiments (among the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Romanians, or the Poles) came with an admixture of xenophobia or antisemitism, so be it.”41 In this respect, Soviet antisemitism was a type of concession to the pre-communist characters of the satellite nations, another temporary evil to be tolerated on the road to building socialism.

The inability of Jews to maneuver within Soviet national policy was evident. As Zvi Gitelman has remarked, Soviet Jews were unable to be Jewish and they were unable to fully assimilate into Russian society.42 They were condemned as Jews; and they were condemned as Russians. The Kafkaesque quality of this tragic contradiction aside, this ambiguity of Soviet Jewish nationality had serious and sometimes lethal consequences for Soviet Jewry. As Yuri Slezkine has written of Soviet Jewry:

All Stalinist purges were about creeping penetration by invisible aliens—and here was a race that was both ubiquitous and camouflaged; an ethnic group that was so good at becoming invisible that it had become visible as an elite. Here was a nationality that did not possess its own territory (or rather, possessed one but refused to live there), a nationality that did not have its own language (or rather, had one but refused to speak it), a nationality that consisted almost entirely of intelligentsia (or rather, refused to engage in proletarian pursuits); a nationality that used pseudonyms instead of names…43

In short, Jews were suspected of anti-Soviet behavior not because of their failings, but rather because of their successes.

The Jews of the Soviet Union had, for the most part, done exactly what had been asked of them. They had assimilated into Russian society; they had adopted Russian as their mother tongue; they had abandoned all manifestations of Jewish religious and secular culture. They had, in all but name, (and often in this respect too) ceased to be Jewish. They had become ideal Soviet citizens in every respect. They had outdone their Russian counterparts in becoming

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model Soviets, and as Slezkin argues, for these reasons, they were a perpetually suspect people. Rather than being congratulated for their assimilation, Soviet Jews were viewed as “hiding” their Jewishness from public sight. This rendered them doubly dangerous. They were Jews who could live undetected within all aspects of Soviet life. In this respect, perhaps more than others, Soviet Jews proved to be ideal targets for a Soviet-style purge. Their assimilation could be unmasked as purposeful concealment and following from this initial deception, others would surely flow.

The outbreak of Soviet antisemitism as seen in the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot was to a large degree the result of the intersection of several historical realities and precedents which taken individually are no less complicated and challenging. The specific history of Czechoslovakia’s relationship with Jews, the foreign policies of the Soviet Union, Israel, and Czechoslovakia, as well as the domestic situations of these countries, and the complicated ambiguities of Soviet national policy regarding the Jews, not to mention the realities of the Cold War, all contributed to the advent of the most blatant act of state-sponsored antisemitism to take place after the Holocaust. While the story which follows is chronologically limited to the months between the opening of the Slansky Affair on November 20, 1952 and the retraction of the Doctors’ Plot on April 4, 1953, much preceded it and likewise, the story did not end with the resumption of Israeli-Soviet relations at the end of 1953.

The “black years of Soviet Jewry,” as the late 1940s and early 1950s have come to be known, have for the most part been discussed in terms of inter-state relations. As the scholarship above demonstrates, a great deal of attention has been paid to matters of diplomacy, realities within Soviet authorities and Party elites, the relationship between the Soviet Union and its post-war satellites, as well as general trends within the Cold War. Important as these interpretations are, they fail to see the Slansky Affair and the wave of antisemitism which followed as a “Jewish story.” The purpose of the following pages is therefore twofold. It is an attempt to add another dimension to the already complex history of the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot as well as present the Slansky Affair as an integral part of the post-Holocaust Jewish experience.

The following project is therefore not an investigation of the Slansky Affair and the Doctors’ Plot themselves. Many other scholars have devoted countless pages to this subject. What follows is an investigation of how Jews in the non-communist world reacted to, understood, and interpreted events taking place behind the Iron Curtain. In discussing how Jews, in the United States, Western Europe, and Israel, navigated this latest crisis of world Jewry, I propose to elucidate many of the challenges facing Jews in the years immediately following the Holocaust, the creation of a Jewish state, and the Cold War.

In the first chapter, *Framing the Debate*, I discuss how Jews, irrespective of nationality, political affiliation, and religious conviction, drew heavily upon the recent Holocaust in their efforts to examine and discuss the outbreak of overt Soviet antisemitism. The Nazi genocide of six million European Jews loomed large as Jews struggled to understand the motives behind Soviet antisemitism. A sentiment prevailed that Jews had not done enough to intervene on behalf of European Jewry during World War II. As a result, they closely monitored the trajectory of Soviet antisemitism in a desperate attempt to prevent another Holocaust of European Jewry. Several other themes predominated as Jews attempted to make sense of this new crisis of world Jewry. Among these included: the nature of antisemitism in a post-Holocaust world,
Soviet antisemitism as Cold War politics, as well as the position of Soviet antisemitism within Jewish religious and secular history.

In the second chapter, *The Race against Time: Jewish Authority and the Competition to Save Iron Curtain Jewry*, I explore some of the actions which a host of Jewish organizations and groups took in the weeks and months following the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot. In this section, I describe the activities of Zionist groups, such as the American Zionist Council, Jewish Labor, the Jewish Labor Committee in particular, and American liberal groups, such as the American Jewish Committee, as they sought to act on behalf of Iron Curtain Jewry. In addition to discussing how these groups independently interpreted the events taking place in the Soviet Bloc according to their own ideological convictions, I outline how Jewish groups vied with one another to become the “spokesperson,” and authoritative representative of world Jewry. Following the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel, a crisis in Jewish authority was apparent, and Jewish organizations, following the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism, sought to emerge as the uncontested authority in global Jewish affairs.

In the third chapter, *Communism on Trial*, I attempt to outline the ways in which the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot affected Jewish politics. In addition to investigating how Zionists, Jewish socialists, and more traditional liberal entities navigated the complicated terrain of the post-war political landscape, I focus on how the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism posed unique challenges to the traditional relationship Jews held with the Left. I describe how the events of 1952 and 1953 caused a number of fellow-travelers and Soviet sympathizers to rethink their support and toleration of the Soviet Union in light of that country’s treatment of its Jewish population. Within Jewish circles, a sentiment prevailed that the Soviet Union, in spite of its many detractions, was not antisemitic and that Jews, if they suffered, did so not as Jews, but as Soviet citizens. The outbreak of Soviet antisemitism as seen in the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot brought an abrupt end to this long held conviction. As a result, a great deal of political debate, turmoil, and controversy ensued in the wake of Prague and Moscow.

In the fourth and final chapter, *The “State” of the Trial*, I discuss how the new State of Israel dealt with the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism. I focus on the diplomatic outcomes of the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot as well as the internal repercussions of these events within Israeli society. I outline the events leading up to the break in diplomatic relations between Israel and the Soviet Union in February 1953 and how this break affected the position of Israel and Jews more generally, in relation to the Cold War. I also describe how the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism proved ideologically fatal for the large section of the Israeli population that sought to combine the goals of Zionism and revolutionary socialism. More broadly, I discuss how the new Jewish state saw itself vis-à-vis diasporic Jewry and to what extent Israel believed that it was capable of or obliged to represent the interests of Jewry throughout the world.

The sources I have consulted in the course of this study include a range of Jewish periodicals published in the U.S., Western Europe, and Israel and encompass a spectrum of political and religious affiliations. In addition to these printed materials, I have consulted the archives of several leading Jewish organizations. Among these include the American Jewish Committee, politically liberal and distinctly anti-communist in its orientation, the Jewish Labor Committee, socialist in its convictions, the American Zionist Council, a composite organization of a number of Zionist entities, the Bund, the Jewish Socialist Party of pre-communist East/Central Europe (though greatly diminished by 1952), as well as Jewish groups in Great
Britain, France, and Israel. In order to account for the realities associated with sovereign statehood and international diplomacy, I treat the ways in which Jews in Israel and official Israeli authorities reacted to the advent of Soviet antisemitism separately from Jews living in the Diaspora. My evidence is to a great degree anecdotal. It is a survey of the range of opinions expressed by different segments of world Jewry to a perceived crisis and what these opinions tell us about the nature and character of Jewish communities in the early 1950s. It has been difficult to quantify these findings, and as such, many of my claims are based upon the recurrence of themes observed throughout my research. In spite of my inability to quantify Jewish reactions to Soviet antisemitism, I believe that the quality of Jewish statements reveals much about the major issues facing world Jewry in the years immediately following the Holocaust, the creation of the State of Israel, and the advent of the Cold War.
Chapter One: Framing the Debate

Dreadful events have taken place in Prague, in Moscow and Berlin and Warsaw. A spectre, which many or even most men believed had been laid to dishonored rest with the corpse of Adolf Hitler, is again stalking Eastern Europe.¹

Within days of the opening of the Slansky Trial, Jews, throughout the world recognized that an event of great import was underway. The trial of Rudolf Slansky and his thirteen co-conspirators rapidly filled the front pages of Jewish periodicals and became the main topic of interest for a host of Jewish organizations in the United States, Western Europe, and Israel. Jews of all religious, national, and political affiliations expressed strong sentiments about the events taking place behind the Iron Curtain. Information about Iron Curtain Jewry was sparse and unreliable. Confusion, frustration, and dismay prevailed as Jews struggled to understand the implications of this curious episode. Before Jewish entities could decide how to proceed regarding this latest manifestation of state-sponsored antisemitism, they were first charged with the task of discerning the nature and character of the seemingly anti-Jewish campaign taking place in Prague. Hence, in the weeks and months following the trial, a vigorous debate among a large spectrum of world Jewry surrounding the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism ensued.

Although most Jews, save a small minority of Jewish communists, saw in the Slansky Trial an indication that official Soviet attitudes toward its Jewish population had undergone a change for the worse, interpretations of the trial and its eventual outcomes for Soviet Jewry were diverse and numerous. Jews constructed a variety of narratives surrounding the events taking place in Prague. The array of ways in which Jews sought to understand, explain, and make sense of the Slansky Affair reflected the many challenges and concerns facing world Jewry after the Holocaust and with the creation of the State of Israel. National identity, religious convictions, political ideologies, historical precedent, Cold War realities, and not least among these, the Holocaust produced a set of sometimes competing, sometimes convergent interpretations that Jews circulated among themselves and to the non-Jewish world around them.

The Holocaust and the Realities of Genocide

In late November 1952, as news of the Slansky Trial reached the non-communist world, the Holocaust remained a vivid memory as survivors struggled to rebuild their lives in the wake of its devastating aftermath. Contrary to the widely held belief that Jews, especially in the United States, willfully excised the Holocaust from their cultural and communal lives, scholars, such as Hasia Diner, have shown that Jews engaged with the Holocaust in a host of direct and meaningful ways in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. As Diner has written, "Jews disagreed profoundly about Jewish culture and Judaism, and they also sparred among themselves as to what they ought to do as Jews [. . .] as a result of the Holocaust But they

agreed that it had permanently changed them and their worlds.\textsuperscript{2} Hardly a decade had passed since the crematoria had ceased their operation when Rudolf Slansky and his thirteen co-defendants stood before the judge and the whole of the Soviet world as agents of a global Zionist conspiracy. With roughly three million Jews living in the lands behind the Iron Curtain (a significant percentage of world Jewry), in the very lands on which the Nazis had recently perpetrated their crimes, many Jews could not help but see the Slansky Trials as a prelude to genocide. Antisemitic excesses no longer carried with them the spirit of episodic pogroms, but the existential anxiety over the prospect of wholesale and systematic annihilation.

As Jews sought to understand the meaning behind the Prague Trials, their debates were informed by a multitude of political, religious, social, and national differences. Amid the variety of ways in which Jews understood the Slansky Affair, however, was the inescapable reality that world Jewry, in November 1952, had hardly begun to recover from the blow inflicted by the Holocaust. Whether they were Bundist, Zionist, socialist, communist, American, British, or Israeli, the Nazi genocide loomed large for Jews and cast an ominous shadow over the court proceedings taking place in Prague.

Comparisons between Hitler and Stalin and between Nazism and communism abounded, a trend which would continue, as Hasia Diner has remarked until the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{3} The anti-Defamation League of B’nai Brith declared, “the words were Adolf Hitler’s, writing in Mein Kampf in 1924. How close they came to being the words of the communist world in 1952! The rumblings out of Prague have an ominous sound that chills the soul of anyone whose memory goes back 20 years.”\textsuperscript{4} In an article published in The Jewish Chronicle of London, one author speculated that, “it may truly be said that the instigators of the Prague trial have taken up where Heydrich left off.”\textsuperscript{5} In another British publication, the contributing author expressed genuine fear at the antisemitic nature of the Slansky Trials, exclaiming that, “What does all this portend? With the memories of the Hitler Holocaust still fresh in our minds we naturally fear the worst.”\textsuperscript{6}

The Holocaust infused the Slansky Affair with a pronounced sense of urgency. Jews felt that time for Soviet Jewry was running out, and immediate action was necessary to stem the growing tide of Soviet antisemitism. Raphael Lemkin, author of the Genocide Convention and an Eastern European Jewish émigré, declared that, “the world stood idly by when millions of Jews were murdered by Hitler’s Nazis about ten years ago. The ink is hardly dry on the Nuremberg books and another dictator has already jeopardized the lives of 2,500,000 Jews in his countries.”\textsuperscript{7} Lemkin went on to further remark that, “Hitler used war hysteria to gain his ends and adopted the concentration camp ‘technique’; Stalin is using spy hysteria and the fake trial technique. These are physical and mental tortures of the first magnitude in intensity as

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  \item \textsuperscript{3} Diner, 237.
  \item \textsuperscript{5} Digest of the Anglo-Jewish Press, 5 Dec. 1952, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 116, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
  \item \textsuperscript{6} “Moscow Accuses,” \textit{The Jewish Review} 23 Jan. 1953: 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{7} \textit{ADL Bulletin} Jan. 1953.
\end{itemize}
well as in quantity. They are calculated to destroy a whole religious group. Both are genocide.”

Lemkin argued that the United Nations must take action and honor its commitment to intervene and prevent genocide when and where ever possible. He wrote that, “Now Stalin sits and waits. If no action is taken, the psychological moment may be lost and genocide will, like a great conflagration, get completely out of hand. The fate of Jews behind the Iron Curtain, many of whom are survivors of Nazi genocide, rests with the United Nations.”

The fact that the individual responsible for helping to define the very notion of genocide declared the events taking place in Prague to be signifiers of plans for mass extermination did little to quell the fears of Jews regarding the fate of Soviet Jewry.

The Slansky Trial came to be seen as the most important crisis to beset world Jewry since the Holocaust. As a result, the trial became an immediate priority for several Jewish organizations and leaders. In a meeting of its Public Information and Education Committee, Dr. Simon Segal of the American Jewish Committee declared that, “If there is any priority in the AJC, this is it. It is not unlike the Hitler situation.”

In a letter published in The Jewish Vanguard, a British Zionist publication, Moshe ben Natan, Israeli citizen, exclaimed that, “Next only to the extermination by the Nazis of the bulk of European Jewry, the severance of the Jews of Russia from the body of the Jewish people was the greatest blow we suffered in modern times.” Throughout Jewish periodicals and in organizational gatherings, Jews expressed the sentiment that the memory of the Holocaust placed an obligation on Jews and non-Jews alike to accurately discern the warning signs of genocide and to take all necessary actions to prevent its recurrence. In several Jewish communities, individuals expressed the sentiment that the Hitler crisis had been met with relative apathy by Jews and Gentiles alike. They argued that the magnitude of Nazi crimes was, at the time, unimaginable, and people, as a result, did not take the appropriate measures to save European Jewry. The Holocaust placed the burden of precedent on Jews and Jewish authorities in the “Free World.” Such individuals felt that apathy, in a post-Holocaust world, amounted to permission and was therefore inexcusable.

One author in The Newark Jewish News urged his co-religionists to take very seriously the accusations levied in the purge trials:

Those persons who are tempted [he declared] to deride as farcical the Prague treason trials should be reminded of the ominous possibility that this incredible circus may be a preliminary to disaster for the millions of Jews living in the Soviet Union and her satellites. [. . .] The patent absurdity of the 'confessions' should be evaluated not as an entertainment piece but rather for what they are: stark evidence of the nightmare world of communist justice rigged up as a justification for blood-letting. At this present point, we can only pray that we are wrong in our presentiments of impending horrors.

In another editorial published in The New Leader, the author argued that, “it is hardly possible to kill every Christian and thereby kill Christianity; but it is possible to dispose of a few

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10 Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Public Information and Education Committee, 18 Dec. 1952, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 102, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
million Jews—Hitler proved that—and to eliminate Zionism as a competing force simply by eliminating all potential carriers of it.”

Echoing the words of Raphael Lemkin, the author concluded that:

Rarely has the world had such advance notice of a coming catastrophe as Stalin has given of his intention to commit genocide against Iron Curtain Jewry. Hitler cremated nearly six million Jews in relative secrecy, and at the height of a war; Stalin announces by means of staged trials, broadcast over the radio, that his goal is the liquidation of the remnants left by Hitler. One force alone can, just possibly, deter Stalin from carrying out this monstrous crime—the force of world opinion. At a time when he is prating ever louder of “peace” and “brotherhood” he cannot afford to repel by dark deeds the very nations he would lure into his grasp by pretty words. It is up to these nations to join in raising an outcry that will stay Stalin’s hand.

The appeals by several Jewish writers that the situation behind the Iron Curtain had to be taken “seriously,” reflects two features of the post-Holocaust world. On the one hand, the Holocaust demonstrated that the words and actions of a totalitarian regime ought never to be underestimated. What citizens of the “democratic” world took to be verbal exaggerations and dramatic posturing were in fact statements of intention, and that the Hitlers and Stalins of the world had at their disposal the means to carry out what others might dismiss as verbal excesses. On the other hand, the fact that some Jews felt it necessary to urge their co-religionists to recognize the serious nature of the Slansky Affair reveals that some Jews did not see the events taking place in the East as a “crisis” and/or that Jews perceived the type of antisemitism being displayed in Prague as different than that manifested by the Nazis. That some Jews seemed reluctant to acknowledge the severity of the Slansky Trial only served to intensify the sense of urgency among those Jews who believed the trial to be a prelude to genocide.

At the time of the Slansky Affair and subsequent Doctors’ Plot, rumors circulated widely throughout Soviet society that Jews were to be deported en masse to labor camps under construction in the Soviet Far East. To date, no documentary evidence has been found to support this claim. Whether Stalin’s intentions were genocidal or not is difficult to say. He died in early March 1953, and as such, the extreme anti-Jewish activities of his last months came to an abrupt end. However, what is important to note is that Jews, in the wake of the Holocaust, counted genocide among the real dangers confronting Jewry. They believed that Stalin was not simply capable of committing genocide against his Jewish population on moral grounds alone, but that he had the logistical resources to fulfill such a heinous crime.

The Nature of Soviet Antisemitism

Despite the perceived boldness of the trial’s antisemitism, a number of Jews remarked that Soviet antisemitism was more elusive and difficult to tackle than that presented by Hitler.

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Slansky and his co-defendants were charged as Zionists, not specifically as Jews. Their crimes were technically of an ideological nature. Their racial origin as Jews was brought into question boldly, but veiled, if only thinly, by carefully chosen communist rhetoric. As a memo circulated within the American Jewish Committee, declared, “By ideological tricks the Kremlin has maintained the fiction of combating antisemitism while liquidating Jews in great numbers. They have been striding hard at ‘cosmopolitans,’ ‘internationalists,’ ‘Zionists’ and the like. Hitler was more honest. He always referred to them as ‘Jews.’” In an editorial published in *The Jewish Examiner* of Brooklyn, the author asserted that:

Soviet spokesmen insist that “Anti-Zionism is not the same as antisemitism;” That is technically true. But who decides where one ends and the other begins? Because of Jewish age-old aspirations for the homeland, the division between Zionism and Judaism becomes indistinguishable. To attack the one may easily open the way to an attack on the other. Six million men, women and children were destroyed in recent years in Europe, for no other reason than that they were Jews. The crematoria of Auschwitz reduced Jewish flesh to ashes and the consuming fire did not spare the Zionists, non-Zionists or anti-Zionists. We hopefully anticipate no repetition of this tragic pattern, but we are by no means certain where the current purge will lead.

Frustration over the ambiguity of Soviet antisemitism, in comparison to that of Hitler’s, appeared throughout Jewish sources. Writing in *The Jewish Morning Journal*, Yiddish journalist M. Rivlin stated the following, "The tragic thing about the Prague trials is that, unlike the days of Hitler’s zoological antisemitism, there is no one to whom we can point the finger of guilt. Against whom are we to protest? Against the Czechs, who have a tradition of friendship for Jews? The Czechs themselves are the victims of a terrible tyranny." Rivlin further lamented that, "[Even more] tragic is the fact that while during the Nazi Holocaust all Jews were united as one, today there are still some Jews who dare to defend Stalin's antisemitism, holding him up stubbornly as the greatest friend of the Jewish people."

Historian Lucy S. Dawidowicz, writing in *The Reconstructionist*, remarked at the clarity of judgment with which the world approached Hitler in stark comparison to the far more ambiguous attitudes Jews and non-Jews held toward Stalin:

Everyone understood Hitler. Here was a madman, who had one principle: hate the Jews. But with Stalin, things had been different. The Soviet Union had a law outlawing antisemitism; for a few years the Soviet Union seemed to have been interested in the establishment of a Jewish autonomous republic in the wastes of Asia. How was it possible for seeming philo-Semitism to turn into antisemitism?

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18 Prague Nightmare: Cross Section of Reaction of Yiddish Press, 2 Dec. 1952, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, box 10, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
19 Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Public Information and Education Committee, 18 Dec. 1952, American Jewish Committee.
At a mass rally organized by the Jewish Labor Committee to protest the Prague trial, held on December 21, 1952, James B. Carey, President of the International Union for Electrical, Radio, and Machine workers and Secretary Treasurer of the CIO, declared in his speech:

[In a strict sense Stalin's crime against humanity is even more monstrous than Hitler's — because it is hypocritical. Hitler, a madman, announced and boasted of his planned extermination of 7,000,000 Jews.]

Communism, however, continues to mock all truth and decency by insisting that it is opposed to antisemitism.

While professing to advocate "the brotherhood of man," communism propagates the most vicious hatred of our Jewish brethren.

While proclaiming a philosophy of equality, communism deliberately reduces hundreds of thousands of Jews to poverty and near-starvation.

While pretending to advocate justice, communism sends tens of thousands of Jews to prison or exile without trial or the opportunity of self-defense.

While mouthing the word "democracy," communism directs the full fury of its antidemocratic despotism against the Jewish minority.21

In the months following the trial, debates raged over its antisemitic character. The definition of antisemitism became a topic of public debate as Jews sought to determine the motives behind the trial and its ultimate implications for Soviet Jewry in particular and world Jewry in general. Crucial to these debates was an attempt to determine how closely Soviet antisemitism resembled that perpetrated by the Nazis, and by extension, to what degree the Slansky Trial signaled the potential for mass extermination of Jews behind the Iron Curtain. The Nazi genocide had greatly reshaped the meaning of antisemitism for many Jews. While most Jewish authorities agreed that the Slansky Trial was antisemitic and that Jewishness, itself, had been brought into question during the trial, the exact nature of the antisemitism displayed in the Prague courtroom was, by no means, universally accepted.

Underlying much of the debate over the trial’s antisemitic character was the fact that Slansky and his co-defendants were charged as Zionists and as agents of American, British, and Israeli imperialism. While the term “of Jewish origin” followed the names of the eleven Jewish defendants in the indictment, communists maintained that Zionism, and not Jewishness was the crime at hand. Following the trial, Czechoslovak Premier Klement Gottwald continued to proclaim that the trial was anti-Zionist, not antisemitic, and that antisemitism and all other acts of racism were forbidden in the Czech constitution.

Except for the brief period during which the Soviet Union supported the partition of Palestine, born largely out of a desire to weaken British and American influence in the Middle East rather than genuine sympathy for Jewish national aspirations, Zionism had never been tolerated as a viable ideology in the communist world. It was viewed as capitalist in extraction and indeed many Zionists had been persecuted in the 1920s and 1930s. Unlike other national movements encouraged throughout the Soviet Union, Jewish nationalism was seen as a competitor to communist ideology. To be Zionist meant that one viewed the interests of the Jews as separate from those of other oppressed groups. As a result, the communists deemed

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Zionism to be incapable of adopting a true socialist character. Contrary to Soviet aims, Jewish nationalism was deemed nationalist in content and socialist in form. Unlike the Soviet-led programs of nationalist development that sought to transform small, pre-capitalist tribes into socialist nations, Zionism had developed independent of communism and as such was seen as a threat within the communist paradigm.

Even before the immediate crisis of Soviet antisemitism reached its peak with news of the Slansky Affair and the Doctors’ Plot, Jewish entities acknowledged that Soviet antisemitism posed unique challenges. In 1949, the American Jewish Committee’s Advisory Committee on Soviet Russia convened to discuss the topic of antisemitism and its meaning in a postwar context. During the meeting, the question was raised whether “definitions of antisemitism suitable for free countries with freedom of expression can be used without modification in the conditions of totalitarian dictatorship, where open social movements are not allowed, and many currents of thinking and feeling can be expressed only in devious, undercover ways.”22 The Committee concluded that “care should be taken to distinguish between simple popular dislikes and definite antisemitic action, between casual antisemitic remarks and consequent antisemitic policies, between direct antisemitic actions of the authorities and official attitudes which may be described as concessions to or appeasement of antisemitic moods.”23 Reaching these conclusions in the absence of a direct crisis, caution was above all valued. However, even in this more theoretical approach to the matter of Soviet antisemitism, a notion prevailed that it was somehow different from other forms of antisemitism.

In the wake of the trial, however, as a sentiment of impending crisis loomed ever larger in the minds of many Jews, distinctions in the forms and manner of various antisemitic manifestations decreased in significance. Jews, Zionist and non-Zionist alike, dismissed the distinction between anti-Zionism and antisemitism—maintained consistently by communist authorities—as immaterial. As Jonathan Frankel has written, “[O]nly the most ideologically iron-clad communists could fail to see that the term ‘Zionists’ was being used as a euphemism for ‘Jews’ or ‘Semites,’ and that the Soviet regime of Stalin’s last years was moving toward a policy of Judeophobia so extreme as to arouse not wholly unjustified fears of a second—communist—Holocaust.”24 In a lengthy analysis of Soviet antisemitism, Joseph Gordon, the American Jewish Committee’s Eastern European specialist, remarked that, “of course it is possible to be anti-Zionist without being anti-Semitic, but the really crucial point is that not only Zionists, but also non-Zionists and anti-Zionist Jews are being persecuted under the charge of Zionism.”25 Gordon further asserted that “If Slansky, Geminder, Fischl, Freund, Ana Pauker were...

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22 Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Soviet Russia Project, 11 Feb. 1949, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 101, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, 2.
23 Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Soviet Russia Project, 11 Feb. 1953, 3.
'Zionists,' can there be a Jew who is not? If Soviet-Jewish writers, faithful communists of long standing, are described as homeless cosmopolitans, what Jew is immune from danger?"26

In an editorial published in *The Jewish Chronicle*, the author expressed concern over the inability of the Eastern European masses to discern any real difference between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. He declared:

In spite of the fact that communist official speakers, including the Premier of Czechoslovakia, have repudiated the charge of antisemitism made by the West, it is not easy to see where the dividing line is drawn between antisemitism and anti-Zionism. It is clear that even if the Kremlin is sincere in wishing to draw such a line, most of the peoples under Soviet domination will not appreciate the distinction. Moreover, though the Prague trial may be indicative of an increasingly hostile attitude, which can in no way be condoned, towards Zionism, or Jewish nationalism, rather than towards the Jewish population of the U. S. S. R., and its satellites, the danger of the situation is clear for all to see.27

It is clear that Jews continued to see Eastern Europe as a hotbed of antisemitism and believed that the anti-Jewish propaganda of the Nazis had only intensified the region’s antisemitic proclivities. As a result, some Jews felt that the ideological distinctions between anti-Zionism and antisemitism would be lost on the general populations of Eastern Europe and would arouse a surge in antisemitic activities.

Indeed, speculations circulated that the Soviets intended, through this very rhetorical ambiguity, to incite popular hostility toward Soviet Jewry and to signal to the populations at large that antisemitism was, if not officially sanctioned, tolerated. Writing in the Yiddish daily, *Der Tog*, Zachariah Schuster, head of the American Jewish Committee’s Paris office, wrote:

I should like to emphasize that this new version of international antisemitism differs from all previous ones inasmuch as it seeks deliberately to create confusion as to its meaning and essence. In communist propaganda the word Jewish is never put alone. It is always hyphenated with all the other taboos and evils in communist mythology. Here is the communist’s equation — Jew equals bourgeois nationalist; equals Zionist; equals Israel; and all these equal Jewish imperialism. This confusion is deliberately created in order not to alienate those elements of the world population who would abhor hatred based on religious or ethnic or nationalist grounds. It is, therefore, made into a fight against a political enemy. It is absolutely essential to understand the international communist technique. While perpetrating this new brand of antisemitism and inciting hundreds of millions of people living in communist countries against Jews, they do at the same time pretend that they are still basically opposed to antisemitism.28

The ability of Soviet authorities to continually maintain that they stood on the frontlines of combating all forms of racism and antisemitism while engaging in distinctly antisemitic behavior remains one of the most remarkable features of Soviet antisemitism. As Robert Wistrich has written, “the communists (with the Soviet Union marching at their head) cleverly

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26 Gordon, Is There Antisemitism in the Soviet Union?, 9. Anna Pauker was a high level member of the Rumanian Communist Party and was similarly arrested and tried as a Zionist agent around the same time as the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot.
utilized the prestige they had acquired as major architects of Hitler’s military defeat to attack and discredit the anti-Semitism of their adversaries, even while appropriating some of the ugliest features of the National Socialist system.”

Soviet antisemitism was indeed real, and countless Jews suffered and paid the ultimate price as a result. Jews, however at the time of the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot had immediately discerned that Soviet antisemitism differed in one important aspect from the Nazi variety. Soviet communism, because of its ideological character, had to reject antisemitism as a product of capitalism and as such, entirely contrary to communist belief. While the results of Soviet “anti-Zionism” differed little in practice from typical manifestations of antisemitic discrimination, it is possible to argue that the believing communist saw his or her anti-Zionism as a necessary measure to safeguard Jewry from corrupting influences. In theory and in practice, Soviet anti-Zionism and antisemitism, more likely than not, existed along a spectrum, and most individuals, depending on a variety of factors, could be situated at several points between the two poles of anti-Zionism and antisemitism.

Though a number of Jews agreed that the end results of Soviet and Nazi antisemitism were the same, several Jewish writers remarked upon the non-racial character of Soviet antisemitism in comparison to that expressed by the Nazis. Like Schuster, such individuals saw Soviet antisemitism as a political expedient rather than a permanent feature of communism. According to Nazi ideology, a Jew could never cease being a Jew. His/her Jewishness was inherited and a part of his/her biological makeup. Because Nazis hated the Jews and Jews could never “shed” their Jewishness, antisemitism was a permanent and unchanging part of Nazi ideology. It would not lessen or intensify according to different circumstances. Soviet antisemitism, in contrast, was seen as variable and dependent on the particular circumstances of the day. This quality of Soviet antisemitism did little to quell Jewish fears, but in theory, the situation of Soviet Jewry could improve unlike that of Jews living under Nazi rule.

In a lengthy analysis of the Slansky Trial’s impact within Israel, one Israeli author wrote that:

The Jews, shattered as they are by the new communist antisemitism, are not deceived into believing that Nazi and communist Jew baiting are of one kind. The Nazis were fanatical anti-Semites who believed in the creed of racial superiority and fell victim to their belief. Not so the communists. They do not believe in antisemitism, They merely adopt it as one more expedient, decreed by Moscow, and applied with cold calculation and amoral Machiavellism. Soviet antisemitism is not part of the Dogma, it is a means of ruling the masses, by inciting them, diverting their attention, or dividing the subject peoples, it may not be a lasting phase. But, the Prague trials have certainly ushered in a new era, in which Jews in the Soviet countries have ceased to be equal citizens, and will become lower grade subjects—merely because they are Jews.

In an article published in *Pioneer Women*, Jewish scholar and commentator C. Bezalel Sherman declared that:

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Whereas the Nazi is an anti-Semite as of “principle,” the communist can become a practicing anti-Semite if it suits his purposes. Hitler conceived antisemitism as a “social ideal” for which he was ready, in his degeneracy, to offer “sacrifices.” Stalin uses antisemitism, as a political umbrella to be opened at the first sign of a drizzle. On a number of occasions Stalin has shown that he is not averse to antisemitism.\

In his speech given at the Jewish Labor Committee’s protest rally, Raphael Abramovitch, former Menshevik leader and Soviet exile, declared that:

Many people speak now of Stalin imitating Hitler. Ho, it is not Mr. Adolph Hitler, the German race and blood fanatic, whom Stalin is now trying to imitate. […] Stalin has no intent to synthesize the class theory of Marxism with the blood and race theories of Nazism. A regime which wants to rule all the peoples of the world, of every continent and every color, does not accept race theories. His antisemitism will be a political one or in many countries a social one—by identifying Jews with bourgeois and capitalism. But this antisemitism will be no less poisonous and dangerous for the world, the peace of the world and world democracy than the biological theories of the Streichers and the Hitlers.

The seemingly non-racial character of Soviet antisemitism was for most an academic point and provided little comfort regarding the situation of Iron Curtain Jewry. In a letter exchanged between Joseph Lichten of the Anti-Defamation League and Lester Waldman of the Jewish Labor Committee, Lichten wrote that:

antisemitism, as such, is not a part of communist doctrine as it was an integral part of Nazism; however, the Kremlin and its satellites do not hesitate to utilize antisemitism as an instrument when and if they find it suitable or politically expedient. While Soviet antisemitism thus differs from the Nazi variety—the final destruction of Judaism is the ultimate goal of both.

That Soviet antisemitism may have lacked the racial component endemic to Nazi doctrine did little to quell the fears of Joseph Gordon of the American Jewish Committee who asserted that:

Hitler’s insistence that a man of Jewish origin could not ‘redeem’ himself from his racial characteristics has tended to obscure the well known fact that throughout previous ages anti-Semites often exempted from persecution those Jews who cut all ties with Jewishness and turned against their faith, their traditions and their brothers. Yet Christian anti-Semites who accepted baptized Jews were still anti-Semites. The exemption of converts is quite compatible with antisemitism; although experience teaches that the anti-Semites often catch up with the converts too.

Not all Jews drew the distinction between the racial antisemitism of Hitler and the political antisemitism of Stalin. Indeed, some Jews believed that Soviet antisemitism grew out of the conviction that Jews were racially different. No matter how fully Soviet Jews assimilated into society; no matter their ignorance of anything Jewish, cultural as well as religious, Soviet

32 Address by Raphael Abramovitch at Jewish Labor Committee Rally, 21 Dec. 1952, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 116, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, 11.
Jews retained some awareness of their Jewishness. This was not for lack of trying on the part of Soviet Jewry, but rather Soviet society’s unwillingness to accept that a Jew could ever cease being a Jew. As Yuri Slezkine has written, “They may never have been to a synagogue, seen a menorah, heard Yiddish or Hebrew, tasted gefilte fish, or indeed met their grandparents. But they knew they were Jews in the Soviet sense, which was also—in essence—the Nazi sense. They were Jews by blood.”\(^{35}\) The ambiguities of Jewish nationality in the Soviet Union highly complicated the ways in which Jews interpreted the events taking place in Prague. It enabled some Jews, as seen above to view Soviet antisemitism as a serious, but potentially fleeting crisis. It similarly prompted other Jews to condemn the Soviet Union for its intrinsic hatred of its Jewish population.

Writing in *The Jewish Vanguard*, Israeli author Moshe ben Natan lamented that, “there is no country where a Jew, if he so desires, finds it more difficult to erase the last traces of his Jewish identity, for the word ‘Jew’ is inscribed on his papers, and there is no way in which he can exchange it for ‘Ukrainian,’ ‘White Russian,’ etc...”\(^{36}\) Slansky and his co-defendants had been communists first and foremost. They were men who had abandoned their religious identities for the sake of the revolution and had cast their lot with the plight of the working class. Several of the defendants were notorious for their attempts to limit Jewish emigration from Czechoslovakia and from preventing Jews leaving the country from taking any more property than was permitted by law. They were Jewish in origin alone, but were brought before the judge as Jews all the same. As a result, many came to suspect that the crime at hand was neither treason nor conspiracy, but Jewishness itself. The trial aroused among Jews the belief that the Soviet Union had deemed Jewishness as something biologically incompatible with, or at the very least alien to, communism, and as a result, all Jews would become suspect for the very fact that they were Jews.

**Halt the Hysteria**

Although it seems that the majority of non-communist Jewish authorities freely drew upon comparisons between Hitler and Stalin to convey their worry about the Prague Purges, a number of Jews raised their voices in opposition to what they viewed as a type of careless hysteria on the part of Jewish leaders. Well-known anti-Zionist and editor of *The Jewish Newsletter*, William Zukerman, in responding to the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism, wrote that:

> It was natural that the official injection of communist antisemitism into the Cold War should have thrown Jewish public opinion into a state of turmoil and confusion. The event marked the emergence of a new crisis in post-war Jewish history, one that has many points of likeness with the earlier Jewish crisis created by Nazism which has resulted in so much tragedy. It is also natural that because of the many similarities, including the fears which it has engendered, there should be a tendency to treat the

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\(^{36}\) Ben Natan, “Two Million,” 4.
present crisis as if it were a continuation of the old, or at least, a new edition of Nazism and to apply to it the same methods of diagnosis and treatment.  

Zukerman continued:
Actually, this is an error which may lead to serious consequences. While it is true that antisemitism is an ancient evil with a familiar pattern, it may assume different forms which are as distinct from each other in manifestation as in results. Nothing can be more harmful at the present moment than to assume that there is no distinction between the antisemitism of communism and Nazism, and to treat them both in the same manner. It is a dangerous oversimplification to assume that the present crisis is but a repetition of the one of World War II except that Stalin takes the place of Hitler.

Zukerman concluded that, “the emergence of Israel has so radically changed the Jewish position the world over that an entirely new approach is needed and new methods have to be used in dealing with most Jewish crises, including the latest one.”

As an anti-Zionist, Zukerman believed that individuals attempting to perpetuate the myth of Jewish disloyalty and unreliability could now point an accusatory finger at the new Jewish state to demonstrate that Jews indeed had divided national identities. This reality alone was enough to render different, for individuals such as Zukerman, the situations of 1933 and 1952. The Holocaust had of course altered the ways in which Jews approached antisemitism, but so had the creation of Israel, argued Zuckerman and his followers. To ignore this fundamental reality would only further endanger the Jews not only of the Soviet Union, but the world over.

Echoing these sentiments, Lessing Rosenwald of the American Council of Judaism, whose agenda was first and foremost anti-Zionist in character, declared that:

{Detestable} as the lies and general conduct of the Soviet regime have been, there is yet no indication that it intends to engage in physical mass extermination of its Jewish subjects. This terrible and dread possibility cannot be ignored for the future. But to stress that possibility now as against what has actually happened can serve only to create self-defeating hysteria, make Soviet disclaimers easier and detract attention from the grand design that the Soviets hope to advance through this campaign.

Like Zukerman, Rosenwald urged Jewish authorities to adopt a program of responsible caution in confronting the matter of Soviet antisemitism. Rosenwald further argued that to use the Slansky Trial as a means to pressure Soviet authorities into allowing its Jewish citizens to emigrate to Israel was not only unrealistic, but placed Soviet Jewry in an ever dangerous situation. As cosmopolitans, Slansky and his co-defendants were accused of prioritizing their

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37 William Zukerman, Jewish Newsletter: The New Danger, Communist antisemitism and how to deal with it, 2 Mar. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 115, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
38 Zukerman, The New Danger.
40 Statement by Lessing J. Rosenwald, President of the American Council of Judaism, 2 Mar. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 115, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
allegiance to other Jews above all else. As a result, individuals such as Zukerman and Rosenwald feared that in urging the Soviet Union to permit its Jewish citizens to emigrate, Jewish authorities were only supporting the notion that Jews were inherently disloyal and ready, at any moment, to betray their homeland. Men like Zukerman and Rosenwald did not seek to dismiss the crisis presented by Soviet antisemitism or deny that a change in Soviet policy toward its Jewish citizens had taken place. Rather, they urged Jews to approach the problem of Soviet antisemitism on its own terms and to recognize that the situation of 1952 and 1953, though similar, was not the same as that seen in 1939.

Criticisms of the manner in which Jewish authorities were handling the Slansky Affair were not limited to anti-Zionist voices alone. Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, prominent Zionist and social activist, set forth a scathing critique of the American Jewish Committee’s treatment of the Prague trials. In a letter exchanged between himself and John Slawson of the American Jewish Committee, Silver harshly critiqued documents being published by the AJC and its general approach to the problem of Soviet antisemitism as not simply careless, but entirely inaccurate. He asserted that:

The author of your document has worked hard to prove that the label of antisemitism must be pinned at all costs on the Soviet Union because it has repressed the Jewish group along with other minority groups. Dialectic attempts are made to bracket the so-called Russian antisemitism with Nazi antisemitism and to suggest that whatever differences do exist between the two are purely incidental and irrelevant. I somehow got the feeling that the author was embarrassed by the fact that he was not able to point to definite pogroms or gas chambers in the Soviet Union to clinch his elaborate argument.41

Silver continued, “Whenever a valid criticism needs to be made against the Soviet Union or any of its satellites, it should, of course, be made. Antisemitic manifestations or incidents should not be over looked or condoned wherever and whenever they occur, but the author of this document has put together two and two and has come up with six.”42

Silver further condemned the American Jewish Committee for its careless use, as he saw it, of the term “antisemitism.” Like other Jews, Silver believed that the Nazi genocide had vastly altered the meaning and implications of antisemitism. Where other Jewish leaders, however, in the wake of the Holocaust, infused all and any act of antisemitism with a level of urgency equivalent to that perpetrated by the Nazis, Silver argued that the term “antisemitism” be used with particular caution in order not to diminish the uniqueness or gravity of Nazi crimes. He wrote that:

Antisemitism as a state measure and as party political strategy has come to have a very specific meaning since the days of Hitler, regardless of its time and place of origin. It carries specific and deadly ominous connotations to the Jews of the world and to other people. Unless the evidence is conclusive that the Soviet government has adopted antisemitism as a public {measure} and that the Communist Party is subscribing to it officially with the idea of denying to the Jewish group rights which are enjoyed by other

41 Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver to John Slawson, 29 June 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 98, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
42 Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver to John Slawson, 29 June 1953.
groups, or of exterminating it altogether, the term should not be employed in this instance at all, or should be so qualified as to leave no doubt in the mind of the reader just exactly what it is that you have in mind. It is ridiculous to speak of the life and death distinctions which do exist between Nazi antisemitism and of other forms of anti-Jewish prejudice, which exist all over the world and which sometimes assume serious proportions, as merely "a question of semantics."  

Ending his letter, Rabbi Silver concluded that:  
An organization committed to the protection of Jewish interests all over the world might do better than to hunt with the pack. It should explore every channel available for diplomatic intercession and should seize every opportunity to encourage governments which make public avowal of their opposition to antisemitism, and which give evidence of attempting to rectify whatever mistakes have been made. I believe that the American Jewish Committee ought to re-study its position with an eye to serve truly the best interests of the hundreds of thousands of Jews in the Soviet Union and in the satellite countries.  

Silver made public his unwillingness to condemn the Slansky Trial as antisemitic and faced harsh criticisms from leading Jewish periodicals and organizations as a result. Jewish communists seized upon Silver’s evaluation of Soviet actions and cited him frequently to affirm their ongoing faith in the Soviet Union. For this, Silver faced even sharper attacks. Notwithstanding, Silver continued to refrain from classifying the events of 1952 and 1953 as “antisemitic,” and welcomed the Soviet government’s public retraction of the Doctors’ Plot shortly after Stalin’s death in April 1953.

Echoes of the criticisms described above also appeared in the Jewish public at large. In a letter to the editor published in *The Jewish Examiner* of Brooklyn, one J. N. Cohen accused Jewish leaders of exaggerating the situation of the Jews in the East in order to curry favor with anti-communist forces in the government and in society as a whole.

I belong to two Jewish organizations [wrote Cohen] whose leaders are beside themselves in their eagerness to destroy the Russians, drop atom bombs immediately and to send an expeditionary force from Israel against the entire Iron Curtain. When Hitler was slaughtering millions of our people it practically took a keg of dynamite to rouse the indignation of these same people. "Take it easy," they cautioned. "After all, we may do more harm than good for the German Jews."

Only the demands of the membership forced these leaders, reluctantly, to sponsor protests. But when it comes to Russia, mass meetings are set up in a matter of hours. How come?

The present outburst smells strongly of politics. Our Jewish leaders are trying desperately to prove to Sen. McCarthy and McCarran that they are Commie haters, even if it means that they must monkey with facts, help spread hysteria in the land and what is even worse, soft pedal anti-Semitism and re-Nazification in Western Germany.  

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43 Rabbi Abbah Hillel silver to John Slawson, 29 June 1953.
44 Rabbi Abba Hillel silver to John Slawson, 29 June 1953.
Cohen conceded that, “There are some ugly things about the Russian and Czech purges, and in news reports from the Iron Curtain.” Despite this concession, he concluded:

They suggest an anti-Jewish atmosphere but so far there are no actual proofs of “genocide” and “mass-pogroms” as feverishly alleged by our Jewish leaders. Even Israel has not charged that this has actually happened and if you carefully read the newspapers — and not the screaming headlines — you find a note of caution against assuming that Jews are the exclusive victims of the purges or that they will result in massacres. An exaggeration? I do not say they will not happen. But they have not happened and probably won’t. We should not deliberately exaggerate the truth for political reasons or to build up the Israel bond drive and UJA. Sometimes it seems to me that Jewish leaders will be horribly disturbed if Russia disappoints them and fails to take steps to kill its two million Jews, as gloatingly predicted by The N.Y. Post.46

In its following issue, The Jewish Examiner published another letter in which concerned reader, Mr. A. L. Berger declared his support for the sentiments expressed by Cohen. He wrote, “I was glad to see the letter of Mr. J. N. Cohen in your last issue, taking our Jewish organizations to task for going haywire over the Prague and Moscow trials. In my opinion the Jewish people (including The Examiner) are being ‘taken in’ by the biggest hoax in our history.”47

It is unclear whether the criticisms of Cohen and Berger arose from Soviet sympathies, anti-Zionist sentiments, dissatisfaction with American Jewish leadership, worry over the rise of anti-communist hysteria in the U.S., or from other attitudes altogether. What their words signify though is that not all Jews viewed the Slansky Trial as a “Jewish crisis.” They found the frantic fervor with which many Jewish leaders approached the matter at hand as insincere and selfishly motivated. Like Silver, they felt that the frequent comparisons between Hitler and Stalin and the events of 1933 and of 1953 only served to diminish the magnitude of the recent Nazi genocide. They lamented that Jewish leaders were shamelessly participating in the anti-communist hysteria of the day. Like many others, they recognized that the notion of antisemitism had changed in the wake of the Holocaust and condemned individuals who carelessly brandished the term in order to achieve their own political ends.

The Slansky Trial brought into focus the necessity for redefinitions in a post-Holocaust context. Genocide had recast the meaning of antisemitism, and in 1952, in the wake of the trial, the mold was not yet set. The events of 1952 and 1953 required that Jews examine the degree to which the antisemitism of the Holocaust was unique and to what extent it should inform subsequent manifestations of antisemitism. Words and their meaning took on an unparalleled importance as Jews struggled to divine Soviet intentions. Definitions of antisemitism, in the immediate post-Holocaust era, had to extend beyond the realm of academic inquiry. The lives of a significant percentage of world Jewry depended on the definition of antisemitism. The urgency created by the Slansky Affair rendered immaterial, for some individuals, the distinctions between different forms of antisemitism. For others, the crisis aroused by Soviet antisemitism turned what some viewed as semantic disputes, into a vital necessity for the welfare of world Jewry.

46 Cohen, 10.
Missing the Target

For those Jews who viewed Soviet antisemitism as a tactical rather than ideological move, the question arose as to whether Jews were, upon closer examination, the actual target of the Soviet agenda. The American Jewish Committee, concerned as it was with disassociating Jews from communism within the public imagination, argued vociferously that the true target of the Slansky Trial was the United States and the democratic world at large. In a memo on the topic of communist antisemitism, S. Andhill Fineberg of the AJC wrote that:

We must bear in mind that communist propaganda is three-pronged. It speaks simultaneously out of the right side, the left side and the center of the mouth, cleverly bringing contradictory appeals to the attention of those particular groups which are susceptible. The only consistent and never deviating note of communist propagandists is the "hate America" theme.48

At the AJC’s 42nd annual convention, held in February 1953, Jacob Blaustein, AJC president, pronounced that:

By openly adopting the vicious device of antisemitism, the Red leaders are trying to lure extreme neo-Nazi and neo-Fascist groups into an anti-American bloc. The insecure Moscow leaders hope that this tactic will frustrate the American policy of welding a democratic coalition strong enough to thwart Red aggression. Thus, the real target of Soviet antisemitism is the United States.49

Jewish authorities were highly conscious of the strong association between Jews and communism and the dangers fraught therein. As Hasia Diner writes, “American Jews knew well that Americans on the right considered ‘Jew’ and ‘communist’ synonyms and that much anti-communist rhetoric conflated them.”50 In claiming that the trial’s antisemitism was a veiled attack on the United States and the democratic world, the American Jewish Committee aimed to transform the Slansky Affair from an isolated Jewish issue to an episode which ought to concern the whole of the “free world.” This strategy enabled the Committee to simultaneously shift attention away from the anti-Jewish rhetoric pronounced at the trial while demonstrating that Jews were communism’s victims, not its masters, and as such, posed no threat to the democratic spirit. The American Jewish Committee also believed that there was a real and present danger in stressing too fervently the uniqueness of Jewish suffering under communist rule. The decision to stress the antisemitism of the Slansky Trials as part and parcel of the greater conflict between East and West at once infused the trial with a type of global import while protecting Jews from accusations of insularity and marginality. As such, Fineberg wrote, “In appealing to humanity at large against communist antisemitic aggression we should bear in mind that we are not alone among the victims. Others may even resent our stressing the anti-Jewish feature of communist persecution if we appear indifferent to what has been happening to others.”51

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48 Fineberg, Communist Antisemitism.
49 AJC News, 31 Jan. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 97, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
50 Diner, 237.
51 Fineberg, Communist Antisemitism.
In a letter exchanged between Eugene Hevesi and Milton Himmelfarb of the AJC, Hevesi asserted that:

all other Jewish statements by organizations and the press confined themselves to the airing of the menace to Jewry, almost without any attention to the woes of the communist menaced free world of which we are a part. This is one weighty reason more that our Declaration should have the power of affecting Jews and non-Jews alike, of strengthening the feeling of righteousness of the cause of democratic freedom, of weakening the fifth column everywhere and to be recognized as a weighty contribution to the strength of the free world’s moral and spiritual front.  

The AJC was not alone in its belief that Jews ought to approach the problem of Soviet antisemitism as part of the broader Cold War struggle between East and West. In an editorial published in The Reconstructionist, the author urged Jews to see past the apparent antisemitism being employed in Prague, and instead, direct their outrage at the menace which communism posed to the world at large.  

{We should not assume} antisemitism is the major motivation of the Czech trials or that our opposition to communism should be based primarily on the Soviet’s antisemitic policy. To do so would not only be a serious misreading of the actual facts involved in the present Czechoslovakian situation, but would also deprive us of a sound understanding of Soviet and communist strategy and policy. The Czech trials are but another manifestation of the monstrous totalitarianism of the Soviet Union and an illustration of its complete disregard for any of the great human values which we are so anxiously seeking to preserve and extend.  

The author continued, “certainly there is room for great indignation over the use of anti-Jewish prejudice in the Prague purge, but our excitement and moral fervor would be misdirected indeed if we were to base our opposition to communism on this fact alone. We must first understand communist policy in the larger context of its general totalitarian practice.”

In addition to positioning the Slansky Affair within the broader context of the Cold War, arguments were set forth that Soviet antisemitism was a byproduct of that society’s totalitarian character. In this view, what bound Soviet and Nazi antisemitism was not its content, but rather that both arose out of a type of totalitarian logic. In his critique of the Anti-Defamation League’s pamphlet comparing the Slansky Trial to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, Joseph Gordon argued that totalitarian antisemitism, while bearing many similarities to its non-totalitarian counterparts, had to be taken on its own terms.

It is, of course, [declared Gordon] not mere coincidence that the Nazis and the communists are using the same kind of "arguments" in their anti-Jewish hate campaigns. But it would be more useful to point out that this similarity is the consequence of the inner logic of any totalitarian regime. The interesting and important point is that the communists arrived at the point where they are using the same

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54 “Czech Trials Explode a Myth,” 3.
methods of slander, hate-mongering, and persecution as the Nazis, without consciously using old antisemitic textbooks. It is the dynamic of the totalitarian system of oppression that drives them along Hitler's path.\textsuperscript{55}

In this view, Soviet antisemitism was an inevitable outcome and would remain a permanent feature of Soviet life as long as the Kremlin employed totalitarian means of rule. Totalitarian societies were in constant need of scapegoats to explain their failures or shortcomings. The chosen scapegoat might not always be the Jews, but the Jews would always be eligible for the role of scapegoat. As such, Jews in totalitarian societies would always be set apart from the rest of the population. Their perpetual function as scapegoat required that society deem them different. In Nazi Germany, the difference of Jews took on a racial form. For the Soviets, Jewish difference could come in a variety of forms, sometimes racial, but often cultural factors served to separate the Jews from mainstream Soviet society. In this view, the resemblance between Nazi and Soviet antisemitism was functional rather than substantive.

**Historicizing the Trial**

Behind Jewish efforts to interpret the origins of Soviet antisemitism was ultimately a desire to predict where the anti-Jewish campaign taking place behind the Iron Curtain would conclude. Though Jews drew upon a host of experiences and influences as they attempted to make sense of events in the East, a uniquely Jewish mode of interpretation emerged. Inherent in Jewish efforts to place the trials within a Jewish historical framework was the fundamental question of whether Soviet antisemitism had comparable precedents in Jewish history or whether it marked an entirely new mode of anti-Jewish activity.

The Dreyfus trial, in particular, emerged as one of the most important episodes through which Jews sought to interpret the Slansky Affair. In a memo to the AJC’s Staff Committee on communism, Joseph Gordon declared that:

The trial against Rudolf Slansky and co-defendants, which started in Prague last Thursday, is the greatest and most terrifying antisemitic show trial in world history. The Dreyfus case was just child’s play by comparison. There one Jew was accused of treason and this treason was only by implication connected with his Jewish origin. Here, an entire generation of Jews is accused of treason, espionage, sabotage, multiple murder, and many other crimes, all performed in the services of a world-wide diabolical "imperialist-Zionist" conspiracy. Potentially the trial is an appeal for a grandiose pogrom.\textsuperscript{56}

Writing in *The Call*, a publication of the socialist Workmen’s Circle, Israel Knox wrote that:

In the Dreyfus affair in France it was a single Jew who was denounced; the accusers tried to conceal their antisemitism and to pretend that they were solely concerned with justice. And France was divided between defenders and revilers of Dreyfus. Some forty

\textsuperscript{55} Joseph Gordon to John Slawson, 26 Feb. 1953, Comments on “Protocols and the Purge Trials,” Publication of the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai Brith, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 10, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.

\textsuperscript{56} Joseph Gordon to Staff Committee on Communism, 24 Nov. 1952, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 11, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
years ago a Russian Jew, Mendel Bailis, was charged with the murder of a Christian child for alleged "ritualistic" purposes. The Russia of the czars was torn asunder; hundreds of thousands of Russians protested; prominent Russian lawyers, writers and professors stood up in behalf of Bailis, and finally a jury of simple folk acquitted Bailis. Is it odd, then, that one almost experiences a feeling of nostalgia for the imperfect world of yesterday and a sense of tragic loss for the world that might have been if mankind’s progress had not been shunted aside by the abysmal tyrannies, total and terrible, of our day?[^57]

Knox concluded that, “It is in this sense that the Prague trial is in a class by itself. It dared to do something that would have been unthinkable before the dark night of totalitarianism came upon us.”[^58]

A sentiment arose among Jews that the antisemitism born of totalitarianism was markedly different than antisemitic manifestations of earlier days. Its menacing potential reached beyond geographic borders. It threatened not only those Jews directly subject to its effects, but all Jews. It was endowed with the immediacy of a life and death struggle and carried with it the sadness over the failures of modernity. A notion emerged that non-totalitarian antisemitism, though perhaps less rational than its totalitarian counterpart, was nevertheless limited in scope. It was more spontaneous and changed according to the mood of the masses, but was as a result, transient. While totalitarian antisemitism might resemble and even imitate more traditional modes of antisemitic activity, its scope and disastrous potential constituted an incomparable threat to world Jewry.

Writing in the Hebrew weekly *Hador*, published in New York, one author wrote that, “The recent trials in the peoples' democracies would no doubt make Torquemada spin in his grave, for the communist cruelties far surpass the evils of the Spanish Inquisition.”[^59] In *The Jewish Spectator*, another author remarked upon the failure of previous regimes to convert Jews. He declared that the Persians abandoned their efforts to convert its Jewish population, ultimately allowing them “to become bad Jews because they could not make good Muslims.”[^60]

A type of nostalgia arose for what was seen as the more innocent antisemitism of the pre-modern era. Pogroms, accusations of ritual murder, and general scapegoating, while all tragic features of Jewish life in the Diaspora, were nevertheless well established modes of anti-Jewish activity. Jews knew their scripts well and could often predict their outcomes. Totalitarian antisemitism marked a type of historical departure. Though the Holocaust had claimed six million Jewish lives, Jews, at the time of the Slansky Trial, continued to struggle to understand the nature and character of totalitarian antisemitism.

The emergence of overt antisemitism behind the Iron Curtain reinforced the notion that Jews were nowhere truly safe. German Jewry had been among the most assimilated Jewish populations of Europe. Their wealth and prosperity, however, did little to save their lives in the face of Nazi intentions. Many Jews took from this the lesson that Jews must remain eternally vigilant even in those societies in which wide scale antisemitism seemed unlikely or

[^58]: Knox 4.
[^59]: Prague Nightmare: Cross-Section of Yiddish Press.
even unthinkable. Addressing a meeting of the Belfast Trades Advisory Council, Lord Silken remarked that:

Let us never forget that however happy we may be in London and elsewhere we can never be quite sure that these happy conditions will always remain. When Czechoslovakia became communist one of the new laws passed was one under which it became a [crime] to say unkind things against Jews or any other race. One would have thought that the Jewish people would be safe from internal persecution or that they would be no more oppressed or suppressed than anybody else, but to-day we find that 14 people are being charged with treason and espionage, of whom 12 are Jews, and that one of the offences with which they are being charged is that they are favourable to Zionism.\(^\text{61}\)

Silken stated that even though similar manifestations of antisemitism were unlikely in Britain, they were not impossible. He urged that “the mood of a people changes very rapidly and that in a few years the mood in Czechoslovakia has changed from one of complete tolerance for all races to one of definite intolerance against Jews.”\(^\text{62}\)

Jews approached the matter of Soviet antisemitism with a comingling of contemporary and traditional modes of interpretation. A number of Jewish commentators urged their co-religionists to take comfort in their history as they struggled with the impending consequences of Soviet antisemitism. In a proposed draft regarding the trial, Eugene Hevesi of the American Jewish Committee wrote:

> Jewish history, in its inner meaning, cannot be explained by historic materialism on which the justification of all tyrannies and of their amoral and inhuman quest for power is based. Otherwise Israel would have long disappeared from the stage of history, instead of the colossal might of Babylon, Nineveh, Rome, and the Third Reich of Hitler. It is, therefore, the sense of their history which calls upon the Jews of the entire world to realise the decisive show-down character of the contest provoked by materialistic communism, in which every nation and every individual sooner or later must take sides, and to embrace wholeheartedly the cause on the side of which the future of freedom, morality and humanity lies, with the unshakable conviction, faith and devotion which has been the secret of their survival through all tempests and unspeakable sufferings of their history.

> We Jews have, therefore, no choice but to accept the challenge of Stalinist aggression, just as we could not help facing the wrath of Nazism. [I]t is our duty to address a last warning to the tyrants: Hate us and condemn us if you like, it is within your power. But do not dare defame us, beware of availing yourself of the bestial, colossal lie of Hitler. [. . .] Beware of the exploitation of the ancient subhuman instinct of antisemitism. Beware of this greatest shame of history.\(^\text{63}\)

> Despite the unique challenges of Soviet antisemitism, Jews offered up their sense of historical continuity as a weapon in the battle to save Soviet Jewry. References abounded of the inability of earlier regimes to convert their Jews to other faiths, and suggested that the Slansky


\(^{62}\) “Jewish Insecurity.”

\(^{63}\) Hevesi to Himmelfarb, 23 Jan. 1953.
Trial was evidence that the Soviets were having similar difficulties in detaching their Jewish citizens from Judaism. Writing in *The Jewish Spectator*, one author asserted that, “we can derive at least this melancholy satisfaction from the present wave of official antisemitism, going on in the communist satellite lands: Communist antisemitism gives evidence that Judaism in Russia and other communist areas refuses to die.”

Although some Jews derived a sense of optimism from the precedents of Jewish History, others found in the Slansky Affair more ominous historical parallels. Writing in *The Reconstructionist*, author Sol Colodner wrote that:

> What is developing today behind the Iron Curtain is a repetition of the Nazi pattern of persecution of German Jewry—with slight modification and possibly graver results. The French Revolution had its impact upon German Jewry by causing Jews in Germany to identify themselves completely with German culture. Enlightenment and the spirit of liberalism that flourished during the 18th and 19th centuries in Germany resulted in an abandonment of Judaic ideals of Torah, Palestine and the Hebrew language. Jewish identification was melted in the "pot" of empty idealism and liberalism. Complete cultural assimilation caused German Jewry to lose its vitality. Its anemic condition and loss of national consciousness made it difficult to counteract the effects of nationalism. German Jewry was doomed.

Colodner continued:

> In Russia it is not cultural assimilation but political assimilation which is causing havoc to Jewry behind the Iron Curtain. The Russian Revolution had its effect on Russian Jewry. After World War I, Jews in Soviet Russia embraced a new "religion" — communism. [. . .] Jews agreed to surrender their heritage and their past. They chose to forget their identity and to relinquish their rights. In this communist timetable it appears that Jewry in Soviet-dominated countries is about to suffer the same degradation as in Nazi Germany. Not cultural assimilation, but political assimilation has left Russian Jewry spiritually anemic. It does not have the moral strength to resist. 

Like Colodner, other Jews saw in the Slansky Trial and later Doctors’ Plot, the need for stressing and maintaining a strong sense of Jewish identity as the most effective weapon in combating persecution. Moshe Ben Natan, writing in *The Jewish Vanguard*, declared:

> As a weak people, whether in the homeland or in exile, we have always been tempted to pin all our hopes to some political or spiritual force outside of ourselves..., these tendencies have always led to disappointment and degeneration. Participation in the struggle for peace and progress, alliance or friendship with peoples and groups with whom we have a kinship of interests or aims, are necessary and beneficial, so long as we never surrender the right to be the filial Judges of our own interests and our own ideals. That is the lesson of Jewish History, and it is not the least important lesson of the events of the last few months.

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64 “Open Forum-Communist Antisemitism,” 27.
66 Colonder, 31.
The American Jewish Committee sought to circumvent the above reaction. While they sought to raise Jewish awareness of Soviet antisemitism and to use the trial as a means of arousing Jewish unity, they struggled to resist what they perceived as Jewish insularity and a desire to retreat into cultural parochialism. In a letter exchanged between John Slawson and Milton Himmelfarb of the AJC, Himmelfarb reported on Jewish reactions to the Slansky Trial which he observed while attending public meetings to discuss the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism. Himmelfarb noted that:

another reaction is also possible. This first became evident to me when a member of a Hillel group that I was addressing made it apparent that she thought me naive for being so indignant about the Prague trials. Her attitude was that what happened in Prague should not be surprising; after all, whether on this or that side of the Iron Curtain, goyim are still goyim. The Prague trials, she felt, constituted only one more superfluous illustration of the eternal truth that goyim everywhere and always have been, are and will be anti-Semites. I have heard of other expressions of this attitude in recent weeks.  

In a Cold War atmosphere already saturated with sentiments of distrust, Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee, sought to capitalize on feelings of Jewish outrage over the trial while further incorporating Jews into mainstream life. Most Jewish organizations viewed the unity displayed by Jews following the trial as a boon and used the trial to promote Jewish interests. In the United States, however, Jewish efforts to appropriate the trial were tinged with a fear that the trial would encourage Jews to retreat into a type of self-imposed cultural exile, and lend support to the belief that Jews intentionally set themselves apart from society at large.

For some Jews, religious and secular history were and are indistinguishable, and the former, as much as the latter, emerged as a prominent means by which to historicize the trial. Interpreted religiously, the Slansky Affair was not merely the latest in a centuries' old chain of crises to beset the Jewish people, it was a repetition, a replaying of events suffered by Jews throughout their diasporic history. Stalin, in this view, became the reincarnation of Haman and the Pharaohs of old, the villains of the holidays of Purim and Passover respectively. Indeed, the observance of Purim and Passover in 1953 took on particular significance as Soviet antisemitism seemed to threaten the lives of millions of Jews.

Purim [wrote one Jewish author] repeats itself. From unremembered times, Purim has been an occasion for masquerading. The error of our ceremonials, however, lay in the fact that they were the Jews who in this fourteenth day of Adar masqueraded; the truth is that it is the anti-Semite who makes the mask a prop essential to the drama. The political theater displayed at the Slansky Trial resembled closely the themes of masquerading and political deception essential to the Purim story.

The relevance of the tale was apparent to many. In The Canadian Jewish Chronicle, one author wrote that, “The Purim festival of last week was more welcome, and its significance appreciated more this year than in the past few years. The celebration of Purim this year came

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at a time when the successors of Haman are actively engaged in plotting against the Jewish people.\textsuperscript{70} Writing in \textit{The American Zionist}, another author emphasized the convergence of Jewish religious and secular history. He stated:

Many scholars claim that the events recorded in the Book of Esther, to be celebrated soon on Purim, never really happened. If so, the Book of Esther is one of the most remarkable pieces of historical fiction ever written. If it is not true history, it has become for the Jews typical history.\textsuperscript{71}

He continued:

If Haman never lived and plotted in Susa, he has been living and plotting in other capitals ever since. With ghastly regularity he has reappeared down the centuries under many names: no one, unfortunately, can doubt the reality of Antiochus, Titus, Torquemada, Chmielnicki, Pobiedonostsev, or Hitler. Susa, or "Shushan the palace," has in its time been transported, as though by blade magic, to the Palantine Hill in Rome, to the Alhambra in Granada, to the Brown House in Munich—and now it has come to rest in the Kremlin.\textsuperscript{72}

Passover 1953, perhaps even more than the holiday of Purim, inspired a specifically Jewish interpretation of Soviet antisemitism. The parallels between the events commemorated at Passover and those taking place in the Soviet Union were stark for many Jews.

For the second time in two decades [wrote Harold Eidlin, Jewish author], the joys of Passover mingle with the sorrow of a people in mourning for the martyrs of a new era sacrificed on the altar of antisemitism. The ancient festival of freedom is again being celebrated against the black backdrop of menacing gestures by the enemies of freedom.\textsuperscript{73}

Eidlin continued, “The tragedy of Passover, 1953, is that the ‘bread of affliction’ with which we remember the sufferings of the wandering children of Israel will serve as a solemn reminder of a new affliction.”\textsuperscript{74}

The uncertainty and hope aroused by Stalin’s death in early March 1953 injected the holidays of Purim and Passover with even greater significance. An editorial in \textit{The Jewish Chronicle} proclaimed:

with the story of Haman freshly recalled only a day earlier, the mortal stroke suffered by Mr. Stalin on Shushan Purim, and his subsequent death, may have held for some Jews, in the light of recent events behind the Iron Curtain, a mystical, almost providential, meaning. But the question that Jews will now ask is what effect Mr. Stalin’s removal from the scene will have on the fortunes of the estimated two and a half million of their brethren in the Soviet Union and its satellite countries generally.\textsuperscript{75}

Another editorial declared:

We do not know whether in the countries behind the Iron Curtain there will be much celebration of Passover this year... But how will the Haggadah sound to the thousands

\textsuperscript{70} Rabbi S. M. Zambrowsky, “As I See it,” \textit{The Canadian Jewish Chronicle} 27 Feb. 1953.
\textsuperscript{72} “Susa to Moscow,” 4.
\textsuperscript{74} Eidlin, 60.
\textsuperscript{75} “Russia’s New Ruler,” \textit{The Jewish Chronicle} 13 Mar. 1953: 18.
who now languish in Russia and its satellites, beneath the threat of imminent persecution? The reign of Stalin was marred by antisemitism only in its final days; will the new Pharaoh, who knows not Joseph, take his predecessor's peroration for his example? Will his Cossack blood assert itself?\footnote{76} Though religio-historical interpretations of the trial provided Jews with ominous parallels, they also served as a source of strength and optimism. Not a few authors in lamenting the repetitive character of Jewish suffering also held up this very same suffering as a defensive strategy and warning to enemies of the Jewish people. In his article referenced above, Harold Eidlin remarked that:

In these ominous days that may signal the beginning of a modern Exodus, it is comforting to recall the history of the Jews. \ldots It is significant that the once-mighty Egyptian and Nazi empires crumbled to dust when their paranoia turned to persecution of the Jews. History is replete with the names of other empires whose destruction came about after their persecution of Jewry—Assyria, Babylonia, Rome. Their downfall was more than coincidentally linked with their tormenting of Jews. The masters of the Kremlin would do well to ponder their fate—in the light of the history of Jewry.\footnote{77}

In his sermon, Rabbi S. M. Zambrowsky of Canada declared that:

We recall the story of Exodus, as a reminder, that evil often triumphs but has never yet conquered. For on that same day when the Exodus of Egypt took place, a warning came forth to all future tyrants of the world: that a reign of terror, slavery and oppression cannot endure for long. And those who fail to heed the message must go down in defeat.\footnote{78}

Zambrowsky continued:

Stalin may not heed our heart-rending cry; "Let my people go." But our people know and will remember that God's eternal justice will prove itself once again. For he who has championed the cause of the persecuted throughout our history will also champion the cause of the persecuted behind the Iron Curtain. Let there, therefore, be no despair. Let free Jewry call upon the free world to press hard the ancient plea "Let my people go." Let our outcry of "Let my people go" be such a mighty and powerful one that it should pierce through even the Iron Curtain. Let a free people prepare itself to be ready for the day when this will happen. For happen it shall as it must. Instead of being driven to discouragement, let this challenge drive us to united action and with determination complete the task of total redemption for the Jewish people.\footnote{79}

Another editorial asserted that:

In starting up with the Jewish people, the communists forget that they are not the first ones. That many a mighty nation and empire who dared defy the Jew, who represents the spirit of the Divine in this world, went down in defeat. And so Purim was a welcome guest this year because it reminded us of the fate of our enemies even as it told us of the triumphs of the eternal Jew. We, like generations before us, cannot refuse to

\footnote{76} "The feast of Passover," \textit{The Canadian Jewish Chronicle} 27 Mar. 1953: 3.
\footnote{77} Eidlin, 60.
\footnote{79} Zambrowsky, "As I See it: From his Sermon," 6.
continue the battle against Amalek. We have won before. We shall, with the help of God, win it again. This is the message of Purim and the Sabbath of Remembrance this year.\footnote{Zambrowsky, “As I See It,” 27 Feb.}

Like secular interpretations, religious interpretations, too, could not help but be influenced by the language of the Cold War. The values to be derived from the Purim and Passover stories became representations of the struggle between East and West, between tyranny and oppression, between Western democracy and Eastern communism. Rabbi Zambrowsky opened his sermon with the following, “We review this significant story at a time when tyranny and oppression are again reigning supreme; under circumstances that are most tragic to several million of our people living under the despotic rule of an ultra modern Pharaoh behind the Iron Curtain.”\footnote{Zambrowsky, “As I See It: From his Sermon,” 6.}

Another Jewish author declared that:

there is no place in the world for Amalek and the Jew to exist together. There is a clash of civilizations, as there is a clash of civilizations between the communism of Stalin and Judaism. The essence of Judaism is human and individual freedom. The essence of Stalin communism is slavery and oppression. The two could never march together.\footnote{Zambrowsky, “As I See It,” 27 Feb.}

In an editorial in The Jewish Veteran, the author asserted that:

Our wise Rabbis, in preparing the ritual for our Passover services, give to us the heritage of past generations. History has taught them that the tyrant, the bigot and totalitarian dictator seek out scapegoats for persecution as diversions for the masses of subjugated people. [. . .] The survival of Judaism depends upon the successful outcome of the struggle to overcome the communist threat.\footnote{“Let my People go,” The Jewish Veteran Mar. 1953: 2.}

In addition to standing for the triumph of the Jewish people over their enemies, the holidays of Passover and Purim, in the wake of the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot, became inscribed in a Cold War paradigm. The survival of the Jewish people was not dependent upon the strength of Judaism alone, but upon the outcome of the struggle between East and West.

The adaptation of religious interpretation to the circumstances of the Cold War was not a singularly Jewish practice. In his speech to the fourteenth annual CIO convention, held shortly after the Prague trial, James B. Carey drew upon the holiday of Chanukah to arouse indignation at Soviet antisemitism and to underscore the religious freedom found in the democratic world. He pronounced:

The Feast of Lights should be a time of sacred importance not simply to Jews but to all believers in freedom; because the Feast of Lights marks the first war in history for religious freedom. History tells us how the Feast of Lights commemorates the victorious rebellion by the Jewish people against the King of Syria who attempted to suppress the Jewish religion in Palestine more than 2000 years ago.

All of us — regardless of our varying faiths — Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and others — might well take this holy period of the year as a personal period of re dedication to the principles of religious freedom, political liberty and the brotherhood of Man.\footnote{Address by James B. Carey at Jewish Labor Committee Rally, 13-14.}
In addition to Cold War rhetoric, the Holocaust too greatly influenced religious interpretations of the trial and of Soviet antisemitism more broadly. Several Jewish writers lamented the reality that the holidays of Purim and Passover remained timely and relevant. They expressed the notion that the Holocaust ought to have been the last great incident of Jewish suffering, and that all subsequent religious observances would be acts of remembrance rather than ones characterized by vigils and concerns for the present. Writing in *The National Jewish Monthly*, a publication of B’nai Brith, Editor Edward Grusd wrote that:

In 1945, when Hitler died in the bombed rubble of Berlin, we said: "At last the nightmare is over." But we were mistaken. Soon after, the Jew-hatred used by the dead dictator was taken up by the live one.\(^85\)

He continued:

Passover has an ineluctable way of being timely. We wish it weren’t. We wish we could teach our children: "Passover is a holiday that reminds us of the slavery and oppression that used to exist among men." But of course we can’t teach them that. Slavery and oppression are still very much with us. Passover is therefore not merely a lesson in history, warning us not to injure the rights of others, since we were once slaves in Egypt ourselves. It is still the traditional holiday it always was—the glorious challenge to the human spirit to strive for freedom.\(^86\)

Another author, commenting on the holiday of Purim remarked that:

When, eight years ago, the ignominious immolation of that monster was at last vouchsafed to a waiting world, we felt certain that the Hamanjac pattern finally had been broken, that the Judaeophobic strain had at length exhausted itself, that henceforward the professional anti-Semite was to be as extinct as the dodo: We looked forward, then, to the Purims of the future as occasions upon which, in friendship and at ease with all mankind, we would remember all past nightmares as but the troubled stories of a long ago that to a happy ending came. Purim was to be a recall of the historic, the passé, no longer an index to things contemporaneous. We were wrong. Recent event, indeed, has rendered our error all too manifest. An heir has come forward to claim the mantle and the succession of the last deceased anti-Semite.\(^87\)

The shadow of the Holocaust converged with biblical interpretations of the trial to produce a larger than life villain of the Jews. One author asked:

Wherein lies the great crime of Stalin which even supersedes the crimes of a Hitler? After experiencing the greatest calamity in the world which caused us to suffer a toll of seven million victims, seven million out of seventeen, Israel was on the march to its freedom and independence. Tired and weary from all the attacks like Amalek of old, Stalin attacks our hind forces, the remnants of our people.\(^88\)

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\(^86\) Grusd, 237.

\(^87\)“the Feast of Purim,” 3.

\(^88\) Zambrowsky, “As I See it,” 27 Feb.
The view of Stalin as biblical successor was by no means novel. It was, indeed, predictable and deviated little from previous modes of Jewish religio-historical interpretation. What set such religious views apart, however, was the close proximity of the Holocaust as well as the Cold War and its rhetoric of clashing civilizations. These factors converged to produce a uniquely Jewish mode of interpreting the Slansky Affair and subsequent manifestations of Soviet antisemitism that drew upon both the traditional as well as the novel.

Conclusions

The Slansky Affair, at first glance, was an internal Soviet matter. Taking place behind a supposedly impermeable Iron Curtain, its effect on Jews should have been limited to Soviet Jewry. Jews, however, the world over, felt intimately connected with the trial. Whether condemning, defending, or simply trying to understand the accusations levied in the trial, Jews, beyond the borders of the Iron Curtain, saw the Slansky case as directly influencing their lives. There was no single consensus regarding the ways Jews interpreted the trial. Their views were determined by political, religious, social, and national distinctions. Amid these variations, however, lay several immutable realities. The trial’s proximity to the Holocaust automatically sparked genuine fears of genocide. Few Jews could avoid the tragedy of the Holocaust as they sought to understand Soviet antisemitism. The Holocaust, at once, set the trial apart, as the most important anti-Jewish activity to take place in the post-Holocaust era, as well as placing it in a long history of Jewish suffering and persecution. The Cold War, too, greatly influenced the ways in which Jews understood the trial. It shaped language as well as sentiment, and lent to the trial a global character. The existence of a Jewish state further complicated Jewish reactions to the trial, to be discussed in later chapters.

Identities were in question, affiliations tested, and lives were at stake. To some the trial was a matter of life or death, to others it was a political moment, and to others still it was history as usual. To most, however, it was an important event, if not crisis, in the life of post-WWII Jewry. It deserved attention by leading Jewish authorities and Jewish communities at large. Once initial estimations of the trial had circulated, Jews then struggled with the question of what to do, how to do it, and how to do it effectively.
Chapter Two: The Race Against Time

Jewish Authority and the Competition to Save Iron Curtain Jewry

What can we do about the situation? It is too early to answer that question in specific detail. At best, we cannot do enough. But we must do all we can and not permit ourselves to be paralyzed by the sheer horror of the mass misery that the new communist policy forebodes. We must bend every effort to rescue as many of our people as we can and enable them to escape from behind the Iron Curtain and find security and happiness in new homes.¹

The odds against success may be great. But in the face of peril, the odds must be disregarded.²

Just weeks after the conclusion of the Slansky Trial, Jews, worldwide, began to assemble, organize, and collectively respond to the sense of crisis aroused by the advent of Soviet antisemitism. While the post-Holocaust era saw a more thorough assimilation of Jews into society at large, especially in the United States, it also bore witness to dramatic shifts in modes of Jewish identification. Despite the fact that contact with and information about Iron Curtain Jewry was sparse and unreliable, and western Jewry was becoming less “Jewish” and more “western,” Jewish reactions to the Prague trial affirmed that many Jews believed in a common story and shared plight. As Henry Feingold has written, “If one had to single out one prominent characteristic of the Jewish political persona, it would be its overriding concern for the welfare of Jews abroad. Even before the establishment of a Zionist consensus in the late thirties, it tilted outward almost as if better to hear the cries for help from its beleaguered brethren.”³ The Holocaust intensified the sentiment that vast geographical distances were immaterial when confronting the designs of a totalitarian regime. What happened to Jews in one country held significance for Jews elsewhere, regardless of their differing circumstances. Moreover, in the face of a significantly diminished world Jewish population, Jews felt obliged to protect and enlarge the remnants of any and all Jewish communities.

Jewish activities surrounding the trial took on many forms. Through protest rallies, media campaigns, fundraising projects, religious sermons, relief work, diplomatic and government intervention, cultural productions, print publications, as well as smaller, more informal gatherings, Jews registered their indignation at the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism and in doing so, attempted to save the lives of their co-religionists behind the Iron Curtain. The various ways in which Jews reacted to the trial reflected more than political, religious, cultural, and national affiliation. It embraced the changing character of Jewish identities in the post-war era. In deciding how to best tackle the problem of Soviet antisemitism, Jews both scripted and performed new modes of self-identification.

² AJC Program to Combat Soviet Antisemitism, 29 Dec., 1952, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 101, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
World Jewry was no longer centered in Europe as it had been before the war. Millions of Jews lay cut off from the greater body of world Jewry. A Jewish national homeland had come into being, and American Jewry gained an important political voice, both domestically and internationally. In responding to Soviet antisemitism, Jews collided head on with the challenges of life after the Holocaust. Whether attending a protest rally, signing a letter campaign, or simply voicing their opinion on the proper course of action, Jews acted out critical shifts in the nature and character of world Jewry and their relationship to it.

The dramatic changes in post-war Jewish demographics called into question both traditional and novel Jewish authorities and modes of representation. Pre-war Jewry had of course been anything but monolithic. The prospect of genocide made real by the Holocaust and the creation of a Jewish state, however, greatly altered the ways in which Jews took collective action. Many Jews believed that East European Jewry was without a voice, and as such, was in dire need of a spokesperson. A variety of Jewish authorities competed for the right to speak for and represent Iron Curtain Jewry in the wake of the Slansky Affair. Israel was, for many Jews, the natural choice for the defense of Iron Curtain Jewry. Others, however, vehemently contested Israel’s monopoly on Jewish representation.

Except for a small, but often vocal, group of devoted Jewish communists, most Jews expressed outrage and fear at the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism. Unified indignation, however, did not always lead to unified action. The “Jewish response” to the Slansky Trial and later manifestations of Soviet antisemitism took on many forms and embraced a variety of tactics. How Jews reacted, what they did and what they said both to the world at large and to one another, revealed that in 1952 and 1953 world Jewry was in a process of redefinition.

The goals of Jewish activity surrounding Soviet antisemitism, like the activities themselves, varied according to a multitude of factors. Many of these goals found broad support among a diverse spectrum of Jewish communities. Others aroused heated conflict and public controversy. Zionists saw the trial as an opportunity to stress the importance and vital necessity of a Jewish state. Such individuals, whether they believed it practical or not, hoped to bring about a mass exodus of Iron Curtain Jewry to the new State of Israel. They also saw the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism as an opportunity to affirm Israel’s position as a pro-western power and as such, to call for its protection by the United States and the “free world.” Anti-Zionists used the trial to demonstrate that Israel had only complicated the position of Jews the world over by bringing into question Jewish loyalties among the nations in which they dwelled. Anti-communists saw in the trial a prime moment not only to further condemn the Soviet regime, but to lure Jews with Soviet sympathies to the anti-communist camp as well as disassociate Jews from communism more generally. To organized labor, the trial presented a platform on which labor leaders could further demonstrate, as they saw it, the Soviet Union’s enmity toward the working class and likewise, to detach the trade union movement from the taint of communism. Agendas aside, in organizing and participating in activities surrounding the trial, Jewish entities competed for the right to defend, represent, and direct Jewish interests.

**The Zionists**

Some Jews, while supporting mass action, recognized its probable futility in the face of Soviet might and looked to the new State of Israel as the only viable hope for Iron Curtain
Writing in *The Jewish Spectator*, one author declared, “Indeed, American Jewish organizations should ‘protest’ against what the Russians are doing — and are intent upon doing — to the two and a half million Jews trapped in their realm. But let us not fool ourselves into believing that these protests can accomplish more than relieve our pent-up indignation and help soothe our sorrow.” He further proclaimed, “As to political action it is the State of Israel — and only the State of Israel — that has the possibility of mustering its force.”

In their response to the Soviet Union’s attempt to discredit the Zionist movement and the State of Israel as a pawn of British and American imperialism, Zionists seized upon the outbreak of overt Soviet antisemitism to affirm with greater vehemence the necessity for a Jewish state. The Holocaust had not ended the persecution of Jews. To the contrary, it seemed to have emboldened and rendered ever-more terrifying future acts of antisemitism. The Prague Purges enabled Zionists to proclaim that diasporic Jewry would always face the possibility of persecution and as a result, a Jewish state was vital for the survival of world Jewry.

Zionists, more than any other Jewish group, had a real stake in rejecting and opposing Soviet antisemitism. Soviet and satellite leaders, including Premier Klement Gottwald himself, proclaimed openly and vigorously that the trial was anti-Zionist in character. The sabotage and espionage with which Rudolf Slansky and his co-defendants were charged sprang from their supposed adherence to Zionism. They committed their crimes as servants of the State of Israel and by extension, western Capitalism. The Zionist movement and its ultimate achievement of a Jewish state were fundamentally challenged by the verdict handed down in Prague. Where non-Zionist groups opposed the trial proceedings for their blatant anti-Jewish character, Zionists had to defend their movement against accusations of criminal activity and wide scale ideological corruption.

In the months following the trial, Zionists organized a variety of mass rallies and fund raising campaigns in the hopes of ameliorating the position of Soviet Jewry, strengthening the position of Israel as a pro-democratic force, and defending the Zionist movement as a whole. On February 16, 1953, the American Zionist Council held a rally in New York City’s Manhattan Center. The meeting was sponsored by 31 Jewish organizations, representing a total of 3 million American Jews. The sponsoring organizations ranged in political and religious orientation. Zionists from the left and the right as well as the secular and religious communities came out in force to attend the rally. The protest meeting was broadcast in English, Hebrew, as well as several other languages, via Voice of America, to Europe, the Middle East, and throughout the United States. Among the speakers were Senator Thomas Dewey and Representative Immanuel Sellers of New York, Father George B. Ford of the Corpus Christi Roman Catholic Church in New York, Dr. Israel Goldstein, President of the American Jewish Congress, Dr. Simon Q. Kramer, President of the Synagogue Council of America, Berl Locker of Jerusalem, Co-Chairman of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, Benjamin Tabachinsky, National Campaign Director of the Jewish Labor Committee, Dr. Walter van Kirk, Executive Director of the Department of International Justice end Goodwill of the National Council of Churches of Christ, and Matthew Wohl, Vice-President of the American Federation of Labor. Louis Lipsky, Chairman of the American Zionist Council, presided at the assembly.

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Although Zionists viewed Soviet antisemitism as a matter which ought to concern Jewry as a whole, they naturally looked to the new State of Israel to take the lead in the struggle to save Soviet Jewry. The Prague Purges emboldened Zionists to proclaim that Israel was the main center of world Jewry, and by extension, the representative of Jews in global affairs.

Opening his keynote address at the February 16th rally, Louis Lipsky of the American Zionist Council, proclaimed:

This is not an ordinary meeting of protest. Something extraordinary has been happening. [. . .] We are here this evening to protest and condemn, to express our feelings of shock and profound disquiet. We speak for the Jews of Russia, for Jews everywhere, and for the State of Israel, against what seems to be the antisemitic prelude to World War III.6

As a fervent Zionist, Lipsky’s opening words simultaneously condemned Soviet antisemitism while asserting the Zionist movement’s authority in representing and speaking for Jewry on a global scale. The crisis presented by the Slansky Trial enabled the new State of Israel to, as one New York Times reporter put it, “fulfill the basic task for which it was created—to defend the Jew who is persecuted because he is a Jew.”7 This reality was not lost on Zionists, both within Israel and throughout the world. A Jewish state existed, but its meaning to Jews elsewhere was, in the early 1950s, still uncertain. Some of the most influential Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee, supported the financial growth of the new Jewish state, but retained their status as a specifically non-Zionist entity. Because Israel and the Zionist movement as a whole were the stated culprits in the Prague criminal charges, Zionists had to take up the dual challenge of not only defending themselves against the accusations levied at the trial, but of proving to other Jews their right to speak for Soviet Jewry.

Essential to the Zionists’ cause was its ability to underscore the ongoing utility of a Jewish state in the face of antisemitic persecution. If the State of Israel could not effect the immigration of Soviet Jews to the new Jewish state or even ameliorate their position in the lands behind the Iron Curtain, then their claims to Jewish representation would be greatly undermined. As a result, Zionists called upon the Soviet Union to permit its Jewish citizens to emigrate en masse. Lipsky further proclaimed at the February rally:

It is the duty of this demonstration to declare that if Soviet Russia and its satellites regard their Jewish citizens as unreliable for their dreadful purposes; if they are not prepared, in the sight of world public opinion, to liquidate them as did Hitler; if they think they are expendable in industry, art and in science; — they should open the gates of their prison empire and allow the captives to depart in peace.

The State of Israel was created to serve such Jewish needs. It served that need when it received tens of thousands of Jews escaping from the refugee camps of Nazi Germany. It has now declared its readiness also to serve as a haven of refuge for the unhappy Jews of the Soviet Union, with the eager cooperation of Jews the world over.8

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8 Speech given by Louis Lipsky, 3.
Though Jews gleaned from the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot ominous parallels with the Holocaust, one important distinction existed for Zionists and non-Zionists alike – namely, the existence of a Jewish state. The State of Israel was to serve as a barrier against future acts of wholesale Jewish persecution. Whether accepted by world Jewry or not, it was charged with defending and protecting the rights of Jews and of representing Jewish interests.

Zionists had no choice but to call for the release of Soviet Jewry, despite the fact that such pleas would fall on deaf ears. In truth, the State of Israel, the Zionists, and all other Jewish organizations were, for the most part, powerless to assist their co-religionists in the Soviet world. It was Stalin’s death in early March 1953 and little else which brought an abrupt end to the Soviet Union’s overt antisemitic campaign. It is difficult to say to what extent Jews acknowledged the practical limitations of their intervention in the lives of Soviet Jewry. However, the claims of Zionism and the State of Israel—that a Jewish state would ensure the welfare of Jews the world over—were subjected to fierce scrutiny, and indeed, many Jews believed that Zionism was not only ill equipped to deal with all matters Jewish, but in some cases was detrimental to Jewish interests.

Crucial to Zionist ideology was the notion that Jewish suffering stemmed in large part from the lack of political agency which diasporic Jewry had always endured. Jews were made to depend on the whims of non-Jewish forces, and as such, their history was often propelled by realities beyond their control. With the creation of a Jewish state, Jews were to be the masters of their own fate. They alone would direct the course of Jewish history, and they could proceed as independent political agents on the global scene. This is not to say that the new Jewish state did not rely upon external aid and indeed sought out such aid and alliances in both the west and the east. Rather, Zionism asserted that with the existence of a sovereign Jewish state, Jews did not have to look to non-Jewish entities for defense and protection. They would find in the Jewish state an unwavering, legitimate defender with the military might to protect Jewish interests. The Slansky Trial was, in many respects, the first post-war crisis to put such claims to the test. The Zionists had to tread carefully as they approached the problem of Soviet antisemitism. On the one hand, it was crucial that they demonstrate Israel’s ability to defend the rights of Jews wherever they may live. On the other hand, the dictates of reality required them to call upon non-Jewish entities to assist in their cause. Jews enjoyed a great deal more agency than ever before, but their trajectory as a group was launched into a new type of co-dependency—namely that of international and diplomatic relations.

Zionists, unlike other Jewish authorities, could not so easily transform the Slansky Affair from a singularly Jewish issue to one of broader concern. Their ideology was intimately bound to national identity, and as such, the Slansky Trial had to remain a “Jewish” matter. This reality, however, did not stop Zionists from attempting to present the Slansky Affair as a crucial moment in the Cold War. In attacking the Zionist movement, Soviets enabled Zionists not simply to disassociate Jews from communism, but demonstrate that it was in the west’s best interests to ensure Israel’s position as a non-communist and democratic force in the Middle East.

Lipsky further declared that:
The antisemitic campaign of Soviet Russia is not only the vital concern of the Jews of the world and the Jews of the State of Israel. It concerns all free people. It is a vital interest of the democratic world. The attack upon the Jews goes hand in hand — in less odious
forms — with the persecution of the Christian world, and of all minorities, and with the
defense of democracy against an implacable enemy. The State of Israel is the outpost of
democracy in the Middle East. Its resistance to totalitarian pressures is Indispensable for
the region of which it is a part.9

Through such rhetoric, individuals like Lipsky sought not only to uphold Jews and the
State of Israel as adherents of democratic values, but argued also to present Israel as an
indispensable ally in the Cold War. Because large numbers of Jews lived in the lands behind the
Iron Curtain, Israel had initially attempted to remain relatively neutral in the struggle between
East and West. A number of Jews, Zionist and otherwise, felt that Soviet antisemitism forced
the State of Israel into the western camp. Even though Israel’s supposed neutrality in the Cold
War had begun to unravel before the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism, some Jews expressed
the sentiment that the Soviet Union, in launching its anti-Jewish campaign, deprived the new
Jewish state of a critical political choice. It denied to the new Jewish state a level of agency that
ought to be afforded to all sovereign states. While some lamented this reality, others viewed
the fixing of Israel’s position in the Cold War as a definite gain for the state. Israel would
become a key partner in the West’s struggle to prevent the spread of communism throughout
the Middle East, and the antisemitism expressed in the Slansky Trial ensured that Israel’s
relationship with the Soviet Union would remain tenuous despite the large numbers of Jews
that dwelled in its lands.

Lipsky concluded his address by comparing Soviet antisemitism as a prelude to world
war just as Nazi antisemitism had preceded the Second World War. He declared that:

Once before, when faced by the Nazi menace, the Western world hesitated and
fumbled, rejected their responsibility and allowed, without resistance, six million Jews
to be done to death. Their hesitation then led to the appeasement of the murderers, to
delay in attack, to giving the Nazi forces immense military and economic advantages,
and was the cause of many of the early defeats of the Allies. How they will now react to
the burgeoning campaign of antisemitism set in motion by the masters of the Kreml
will be a test of their courage, their humanity and their vision.10

Zionists, such as Lipsky, hoped to not merely align Jewish interests with those of the free
world, but to demonstrate that these interests were indeed one and the same. Persecution
of the Jews by a totalitarian regime, as demonstrated by Hitler, would ultimately expand to
encompass other populations. Antisemitism born of totalitarian rule was a sign of impending
war in which all nations and peoples would be involved. As such, in saving Soviet Jewry and
protecting the new State of Israel, western powers would ultimately prevent, or at the very
least, postpone the outbreak of a third world war. Lipsky attempted to demonstrate that what
happened to Jews mattered for the safety and peace of the whole world and that non-Jews, as
a result, ought to take careful notice of events taking place behind the Iron Curtain.

9 Speech by Lipsky, 3.
10 Speech by Lipsky, 3.
Labor

Despite the fact that Soviet aggression was overtly directed at Zionism and the new State of Israel, other Jewish groups felt similarly threatened by the court proceedings taking place in Prague. They saw Soviet antisemitism as a matter relevant to the whole of world Jewry, and as such felt equally obliged to prevent its spread and combat its effects. In fact, it was non-Zionist authorities who, in many respects, spearheaded Jewish activities to protest and counteract the potentially disastrous outcomes of Soviet antisemitism. In the United States, it was the Jewish Labor Committee, which organized the first large scale protest rally in response to the Prague trial, a fact that was not lost on some observers. Writing in the Yiddish daily, Der Tog, commentator S. Margoshes remarked upon the relative silence of the Zionists surrounding the Prague trial in comparison to Jewish labor:

One could therefore imagine [wrote Margoshes] that the Zionists would be the very first to throw back the Soviet attack which has directed most of its fire on World Zionism. Time was when Zionist leaders stormed at great public meetings and led tumultuous protest marches through the streets of New York and other American Cities on occasions fraught with no greater danger than confronts the Jews of the world as a result of the new outbreak of Soviet antisemitism But strangely there were no meetings and no demonstrations at this time. The only great protest meeting and demonstration that took place was called by the Jewish Labor Committee. [. . .] For the life of me I cannot understand this apathy of the Zionist groups issued statements for of the greatest tragedies that befell the Jewish people since the War. Maybe there is some good reason for holding back the full expression of the sense of outrage against the Soviet blood libel on the world Zionist movement. If so, I have failed to see it. Meanwhile it would seem to me that the Jewish Labor Committee expressed the feeling of the Jewish masses, Zionist and non-Zionist alike…

The Zionists were of course no less interested in the fate of their co-religionists in the East than their socialist counterparts. In the United States, it was Jewish labor which held the first significant rally to protest Soviet antisemitism. The Jewish Labor Committee had decades of experience in combating the soviet regime. For this reason, they may have been organizationally better equipped for putting together large scale rallies in a relatively short amount of time. Additionally, Zionists were to a degree bound to the directives of the Israeli state. Their apparent slowness to react might have arisen in part from their desire to follow the lead set forth by official Israeli authorities. The criticisms of the Zionists by Jewish labor reflected less the truth of Zionism’s commitment to Soviet Jewry than the rivalry which existed between different Jewish entities in the post-war era. To be sure, the aims of Jewish labor and the Zionists were not wholly different. Indeed, the intersections between Zionism and the Jewish labor Movement were varied and numerous.

The Zionists’ claim, however that Israel ought to hold the exclusive right to represent Jewry on a global scale was, by no means, accepted within competing Jewish authorities. The Jewish Labor Committee, having long opposed Soviet rule, even during World War II when it was largely unpopular to do so, saw the Slansky Affair as an opportunity to declare that they all along had seen through Soviet propaganda and had always known what was best for the Jews.

During the Second World War, it was the Jewish Labor Committee alone that organized a public rally to protest the execution of Bundist leaders Erlich and Alter by Soviet authorities. For the duration of America’s participation in WWII, the Soviets were temporary allies. As such, to protest Soviet actions was viewed as unpatriotic and detrimental to the war effort. The Jewish Labor Committee could thus claim that their commitment to combating communism did not depend on external factors. It was constant and unswerving.

While other large Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee and the American Zionist Council, debated over the proper course of action following the trial, the Jewish Labor Committee, within a matter of weeks, organized and held a widely attended and highly publicized rally to protest the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism. Before the conclusion of the trial, the JLC recognized the necessity for swift action. In a letter exchanged between Jacob Patt and David Dubinsky of the Committee, dated November 25, 1952 (more than a week before Slansky and his co-defendants were hanged), Patt urged the following, “With the current trials taking place in Czechoslovakia, especially with the antisemitic tones of these trials, it was my idea that we should do something dramatic in order to stimulate public opinion and to mobilize that opinion against the communists.”

While at this early date the exact form which the JLC's protest would take was not yet determined, Patt exclaimed that, “All are agreed that we have to move quickly or not at all.”

It did not take the Jewish Labor Committee long to discern the significance of the Slansky Trial as an important if not critical episode in the lives of post-war Jewry. Like Zionist authorities, the JLC saw in the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism an opportunity not simply to advance its particular agenda, but to reaffirm its role as voice for the Jewish worker and Jewish interests generally. Where Zionists underscored the gains in political agency their movement had afforded world Jewry, the Jewish Labor Committee boasted of its decades-long commitment to opposing communism even when such opposition was discouraged. Speaker after speaker, at its December 21 rally alluded to the constancy of the Jewish Labor Committee’s position of combating Soviet communism. Where other Jewish authorities had welcomed and even courted Soviet support, especially in creating a Jewish state, the JLC had remained a stalwart opponent of the Soviet regime.

In his speech to the rally participants, Adolf Held, Chairman of the JLC, declared that, “the labor movement fights tyranny not when it is a monster striking at its victims, but when that tyranny is in its infancy.” Where some expressed sincere shock and disbelief at the Soviet Union’s employment of antisemitism, the JLC simply lamented that its past condemnation of Soviet communism had not been stronger and, as a result, failed to convince more people of communism’s dubious nature, as they saw it.

Throughout his rally address, James B. Carey, Secretary Treasurer of the CIO, underscored the continuity to be found in Soviet manifestations of antisemitism. Referring to the execution of Bundist leaders Viktor Alter and Henryk Erlich by the Soviet Secret Police during the Second World War, Carey exclaimed:

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12 Jacob Patt to David Dubinsky, 25 Nov. 1952, Jewish Labor Committee, Administrative and Organizational Records Series, Box 62, Folder 1, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
13 Patt to Dubinsky.
14 Speech by Adolf Held, 21 Dec. 1952, Jewish Labor Committee Rally, Jewish Labor Committee, Box 62, Folder 2, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
Beyond doubt, for many it did take courage in 1942 and 1943 to denounce Soviet Russia for the murder of Alter and Ehrlich. We were in the midst of the utmost terrible war in human history, fighting the most terrible enemy mankind had ever known. Soviet Russia was an ally; and we were comrades-in-arms with the Russian people. We were told that to hold that protest meeting here in New York 10 years ago would serve only to alienate us from our allies. It would create disunity and distrust — perhaps damage the successful prosecution of the war. Today we have only one regret about that protest meeting. We regret that it wasn't 10 times larger and that there weren't 10 times as many such meetings in the United States and around the world.\(^{15}\)

Essential to the claims of Jewish labor was the notion that the campaign of Soviet antisemitism taking place in 1952 and 1953 constituted a fulfillment of that regime’s totalitarian character. The continuity of the Jewish Labor Committee’s opposition to communism stemmed not simply from that organization’s ideological convictions, but from, as they saw it, the Soviet Union’s undeviating hostility toward the worker in general and the Jewish worker in particular.

The Slansky Trial did not represent a shift in Soviet policy from philosemitism to antisemitism, but rather a confirmation of the Soviet Union’s longstanding anti-Jewish agenda. In his address to the December 21 rally, JLC Chairman, Adolf Held, declared, “the American labor movement, together with our brothers and sisters of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions did not pause to reflect. They knew that the pattern for Soviet antisemitism had been cut by the Kremlin not in the weeks preceding the Prague trials. They knew that the whole blueprint for destroying the last remaining vestiges of the Jewish communities behind the iron curtain was begun many years ago.”\(^{16}\) As long-time opponents of Soviet communism, the Jewish Labor Committee could establish itself as the most experienced, knowledgeable, and therefore capable Jewish authority in leading the movement to combat Soviet antisemitism.

Despite its ongoing condemnation of Soviet communism, the Jewish Labor Committee’s task was not without obstacles. The JLC was charged with denouncing the “workers’ paradise” and demonstrating Jewish labor’s commitment to democratic principles while simultaneously upholding the values and goals of trade unionism. The Rosenberg trial and the general atmosphere of Cold War hysteria had only served to further complicate Jewish labor’s attempt to distinguish itself from Soviet communism. Before the December 21 rally, Held declared, “To Jewish workers communism is as abhorrent as is Nazism and fascism.”\(^{17}\) Indeed, the Jewish Labor Committee urged vehemently that the differences between Nazism and communism lay only in their form, not their substance, and as such, “Jews”\(^{18}\) are equally repelled by both.

Within Jewish circles, the JLC sought to rid its ranks of communist elements and discredit Soviet communism as a viable ideology for the Jewish worker. Externally, the JLC was

\(^{15}\) Speech by James B. Carey, Jewish Labor Committee Rally, 21 Dec. 1952, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 116, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, 1.

\(^{16}\) Speech by Adolf Held.

\(^{17}\) Speech by Adolf Held.

\(^{18}\) In debates surrounding the trial, many Jewish writers remarked that Judaism and Jewishness were fundamentally incompatible with communism, and therefore believed that communists of Jewish descent could not be considered as Jews.
charged with demonstrating that Jews were not communism’s missionaries, but rather its fiercest opponents. With its well established history of opposing Soviet rule, the Jewish Labor Committee could present itself as a type of Cold Warrior par excellence. Indeed, it had recognized the danger long before the onset of Cold War tensions.

Where Zionists saw in the Slansky Trial an opportunity to affirm Israel’s indispensability in preventing the spread of communism throughout the Middle East, Jewish labor sought to present itself as an essential agent in combating the spread of communism among the small and post-colonial nations of the world. In doing so, Jewish labor drew a sharp distinction between itself and communism while demonstrating that it too was an indispensible ally in the struggle against the Soviet regime. Declaring in his address before the December 21 rally, Carey exclaimed that:

We have, in addition, another broad and intense concern growing out of the emergence of communist antisemitism. Our union brothers and sisters in India, in Indonesia, in Africa and other parts of the world must be warned that they will be deluding themselves if they assume that communism’s persecution of minorities will be confined to antisemitism. Like Zionists, Jewish labor hoped to gain external support for its cause in demonstrating its undeviating commitment to curbing communism’s spread throughout the world by providing workers, where ever they may live, with a viable alternative to communism.

As a Jewish entity, the Jewish Labor Committee, of course, sought to intervene on behalf of Iron Curtain Jewry and, in doing so, to underscore its ability to serve as an undisputed Jewish authority. However, as trade unionists, their opposition to Soviet communism embraced a broader range of grievances, and as such, Jewish labor’s activities surrounding the trial reflected its internationalist character. Among the activities proposed at the rally were 1) a redoubled commitment to the development and support of the United nations, 2) a consolidation of international friendships among preexisting allies as well as the formation of new allies, 3) an expanded commitment to reaching out to trade unions and trade unionists throughout the world, and 4), as James Carey put it, “we must, of course, put our own house in order. We must eradicate for once and for all — in our unions and in our national community — all evidences of inequality, discrimination and segregation. Our failure to practice at home the democracy we preach is now the most potent weapon that totalitarianism has throughout the world.”

For Jewish labor, the Cold War embodied a deeply rooted ideological struggle, one that would ultimately determine the survival of the trade union movement on a global scale. Though a majority of Jews had abandoned their faith in the Soviet Union long before the Slansky Trial, an atmosphere of genuine fear over communism’s ability to overtake trade unionism persisted. In his speech before the JLC protest rally, former Menshevik leader and Soviet exile, Rafael Abramovich lamented:

What a terrible shock it must have been for all those who believed in the myth of Soviet eternal friendship for the oppressed Jewish people. What a bitter disenchantment for those who had in their living rooms a framed picture of Mr. Tsarapkin, the Soviet

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19 Speech by James Carey, 10.
20 Speech by Carey, 11.
delegate who in 1948 voted in the U.N. for the State of Israel. Let us speak out frankly as this now destroyed myth had a lot to do with the pro-Soviet illusions in certain circles of the Jewish population in this country, which climaxed in the Sobels and Rosenbergs. But is this myth really destroyed? History teaches, that nothing is so durable and indestructible as myths and false illusions.  

The Jewish Labor Committee acknowledged that communism, despite its “apparent” hypocrisy, still held appeal for millions of people throughout the world. While the Committee gave the crisis of Soviet antisemitism its due prominence, its opposition to Soviet rule encompassed a far broader and expansive campaign. It was not enough for the Jewish worker to consider the well-being of his co-religionists behind the Iron Curtain, his mission must take into account all those susceptible to the communist creed. For the Jewish Labor Committee, the Slansky Trial represented yet another flashpoint in the ideological war in which they had long been engaged. Their obligations were clear and without doubt. As Carey concluded in his address at the Jewish Labor Committee’s rally, “It is still a war for men’s minds and souls. But we of organized labor too often speak of the importance of ‘education’ and let the speaking suffice. If the workers of Asia, Africa or other parts of the world need education to help combat the anti-democratic myths spread by communism, let us as trade unionists give them the means of obtaining that education.”

The JLC saw itself as a key ideological warrior on the front lines of the Cold War. The Slansky Affair was, for it, a “Jewish” issue, but its implications held significance for Jews and non-Jews alike.

In addition to its widely attended protest rally, radio broadcasts, informal gatherings, and appeals for financial support, the Jewish Labor Committee petitioned government officials and diplomatic entities to address the crisis of Soviet antisemitism. On January 21, 1953, after having been refused an appointment with the Soviet ambassador, Adolf Held, JLC Chairman, led a delegation of labor, fraternal, and veterans organizations to the doors of the Soviet embassy in Washington D.C. In addition to picketing before the embassy, the group submitted a letter of protest and indignation to the embassy’s secretary:

We cannot be silent [declared the letter]. The world has paid a high price for silence before World War II. Because the world failed to realize the diabolic plan of Hitler to exterminate physically the Jewish people, Hitler perpetrated the first persecutions. We have paid with six million lives in concentration camps and gas chambers. The world even failed to believe these murders when the smoke was already coming out of the chimneys of the crematoria. The tragic shadows of the annihilated millions remind us of this danger and increase our anxiety lest the new line in Soviet policy towards Jews endanger the existence of those who miraculously escaped Hitler's murderous grasp. We accuse the Stalin regime of a deliberate plan to complete that destruction which Hitler began.

We raise our voices in behalf of the millions of Jews whom the communist leaders are making hostages in the onslaught against world freedom.

21 Speech by Rafael Abromovich at Jewish Labor Committee Rally, 21 Dec. 1952, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 116, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY. 6-7.
22 Speech by Carey, 11.
We demand of the Soviet government to put an end to the calumnies against the Jewish people and their organizations; that it extend protection to the Jewish population against criminal attacks and persecutions which are certain to result from official antisemitic propaganda. We demand an immediate stop to all deportations. We demand an objective and non-partisan investigation through a United Nations Commission regarding the conditions of the Jews and other minorities in Soviet Russia. We demand freedom to emigrate for those who want to leave.23

With sparse information about the status of their co-religionists behind the Iron Curtain, Jewish organizations and leaders in the non-communist world believed their Soviet brothers and sisters to be entirely defenseless, impotent, and to be little more than hostages in a society which sought to eradicate them culturally, if not physically. The actions of Jews following the trial had as much to do with the fate of Soviet Jewry as it did the changing nature of Jewish collective action in a post-Holocaust context. Where other Jewish organizations feared that too loud an outcry against Soviet antisemitism might bring further harm to Iron Curtain Jewry and too prominently highlight the uniqueness of Jewish suffering as somehow worse than other Soviet citizens, the JLC declared boldly that the current campaign being carried out in the Soviet Union was intended to destroy its Jewish population. Indeed, the JLC saw Soviet antisemitism as inextricably linked to the greater struggle between communism and democracy, but it nevertheless underscored the events of 1952 and 1953 as having particular interest to Jews.

The American Jewish Committee and The Liberal Agenda

We know that antisemitism is one of the most exportable commodities in the world, against which tariff barriers are useless. Just as the rise of Hitler in Germany constituted a threat of the gravest character to Jews in America, so there is every reason to assert that Stalin’s readiness to exploit antisemitism threatens American Jews today... American Jews will need to be alert in defense of their rights and status. They will have to exercise vigilant counteraction through their community relations agencies and give them the means they need for the job.24

Following the end of the Second World War, the American Jewish Committee emerged as one of the most potent Jewish organizations in the free world. Its constituents generally consisted of wealthy, secular American Jews who sought to promote a thorough assimilation of Jews into American society. Its agenda was first and foremost liberal, and as such the Committee was staunchly anti-communist and considered itself to be, above all, firmly on the side of western democracy. In keeping with its goals of promoting Jewish assimilation, the Committee was distinctly non-Zionist. It supported Israel as a type of democratic experiment in the Middle East, but in no way encouraged American Jews to emigrate to the new Jewish state. Despite its non-Zionist attitudes, Israeli leaders, writes Charles Liebman, viewed the American

Jewish Committee as the most influential of America’s Jewish organizations both for its representation of American Jewish interests and its access to the U.S. government. 25

Like its Zionist and labor counterparts, the AJC took up the matter of Soviet antisemitism, and similarly saw itself as the most capable Jewish entity to tackle this latest crisis. The American Jewish Committee, both in rhetoric and deed, expressed the belief that Soviet antisemitism was an immediate threat to world Jewry and to American Jewry in particular. Amid a plethora of anti-communist propaganda lay the belief that, like the Nazis, the totalitarian might of the Soviet regime ought never to be underestimated, and Jews did not have the luxury of finding security and comfort in the Iron Curtain which separated themselves from their Soviet co-religionists.

The American Jewish Committee, concerned as it was with disassociating Jews from communism, promoting a more robust assimilation of Jews into mainstream life, and advancing a progressive, liberal (and distinctively anti-communist) agenda for Jews and non-Jews alike, saw in the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism a daunting set of challenges as well as a propitious spectrum of opportunities. In a memo distributed shortly after the Slansky Trial commenced, the Executive Committee of the AJC declared, “We are both challenged and given the opportunity to place the organized free world, Jewish and Gentile, behind the Jewish communities of the United States, overseas and Israel as against the totalitarian accusers.” 26

Chief among the AJC’s fears regarding the advent of Soviet antisemitism were concerns that Soviet accusations would confirm rather than destroy myths of the existence of international Jewish conspiracies, provide anti-Semites with further evidence of the untrustworthy character of Jews, as well as taint the AJC’s relatively liberal agenda by further associating the efforts of left-wing entities with communist ideology. As Hasia Diner has written of Jewish organizations in the early 1950s, “American Jewish communal agencies, in turn, attempted to prove that Jews opposed communism, at the same time that they remained wedded to liberalism.” 27 The AJC saw the Slansky Affair as a fortuitous, if not welcomed moment to discredit, once and for all, popular antisemitic myths, and thereby gain legitimacy as a spokesperson for world Jewry in general and American Jewry, in particular.

Like the Jewish Labor Committee, the AJC’s mission was twofold. Its aims were directed at once outward toward society at large as well as inward, within Jewish communities both in the U.S. and abroad. Externally, the AJC sought to sever the connection between Jews and communism on a societal scale. Internally, the AJC hoped, through the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism, to shatter the myth, still persistent in some Jewish circles, that the Soviet Union, while many things, was not antisemitic. Indeed, the AJC hoped to strengthen its external agenda, by bringing about its internal goals. In a statement of its anti-Soviet agenda circulated at the end of December, the Committee set out the following:

Although the number of Jewish communists is small in proportion to the total number of Jews in the U.S.A., there is nevertheless a grave potential danger that the conspicuous Jewish minority among the communists will turn the understandably strong anti-communist feeling in this country against all Jews. The Prague trials afford a striking object lesson which can be used to whittle down the number of Jews still committed to communist ideology, thereby lessening this danger. 

Throughout its campaign to protest and limit the effects of Soviet antisemitism, the AJC remained highly conscious of the reality that its message, while well-intentioned, might easily be misinterpreted, either purposely or unintentionally, and as a result, undercut its entire institutional efforts. In attempting to present Jews as patriotic citizens committed to western values of freedom and democracy, they might easily portray Jews as “too eager” to assert their anti-communist credentials and thereby arouse suspicions that the actions of the AJC were insincere. In boldly contesting the existence of international Jewish conspiracies, they might intensify, rather than quell antisemitic suspicions. In drawing distinctions between the liberalism of the AJC and the totalitarianism of communism, they might further taint the former with the latter. In protesting too much or too little, the AJC and other Jewish organizations might help to perpetuate the very perceptions of Jews which they sought to undermine.

It was not enough for the AJC to simply discredit the notion that all Jews were communists and all communists were Jews. Through its exploitation of Soviet antisemitism, it sought to present Jews as fierce opponents of communism and natural friends of freedom and democracy. Explicitly stated in its December 1952 memo, “[Our] objective is to drive home the truth that Jews, traditionally identified with human rights, are natural foes of communism and the inevitable targets of Russian enmity. The net result of this campaign should be to change the equation from Jews equal communism to antisemitism equals communism.”

Similarly, the AJC felt it a special duty of Jews to draw attention to communism’s “true” nature and serve as conspicuous leaders in the struggle between East and West. As the latest victims of Soviet aggression, the AJC felt that Jews were charged with the task of denouncing the Soviet regime, as they saw it, as corrupt and bent on domestic as well as international oppression. Like the Jewish Labor Committee, the AJC saw the Cold War as an ideological showdown to win peoples’ minds. By 1952, the number of Jewish communists was indeed small, but many Jews still entertained feelings of sympathy with the aims of the Soviet Union. According to Diner, “Some postwar American Jews, whose numbers defy easy enumeration, supported the Soviet Union and, despite the hysteria sweeping the United States, championed communism.” To the AJC, it was crucial to strike a mortal blow at the belief that, "say what you will, the communists are not antisemitic, and we are ‘or’ whatever its shortcomings, the communists at least believe in race equality and practice it — and look at us in the United States.” The AJC felt that as long as Jews openly clung to this belief, its organizational efforts would be greatly hampered.

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29 AJC Program to Combat Soviet Antisemitism, 2-3.
30 Diner, 291.
31 Why An All Out Effort, 3.
Not only should Jews show themselves to be unequivocal enemies of communism, argued the AJC, but the outbreak of overt Soviet antisemitism afforded them a prime opportunity if not an obligation to undercut Soviet claims that they alone truly promoted ethnic and racial equality:

As Jews [declared the AJC], events have given us a special role, which in turn provides us with a special opportunity to make a substantial contribution to the freeing of the minds of decent-minded opinion-molders in Europe and Asia, as well as the oppressed masses in many countries from perhaps the most persistent—and the most cruelly deadly—remaining illusions about communism.32

Both the AJC and the Jewish Labor Committee believed that the advent of Soviet antisemitism had charged Jews with the task of preventing communism’s spread and likewise promoting Western democracy as the only viable ideology for peoples and nations whose political structures and allegiances remained uncertain. The AJC urged Jews to boldly voice their indignation at the actions of the Soviet Union so that the world might come to see Jews not as communism’s most zealous proselytes, but its fiercest and most formidable enemy:

remember [declared the AJC in December 1952], our silence or merely mumbled words of disapproval can be as eloquent testimony for Stalin as the strongest advocacy. We must do more than issue abstract resolutions to the papers to the effect that we are against sin, "whether of the left or the right," we must stand up publicly and be counted in the ranks of those who are actively anti-communist as a chief witness for the defense of freedom and free peoples... 33

As the AJC plotted a course of action following the Slansky Trial, it faced a host of traditional and novel challenges. In a letter exchanged between Ed Saveth and Morris Fine of the AJC (regarding the AJC’s program to combat Soviet antisemitism), Saveth exclaimed:

I think that a program of this dimension has the danger of bringing the Jews too much into the news. I don’t know how to avoid this danger, frankly, but it seems to me that as a group we tend to be capturing too many headlines these days and it is possible that the more we are in the news the stereotype of “Jewish omnipresence” is reinforced. 34

Though Saveth qualified his concerns as “precaution and not as an argument against the program,” 35 his reaction was not unique. In considering the best course of action to most effectively combat Soviet antisemitism, the AJC as well as other Jewish authorities came up against a plethora of possibly harmful outcomes.

As outlined in its December strategic memo, the AJC noted the following sets of concerns surrounding Jewish protest of Soviet activities:

1) Perhaps it’s wiser not to protest; after all, there are some hard to explain facts about Zionist activities in the satellite states; and there is much suspicion about Zionist aims among Gentile masses generally.

2) We should not protest because we do not want to defend Slansky, etc.

32 Why An All Out Effort, 3.
33 Why An All Out Effort, 3.
34 Ed Saveth to Morris Fine: drawing in conservatives to the protest, 6 Feb. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 102, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
35 Saveth to Fine, 1.
3) the Jews should not protest because we will only be confirming the canard that Jewry is eternally guilty of and stands behind disloyalty to the state.

4) One also hears around in the community certain shrewd practical reservations about Jewish action on this matter. "Let's not do anything to spread the news of the conspiracy."

5) It is being said by many honest anti-communists (and, of course, by some who are not) that because Jews have not been in the forefront of public protest against communism, it would "look bad" if now, for the first time, and only when our own ox is gored, the Jews speak up.

6) Some have said that such a campaign would spread "McCarthyism" in The United States.

Though the AJC leadership acknowledged the seriousness of the above concerns and believed truly in the delicate nature of the task at hand, it similarly recognized the political situation of 1952 and 1953 as favorable for Jewish mass action against communism:

A most encouraging factor [wrote the AJC’s Executive Committee is the fact that we can count on a present climate of less misunderstanding of our motivations, and fewer potential boomerangs than in the early Hitler period — after all, the United States is engaged in fighting communism in open battle in Korea and in a global Cold War—a struggle, moreover, that has the support of every responsible layer of American society.

In voicing their protest, Jews would only be adding to the already vociferous anti-communist chorus. Unlike the rise of Nazism, Jewish protest against Soviet antisemitism would mirror America’s broader Cold War position. Whether their pleas would compel state authorities to act on behalf of Soviet Jewry remained to be seen. At the very least, Jewish indignation against Soviet rule would, in 1952 and 1953, be automatically infused with a pro-American and pro-Western sentiment. As stated in its January, 1953, “Program to Combat Soviet Antisemitism,” the AJC confidently declared:

It is hardly likely that we need search for allies in combating communism. Our problem is to select the groups and individuals most likely to advance our appointed objectives. In so doing we should bear in mind that it is not necessary to create anti-communist sentiment in the U.S.A. It is already present and, indeed, seems to be constantly mounting. Our job is to encourage expression of this sentiment not merely as a vague, amorphous hostility, but rather in terms of the specific themes which are our particular concern.

Similarly, the fear that mass Jewish action would encourage rather than discredit antisemitic beliefs and lend credence to the existence of international Jewish conspiracies was believed to be without much basis. As part of its organizational strategy, the AJC believed that:

Today they [Americans] are not only antisemitic but anti-antisemitic; they abhor it as violating every decent American ideal, and they feel guilty over its use by "Christian

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36 Why An All Out Effort, 8.
37 Why An All Out Effort, 2-3.
38 Program to Combat Soviet Antisemitism, Jan. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 98, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
society." So much so that none of the chief demagogues of our society have dared even criticize leading Jewish political figures openly, much less experiment with the political use of antisemitism.\footnote{Why An All Out Effort, 3.}

Although organizations, such as the AJC, feared the ramifications of antisemitism and believed it to be no less dangerous than in the days of Hitler, they also came to believe that Hitler had rendered antisemitism to be a distinctly non-democratic and therefore, non-American value. While many Americans might continue to entertain anti-Jewish prejudices, it became increasingly unpopular to openly express such tendencies.

Finally, based on a series of informal interviews with Jews and non-Jews alike, Elliot E. Cohen of the AJC came to the conclusion that in 1952:

It is interesting to note that the sense that we were confronted by a complex, confused situation in which education of public opinion would be extraordinarily difficult is not at all borne out by actual public reaction. Some liberal leadership, and some Jewish leadership, find the issue complex. The average American citizen does not. This is not to deny that there is much about the Czechoslovakian purge trials and the psychological and political motivation behind them that is unknown and hence subject to contradictory interpretation. However, this does not seem to confuse the public mind unduly.\footnote{Letter from Elliot E. Cohen to Dr. John Slawson, Memorandum B-Suggestions for a Pattern of Public Meetings for the Campaign to Combat Soviet Racism, Antisemitism, and Genocide, 12 Dec. 1952, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 117, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, 2.}

It became clear to Jewish leadership that their concerns, while not without validity, did not necessarily coincide with the feelings of Jews and non-Jews at large. Caution was in order, but the majority of Jews yearned for a swift, decisive, and conspicuous reaction to the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism. In an era in which Jews had gained a degree of political autonomy in the form of Israel and in which antisemitism existed as a distinctly anti-democratic value, the AJC boldly declared, “we must not be too proud or too embarrassed to be among the leaders, initiating and promoting public action. We have been in the vanguard on other fighting issues of freedom, and Americans know it. We can only embarrass them by standing back; they will mistake our group shyness as meaning that their own strong action on our behalf would, somehow, embarrass us.”\footnote{Why An All Out Effort, 4.}

The question of joint sponsorship loomed large as the AJC and other Jewish authorities drafted their various programs to combat Soviet antisemitism. On the one hand, the support of non-Jewish entities would transform the matter of Soviet antisemitism into an issue with broader appeal. On the other hand, it was Jewish lives at stake, and in courting non-Jewish organizations and personalities, the AJC might run the risk of diluting the matter at hand. After careful consideration, the AJC leadership concluded that:

As the result of the concerned discussion of the past few weeks, we have arrived at a point where we are justified in saying that by far the predominant sentiment among AJC laymen and people out in the Jewish community, as well as of opinion-molders in the various areas of the general society, is strongly in favor of public meetings to give expression to American condemnation of the revival of the antisemitic conspiracy

\footnote{Why An All Out Effort, 3.}
\footnote{Letter from Elliot E. Cohen to Dr. John Slawson, Memorandum B-Suggestions for a Pattern of Public Meetings for the Campaign to Combat Soviet Racism, Antisemitism, and Genocide, 12 Dec. 1952, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 117, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, 2.}
\footnote{Why An All Out Effort, 4.}
canard by the Prague trials. Among those favoring such meetings there is almost unanimous agreement that the soundest and most effective approach is that of joint sponsorship by various liberal labor, church and civic organizations, with the Jewish organizations, of course, participating.\textsuperscript{42}

Toward this end, the AJC cast its net wide. In order to effectively raise awareness and possibly mitigate the results of Soviet antisemitism, the AJC appealed to a variety of Jewish and non-Jewish organizations. Among those the AJC hoped to draw into the struggle against Soviet antisemitism included veterans’ organizations, anti-communist groups, labor, religious authorities, liberal organizations, such as the ACLU, the NAACP, Jewish communal entities, as well as associations of refugees from communist countries.

To reach veterans groups, the AJC hoped to enlist the help of the American Legion as well as the Veterans of Foreign Wars. With the aid of the All-American Conference to Combat Communism, the AJC hoped to solidify its position as an undisputed enemy of the Soviet regime. Labor organizations, such as the AFL, CIO, and International Federation of Free Trade Labor Unions would spread the AJC’s message to a large section of society who’s anti-communist sentiments had already been confidently declared both by the speeches made at the Jewish Labor Committee’s December rally and statements issued by George Meany and other labor leaders. Crucial to the AJC’s campaign was a conspicuous showing of interfaith cooperation. As such, it appealed strongly to Christian organizations such as the National Council of Churches and the National Catholic Welfare Conference.

While the above groups would compose an important segment of the AJC’s outreach activities, their support would not be difficult to obtain. Much more challenging, as viewed by the AJC, were “Americans who still view liberalism with suspicion; and Americans — including Jews — who are still ‘soft’ toward communism.”\textsuperscript{43} In its struggle to tackle the crisis aroused by Soviet antisemitism, the AJC had to combat perceptions as much as realities. As such, the organizations with which it chose to associate were as important, if not more so, then its own words and deeds. If Jews were viewed by society at large as a suspect group, then the plight of their Soviet brethren would surely fall on deaf ears. Similarly, if organizations known for their liberal agenda did not actively join in the struggle against communism, then their efforts would continue to bear the taint of communist subterfuge.

The AJC felt it crucial that organizations, such as Americans for Democratic Action, the Committee on Cultural Freedom, and the ACLU, add their organizational voices to the outcry against Soviet antisemitism. However, as stated in its strategic program, “These and similar organizations, recognized as spokesmen for liberalism, should be spurred to become as vocal as possible in denouncing Soviet antisemitism. We know the leaders of these groups to be staunchly anti-communist, but the public as a whole does not accept them as such.”\textsuperscript{44} While the AJC foresaw a host of challenges in this regard, it nevertheless hoped that through its careful

\textsuperscript{42} Letter from Elliot E. Cohen to Dr. John Slawson: Memorandum B: Suggestions for a Pattern of Public Meetings for the Campaign to Combat Soviet Racism, Antisemitism, and Genocide, 12 Dec. 1952, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 117, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, 1.

\textsuperscript{43} Program to Combat Soviet Antisemitism.

\textsuperscript{44} Program to Combat Soviet Antisemitism.
treatment of Soviet antisemitism, it might advance liberalism as a distinctly non-communist ideology and hence, bring about a palpable change in public perceptions.

Not only did the AJC hope to distinguish itself and other left-leaning organizations from the taint of communism, but it truly felt that the Soviet regime would be more receptive to criticisms emanating from the Left. “The communists [declared the AJC] have always looked to the rank and file membership of these groups, plus a sizeable body of sympathizers who are not members, to furnish a claque of ‘confused liberals’ who could be counted on to applaud communism’s histrionics on the civil rights and minority-group scene in the U.S.A. It is reasonable to assume that a storm of censure from this source stands more chance of being heeded by the Kremlin than criticism from quarters traditionally hostile.” However unlikely, the AJC as well as other Jewish organizations had to believe that the Soviet Union was not immune to external criticism. Even though the AJC’s program to combat Soviet antisemitism was, in large part, a domestic affair, it had to maintain the perception that its efforts could influence Soviet policy. Its legitimacy as both a leading Jewish organization and a progressive authority depended on a belief that its organizational activities were more than well-intentioned propaganda. As a result, the AJC had to firmly establish “the fact that, far from being ‘pink’ as compared with ‘red,’ liberalism is as different from communism as white from black.”

Among those liberal organizations to which the AJC hoped to apply for support was the NAACP. Despite the fact that, as the AJC put it, “Negroes are virtually non-existent in the Soviet domain, American organizations with Negro constituents should nevertheless prove helpful in dispelling the misconception that racial minorities fare well at the hands of the Russians.” Similarly, the AJC felt that, “what is bad for the Jew, is bad for the Negro,” and as such, black Americans might prove to be a particularly vocal constituent in the struggle against Soviet antisemitism. In courting black organizations to assist in the campaign to combat Soviet antisemitism, the AJC acknowledged that they stood to learn a great many strategic lessons from organizations such as the NAACP.

The Negroes [declared an AJC memo] in respect to open public stand on a communal basis have been ahead of us. The Negro churches, organizations, and "celebrities" have stood up, and the effect has been massive and electric. Everyone knows by now that it is Jackie Robinson, not Paul Robeson who speaks for American colored people. We Jews have a like opportunity to make a very special key contribution to democratic victory. Although the AJC had to tread carefully as it chose organizations and personages to aid in its campaign to both raise awareness about and mitigate the disastrous outcomes of Soviet antisemitism, it, ultimately, stood to gain by enlisting other, non-Jewish, groups in its efforts. Indeed, the danger of diluting the situation’s specifically Jewish character existed. However, for the AJC and other Jewish entities for that matter, the crisis of Soviet antisemitism existed more as a domestically entrenched episode than one which took into account the facts of Soviet

45 Program to Combat Soviet Antisemitism.
46 Program to Combat Soviet Antisemitism.
47 Program to Combat Soviet Antisemitism.
48 Eugene Hevesi to Simon Segal, Confidential, 28, Jan. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 102, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
49 Why An All Out Effort, 4.
Jewish life. In the end, even if the AJC failed in its attempts to rally a diverse group of supporters surrounding the issue of Soviet antisemitism, it could confidently declare that, “even if unsuccessful, such a Jewish initiative would be one of the wisest tactical moves we can make. This is so because if our proposal is rejected, the rejection itself would once and for all counteract, in a dramatic manner, any and all insinuations that Jews are not good enough patriotic anti-Stalinists.”

Once the AJC decided with whom and to whom it would direct its protest efforts, the question of content followed. Despite the fact that hardly a decade had passed since the Holocaust, the AJC feared that there existed, “a kind of weariness, as of that of assuming one more heavy burden, at the thought of a meeting whose keynote is a protest against terror and genocide.” In order to engage the public more thoroughly, the AJC sought to condemn Soviet antisemitism through glorifying the values of western democracy:

If these gatherings [proposed the AJC leadership] could be not merely expressions of human indignation against Soviet tyranny and slaughter, but at the same time a celebration of what the United States, as well as the West generally, has to offer in its democratic processes and its free climate, then these meetings might well be not only tremendous propaganda to the neutrals and others on the benefits of western freedom, but a real uplift in our own morale.

The AJC hoped to not simply present western democracy as an alternative to communism, but as its veritable opposite. In doing so, it not only injected a spark of optimism into what was otherwise a rather bleak episode, but served to demonstrate to Jews and non-Jews alike with lingering Soviet sympathies that the values which they held so dearly were to be found not in the East, as they had believed, but in the western lands in which they already dwelled.

Toward this end, the AJC proposed that educational and recreational programs be set up in order to, as they put it, “help those Jews substitute reality for illusion, and to help offset the spiritual and psychic shock that this disillusionment may cause them.” While the AJC generally approached those who still believed in the virtues of the Soviet Union with a level of distaste and condescension, it nevertheless hoped to ferry these individuals over the turbulent waters that lay between communism and the more moderate sections of the Left. As a bridge for such individuals, the AJC sought to promote and sponsor a series of educational programs that would ultimately “strengthen confidence in democracy, improving ability to participate intelligently and effectively in the democratic effort to improve American society, and further the Jewish self-knowledge and self-respect that come with a better understanding and appreciation of the values of Judaism.”

Although staunchly anti-communist, the AJC did not see its mission as conservative in any way. Its leaders saw communism as a totalitarian ideology closer in form and content to Nazism than values upheld by the Left. Far from seeing themselves on the Right, some AJC constituents feared that their campaign to combat Soviet antisemitism drew too heavily on

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50 Hevesi to Segal.
51 Cohen to Slawson, 3.
52 Cohen to Slawson, 3-4.
53 Himmelfarb to Fineberg, 2.
54 Himmelfarb to Fineberg, 2.
liberal support at the exclusion of more conservative elements in society. Neither socialist, nor conservative, the AJC hoped to present Jews and Judaism as a “liberal” and moderate force in society. Of course, Jews were its utmost concern, but it believed that the health and well being of Jewish communities, the world over, was directly related to a nation’s commitment to democratic values.

In addition to educational programs that would provide reeducation for Jews whose faith in communism had been shaken or shattered by the Slansky Affair, the AJC proposed a broad and diverse set of activities that would reach Jews and non-Jews alike. Sermons were to be distributed to Rabbis. Jewish community centers would be furnished with fact sheets, pamphlets, and a wide variety of educational material. Recommendations would be circulated for appropriate speakers, i.e. experts in the field of the Soviet Union and its treatment of the Jews as well as refugees from the Soviet world. The AJC also made significant use of popular radio and television to dramatize the plight of Jews behind the Iron Curtain and reach a large audience in a relatively short amount of time. The Committee also hoped to make the following publications available to a wider audience: *The Soviet Union’s Latest March of Crime, Jews and the Soviet Union* by Solomon Schwartz, and *The Jews in the Soviet Satellites*, edited by Peter Meyer (a.k.a. Joseph Gordon, AJC East European specialist).

Highly important to the AJC was demonstrating the historical continuities of Soviet antisemitism both with Nazism as well as pre-Soviet Russia. As a result, the AJC hoped to draw upon several anniversaries to present Soviet antisemitism as having historical parallels. Among those dates considered were the 20th anniversary of Hitler’s rise to power, the 5th anniversary of the Czechoslovak Communist coup, and the 50th anniversary of the Kishinev massacres, all of which would take place in the early months of 1953. To the AJC and to many other Jewish communities and individuals, Stalin and Soviet antisemitism represented both the new and the old. Stalin was, at once, Hitler and Tsar, and something entirely different. His breed of antisemitism was reminiscent of that perpetrated by the Nazis as well as that found during the time of the Tsars. As discussed in Chapter One, Jews were uncertain as to whether Soviet antisemitism was racial or whether Soviet authorities persecuted Jews on political, cultural, and socioeconomic grounds. The types of antisemitic tropes described at the Slansky Trial seemed to embrace more traditional characterizations of Jews as perpetrators of international conspiracies as well as denigrate Jews in specifically Soviet terms by declaring them to be class enemies. And finally, Jews could not understand how the regime which had liberated the concentration camps and supported the creation of a Jewish state just a few years prior to 1952 could so rapidly change its policy toward the Jews. Because it seemed both traditional and novel and generally defied logic, Soviet antisemitism was met with a greater degree of uncertainty and was, as a result, for a number of Jewish authorities and individuals, far more worrisome than previous antisemitic episodes.

Indeed, the 1950s in general proved to be a great era of uncertainty and transition for Jews the world over. The fact that Europe ceased to be a center of world Jewry, and many Jews remained ambivalent toward the new Jewish State of Israel was a reality not lost on the American Jewish Committee. Like its socialist and Zionist counterparts, the AJC sought, through its treatment of Soviet antisemitism, to establish itself as a legitimate spokesperson for world Jewry. As was the case with the Jewish Labor Committee, the AJC referred to its longstanding
opposition to communism as proof that it possessed the knowledge and expertise to lead Jews through uncertain times:

Incidentally [declared its Executive Committee], it now becomes our opportunity to point out to American Jewry and others that those community leaders who have been warning them about this approaching menace for the past few years have now been confirmed in their reporting and predictions by events; and should now be entitled to the trust in their knowledge and judgment that their competence has earned, as against those who have persistently minimized the dangers coming from the Soviet direction to the Jews and other distinctive groups, and to basic freedoms and civil liberties in all countries, including America.55

The AJC recognized the Slansky Affair and the general crisis of Soviet antisemitism as a decisive moment for the future success of its institution. If its strategies proved effective and gained popular approval by Jews and non-Jews alike, it stood to emerge as a powerful Jewish representative body. If its tactics proved ineffectual or possibly even detrimental to the situation of world Jewry, then its leadership as a Jewish communal entity would be greatly diminished. Notwithstanding, the AJC viewed itself as particularly well-suited to handle the crisis aroused by the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism in the early 1950s. “The present situation [declared members of the AJCs top leadership] constitutes not merely a grave challenge and responsibility, but a great opportunity to demonstrate once more AJC statesmanship, its Jewish organizational and inter-group leadership, and the practical effectiveness of the ‘defense skills and techniques which the Committee has acquired in the Hitler period, both lay and professionally, in combating threats to Jewish security and human liberties.”56

The AJC attributed its superior ability to manage global Jewish affairs to three broad features of its institutional life. 1) “The AJC has the advantage of having a public record of unremitting opposition to international communism. Its leading bodies have long since expressed and implemented its membership's conviction that the totalitarianism of the ‘left’ is of the same nature and is as grave a menace as the totalitarianism of the right; communism is the twin of Nazi fascism and must be combated with equal vigilance and vigor.”57 2) “Among Jewish defense organizations the AJC has the advantage of operating on the foreign as well as the domestic scene. Since the primary source of racist, antisemitic and genocidal threats is abroad, we have an incomparable advantage in information and experienced judgment on such threats. We benefit here from our basic approach that freedom is indivisible and what menaces the freedom of Jews and others abroad one year will likely menace us in this country the next.”58 3) “As an integrative American Jewish organization with its organizational roots reaching solidly into the Jewish communities and its manifold influential contacts and ties with private and governmental agencies and organizations, the AJC has a unique advantage over Jewish separatistic parochial organizations on the one hand, and on general liberal and non-sectarian groups on the other.”59

55 Why An All Out Effort, 2.
56 Cohen to Slawson, 2.
57 Cohen to Slawson, 2.
58 Cohen to Slawson, 2-3.
59 Cohen to Slawson, 3.
The AJC believed that, in the early 1950s, there existed a genuine vacuum in Jewish leadership the world over, and as such, it strove to emerge as an all-inclusive organization that could protect, defend, and above all speak for world Jewry in times of peace and times of conflict alike. At the height of the Cold War, the Committee saw itself as engaged in the business of defense. “The Jews want protection and defense; and they will be only too glad to turn to the AJC in terms of our past record and reputation, and because of the obvious handicaps and disqualifications of other types of Jewish organizations for the task... we cannot help but shine by comparison in this emergency defense situation.”60 That the AJC saw itself in competition with other Jewish communal bodies is clear. Nevertheless, the Committee believed that Jews, upon seeing the organization’s unparalleled abilities, would flock to it for guidance, leadership, support, and most importantly, defense. “In this charged atmosphere, [writes Diner] American Jews’ efforts to prove their anti-communist bona fides constituted in part an attempt at self-defense.”61

Because the AJC believed its mission to be inextricably linked to the global success of democracy, its ambitions were similarly internationally oriented. Despite any cultural, religious, and ideological differences between different Jewish communities, the AJC held firmly to the conviction that all Jews, regardless of their national affiliation, could only thrive in democratic societies. It believed its mission to be of a universal character and as such, it, more than any other Jewish organization, could best represent the interests of world Jewry.

The AJC’s prime international targets consisted of Jewish communities in Europe and South America. Although the Committee sought to represent Jewry on a global scale, it did not extend its jurisdiction to those Jews living in the new State of Israel. In spite of this, the AJC believed it more capable than the new Jewish state in representing Jewish communities worldwide. Following the Slansky Affair, the AJC’s Paris office became an important vehicle for carrying out the Committee’s anti-communist campaign. The Committee believed that communism existed as a far more influential force among European Jews than it did in Jewish communities elsewhere. As a result, it directed a great deal of effort toward eliminating communist representation in European Jewish communities.

Toward this end, the Committee employed a variety of tactics. In France, it helped to form the Comité d’Entente, a coalition of anti-communist Jewish entities. Through this alliance, it hoped to issue pamphlets and other educational materials regarding the Soviet Union’s treatment of its Jewish population. It also sought to provide greater funding to two Yiddish anti-communist papers, *Unser Wort* and *Unser Stimme*, in the hopes of reaching audiences most susceptible to communist influence. The AJC also issued a French publication, *Evidences*, which came out 7 times per year.

In addition to its French activities, the AJC saw the Jewish communities of Austria and Germany as extremely important, not only in ridding communist elements from Jewish communities, but in both obtaining and spreading information regarding the condition of Jews behind the Iron Curtain. In Vienna, the Committee sought to oust communist members of Jewish representative bodies, by providing support for the socialists and Zionists. The AJC saw these Central European countries as crossroads for Eastern and Western Jewry, and as a result,

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60 Cohen to Slawson, 3-4.
61 Diner, 237.
believed it important to have a strong foothold in their various Jewish communities. To what extent the AJC’s efforts in Europe and other Jewish communities abroad yielded any tangible results is difficult to say. Its Paris office, for example, at times requested more funding for its anti-communist projects without any reference to its “successes.” What is important to note, however, in regards to the AJC’s activities internationally, is that it believed its anti-communist mission to be universal and as such, Jews, where ever they might live, fell into its jurisdiction.

Western Europe

The American Jewish Committee was not wrong in its belief that communism played a far more influential and integral role in the lives of Western European Jewry than it did among American Jewish communities. Jews with communist convictions and sympathies actively participated in the communal life of Jewish communities in Britain, France, and in countries with smaller Jewish populations, such as Austria. While their numbers were still small relative to the Jewish population at large, Jewish communists directly west of the Iron Curtain were far more vocal, numerous, conspicuous, and organized than Jewish communists in the United States. As a result, Jewish communities in Western Europe experienced a greater degree of communal upheaval than Jewish populations in the United States following the Slansky Affair.

Like their American co-religionists, European Jewish authorities stood to gain from the dissociation of Jews from communism. Their reactions, however following the trial, were not compelled by or saturated with the type of anti-communist hysteria, as seen in the rise of McCarthyism, sweeping the United States:

While we [stated the British Board of Deputies’ Press Officer] of course take a serious view of the general situation vis-a-vis what is going on behind the Iron Curtain, I am glad that we have not the hysteria which seems to permeate United States policy and which is making the American politician as well as the American State Department the laughing stock of the world.  

Despite their criticisms of American politics, Western European Jewish authorities collaborated closely with American Jewish entities following the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism, and similarly sought to register their deep indignation at and fear surrounding the events taking place behind the Iron Curtain.

While American Jewish leaders vociferously condemned Jewish communists who continued to support Soviet actions and sought to lure Jews with Soviet sympathies to the anti-communist camp, their protest meetings were not disturbed by communist agitators. Street brawls between communists, Bundists, and Zionists were not to be seen. Police were not called to restore order to large protest assemblies. Though perhaps more rigorous and vocal than their European counterparts, American Jewry’s encounter with communism was far more abstract and less visceral than that experienced by Jews in Europe.

Emotions ran high at one of the first gatherings held by the Board of Deputies of British Jews following the trial. After drafting a proposal resolution to protest the court proceedings in Prague, a certain Mr. Stein urged that the statement be immediately amended to reflect what

he perceived to be the truth of the matter. As a communist, Mr. Stein saw no reason for British Jewry’s protest, asserting that the Czechoslovak state had carried out justice in an open and fair manner. As reported by *The Jewish Chronicle*, “There was an uproar and loud protests during Mr. Stein’s speech.” Several members vehemently argued that Mr. Stein’s amendment be rejected out of hand and as such, ought not even to be favored with a vote by the Board. Following Mr. Stein’s speech, Mr. Barnett Janner, Labour MP and Chairman of the Board’s Foreign Affairs Committee urged that Mr. Stein withdraw his amendment. Janner proclaimed that he was “horrified that representatives of Jewish congregations—none of which, he added, would endorse such views—should come forward with such a piece of propaganda.” Mr. Janner’s remarks were said to have been met with loud shouts of “hear, hear,” and vehement applause. In the end, the amendment was put to a vote, being rejected by all but Mr. Stein and one other who seconded the amendment.

Following the Board’s organizational meeting, a public protest assembly was held. While the majority of attendees agreed whole-heartedly with the condemnation of the Prague proceedings, several communist agitators attempted to interrupt speakers. Mr. Max Levitas, communist activist from Stepney, London, was ejected from the assembly. Police patrolled the building’s exterior as communists handed out pamphlets with reproductions of *The Daily Worker’s* recent interview with Czech Chief Rabbi Gustav Sicher in which he declared that no antisemitism existed in Czechoslovakia or the Soviet sphere of influence. They also attempted to collect signatures to support the plight of the Rosenbergs awaiting execution in the United States.

On several other occasions, police had to be called to quell unrest provoked by protest assemblies. At a debate regarding the trial and its significance held at the Anglo-Israeli club and sponsored by the British section of the World Jewish Congress, police were summoned to prevent a large group of communist agitators from entering the debate. At a protest assembly organized by the Zionist organization of Brittan and Ireland, a number of “hecklers” had to be forcibly ejected from the Grand Palace Theater in London. When Mr. Barnett Janner, Chairman of the meeting, registered his disbelief that Jews were once again the victims of state-sponsored antisemitism, communists yelled “Rubbish.” When speakers referenced that Jews were fleeing from East Germany to the western zone, the communists shouted that such individuals were “crooks” and “marketeers.” When the crowd began to express its extreme displeasure at the communists’ frequent attempts to interrupt the meeting’s progress, Mr. Janner remarked that, “Let them demonstrate their anti-Jewishness in order that we can know our enemies.”

The situation in France was similar to that seen in Britain. In late January 1953, *The Jewish Chronicle* reported that street brawling had taken place in three different Jewish neighborhoods of Paris when Jewish communists attempted to tear down posters advertizing an upcoming assembly to protest Soviet antisemitism. The communists were alleged to have attacked Zionists and Bundists, hurting several, and tearing their publications to shreds. Police

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64 “Anglo-Jewry’s Protest,” 1.
were called to attend the matter, and the communists were detained. At the protest meeting which the communists had attempted to hinder in advance, some 50 Jewish and 30 non-Jewish communists were arrested and escorted from the meeting hall after creating an atmosphere of “pandemonium” during the first hour of the gathering. Approximately 2000 individuals were in attendance when the communist agitators were forcibly removed.66

Although Jewish organizations in the United States collaborated heavily following the Slansky Trial, the episode also marked a moment of fierce competition as various Jewish groups vied to take the lead. Jewish groups in Britain and France were, of course, diverse and embraced a range of often conflicting ideologies, but the crisis aroused by the Slansky Trial seemed to provoke, at least temporarily, an atmosphere of unity. At a December rally, held just weeks after Slansky’s execution, 3000 French Jews gathered to protest the trial’s blatant antisemitism. Writing about his experience at the assembly, Jewish commentator, S. Margoshes, remarked that, “Zionists sat aside Bundists. Native born French Jews rubbed elbows with recent immigrants from Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. It was a rare demonstration of Jewish unity, such as only a great misfortune or a great grievance could bring about.”67 Margoshes continued that:

The platform presented a strange sight of members of a family abruptly ceasing their family quarrels to protect their threatened common interests. The leadership of all Jewish groups, with the exception of the communists, was present in force. When Israel Yefroykin, honorary Chairman of the Federation of Jewish organizations, rose to open the meeting it was evident that he spoke in the name of a united Parisian Jewry, flanked as he was by Jewish representatives from the Right and Left. He struck the keynote when he declared that though the speakers might use different languages and voice different ideologies, they would speak with one voice in denouncing the great lie of Prague and the horrible libel upon the Zionist movement and the State of Israel. Speaker after speaker echoed this sentiment.68

Dr. Margoshes’s words, exaggerated as they were, captured the high emotion of the day. As Jewish communists became increasingly reviled by their non-communist co-religionists, tensions between traditionally hostile Jewish groups, such as the Zionists and Bundists, seemed to temporarily decline. The differences in how Jews reacted to the trial from country to country, ideology to ideology, and reform to orthodoxy, are not to be understated. However, the shared indignation across these often otherwise insurmountable barriers must similarly not be overlooked. The outrage common to most Jewish communities following the trial signaled to Jews that there truly existed a concept of “world Jewry,” no matter how indefinite and elusive its character might be.

The Zurich Controversy

Whether they wished to or not, the Slansky Affair, Doctors’ Plot, and the general wave of Soviet antisemitism of 1952 and 1953 forced Jews to examine and grapple with the elusive, but ever-present concept of “world Jewry.” Given the diversity of the world’s Jewish

68 Margoshes, 1.
population, what was it, if anything, that caused Jews to concern themselves with the plight of Jews with whom they shared little in common? Following the Holocaust, was it persecution alone which united Jews the world over? And finally, how had the creation of a Jewish national state altered the meaning of what it meant to identify oneself as Jewish? The Slansky Affair, in short, awakened and brought into focus some of the most fundamental and critical issues surrounding modern Jewish identity.

When the Slansky Affair commenced in late November 1952, Israel had existed for less than five years. While recognized diplomatically as a legitimate sovereign entity, Jews, themselves, had yet to establish the role that the fledgling Jewish state would have in global Jewish affairs. Most of the world’s Jewish population lived outside the new Jewish state and did not wish to make Aliyah. Unlike European Jewry which found itself in a state of complete upheaval and displacement following the war, American Jews emerged in the post-Holocaust era as a stable, financially sound, moderately potent, and well-populated community. Though many American Jews supported the creation of a Jewish state and thought it an optimal choice for those Jews fleeing Europe, they saw no reason why they themselves should emigrate to the new Jewish homeland. They did not see themselves as “exiles,” and as such, felt no obligation to abandon the country in which they had found relative peace and prosperity. The reluctance of American Jews to make Aliyah and more importantly, of American Jewish organizations to support emigration to Israel developed into a controversy of note in 1950.

In that year, Jacob Blaustein, President of the American Jewish Committee, and David Ben-Gurion, Israeli Prime Minister, engaged in open conflict when Ben-Gurion publicly urged Americans to emigrate to Israel and participate in the upbuilding of the new Jewish state. “Classical Zionism [wrote Steven Bayme] had predicted a ‘withering away’ of the Diaspora, and Israeli emissaries abroad provoked considerable consternation by repeated calls for Aliyah.”69

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, support for Israel did not necessarily go hand in hand with Zionist convictions. As such, much of America’s Jewish leadership, especially as seen in the AJC, openly rejected Zionism, while offering financial support for the State of Israel. The AJC was largely concerned with protecting and defending the rights of Jews in the United States and of presenting American Jews as loyal and regular citizens. When Ben-Gurion openly called for American Jews to emigrate to the new Jewish state, the leadership of the AJC worried that Ben-Gurion had, in one broad stroke, brought into question American Jewry’s commitment to the U.S. and had overstepped his authority. In its view, Israel had no monopoly on Jewish representation and indeed, had no right whatsoever to speak for or represent American Jews.

As Charles Liebman has written of the so-called “Blaustein-Ben-Gurion Exchange,” “the growing commitment of American Jews to Israel, their increased feeling of security in America, and their sense that Israel’s existence does not create antisemitism or lead to charges of dual loyalty makes those concerns which precipitated the "exchange" seem quite irrelevant.”70 Though difficult to imagine today when pro-Israel sentiments are generally the norm as Liebman notes, among American Jews, such was not the case in the immediate post-Holocaust

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era. The relationship between diasporic Jewry and Israel at this time was defined more by its boundaries than its points of intersection. Following the Blaustein-Ben-Gurion Exchange, Blaustein agreed to continue the AJC’s ongoing financial support of the new Jewish state as long as Israeli authorities refrained from encouraging American Jews to make Aliyah and acknowledge its lack of authority in American and for that matter, global Jewish affairs. As Steven Bayme writes, “In effect, Blaustein was offering American Jewish largesse and political support to Israel in exchange for modifications in Israel’s self-perception as representing world Jewry and as the central nerve in the Jewish body politic.”

Though occurring before the overt outbreak of Soviet antisemitism, echoes of the Blaustein-Ben-Gurion Exchange reverberated widely as Jews sought to devise programs of action to address the crisis of Iron Curtain Jewry. Despite the reality that Zionism and the State of Israel were the stated targets of Soviet accusations, Jewish authorities, leaders, and organizations, across a spectrum of national, religious, and social convictions, agreed that the crisis should be handled not by Israel, but by the non-governmental Jewish entities of the world. In fact, many such individuals believed that Israel’s intervention on behalf of Soviet Jewry would only exacerbate their precarious status. Even though Jewish lives were at stake, many felt that Israel’s diplomatic interactions with the Soviet Union were independent and something entirely different from Jewish-Soviet relations.

This complicated reality became increasingly apparent when the Jewish Agency for Israel,72 charged with the new state’s economic development and matters of immigration and absorption, announced the convening of an international Jewish conference to protest Soviet antisemitism. On February 13, 1953, the Jewish Agency, headed by Nahum Goldmann and Berl Locker, issued a telegram to Jewish communities throughout the world inviting them to attend the protest conference to be held on March 11 in Zurich, Switzerland. The invitation read:

Executive Jewish agency for Palestine urgently invites you participate conference major Jewish organizations and Communities the world over to consider plight eastern European Jewry and set forth reaction Of authorized Jewish representatives to campaign in soviet Russia and eastern Europe against is real the Zionist movement joint distribution committee and the Jewish people generally stop imperative that Jewish people give unified expression to its alarm over mounting perils for eastern European Jewry and Israel and demand right for eastern European Jews to emigrate stressing readiness Israel receive them73

Far from receiving the Agency’s announcement with enthusiasm and gratitude, several major Jewish organizations, the American Jewish Committee foremost among them, greeted the invitation with hesitance, scorn, and general dissatisfaction. The controversy which ensued demonstrated that in 1953, Israel’s role in world Jewish affairs was, at best, uncertain, and even

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71 Bayme.

72 The Jewish Agency for Palestine had functioned as the pre-state government of British controlled Palestine. Before the creation of the State of Israel, it had been composed of both Zionist and non-Zionist leadership. By 1952, the Jewish Agency was entirely Zionist in character.

73 Invitation to World Jewish Conference, from Nahum Goldmann and Berl Locker, Executives of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, 13 Feb. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 100, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
though many Jews may have openly supported the new state, they rejected its right to speak for all Jews.

Although the American Jewish Committee constituted the most vocal opponent of the proposed conference, several other Jewish organizations and institutions in Western Europe and even in Israel echoed the AJC in its condemnation of the Agency’s actions. The Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Anglo-Jewish Association, the Alliance Israelite, the World Council of Progressive Judaism, Agudas Israel, as well as the Jewish communities of Sweden, Switzerland, and Jewish entities in Israel, despite their eventual agreement to participate in the conference, all expressed doubts about the conclave’s efficacy and advisability.

Behind the uproar lay several points of contention. Some opposed the manner in which the conference was called. Others condemned the conference altogether; and yet others found displeasure in both. The controversy aroused by the Zurich conference indicated that matters of Jewish representation and the role of Israel in Jewish affairs lay at the forefront of Jewish thought and action in the early 1950s.

Chief among the complaints voiced by several Jewish organizations was that the Jewish Agency had unilaterally called the conference. It had publicly announced the conference without consulting any of the invited organizations, and as a result, many organizations felt obliged to attend a meeting of whose structure and content they had little foreknowledge and in whose aims they had little faith. In deciding whether or not to participate in the conference, Eugene Hevesi of the American Jewish Committee conveyed to John Slawson, AJC Executive, that:

The manner in which this conference was called indicates that Israel attributed to it very definite, vital and urgent political purposes, so much so that its planners decided to place the invitee — organized Jewry of the free world — into a position of constraint with regard to participation. They certainly refused to give the invited organizations and communities a chance to ascertain and study the real objectives behind this suddenly called propaganda conclave. By making the invitation public without delay, the Agency has served notice upon the invitees that they better fall in line without trying to find out what the thing was all about.74

In his public letter to Nahum Goldmann and Berl Locker following the conference’s ultimate postponement upon Stalin’s death in early March 1953, Jacob Blaustein, president of the American Jewish Committee, declared that:

The entire problem is indeed complex and delicate. It cannot be dealt with by hastily calling together a public meeting of international scope. In our view the Jewish Agency is guilty of irresponsibility by the procedure adopted with respect to the Zurich meeting, before it was postponed. At the least, there should have been consultation among the major Jewish organizations which have had experience in these matters, before a decision was made to call such a meeting. The desirability of such a meeting, its character, those to be invited, and the objectives to be served by such an international meeting of Jewish organizations at this time — all these factors should have been carefully weighed in advance through consultation among the major organizations.

74 Eugene Hevesi to John Slawson, International Meeting, 26 Feb. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 100, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, 1.
action of the Agency without such prior consultation is not alone objectionable but, in our view, harmful to the best interests of Jews throughout the world.\textsuperscript{75}

At the root of such contentions lay the fear that Israel, and the Jewish Agency, had transgressed its authority in representing Jewish interests. Although Israel was indeed the only proclaimed “Jewish state,” few Jewish organizations, save those of a specifically Zionist orientation, were ready and willing to relinquish their right to Jewish representation in local as well as global affairs. Indeed, many contended that Israel, because of its very nationalistic biases, was the worst choice in defending Jewish interests. In expressing his views on whether the AJC ought to participate in the Zurich conference, Eliezer Greenberg stated in a letter to John Slawson:

This is a fact which the advocates of united action are prone to overlook in their impatient and shortsighted demands for an over-all Jewish body. They fail to see that in these critical times an independent, non-Zionist organization can often function more effectively on behalf of Jews both inside and outside of Israel as has been demonstrated in the past — than can an organization which is expressly Zionist in its orientation, and that furthermore it has often been necessary for independent groups to supplement the efforts of partisan organizations to achieve a specific goal.\textsuperscript{76}

Even though most Jews viewed the Soviet Union’s “anti-Zionist” campaign as a blatant attack on Jews more generally, they nevertheless felt it crucial that the interests of world Jewry and those of Israel remain separate in the public sphere. In expressing his opinion concerning the Zurich conference, Zachariah Schuster, head of the AJC’s Paris office, wrote that:

There are two aspects of this communist campaign. One is directed against Israel, the other against world and primarily against U.S. Jewry, specifically J.D.C. and A.J.C. Although both are [aligned] in Communist propaganda it is not advisable for us to follow suit and lead the counter-offensive jointly. Let Israel work along its own lines and let us - American Jewry, AJC and JDC — react in its own way.\textsuperscript{77}

Similarly, Schuster felt that, “Any alignment — formal — with Israel will only confuse and complicate matters and will bring in the Arab problem, Middle East defense, etc. On the other hand, an independent campaign by ourselves will be direct, simple and convincing.”\textsuperscript{78}

Those organizations and Jewish communities which opposed the conference felt that not only had the Jewish Agency overstepped its authority in matters of Jewish representation, but had conceived the conference more as a pro-Israel rally than a genuine attempt to assist Jews behind the Iron Curtain. Despite the fact that such Jewish organizations might openly support the State of Israel, they, nevertheless, did not wish to be considered Zionist in their

\textsuperscript{75} Jacob Blaustein, AJC, to Nahum Goldman and Berl Locker, Jewish Agency, 20 Mar. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 100, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, 2.

\textsuperscript{76} Eliezer Greenberg to John Slawson, Significance of the International Conference to Protest Soviet Antisemitism and the Position of the American Jewish Committee, 26 Feb. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 100, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, 4.

\textsuperscript{77} Zachariah Schuster to John Slawson, Confidential, Jewish Conference, 16 Feb. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 100, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.

\textsuperscript{78} Schuster to Slawson, 16 Feb. 1953.
institutional ambitions. In the early 1950s, Jews could openly call for the economic, military, and diplomatic support of the Jewish state while rejecting Zionism as a personal ideology. As a result, while many Jews expressed passionate indignation at the Soviet Union’s attack on Zionism and the State of Israel, they did not want to be branded as Zionists themselves.

With the creation of a Jewish state, non-Israeli Jewish organizations feared the loss of their institutional independence and authority in local Jewish affairs. They believed themselves to be in a continuous struggle to maintain a unique voice amid a Zionist chorus. As such, the Jewish Agency’s announcement of its intentions to convene an international conference of world Jewry was received by several Jewish institutions not as an invitation to participate in a demonstration of Jewish unity, but as a threat, that if carried out, would mean the subordination of their organizational authority to the will of Israel.

In assessing the possible outcomes of the conference, Eugene Hevesi of the AJC vehemently declared:

"The real purpose of the conference is to serve certain specifically Israeli and Zionist interests. The urgency attached to its convocation is related to certain of their specific interests which have actually nothing to do with the plight of Eastern European Jewry, and are only indirectly related to the overall problem of Communist antisemitism. In fact, the propagandistic effect of the proposed conference is likely to be directed toward the West rather than the East. The real problem at issue for Israel and Zionism is none other than the questions of continuing American support to Israel, Near Eastern defense, arms and economic grants and general Western rapprochement to the Arabs. [. . .] Every indication points to the likelihood that it is primarily for the support of this position that the conference is meant to convene post-haste and to represent "Jewish unity.""

In Hevesi’s view, the Agency held two basic motives in calling the conference. Externally, it hoped to arouse greater diplomatic and tactical support for the new Jewish state. Internally, it sought to establish among world Jewry that Israel would take the lead in matters Jewish and ultimately knew what was best for the Jewish people. Hevesi continued, "[The] ideological purpose of the conference seems to be to cement and reinforce by a united world Jewish manifestation, ‘the well-known ideological foundations’ of Israel's and Zionism’s position in the world, meaning the concept of a world-wide Jewish nation centered in Israel, and to defend it against the communist assault on Zionism and ‘rootless Jewish cosmopolitanism’."80

In denouncing the conference, individuals such as Hevesi, felt that they were defending the rights of diasporic Jewry against the encroachment of an all consuming Israeli will.

We must also try [declared Hevesi] without delay to convince all non-Zionist organizations and communities here and in Europe of the correctness of this position and of the need for them to accept it. I am not fooling myself in expecting anything else but that most of the Jewish groups will unthinkingly accept the invitation, for emotional, organizational and personal "prestige" reasons. But if we remain alone, we must stand

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79 Hevesi to Slawson, 26 Feb. 1953, 5.
80 Hevesi to Slawson, 26 Feb. 1953, 5.
up for our principles and for the vital interests of Jewish citizens of states other than Israel.\textsuperscript{81}

Those organizations and communities which opposed the conference did not do so solely to retain a degree of independence and authority in a world that now contained a Jewish state. They also believed that the conference itself might serve to confirm rather than discredit Soviet claims that Jews were, by nature, “cosmopolitans,” and as such, their national loyalties were forever in doubt. In this view, the Agency, in calling the meeting, not only placed their Soviet brethren in greater danger, but compromised the position of Jews the world over. Arguing for the AJC’s rejection of the conference, Hevesi exclaimed that:

The proposed meeting can achieve nothing within the Soviet orbit. It cannot add anything to the strengthening of the condemnation of the Kremlin in the free world. It can only contribute to one thing, the strengthening of the impact of the Soviet fabrication that Jews are not normal and reliable citizens of their respective countries but “rootless cosmopolitans” political appendages of Israel, whose organizations act uniformly under the thumb of an Israeli political instrument...\textsuperscript{82}

In addition to portraying all Jews as subject to the State of Israel, the conference, Hevesi felt, stressed the reality that many Jews behind the Iron Curtain had relations in the “free world.” “It is irresponsibly dangerous today [wrote Hevesi] to stress in such a demonstrative manner the continuing Western ties and allegiances of the captive Jews.”\textsuperscript{83} The Anglo-Jewish Association expressed a similar sentiment when its Foreign Affairs Committee declared that, “If the object is to induce in the U.S.S.R. a greater readiness to permit Jews to emigrate, it is felt that the united publicized hostility of world Jewry would tend to operate in the other direction.”\textsuperscript{84} The conference, as a whole, was perceived by a host of diasporic Jewish authorities as a great debacle whose outcomes would be ineffectual at best, and lethal at worst.

As stated above, rejection of the conference and support of Israel were not mutually exclusive. Though fiercely opposed to the conference, Eugene Hevesi, nevertheless, felt it crucial that American Jews continue to openly support Israel’s economic development and its military defense. “I realize [wrote Hevesi] that in the face of the Soviet cabal against her, Israel needs the support of Jews the world over, but this support is available anyway, without any Agency-staged and directed, made-to-order international Jewish demonstration of the ‘Elders of Zion’ in Switzerland. On the contrary, Jews can help Israel only as citizens of their countries, with the help of their governments and their fellow-citizens.”\textsuperscript{85}

Similarly, it was not the conference’s main theme — namely to urge the Soviet Union to permit its Jewish population to emigrate to Israel — which aroused controversy, but rather its complete unreality in current world affairs. In calling for the Soviet Union to “Let My People

\textsuperscript{81} Eugene Hevesi to Simon Segal, 17 Feb. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 103, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, 1.
\textsuperscript{82} Hevesi to Segal, 2.
\textsuperscript{83} Hevesi to Slawson, 1.
\textsuperscript{84} Frankel to Segal, 19 Feb. 1953, Meeting of English Jews About Crisis, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 103, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
\textsuperscript{85} Hevesi to Segal, 1.
Go,” opposing Jewish authorities feared that their pleas would not only fall on deaf ears, but would encourage Soviet authorities to further alienate Iron Curtain Jewry.

If, therefore, this alleged purpose of the conference [declared Hevesi] really means what it says, the participants ought to be sure in advance whether Messrs. Goldmann and Locker are certain that (a) Israel is really prepared, in every sense of the word, to receive a large influx of immigrants, and that (b) there is a chance for Soviet adherence to, or acquiescence in a serious plan of indiscriminate Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe. In such a case, however, the matter belongs before a Jewish world conference of an entirely different character which, after thorough preparation, is really capable of dealing with the many immensely serious aspects of such a plan.

The conference called by the Agency is evidently in no position to deal with such a problem in the spur of the moment. Nevertheless, if the preliminary conditions (a) and (b) really existed in a guaranteed manner, there would be no choice for the AJC but to endorse the conference, participate in it and wholeheartedly support the demand for Jewish migration. If, however, these conditions do not exist (as, unfortunately they exist only in the emotional dream world of victims of Zionist-nationalist propaganda), the conference better desist from playing heroics with the truly heroic problem of mass exodus from the East, because otherwise they either make the conference a disastrous fiasco which is the better case, or else induce an enraged Kremlin to take Israel and the conference at their word by dumping hundreds of thousands of sick and old Jews upon Israel, without permitting a single younger and able-bodied person to leave, thereby getting rid of a social ballast of their own, to the detriment and peril of Israel, and to the delight of their potential allies, the Arab states.86

The Soviet Union’s unwillingness, on the one hand, to release its Jews and Israel’s inability, on the other, to accept such a large influx of immigrants, signaled to Jewish leaders that the conference was not simply ill advised, but patently unrealistic in its aims. Moreover, several Jewish organizations felt that the conference would be a logistical nightmare. Among its reasons for doubting the conference, the Anglo-Jewish Association proclaimed that, “(a) conference which would consist of probably some 150 delegates or so, with staff, would be much too ponderous to achieve anything but the passing of more or less ineffectual resolutions;” and “(b) The cost and effort involved would be quite disproportionate to any results which could reasonably be expected from it.”87

To be sure, personal differences also figured heavily in the conference’s controversial character. In condemning the conference, a number of Jewish leaders directed their enmity toward the personage of Nahum Goldmann himself. The Anglo-Jewish Association declared that, “The view taken here, rightly or wrongly, is that Nahum Goldmann is taking too much upon himself, and that considerations of organisational and personal aggrandizement had entered into the picture.”88 Hevesi of the AJC, in particular, viewed the Agency’s decision to call the conference as a personal attempt by Goldmann to seize control of global Jewish representation. In his memo to Simon Segal, Hevesi referred to the conference as Goldman’s

86 Hevesi to Slawson, 3-4.
87 Frankel to Segal.
88 Frankel to Segal, 1.
“latest world-empire-building attempt,” and charged the AJC with the responsibility of taking the lead in resisting Goldman’s power play. Whether opposition sprang from personal, logistical, or ideological reasons, the Zurich controversy revealed that significant tensions existed between the leadership of the new Jewish state and Jewish communities in the Diaspora. Support for Israel was not synonymous with Zionism, and non-Zionist, non-Israeli Jewish authorities, in denouncing the Agency’s actions, sought to reaffirm their rights as independent and locally controlled Jewish institutions.

Despite widespread opposition to the conference, dozens of Jewish organizations and communities agreed to send delegates to Switzerland, including the American Jewish Committee. The meeting was indeed to be international in scope, including representatives from Jewish communities in Algeria, Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Columbia, Cuba, France, Great Britain, Holland, Italy, Luxemburg, Morocco, Norway, Portugal, Rhodesia, Switzerland, Tunisia, the United States, and Yugoslavia. Additionally, the Jewish community of Turkey was granted permission to send delegates to the conference by the Turkish government, an unprecedented outcome for that community as remarked upon by Zachariah Schuster of the AJC. Though reluctant, the American Jewish Committee along with several other Jewish organizations which had expressed grave doubts about the conference agreed, albeit, conditionally to attend. On February 28, 1953, Jacob Blaustein cabled Berl Locker and Nahum Goldmann with the following stipulations upon whose agreement the AJC would attend the conference:

1) Conference to be convened and conducted under joint and equal sponsorship of participating organizations
2) Conference to be an ad hoc and onetime gathering of purely consultative nature
3) Full concurrence of participating organizations to govern all conference resolutions and statements
4) All conference arrangements and public and press relations to be handled jointly by staff representing participating organizations
5) Conference to be headed by representative presidium

Preliminary meeting with you to be held either Sunday or Monday prior to conference to consider program and objective.

It is our belief that conference should emphasize antisemitism as part of general soviet persecution of minorities, used as instrument in Cold War against the free world, that Israel has been attacked because of its adherence to democracy
6) Conference to issue appeal to stop persecution of minorities and guarantee basic human rights within the Soviet orbit as well as the right to emigrate.

Once the AJC openly declared its acceptance of the invitation to attend the Zurich conference, several organizations, including the Anglo-Jewish Association, likewise agreed to participate.

89 Hevesi to Segal, 1.
90 Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 2 Mar. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 103, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
91 AJC Paris Office to Foreign Affairs Department, 9 Mar. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 103, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
Days before the conference was to open, news that Stalin had fallen ill reached the West. Conference participants had already begun to arrive in Europe when Stalin’s illness renewed doubts about the conclave’s advisability. On March 5, 1953, Stalin’s death was announced, and the situation of Iron Curtain Jewry entered a new phase of uncertainty. Not a few Jewish leaders had attributed the change in Soviet policy toward its Jewish population to Stalin himself, and with his death, it was unknown whether his successors would continue the intense antisemitic campaign of his last months. If Jewish leaders feared, before Stalin’s death, that the conference might exacerbate the position of Soviet Jewry, then their fears were doubly renewed in the face of the leader’s demise. With Stalin’s death, information about Iron Curtain Jewry became even less reliable and increasingly sparse. Notwithstanding, Jews in the West viewed his death with careful optimism, and called for caution, above all else, as the new Soviet agenda began to unfold. As a result, the conference was ultimately postponed and never to be revived.

The controversy surrounding the conference however did not end with its postponement. In the days and weeks following Stalin’s death and the Jewish Agency’s decision to temporarily cancel the conference, Jewish leaders took stock of what really lay behind the meaning of Zurich. In a series of public letters exchanged between the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Agency, the incident came to a head.

On March 20, 1953 just a few weeks after the conference’s cancellation, Jacob Blaustein, issued an open letter to the Jewish Agency. In this public communication, Blaustein made it abundantly clear to the Jewish Agency that, in the eyes of the AJC leadership, they had not only shown themselves to be arrogant and disrespectful in their decision to call, unilaterally, the conference in the first place, but had risked the lives of the nearly three million Jews behind the Iron Curtain in doing so.

We do not wish at this time [wrote Blaustein] to express our views as to the wisdom or the value of a Jewish public meeting of international scope. We do, however, voice the strongest possible objection to the methods you pursued. We trust that the mutual respect which we owe one another will in the future prevail and will exclude such procedures. The Governing Committees of the American Jewish Committee have considered this subject with seriousness and deep concern, and on their behalf as well as my own, I wish now to inform you that any step that you may hereafter take of a similar nature without prior consultation will result in our refusal to participate. I wish also to add that if the plan for holding the proposed meeting in Zurich is revived, our participation will depend on prior consultations as indicated above.92

Blaustein concluded that:

Problems of such gravity for the Jews behind the Iron Curtain, of such importance for the position of Jews throughout the world and of such direct concern to Israel, deserve the best thinking of all of us and our most earnest and deliberate consideration. All organizations in their various functions and special fields have their roles to play. We have always been and still are willing to consult and to cooperate within the areas of

agreement with Jewish organizations which have a contribution to make, on a basis of complete equality and mutual respect in the interest of solving the perplexing problems facing Jewry. The Jewish Agency is an organization with which, as formerly, we are prepared to collaborate on this basis.\(^9^3\)

Blaustein’s letter declared publicly that Israel would not be the default representative in Jewish affairs, and that the non-governmental Jewish agencies of the world would continue to exercise influence in spite of and alongside the new Jewish state.

Following the conference’s postponement and the publication of Blaustein’s letter to the Jewish Agency, several other Jewish organizations came forward with similar sentiments. The Anglo-Jewish Association sent a similarly worded letter to the Agency in which it echoed those grievances expressed by Blaustein.

Opening its letter, the AJA declared:

As you know, the Anglo-Jewish Association viewed with grave concern the convening of the Zurich Conference and only agreed to take part with reluctance for the sake of Jewish solidarity, and in the hope of exercising a moderating influence. It is our firm conviction that a Conference of this nature ought not to have been convened without prior consultations. We believe, too, that it was planned to take place at a most inopportune time, and that the manner in which it was proposed to conduct it was not calculated to conduce to the welfare of the Jewish Communities in Eastern Europe.\(^9^4\)

Like the AJC, the AJA made it clear to the Jewish Agency that their organization would not be subordinated to that of the Agency and that their rights to represent Anglo Jewry would continue undiminished.

The purpose of this letter [declared the AJA] is to notify you that the A.J.A.’s acceptance of the invitation to the original Conference must not be deemed to extend as a matter of course to the Conference as and when it is reconvened. It is earnestly hoped that no steps will be taken to reconvene it in the near future, and that in any event it will not be reconvened without prior consultation with the A.J.A. as well as with other organisations.\(^9^5\)

H. A. Goodman of the Agudas World Organization conveyed in a letter to Jacob Blaustein that his organization was in full agreement with the AJC regarding the conference.

I am writing to inform you [stated Goodman] that the views therein expressed meet with our fullest agreement.

As you may be aware we were most seriously perturbed in relation to this world conference from its inception, and expressed our disquiet in regard thereto in all its stages.\(^9^6\)

The leadership of the Jewish community of Sweden joined with the AJC in its condemnation of the Jewish Agency, stating that they had only agreed to attend the conference

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\(^9^3\) Jacob Blaustein to Nahum Goldman and Berl Locker of the Jewish Agency, 20 Mar. 1953.

\(^9^4\) Letters from Anglo-Jewish Association, 9 April 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 103, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.

\(^9^5\) Letters from Anglo-Jewish Association, 9 April 1953.

\(^9^6\) H. A. Goodman, Agudas World Organization, to Jacob Blaustein, AJC, 17 April 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 103, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
out of a desire to preserve Jewish solidarity rather than any belief in the conference’s ability to effect change. In his letter to Zachariah Shuster of the AJC’s Paris Office, Gunnar Josephsen, President of Sweden’s Mosaiska Vorsamlingen, declared that:

I fully realize the indignation of Mr. Blaustein and A.J.C. over the strange manner in which the conference was called, and I am convinced that their reaction will be of value for the future.

With great skepticism we decided here to participate in the conference and we were glad that the conference could be postponed. The new circumstances will, I hope so, make a new calling unnecessary.97

As reported by The National Jewish Post, the Zurich conference was met with similar skepticism in Israel as well. The Hebrew daily, Maariv, printed that the conference was called largely by the Jewish Agency and by “Zionists who want to enjoy a trip to Europe, make a few speeches and have a good time in Switzerland.”98 Hatzofeh, the mouthpiece of Israel’s Misrachi (religious-Zionist) community, declared that, “the conference could provide an excuse for the Soviet leaders to revenge themselves on the 2,500,000 Jews within their borders.”99 Evidence suggests that some Israelis felt that the Slansky Trial targeted Jews as a whole, and as a result, the crisis would be better managed by non-Zionist entities.

Blaustein’s open condemnation of the Agency was hailed by individuals as well as organizations. In April, 1953, Rabbi Jacob Agust, leader of Beth El, a Conservative congregation in Baltimore, wrote to Blaustein declaring that, “I wish to commend your action and to assure you that many rabbis and scholars are disturbed by the persistence of the Jewish Agency and the possibility it offers of letting the State of Israel speak and act in behalf of the Jews of the world. A thorough re-examination of the entire situation is very much in order. Perhaps, we can all contribute toward this end.”100

In response to the public controversy surrounding the conference, the Jewish Agency issued a publicly circulated rebuttal to the accusations of the American Jewish Committee. On April 3, 1953, the Agency declared that:

The Jewish Agency rejects the protest of the American Jewish Committee on the grounds that it is under no obligation to consult with the American Jewish Committee before calling an international conference. At the time when the Zurich conference was convened it was absolutely essential to hold it as quickly as possible for the conference to fulfill its purpose. Had the Jewish Agency consulted the American Jewish Committee, it also would have had to consult many other Jewish organisations not alone in the United States of America but also in England, France, Latin America, Canada and other countries which are entitled to the same treatment as the American Jewish Committee. To consult all the organisations would have required weeks and it is for that reason that the Jewish Agency decided to call the conference without such consultation.

97 Gunnar Josephsen, President of Mosaiska Vorsamlingen, to Zachariah Shuster, AJC Paris Office, 13 April 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 103, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
99 “Israeli’s Seen Objecting to Zionist Sponsored Anti-Soviet Parley,” 2.
100 Rabbi Jacob Agust to Jacob Blaustein, 10, 13 April 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 103, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
The fact that the organizations invited had accepted the invitations indicates that the reasons for the calling of the conference, even without such prior consultation, were fully understood by all. It must be furthermore pointed out that while taking the initiative in convening the conference in Zurich, the Jewish Agency has clearly provided that the agenda and procedure for the conference would be determined by all organizations represented at the conference. The American Jewish Committee was so informed.\(^{101}\)

As seen by the Jewish Agency, the American Jewish Committee was equally monopolistic in its claims to Jewish representation. Its behavior in matters of global Jewish affairs was largely similar to that of the Agency’s, and as a result, its outcries following the Zurich controversy were riddled with hypocrisy and insincerity. In its response, the Jewish Agency sought to downplay the significance of American Jewry by stressing that numbers alone did not render one Jewish community more important than another.

Despite the fact that several leading Jewish organizations and communal institutions agreed in large part with the American Jewish Committee and that many of these entities admitted that they agreed to attend the conference more out of a fear of being excluded than a desire to participate, the Agency’s claims were not without foundations. While the American Jewish Committee continued to maintain that Jews could best help other Jews as citizens of their respective countries, it nevertheless intervened heavily in non-American Jewish affairs, claiming neutrality throughout. The AJC maintained that its goals were of a “universal” character and applied to all Jews irrespective of national, religious, and political affiliation. It argued that the Jewish Agency’s agenda was first and foremost Zionist and as a result, was inherently exclusive. The apparent discontinuities in the arguments set forth by the AJC were not lost on the population at large.

The AJ Committee [declared in a *National Jewish Post* editorial], while seeking to limit the powers and the scope of The Jewish Agency, and protesting against the assumption of authority by the World Jewish Congress, is itself wedded to the idea of cooperative action by the various Jewish communities of the world. It is to be doubted that in the view of the world whether there is any great deal of difference between the activities of the Jewish Agency and the World Jewish Congress, and those of the American Jewish Committee when it acts in concert with Jewish groups in other lands.\(^{102}\)

Smaller Jewish communities, however, in the wake of the Zurich controversy, rallied behind the AJC. They did so more in opposition and as an alternative to the encroachment of the new Jewish state than as champions of the Committee. The furor aroused by the Zurich meeting signaled to Jewish leaders in the Diaspora that world Jewry might benefit from the existence of an international representative body that could, at least in part, speak on behalf of the world’s Jewish population in times of crisis.

Following the conference’s postponement, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the Anglo-Jewish Association, the World Council of Progressive Jews, and the American Jewish Committee considered the creation of a consultative body

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\(^{101}\) Public Letter from the Jewish Agency, 3 April 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 103, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, 1-2.

\(^{102}\) “The fight Between the Agency and the Committee,” *The National Jewish Post* 10 April 1953: 8.
composed of their constituents that could act, to some degree, in the name of and speak for world Jewry. At a meeting of these five groups, it was stated that:

It is generally agreed that the five Jewish non-governmental organisations represent, in the widest measure, international Jewish opinion. Although these organizations were recognized by the United Nations for their specific interest in aspects of U.N. activities, they— and their constituents — are all concerned with Jewish problems generally. Normally, the situation in Eastern Europe would be their concern. In deciding how such a representative body might operate, it was proposed that:

The meeting would be informal and consultative. There would be no majority decisions, and except for agreed communiqués there would be no publicity. Information would be pooled, and efforts made to achieve co-operation. One of the proposals which this meeting could consider would be whether the proposed Zurich conference should be re-convened and in what conditions.

Though the above considerations fell far short of accurately representing the world’s Jewish population, it indicated that non-Israeli Jewish groups feared the diminution of their authority with the creation of a Jewish national state.

The question of whether an international Jewish body capable of speaking for world Jewry ought to exist permeated Jewish thought more generally following the Zurich affair. At the end of April, 1953, the Willesden (London) branch of the Association of Jewish X-Service Men and Women sponsored a public debate to discuss whether Anglo-Jewry would benefit from the existence of an international Jewish entity. At the meeting one Mr. F. Ashe Lincoln contended that, “it was in the interests of Anglo-Jewry, which had always felt the impact of any upheaval affecting Jewish communities abroad, that there should be one international Jewish organisation which could speak in the name of all Jewish communities.” Mr. Ashe Lincoln contended that such an organization was already in existence in the World Jewish Congress. Contesting Mr. Ashe Lincoln’s claims, Mr. Harold Soref argued that, “what was common in world Jewry was Judaism, not a political racialism. World Jewry was not a political force and there was no such thing— as an international Jewish view... Anglo-Jewry—owed loyalty to Britain alone.”

Even before the announcement of the Zurich conference, the issue of Soviet antisemitism had caused Jews to examine the relationship between world Jewry and the new Jewish state. In mid-January, 1953, the Anglo-Israeli Club held a debate at which participants discussed whether the interests of world Jewry and Israel were identical. At the meeting, Major Lionel Rose declared, “that one needed only to compare the contents of a cross-section of the Israeli press, which reflected the interests of the Israeli public, with that of the British press, which certainly reflected, among other things, the interests of the Anglo-Jewish public as citizens of this country, to see that the interests of the two communities were widely different.” Major Rose argued further that, “the efforts of Zionists to persuade Anglo-Jewish

103 Notes by H. A. Goodman on Representing Five Jewish NGO’s, 16 Mar. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 100, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
104 Notes by H. A. Goodman.
106 “Interests of World Jewry,” 15.
youth to settle in Israel were not in the best interests of Anglo-Jewry, as Anglo-Jewry was itself in need of its Youth.”108 Rose maintained that he spoke as a Zionist, but nevertheless believed that the interests of Anglo-Jewry and Israel were not one and the same. Seconding Major Rose’s arguments, Major Scigal declared that, “the interests of the Jewish community as citizens of one State were the same as those of the other citizens of that State, which, of course, might not be compatible with the interests of Israel.”109 Scigal contended that the situation in Russia was proof that the interests of world Jewry were not only divergent from those of Israel, but in some cases, contradictory.

Opposing Rose and Scigal, Mr. A. I. Richtiger declared that, “the Jews were one people wherever they lived, and the sources from which they drew their spiritual life were the same for every Jew. As one nation, their interests were identical.”110 Supporting Mr. Richtiger, one Henry Warson asserted that, “the existence of Israel was preserving the identity of Jewry. It was highly beneficial to Jewry that there was a Jewish State which could raise its own voice whenever Jews of other countries were victims of persecution.”111 The debate was ultimately inconclusive, and no motion was put to a vote.

The above statements demonstrate that diasporic Jewry, in the early 1950s, disagreed widely as to the role that the State of Israel would play in their lives. In countries such as the U.S. and Britain where Jews enjoyed relative stability and had generally prospered in the modern era, living in the Diaspora did not mean exile. Such Jews had come to see themselves as full citizens of the states in which they dwelled and rejected the notion that they owed any type of allegiance to the new Jewish state. They could support the new Jewish state and even consider themselves to be Zionists, but Israel was not their homeland and as such, had no right to intervene on their behalf. To a degree, these sentiments reflected long held convictions that emigration to Palestine was good for those Jews in the East whose governments were incapable of permitting Jews to assimilate into society at large, but did not extend to Jews in more tolerant societies. Of course, as the above shows, some Jews in the west encouraged Aliyah to the new Jewish state and turned to Israel for guidance in all matters Jewish. That such disagreements were prominent enough to hold a public debate reveals that the relationship between diasporic Jewry and the State of Israel was in the forefront of Jewish thought around the time of the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot.

Even though few Jews entertained the validity of the accusations levied at the Slansky Trial and the Doctors’ Plot, the claims of Soviet and Czech authorities that Jews were, by nature, internationalists and that their national loyalties were always to be in doubt, struck a nerve throughout a diverse array of Jewish communities. The guilt of Slansky and his co-defendants troubled but a handful of Jews. The accusation, however, that all Jews were potentially subordinate to the will of the new Jewish state, forced diasporic Jewry to closely examine its relationship to the Jewish national home. The existence of Israel greatly complicated the position of the world’s Jewish population, the majority of which continued to live in the Diaspora. In a world deeply divided by Cold War suspicions, Jews, more than other groups, had

to establish with whom their loyalties lay. The wave of Soviet antisemitism of 1952 and 1953 forced them to navigate the muddled terrain of modern Jewish identity. What, if anything, did Jews share across national borders? What did it mean to maintain one’s identity as a British, American, or French Jew and simultaneously support the new Jewish state? Which institutions and organizations had the right or ability to represent Jewish interests, and were the world’s Jews in need of an international body that could act in times of crisis?

The Slansky Trial, Doctors’ Plot, and the Zurich conference brought into sharp focus that significant tensions existed throughout the world’s Jewish population and that matters of Jewish identity were highly contentious in the early 1950s. Following the Zurich controversy, William Zuckerman, well-known anti-Zionist and leading commentator on matters of Jewish thought and practice, remarked that:

There is a tendency on the part of the Zionist press to minimize the incident and to treat it as a trivial disagreement over procedure and etiquette, rather than of principle. Actually, the event is much more important than a mere break in procedure. There is a vital principle involved in the issue, nor is it an isolated incident. It is a link in the chain which began with the emergence of the State of Israel and it marks a turning-point in the development of the relations between Zionists and non-Zionists in America... It indicates a growing strain between non-Zionists and Zionists, and heralds an inevitable change that must come in the partnership which lasted more than twenty years.  

Zuckerman was not alone in his belief that the Zurich incident constituted a significant episode in the development of modern Jewish thought and identity. Responding to the conflict between the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Agency, an editorial in The National Jewish Post, declared that:

Too many problems in the Jewish community have been decided by default. That can be blamed on the immaturity of the Jewish community, and the unwillingness of the immature person to face a difficult problem... But the events of the past two decades have thrust maturity upon us, and we are continually being called on to assert ourselves and to adopt definite views—not alone on the question of who represents us, and with what delegated powers, but many other deeply significant matters. It is late, but not too late for these matters to be thrown open to the community at large for discussion. Sometimes years are required before decisions on issues of this import are decided, because what is involved is not merely registering of votes, but deeply held philosophies of Jewish life in the Diaspora. That there is no other alternative, but to begin now to discuss the issue, for delaying or avoiding it, only permits the strongest body to force the decision.

Conclusions

The Slansky Affair and the general wave of Soviet antisemitism of the early 1950s reminded Jews that far from solving issues of Jewish identity, the new State of Israel had injected new complexities into what it meant to consider oneself Jewish. After the Holocaust,
most Jews were intent upon preventing further Jewish tragedies and protecting the lives and well-being of all Jews where ever they might dwell. Toward this end, traditionally Jewish groups demonstrated unity. Bundists fought alongside Zionists; liberal Jewish groups found common ground with more conservative authorities; Religious organizations acted in congress with more secular institutions. A general sentiment that only a great show of Jewish unity could potentially hinder the Soviet Union’s anti-Jewish agenda prevailed.

The call for unity, however, belied the reality that Jewish organizations were, to a degree, in competition with one another in the struggle to save Soviet Jewry. A host of Jewish authorities, in spite of their seemingly sincere aims of assisting Jews in the East, vied with one another to represent Jewish interests on the global stage. The desire for unity, however genuine, encountered a range of divisions throughout the world’s Jewish population. Ideology, religion, class, and national allegiances, to name just a few, divided Jews as they chose how to respond to the events of 1952 and 1953.

The public controversy aroused by the Jewish Agency’s unilateral decision to call an international Jewish conference indicated that in the early 1950s great tensions existed between diasporic Jewry and the new State of Israel. The role the new Jewish state would play in Jewish matters of global import was as yet unclear. Traditional representative organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee, the Anglo-Jewish Association, and the Alliance Israélite, while supporting the development of Israel, saw it their duty to maintain their respective jurisdictions in local Jewish affairs and draw distinct lines between themselves and the new Jewish state.

Despite their efforts to clearly define the role of Israel and traditional Jewish authorities, Jews continued to grapple with the concept of “world Jewry,” and what it meant to belong to such a global entity. What bound Jews together seemed to be as numerous as what sundered them apart. Whether acting in unison with or in opposition to the aims and will of other Jewish groups, Jews performed the complex array of questions surrounding matters of Jewish identity abundant in the early 1950s. While the Slansky Affair changed some of the circumstances through which Jews examined their identities, it did not alter the reality that the Holocaust and the State of Israel had vastly transformed the face of world Jewry. In November, 1952, as the Slansky Affair began to unfold, the new complexities of Jewish identity had hardly come to the surface. The trial only rendered acute what had been dormant since the end of the Second World War.
Chapter Three: Communism on Trial

The topic I have to deal with is a sad one. It is sad because it is connected with the death of a cherished illusion. For many years, many Jews believed that there was one country which did not discriminate against the Jews; where Jews were equal citizens; where there was no antisemitism. This country was supposed to be the Soviet Union. Whatever the merits or demerits of its economic system, however deplorable the lack of freedom there, however aggressive may be its foreign policy, at least — so many believed — at least it does not discriminate against men for their language, origin, or race.

Wishful thinking is a great force; illusions die hard, and illusions about the Soviet Union are especially obstinate. And of all the illusions about communism, this one was dying hardest.¹

Following the outbreak of overt Soviet antisemitism as seen in the Slansky Trial in late November 1952, Jews, throughout the world, were confronted with a complex array of challenges, opportunities, and difficult choices. For those who saw the events of 1952 and 1953 as an ominous prelude to genocide, the priority was, above all else, to save the lives of Soviet and East European Jewry. Action and ideology, in spite of the sense of urgency experienced among a host of Jewish entities, went hand in hand. The various ways in which Jews attempted to intervene on behalf of their co-religionists behind the Iron Curtain were undeniably informed by historical precedent, ideological convictions, national distinctions, group and organizational structures, and not least among these, political philosophies and affiliations. The relationship that Jews held with the Left, both in the U.S.S.R. and abroad, was historically complex, and predated the Bolshevik Revolution. As a result, the political ramifications of the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot for Jews, though in some ways unique, was part of a complicated and tortuous set of historical realities.

The sense of crisis engendered by the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot was as much a moment of personal and internal turmoil as it was an external tragedy in the making. As the most blatant act of state-sponsored antisemitism to emerge since the Holocaust, the trial inevitably brought into sharp focus fundamental issues surrounding post-war Jewish identity. Overt Soviet antisemitism provoked intense political debates among Jews from both the Left and the Right. Jews engaged with the rise of Soviet antisemitism through a diverse array of media. Public protests, print publications, radio and TV broadcasts, diplomatic intervention, organizational efforts, and religious activity all figured prominently as Jews sought to understand, interpret, and ultimately attempt to stem the tide of Soviet anti-Jewish action. Whether attending a protest rally or simply offering up prayers for the safety of Iron Curtain Jewry, few Jews could escape the realities of politics and ideology as news of Soviet antisemitism grew increasingly frequent and ever more pronounced. The fear, outrage, and general outpouring of emotion from Jewish quarters across the globe was necessarily a political

¹ Lecture Delivered by Peter Meyer at the Jewish Center in Jackson Heights, Jan. 1954, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 98, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, 1.
moment. For some it was a turning point, for others, a confirmation of long-held beliefs, and for
others still, it was a time of great political upheaval, ambiguity, and confusion.

Traditional opponents of communism, not surprisingly, found in the trial yet another
example of communism’s corruption as a political ideology. Communists, predictably, saw in
the trial a triumph of Soviet justice and dismissed the cries of antisemitism as the dishonest
claims of war-mongering capitalists. Between these two extremes, however, lay a spectrum of
political beliefs and opinions whose examination reveals much about the character of Jewish
politics in the 1950s.

Recruitment and Vigilance

Whether liberal or conservative, Zionist or Bundist, socialist or communist, the Slansky
Affair prompted Jewish leaders to openly call for greater ideological vigilance among their
respective constituents. While Jews themselves bore no responsibility for the outbreak of
Soviet antisemitism, a number of Jewish leaders expressed that Jews, following the Soviet
Union’s support for the partition of Israel in 1948, had too rapidly forgotten previous Soviet
actions against Zionism and had ultimately allowed a false sense of security to relax their
judgment.

The shock was all the greater [wrote Dr. S. Margoshes, of the Yiddish daily Der Tog] because a great many people had forgotten, or half forgotten, that communism from its
infancy has been consistently hostile to Zionism. This is not the first time that Zionism
has been called "bourgeois," "fascist" or other names. It should not cost a great effort of
memory to recall the tens of thousands of Jews who have been banished to Siberia
during the past thirty years on charges of Zionist activity. It was an illusion to suppose
that communists had given up their opposition to Zionism simply because the Soviet
Union, together with more than two-thirds of the other members of the United Nations,
voted for the partition of Palestine in 1947. That vote was cast against Britain, and not
for Zionism. 2

Writing in The Canadian Jewish Chronicle, another commentator remarked that,
It is an error, we think, to state that the Prague trials proffered an ideological
innovation. The Soviet regime, with one solitary instance of exception, has stood
consistently opposed to the Zionist idea. That instance took place when the Soviet
representative before the United Nations, intending to bedevil British aspirations, spoke
out in favour of the partition plan. His address constituted a strategic aberration from,
not a routine illustration of Soviet Zionphobia. Apart from those kind words, there have
issued from the Kremlin nothing but anti-Zionist invective and vituperation. 3

That the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism and anti-Zionism seemed to come as a surprise
to so many Jewish communities signaled to leaders that Jews had grown lax in their ideological
convictions and had permitted corrupting influences to enter their ranks. To some Zionists and
socialists, in particular, the turmoil resulting from the Slansky Affair embodied a type of

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ideological wake-up call. It represented a moment of weakness, but one that could be easily remedied through a recommitment to basic political values and practical action.

Writing in The Jewish Vanguard, a British Zionist publication, author A. Solomons urged his readers to recognize in the Slansky Affair the historical precedents which gave rise to the Zionist movement. “The collapse of Democracy and the emergency of the horror of racialism and Hitlerism [wrote Solomons] has revealed the precariousness of the emancipation granted by the bourgeoisie. [. . .] Now the "Prague Trials" have likewise demonstrated the flimsiness of the equality granted by the dictatorships. [. . .] The taunts of the communist prosecutor, accusing the victims of their Jewish origin which they themselves always ignored, should open the eyes of Jewish communist assimilators, just as the Dreyfus trial revealed to Herzl the fallacy of assimilation as a solution to the Jewish problem.”

Solomons went on to further lament that despite the existence of a Jewish state, Zionist ideological education, as revealed by the Slansky Affair, was in a regrettable state of dilapidation and as a result, was in dire need of collective resuscitation.

At no time in history [declared Solomons] has the truth of the Zionist diagnosis and ideology been so obvious as at the present.

Nevertheless, in spite of this, we are faced with Zionist deterioration, disintegration and assimilation.

Solomons continued:

One of the causes of this sad state of affairs is lack of Zionist education. The need for practical aid for Israel is so acute that ideological and cultural work has been utterly neglected, and some even look upon it with contempt as mere verbiage.

This has led to the present deplorable state of Zionism and may eventually also lead to a decrease in practical work for Israel. There is no iron wall separating practical and ideological work. Both are urgent and interdependent and neither must be neglected.

For individuals such as Solomons, the crisis prompted by overt Soviet antisemitism was inherently an ideological moment. Lives were indeed at stake, and practical and immediate action were to be the order of the day, but action, bereft of ideology, according to Solomons, offered only short-term and temporary solutions to long-standing issues facing the Jewish people.

All was not lost, however, and Solomons proposed a vigorous campaign of Zionist education that would not only provide solutions to the crisis of Soviet antisemitism, but would strengthen Jewry against future acts of persecution. Solomons thus concluded:

Whilst the menace to the survival of the Jews in the Diaspora is serious, we must not exaggerate it. We must avoid both despair and complacency.

Let the situation spur us to action and if we take energetic measures it will prove true once again that the "eternity of Israel will not be falsified."

To guard against this bleak prospect we must unite in the national task of aiding Israel. We must build all possible bridges between our national spiritual centre and the Diaspora.

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5 Solomons, 5.
6 Solomons, 5.
We must encourage Aliyah and learn Hebrew. We should not confine our activities only to practical work but must also be energetic in popularising Zionist ideology, Zionist classics and all Jewish cultural values.\(^7\)

Where Mr. Solomons drew from the Slansky Affair evidence of Zionism’s ideological underdevelopment, others found proof of its utmost fulfillment and ongoing necessity. Writing in her column, Israel correspondent, Joan Comay, detailed the following anecdotes of how Israelis received news of the Slansky Trial.

At eight o'clock this morning Anya the (maid), arrived as usual and found me staring miserably at this headline in *The Jerusalem Post*: "Russia Opens Attack on Jewry with Doctors' Confessions of Murder." Anya had heard the story earlier on the radio and was upset and tearful at the thought of her mother and sister still in Russia. She herself, had come here the hard way nearly five years ago—getting into Rumania on foot in midwinter with her three-year old daughter at her side, her worldly possessions in a rucksack on her back, and her husband lying dead in the snow behind her, shot by border guards: then on by Jewish underground on an "illegal" boat through the Black Sea and the Dardanelles, only to be captured again by the British Navy and put behind barbed wire again on the Island of Cyprus; finally reaching her destination after her release in February, 1949. Sturdy, wholesome-looking Anya has married again, and what with babies and old and ailing parents-in-law at home, and the four-hour job for me, and the food shortages and clothing shortages, and standing in line and the high cost of everything, her life is not easy.

Yet Anya took my breath away this morning with her passionate declaration that she was proud to live in Israel, and would not change it for a comfortable life with her brother-in-law in Chile or her other cousin in New York, both of whom wanted the family to come over. "If my relatives ever get out of Russia, they needn't knock at strangers' doors, this is their home." That's the kind of basic Zionism which everyone here feels this morning. My grocer said we should have ships ready to bring those who could still be fetched out from behind the Iron Curtain. The elderly German Jew who brings my milk said it was the same chapter starting again, but with one big difference, and the difference was Israel.\(^8\)

Echoes of Ms. Comay's remarks could be found in other Zionist publications. Writing in *Pioneer Women*, one contributor declared, "Israel, weighed down by innumerable internal problems, reacted to the shattering news of impending peril to the two and a half million Jews behind the Iron Curtain with acute immediacy, demonstrating that the young, struggling state is aware of its national responsibility as the heart and voice of the Jewish people."\(^9\)

While turning the pages of *Pioneer Women*’s March 1953 issue, one encountered the following letter from Israel in which Ms. Judy Shepard exclaimed:

The past weeks were hard on Israel as blow after hammer blow came from behind the Iron Curtain and every vestige of forlorn hope that the Soviet campaign might stop short of totality was stripped away until the Soviet world stood exposed as the implacable

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\(^7\) Solomons, 5.


enemy of Israel. Israeli reaction was not fright but anger, a spirit of fight and virtually complete unity. The thought that this was an important step on the road to inevitable war flashed through the mind of many an Israeli, but no one panicked. It is but a thousand miles from the Russian Caucasus to Haifa; yet no one awoke in the night, screaming, from a nightmare about an atomic bomb attack. The ability to absorb with calmness the kind of terrifying knowledge which has turned citizens of other, greater nations into neurotics is perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of the Israeli character.  

Being the stated culprits behind the charges pronounced at Prague and Moscow, Zionists were not only beset with the task of proving their innocence, but had a great deal at stake ideologically. With the creation of a Jewish national state, Jews would no longer be forced to depend upon the good will and whims of non-Jewish entities for their defense and protection. Jews themselves would be responsible for their own well-being, in matters physical, spiritual, and ideological. The new Jewish state offered Jews a permanent physical space to which they might turn in times of crisis, as well as an official voice to represent them when necessary. The threat to significant numbers of Jews posed by the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot, put to the test Zionism’s most fundamental claims that only with the existence of a strong Jewish state could Jews live without the constant fear of persecution, exile, and extermination. Whether finding in Israel’s response to the Slansky Affair disappointment or vindication, Zionists and non-Zionists alike were highly conscious of the reality that Israel’s activities surrounding Soviet antisemitism would be highly scrutinized by Jews and non-Jews. As such, it was a moment which called for greater ideological uniformity. Zionists, burdened as they were with the tasks of defending their ideology from within and without, were forced to grapple with the current state of their ideological formulations and group adherence.

Despite the fact that socialists, liberals, and conservatives were not directly embroiled in the accusations uttered at the Prague trial, they, nevertheless, viewed the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism as both an opportunity to advance their respective ideologies as well as a moment to evaluate the ideological purity of their constituent parties and organizations. Speaking at the Jewish Labor Committee’s 1953 national convention, Adolf Held, JLC Chairman, declared that:

In the last decade the labor movement has done a magnificent job in liberating hundreds of thousands of American workers from the deadly grip of communist control...

Today, when the communists sustained such heavy losses in our labor movement they prepare for new psychological offensives to regain the old strength. We can expect a veritable rash of peace fronts, of new infiltrations, of new traps with velvet trimmings. We warn the labor and liberal movements of our country and of the world: this is not the time to let down your guard. On the contrary, this is the time for alertness and offensive. Today, not tomorrow; laxity may prove fatal.  

In an editorial published in The Jewish Frontier, socialist monthly, the author declared:

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It would be well for all Jewish organizations in the free world to be on their guard against a wave of communist frameups. This is not an idle warning motivated by distaste for the Stalinist fraternity. The threat of frameups — made in an effort to silence Jewish protests against the antisemitic trials in Prague and Moscow — comes from the communists themselves. We are merely publicizing their threat and calling attention to the fact that they are morally capable of carrying it out. [. . .] Jewish organizations are now forewarned.12

Despite the fact that Jewish membership in the Communist Party had dropped significantly from earlier decades at the time of the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot, the impression that Jews were intimately connected with communism and were more vulnerable than other populations to communism’s ideological claims persisted both throughout society at large and within Jewish communities themselves. To be sure, the wave of recruitment efforts among Jewish organizations following the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism was driven as much by opportunism as by a genuine desire to lure Jews away from communism once and for all. Amid the clatter of propaganda and slogans, however, lay a real sense of fear that despite the Soviet Union’s brazen use of antisemitism as a political weapon, Jews might still cling to communist ideals and persist in their loyalties to the Soviet world. American Jewish organizations, in particular, such as the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Labor Committee, were acutely aware of the associations of Jews with communism held by non-Jews in the early 1950s. Even though this belief was itself a type of antisemitism and was largely untrue, their organizational records indicate that the disassociation of Jews from communism in the public imagination was among their top priorities. They were themselves organizations with deeply rooted anti-communist convictions and as such, attempted to use their own anti-communism to improve the image of Jews in an American society riddled with fears of communist infiltration.

Jewish leaders and organizations, on the Right and on the Left, recognized that a great deal of ideological confusion circulated following the shock of Prague and Moscow. In a letter sent out to its constituents in January, 1953, Alfred Kohlberg of the American Jewish League Against Communism penned the following:

The League needs more members and more funds. It is my hope that each member will constitute himself a Committee of one to spread our message and gain recruits. All American Jews who are not communists are welcome, no matter how confused in the past. [. . .] Like ex-communists, ex-Fellow Travelers, witting or unwitting, are welcome after atonement.13

That the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism would cause many Jews to reevaluate their political convictions and affiliations was widely accepted, but to which ideologies they would turn was unknown. The influx of new members that both the Left and Right hoped to enjoy following the Slansky Affair was welcomed and sought out, but with the enlargement of their ranks, ideological vigilance had to be paramount. Time was of the essence, and organizations

13 Letter from American Jewish League Against Communism to its Members, 26 Jan. 1953, Jewish Labor Committee, Box 55, Folder 4, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
from the Jewish Labor Committee to the American Jewish League against Communism sought to ensure that disillusioned communists could find refuge in their respective ideologies.

**Retreats from Communism**

To what extent the outbreak of overt Soviet antisemitism as manifested in the Slansky Affair caused Jews to reexamine, change, or abandon their political affiliations is difficult to say. The evidence available is anecdotal and obfuscated by political, personal, and ideological biases. Equally difficult is discerning to which ideologies Jews may have turned in the wake of their fall out with the Communist Party. Notwithstanding, sources across a variety of periodicals and organizations indicate that the antisemitism of the Slansky Affair and the Doctors’ Plot caused some Jews to rethink their relationship to communism and to the Soviet Union. Rethinking, however, did not mean outright abandonment of the Communist Party. Indeed, it was not until 1956, in the wake of Makita Khrushchev’s Secret Speech to the 20th Party Congress, in which he revealed many of the crimes committed under Stalin’s rule that loyal communists in the West began to question their faith. As Tony Judt has written of French intellectuals, both Jewish and non-Jewish, regarding their relationship to the Communist Party, “In this sense, 1956 was a delayed response; it represented a sort of time-lapse in sensibilities, a decent interval between the death of faith and departure from the church.”

The Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot may have proven to be quite troubling for communists in the West, but as Judt notes communists had grown accustomed to explaining and thereby excusing crimes committed in the name of communism. Disturbed though they might have been by the news emanating from Prague and Moscow, the believing communist who remained loyal through the early 1950s could probably find ample precedents to justify what seemed to the rest of the world to be a blatant demonstration of antisemitism. Notwithstanding the reality that the Slansky Affair did not cause the majority of Jewish and non-Jewish communists to break with the Party, Jewish organizations and periodicals reported widely on the shock and disillusionment which beset Jewish communities throughout the non-communist world in the weeks and months following the events in Prague and Moscow. To some degree, these reports might have been directed toward and reflective of Jews with Soviet sympathies rather than members of the Communist Party, and to a large extent, may have also reflected wishful thinking on the part of Jewish entities which hoped to dissociate Jews from communism in the public imagination. In a report examining how American Jewish communists reacted to the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism, historian Lucy S. Dawidowicz, declared that: There is no question that the communist ranks went through a great upheaval from December 1952 until now. We cannot know, of course, with any degree of exactness how many people left the party and how many fellow-travelers became disenchanted. For another thing, we must realize that it usually takes a long time for a party-member to make the final break. One thing, at least, is certain: the Prague trial and especially the

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indictment of the Moscow doctors raised a lot of doubts among communists, particularly the Jews among them.\textsuperscript{15}

In a report outlining Western Press reactions to the Slansky Affair, the American Jewish Committee asserted that, “one thing is already certain. No single event has cost the communists more in prestige and support, so isolated then from the rest of the Jewish communities in Western-Europe, or so unified the opposition to them, as the Prague trial.”\textsuperscript{16}

Throughout Western Europe where the Communist Party played a more significant role in political life and where Jewish communists participated more fully in official Jewish communal structures, the advent of overt Soviet antisemitism seemed to cause important shifts in the political lives of individual Jews. Reports circulated widely throughout the Jewish press that, in the wake of the Slansky Affair, Jewish communists in Britain, France, Germany, and Austria resigned from the Communist Party in protest of the blatant antisemitism demonstrated in Prague. \textit{The Jewish Chronicle} of London reported numerous accounts of desertions from the Communist Party by Jews following the events in Prague and Moscow.

In one editorial, author Alan Rose declared the following:

The truth of the matter is that the Communist Parties in Western Europe and, indeed, throughout the whole world [west] of the Iron Curtain, are experiencing the greatest difficulty in keeping their Jewish members within the ranks of the party. The Communist Party of Great Britain is no exception—a number of important Jewish communists, mainly intellectuals, have already resigned: these have been followed by desertions by the rank and file of the party, who in the main retained their membership because of the party's proud boast of being in the "vanguard against antisemitism.\textsuperscript{17}

Readership of \textit{The Daily Worker}, the main organ of the British Communist Party, was said to have declined significantly following the Slansky Trial as Jews turned away from what they perceived to be the antisemitic propaganda therein. Jewish publications gave the impression that the Communist Parties of the world were desperately seeking to retain their Jewish members as much to prove that the accusations levied in Prague were indeed in no way antisemitic as to maintain the financial support proffered by its Jewish rank and file. "The leaders of the British Communist Party [declared the American Jewish Committee] are desperately trying to prevent loss of members and financial support which threaten to be a consequence of the Slansky Trial and executions in Prague."\textsuperscript{18} The AJC's report on the situation in Europe went on to assert that \textit{The Daily Worker}'s publications following the news from Prague sprang more from that periodical's desire to prevent any further reductions in readership than from a real desire to present what had taken place in Prague as a paragon of incorruptible Soviet justice.

The anxiety behind its publication [declared the AJC's report] is understandable when it is recalled that large numbers of the most faithful communists and fellow-travelers were

\textsuperscript{15}Lucy S. Dawidowicz, “How the American Communists Reacted to Soviet Antisemitism,” 20 April 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 101, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.

\textsuperscript{16}Western Press Reaction to the Slansky Trial, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, Foreign Affairs Department Part 1, Box 10, Yivo Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.

\textsuperscript{17}Alan Rose, “Bogy of Dual Loyalties,” \textit{The Jewish Chronicle} 30 Jan. 1953: 16.

\textsuperscript{18}Western Press Reaction, American Jewish Committee.
first attracted to the party as the declared opponents of all anti-Semites in the pre-war years, and that both the party and The Daily Worker have for long benefited very considerably from the generous donations of Jews, many of whom, without being communist, saw their subsidies as insurances against antisemitic Fascism.\(^1^9\)

In his lengthy discussion of the impact of Soviet antisemitism on the Jews of Britain and British society more generally, political thinker George Lichtheim noted that membership in the Communist Party of Britain had dropped by 75 percent between 1952 and 1953, attributing these desertions to sharp declines in Jewish membership in the wake of events behind the Iron Curtain. Lichtheim declared that drops in membership were most prominent in regions with large Jewish populations such as London and Manchester. “All this is not to say [declared Lichtheim] that the organization is collapsing, but it has sustained a blow, and the Stalino-liberal penumbra surrounding it has shrunk perceptibly.”\(^2^0\)

The repercussions of the Slansky Affair hit the Jews of France with particular intensity. Not only did communism enjoy a considerable amount of support and influence among French Jews, but Jewish communists in France participated in official Jewish bodies, organizations, and communal life. As previously noted, tensions in France between Jewish communists and non-communist Jewish entities quickly deteriorated from heated verbal exchanges to outright street brawling following the outbreak of the Prague trial. In February 1953, the Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France (CRIF), the umbrella organization of French Jewry, tabled a resolution that would exclude the communists from organized Jewish life. The motion was supported by the majority of French Jewish organizations including the Consistoire Central, the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the Fédération des Sociétés Juives de France, and the Bund. The Union of Liberal Judaism set forth another resolution calling for the dissolution of CRIF and its reconstitution without the communists.

The claims of Jewish organizations and periodicals that Jewish communists were abandoning the Party in large numbers is difficult to corroborate. It is likely that some Jewish communists and Jews with Soviet sympathies questioned their loyalties in the wake of Prague and Moscow and may have consequently left the Party, but it is difficult to quantify these defections and even more challenging to innumerate the disaffection experienced by fellow-travelers. References to defections from the Party were reported in non-communist and often anti-communist periodicals. Similarly, communist publications did not make a point of reporting Party defections in its published pages. As such, the wealth of reports offered by non-communist publications coupled with their notable absence in communist periodicals suggests some wishful thinking and exaggeration by the former and willful omission by the latter.

When Jewish sources reported on “large-scale” defections from the Communist Party by Jews, they frequently argued that many Jews had joined the Party or sympathized with its aims not because they believed in the veracity of Marxist ideology, but because they felt that communism offered the only viable solution to antisemitism. With the Soviet Union’s employment of antisemitic tropes as seen in the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot, argued such reports, the tenuous thread binding Jews to communism would at last be severed. Indeed, a number of individuals and organizations welcomed

\(^{19}\) Western press Reaction, American Jewish Committee.

this outcome, and while distressed by the genocidal possibilities of Soviet antisemitism, nevertheless drew a breath of relief as the Soviet Union finally showed, as they saw it, its “true colors.”

Amid the anxiety, shock, and disillusionment felt throughout Jewish communities was the notion that from Soviet antisemitism some good might ultimately arise.

Much emotion has [declared one editorial] understandably been displayed over the notorious Prague trial and the invidious accusations made against the nine Moscow doctors, six of them Jews. Indignation among us is natural and justifiable when we realise the implications and the threats inherent in the all-embracing communist charges against “Jewish bourgeois nationalists,” against Zionists and Israel. The immediate expression of the strong indignation felt at these ominous events by Jews and their sympathizers has produced what might be termed a negative good. \(^{21}\)

Jews, across a spectrum of political beliefs, expressed the notion that in addition to drawing Jews away from Soviet sympathies and the Communist Party, the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism would likewise help to disprove the sentiment that Jews were inherently disloyal and more susceptible to the trappings of Bolshevism thought than other groups. The strong association between Jews and communism held in many European societies and in the U.S seemed to undermine the goals of several Jewish organizations, the American Jewish Committee most notable among them, of more fully assimilating Jews into society at large. The myth that Jews and communism shared a special bond was itself a type of antisemitism, but Jewish organizations sought to tackle its antisemitic implications by completely discrediting its veracity rather than accusing those who propagated the myth of an antisemitic agenda.

Commenting on the situation in Britain, Lichtheim declared, in no uncertain terms, that:

> It was the habitual association of the terms "Jew and 'communist" which fed whatever genuine sub-surface antisemitism there was, and this association has been killed stone-dead. And thereby the Soviet government has done an immense service to Jews in this country, and probably in other countries too. For the association was there, and not merely because Jews were conspicuous among fellow-travelers and because in some districts the Communist Party was largely a Jewish organization. [. . .] What troubled people was the thought that some members of the community might be constitutionally liable to catch the infection, and this suspicion has been killed so far as the Jews are concerned. Jewish sympathy for Russia was something very different; it was dangerous and smacked of disloyalty. The collapse of this emotional relationship outside the narrow circle of the party faithful who are anyhow regarded as incurable has cleared the atmosphere. \(^{22}\)

Lichtheim, along with a host of Jewish organizations and leaders, viewed the Soviet use of antisemitism as a welcome blunder by that regime. Following World War II and the Holocaust, antisemitism, as wielded by a state authority, was closely associated with Hitler and Nazism. As such, it was viewed as anti-democratic and incompatible with the values of the “Free World.” Discussing the situation in Britain further, Lichtheim noted that:

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\(^{22}\) Lichtheim.
An issue on which the intelligentsia has made up its mind is pretty well a closed issue so far as this country is concerned. Antisemitism is such an issue. Since the Hitler experience, and despite the Palestine conflict, there has been a kind of tacit recognition that antisemitism (genuine antisemitism, that is, as distinct from private dislike of Jews) is a disease. It is not that more people are fond of their Jewish neighbors... He has merely come to the conclusion that systematic Jew-hatred is a dangerous kind of lunacy in which he does not intend to participate; that is all, and it is quite sufficient to sink the Soviet government in the public estimation, and particularly in the estimation of the educated minority which reads papers like The Times, The Manchester Guardian, The Times Literary supplement, The Observer, and the political weeklies.23

American commentators expressed similar notions that, in the wake of the Second World War, antisemitism as state policy, was viewed with distaste and marked as distinctly un-American. Soviet antisemitism, it was felt, served to bring about three positive realities where Jews and anti-communists were concerned. 1) Finding in The Soviet’s use of antisemitic tropes echoes of Nazism, the opinion making inteligencia would be forced to abandon any sympathies they may have entertained for the Soviet Union. Accordingly, those who continued to defend the Soviet regime, after the events in Prague and in Moscow, were viewed with renewed virulence. 2) The Slansky Affair would open the eyes of many Jews, especially those with more tenuous sympathies, to the evils of Soviet rule. As Jews composed significant portions of the Communist Parties in the west, this would undoubtedly strike a marked blow at the strength of such parties. And 3) in using antisemitism as an instrument of state, the Soviets would, once and for all, destroy the myth that all Jews were Bolsheviks at heart and ready to betray their nations at any given moment.

Thus [wrote Lichtheim] the Kremlin's calculated essay in "controlled" antisemitism may be said to have served as a catalyst in bringing together and consolidating a mass of floating emotions and opinions about the Soviet Union, and about the Jews. In both respects, a great deal of nonsense has been blown away by the cold blast of reality. The breach has been made and fresh air is coming into the intellectual sickroom so long inhabited by a minority of Jews in this country. The Soviet myth has collapsed for some of its most persistent and sentimental devotees, including many who were never communists. The proof is to be encountered daily in the columns of the Jewish and non-Jewish press, at public meetings and student reunions, and in private gatherings... The long nightmare is ending.24

Just as individuals such as Lichtheim and organizations such as the American Jewish Committee hoped that Soviet antisemitism would serve to weaken if not totally destroy the notion that Jews and communism were inextricable entities, some Jews used the antisemitism of the Prague trial to declare that Judaism and Jewishness were inherently incompatible with the values of communism. Such individuals argued that to be a communist, one must inevitably relinquish any claims to Jewish self-identification and vice versa. Where communist authorities went to great lengths to highlight the Jewish origins of the Slansky defendants, Jews, throughout Jewish sources, sought to distance the victims of the Prague purges from any and

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23 Lichtheim.
24 Lichtheim.
all ties they may have had to Jewish communities both within and beyond the Iron Curtain. Sympathy for Slansky and his co-defendants was in short supply. Condemnation of the Prague proceedings by Jewish voices throughout the world did not spring from feelings that the 14 accused had been unjustly tried and found guilty of crimes that they had not committed, but rather from the implications that the trial held for the nearly 3 million Jews perceived to be trapped in the Soviet lands. That few Jews believed in the veracity of the charges levied in Prague did not mean that Slansky and his co-defendants were assumed innocent. Sentiments abounded that the defendants had not simply shed their Jewish identities in their efforts to build socialism, but had actively worked against the reconstruction of Jewish communal life in post-WWII East Europe. As a result, few mourned the fate of Slansky and his 13 co-conspirators. Indeed, many expressed that the Prague victims had gotten their just rewards. The Slansky defendants were depicted as traitors to the Jewish people and as such, had met a fitting end. If the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism was to help sever the association of Jews with communism in the public imagination, then little could be gained from defending loyal communists, such as Slansky.

Discussions of how to treat the Slansky defendants themselves permeated the minutes of meetings of Jewish organizations, and throughout the Jewish press a type of virulence toward Slansky and his alleged co-conspirators was pronounced. Writing in The Jewish Chronicle, one author declared that:

There is one important aspect from the Jewish point of view appertaining to the Prague Trial which has not received sufficient emphasis, namely, that these communist leaders [...] not only have never helped any Jewish or Zionist cause as communists (except, of course, when the Party line demanded it), but precisely the opposite. They, in common with other Jewish communist leaders since the Russian Revolution, have been the main instigators against every Jewish aspiration, to prove to their non-Jewish comrades what super-communists they are. I have no doubt the reward they have received for their efforts has been richly deserved.25

In a letter to the editor published in The National Jewish Post, Rabbi Steven Schwarzschild of Fargo, North Dakota, similarly exclaimed:

May I express a word of caution regarding some of the Jewish figures right now involved in the antisemitic purges behind the Iron Curtain? I am sure that few people will have been misled into believing that the Jews who are put on trial by the Russian and satellite governments are laudable and representative Jews simply because they are being used as scapegoats for the entire Jewish people. It is realized that, for example, Slansky and his colleagues were dissenters from their inherited faith and opponents of their historic people, servants throughout their lives of a brutal and merciless totalitarianism and active leaders of an anti-Jewish and anti-libertarian movement.

We protest against their condemnations not because they were of Jewish birth but because they are being proclaimed as representatives of a Jewish conspiracy.26

The lack of sympathy and general vitriolic sentiments directed toward the Slansky defendants was not limited to the fourteen condemned in Prague. Following the trial, across a spectrum of Jewish publications and groups, Jews reviled communists in general and the Jews among them in particular. Several individuals went so far as to say that to be a communist, one could not be a Jew. The two were not simply mutually exclusive, but polar opposites. Communists of Jewish descent were portrayed as traitors to their own people and to the very values they claimed to uphold. They were frequently described as non-thinking slaves of Moscow who refused to see the evidence before their eyes.

Writing in his daily column in *Der Tog*, S. Margoshes declared:

That the Jewish comrades in Paris, Tel Aviv and New York would accept such confessions as gospel truth goes without saying. They have professed to believe worse kinds of absurdities committed in the name of communism, and there is no reason to believe that there is any fantastic story coming out of Moscow or other capitals of communist countries that the communist faithful would reject as incredible. There is no limit at all, it would seem, to the credulousness of the believing communist.27

In an earlier column, Margoshes further condemned Jewish communists not simply for their ability to believe falsehoods in direct opposition to the values that they claimed to profess, but for their willingness to accept as true, traditional slanders against the Jews. “Someone said [declared Margoshes] that if the Soviet masters should repeat the medieval canard that, for reasons of their own, Jews are using the blood of Christian children for Passover matzos, some comrades in the United States and elsewhere would agree and deduce evidence in corroboration of the old libel...”28

Some Jews expressed that attempts to convince Jewish communists of the error of their ways were futile. Such individuals believed that if the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot did not awaken Jewish communists to, as they saw it, the fundamentally corrupt nature of the Soviet regime, then public debates and exchanges would only provide Jewish communists with a legitimate platform on which to air their views. In a letter to the editor, published in *The Jewish Chronicle*, one such author C. C. Aronsfeld condemned the paper for including the point of view of Jewish communists as part of its coverage of the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism.

You argue [wrote Aronsfeld] as if we were dealing with Jews in the sense in which the name has been understood throughout our history. Apparently you do not realise that communists of Jewish descent are Jews only according to the blood, not according to the spirit. They deny the brotherhood of Israel as well as the God of Israel and with perfect conviction believe in a new religion. From a Jewish and strictly historical point of view, they do not essentially differ from Jewish converts to Christianity or any other established religion. They accept Karl Marx as their godhead.29

Aronsfeld continued:

Any debates with them must inevitably proceed on the same level as the celebrated disputations of the Middle Ages; certainly they are just as futile. Whereas the medieval disputation was governed by the principle that whatever the prowess the arguer the

Christian must win, now the sure result is that the communist cannot lose. For he is not open to rational argument, being smitten with obsessions which, combined with the calculations of Muscovite realpolitik, contain all the destructive elements of Hitler's racialism.\textsuperscript{30}

The narrative of conversion permeated attacks on Jewish communists in the months following the Slansky Trial. A number of commentators argued that in deciding to persist in their faith in communism in the face of the patently absurd charges pronounced against the Slansky defendants and the Moscow doctors, Jewish communists displayed the full extent of their conversion. Only the fervor of a firmly held religious belief, argued a host of Jewish writers, could explain the inability of Jewish communists to see, as they believed them to be, the stark facts before their eyes. Indeed, as Toni Judt has written of French intellectuals in the post-war era, “In order to appreciate the belief system of postwar intellectuals, we need to grasp that what is at issue here is not understanding, the cognitive activity usually associated with intellectuals, but faith. To react as people did to the impact of communism in the years following 1945, they had first to accept unquestioningly a certain number of the fundamental tenets of what amounted to a civic religion.”\textsuperscript{31} The conversion of which critics of Jewish communists spoke was at once ideological, political, and religious and required the individual to obliterate his or her former identity. In this view, the term “Jewish communist” was chimerical. The conversion from Jew to communist was as complete as that from Jew to Christian. In ironic fashion, the term “of Jewish descent,” employed by Czech and Soviet authorities to describe eleven of the fourteen Slansky defendants, was widely favored by Jews who wished to demonize their communist brethren. For Czech and Soviet authorities, the term “of Jewish descent” represented a type of indelible blemish on one’s communist credentials. It implied that Jewishness was a permanent impediment to fully grasping the aims and values of communism. In other words, no Jew could be a true communist. For Jews, the term implied that the Jew turned communist remained Jewish only as an unfortunate accident of birth. The communist “of Jewish descent” was no more Jewish than the convert to Christianity and as much a source of shame and embarrassment.

It appears that some Jews viewed the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism as a moment of choice. The types of accusations levied against the Slansky defendants and the Moscow doctors seemed to entirely undermine the traditional modes of defense offered up by communists. The claims of Jewish communists that antisemitism was constitutionally forbidden by Soviet and satellite authorities was met with ridicule and dismissed as inadequate in the face of the rhetoric emanating from the Soviet world. The choice for Jewish communists, as expressed by their critics, was to either admit the error of their ways or show themselves to be traitors in every respect of the word.

Writing in The National Jewish Monthly, a publication of B’nai Brith, Edward E. Grusd expressed the sentiment that communist “explanations” were little more than weak excuses. Before those trials took place [declared Grusd], certain misguided liberals—to say nothing of communist propaganda itself—tried to explain away the mounting proofs of

\textsuperscript{30} Aronsfeld, 19.
\textsuperscript{31} Judt, 153.
Red Jew-hatred by all sorts of pilpul. Look, they said. Ilya Ehrenburg and Lazar Kaganovitch are Jews, and they occupy high positions in Russia; so many Jewish writers and scientists won the Stalin Medal or other decorations during such-and-such a year; and besides, there can’t be any antisemitism in the Soviet Union because it is forbidden by the Constitution. Of course some Jews are suffering in Russia, the apologists often added, but not as Jews; if they are hungry it is because everybody is hungry, if their religion is under attack it is because all religion is under attack, if they are "liquidated" it is not because they are Jews but because they were guilty of actions against the state. Well, all such flim-flam was blown sky-high in Prague.32

The claims of Jewish communists that what was going on behind the Iron Curtain was anti-Zionist and not antisemitic were similarly dismissed as so many excuses. Writing in The Jewish Frontier, author Marie Syrkin declared:

Even now there are many individuals, neither communists nor confirmed fellow-travelers, who find it impossible to accept the idea that Soviet Russia is antisemitic as well as anti-Zionist. They clutch at the anti-Zionism as a saving grace which will defend them from a still more unpalatable truth. Russia's severance of diplomatic relations with Israel will be offered as comforting evidence: Israel, the political entity, not Israel, the Jewish people, is the target.33

It was felt, by some opponents of communism, that the time for excuses was over and that tolerance for Jewish communists was at its limit. The protestations of Jewish communists were seen as little more than last ditch efforts to hold off for just a little while longer the revelation that the regime in which they had invested so much was fraudulent. No longer would the Jewish world continue to coddle their communist brethren whose allegiance to the communist creed stemmed from a type of revolutionary nostalgia whose aims had long since faded from reality. The events of 1952 and 1953 came to represent a type of ultimatum to Jewish communists.

At the conclusion of his article, mentioned above, Richard Stebal wrote that:

We can only hope that this last communist manifestation will cause some soul searching among those very few but rather visible Jewish communists in the free world, who, in all their innocence, have been supporting this obnoxious creed, which has as much in common with the communist idea as had Hitler's pernicious creed in common with socialism, and will finally realise that they are not only acting treacherously towards their fellow-Jews and human decency but are digging their own graves.34

Similar sentiments echoed from the editorial pages of The Jewish Vanguard.

Among communist supporters [declared one editorial] are many sincere but misguided people who thought that communist regimes had freed Jewry from persecution and bondage. For them the latest news must have come—whether they are prepared to admit it or not— as a bitter shock.

34 Stebal, 19.
If they continue to suppress their inner feelings and follow blindly the official line dictated from above, they will show tremendous weakness and lack of courage. For them the time of decision is now.

Are they with the Jewish people which is attempting to build for itself a new home in Israel, or with those who intend to undermine its very existence?35

Amid the flurry of condemnations directed toward Jewish communists was the baffling admission that, despite its ideological corruption and misdeeds, as viewed by anti-communists, communism and the Soviet regime had continued to enjoy the support of highly intelligent, educated, literate, and informed individuals. The Jewish communists were thus doubly reviled. They were members of an intellectual elite who not simply ought to have known better, but were obliged to do so. As members of the educated elite, Jewish communists were expected to set an example and guide their less analytical co-religionists in important matters such as politics. This sentiment was as much a further condemnation of the faithful Jewish communist who allowed him or herself to be duped as a type of grudging admission of and wonderment at communism’s continued success in “fooling” men and women of great intellect.

Opponents of communism were at a total loss to explain how Jewish communists, many of them individuals who turned toward communism because of its claims of racial equality, could persist in their beliefs when confronted with proof that despite constitutional bans on racial discrimination, not all Soviet subjects were, in practice, equal. Despite efforts by Jewish groups to compare Nazism with communism, the reality was that the evils of communism were far more ambiguous than those demonstrated by the Nazis. Writing in The National Jewish Monthly, Rabbi Herman Kieval lamented, “What a spiritual chaos we must be living through when intelligent and idealistic people can be confused as to which is the ‘liberator’ and which the ‘enslaver’ among the political ideologies of our time!”36 Kieval continued:

One of the grimly fascinating aspects of the current struggle between Russia and the West is the amazing loyalty which communism has been able to elicit through the years from certain people of outstanding intelligence and sensitive spirit in every country. The fumbling amateurs of totalitarian propaganda, Mussolini, Hitler, and Goebbels, succeeded in attracting only the dregs of the intelligentsia abroad with their outrageous lies, their pseudo-science and their vainglorious visions. Only rarely were they able to delude ranking men of science, philosophy, and religion into blessing their bloody cause. Not so the clever comrades of the Cominform. They have managed to sell their system of theories, in whole or in part, to some of the finest minds and spirits in Europe, Asia, and America, especially in the period immediately preceding World War II.37

The disbelief with which many Jews met the news of the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot and their subsequent attempts to understand the motives behind these unsettling episodes was proof that Jews wanted desperately to give the Soviet regime the benefit of the doubt. That many Jews continued to search for explanations behind Soviet actions rather than condemning these actions outright was a testament to communism’s powerful allure.

37 Kieval, 320-322.
The following letter, published in the communist Monthly, *Jewish Life*, illustrates the state of confusion and total bewilderment which many Jews experienced following events in Prague and Moscow. The letter is addressed to W. E. B. Du Bois and represents an appeal by Jews to obtain clear and unbiased facts concerning the status of Jews behind the Iron Curtain.

Dear Mr. Du Bois:

I do not know exactly how to begin this letter or even why I am writing to you. I hope to find an answer to something which is now bothering me. I have just finished your *In Battle for Peace*, and also your book about the world and Africa. On the basis of these readings I feel you are the man most qualified to answer me.

Up until now, I have felt that Russia sincerely meant most of what she said regarding racial and religious prejudice. There actually is no "Negro problem" in Russia simply because there are not that many Negroes. However, there are many Jews, and for a long, long time there has been a Jewish problem in Russia. I was pleased to learn that the government was trying to abolish antisemitism by the passing of laws forbidding it. Now I read in our press of antisemitic purges and I am puzzled. Allowing for the distortion and exaggeration of these Jewish purges in the American press, I have read several accounts less exaggerated in the liberal Jewish press. I am beginning to feel that there is some basis for these accusations. If there is any basis — Russia is doomed — not by our H-bomb, but by the degeneration of her own internal foundation.

As I said before, I hope you can understand why I am writing to you. I also want peace in the world and even if these charges are true I do not think the problem will be solved by war or force of arms. However, as a Jew I will certainly regard Russia in a much different light than I have up to now. I am sure you can understand this.

Although I am sure you have much to keep you busy, I shall feel not only honored but greatly relieved in my mind to hear what you think about the subject. For surrounded by half-truths as most of us are today, I would like an honest, direct answer from a free, clear thinker which seems to be very rare in our world in our time.  

Appearing as it did in the pages of a communist periodical, Du Bois’s answer closely followed the official Party line. He urged the author of the letter to ignore the claims of antisemitism against Soviet authorities and to be assured that Jews in the Soviet lands were in no way threatened either as Jews or otherwise. Despite its use by *Jewish Life*’s communist editors as a means of dismissing accusations of Soviet antisemitism, the above letter captures the uncertainty and reluctance with which Jews received news of the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot. Jews, across a political spectrum, could simply not reconcile how a regime which had devoted itself to racial equality, had liberated the Nazi concentration camps, and which had only a few years prior supported the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, could be responsible for such a blatant demonstration of antisemitism.

Although the doubts of Jewish communists and fellow-travelers were welcomed by Jewish organizations seeking to put an end to Jewish sympathies for the Soviet Union, some felt that the time for questions was over. Syrkin further exclaimed in her March 1953 article that:

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The belief that no matter how evil the means, the end still stemmed in some perverse fashion from the original revolutionary dream, died hard and finally only the other day. Perhaps the most tell-tale evidence of the current inability to accept the obvious is the persistent questioning as to the Soviet’s motives. Why? What purpose may be achieved? The notion that one may be dealing with an end and not a means is rarely voiced. Manifestations of overt antisemitism, from Hitler down, have usually been subjected to analysis rather than interrogation. The cause rather than the purpose was obscure. But Soviet Russia is still receiving the compliment of the question mark and the exclamation point.39

For individuals such as Syrkin, questions, debates, and inquiries into the nature of Soviet antisemitism lent a type of legitimacy to the anti-Jewish activities taking place behind the Iron Curtain. What mattered was not why antisemitism was taking place in the Soviet lands, but the fact that it was happening at all.

Even as some Jews urged their co-religionists to cease searching for the reasons behind Soviet antisemitism, others felt it crucial to discern the motives behind the events taking place in Prague and other Soviet Bloc capitals. As Jews began to see Soviet antisemitism as a systematic line created at the highest levels of the Soviet regime rather than a series of isolated incidents carried out by a small number of individuals, distinctions between Hitler and Stalin arose. The former was regularly referred to as a “mad man,” whose antisemitism sprang from a type of fanatical irrationality. Stalin, on the other hand, was seen as shrewd, calculating, and while his reasons often lay hidden from public view, they nevertheless sprang from the rational mind. For many this fact rendered Soviet antisemitism more heinous than that expressed by the Nazis. Hitler’s antisemitism was seen as a type of insanity. As such, he truly believed in the “rightness” of his genocidal program. It was argued that Stalin “knew” better, and that his antisemitic program was by choice.

Unlike the Nazi situation, Jews, in combating Soviet antisemitism, had to contend with other Jews. As a result, the campaign to stem the tide of Soviet antisemitism was an internal as well as external endeavor. Writing in The National Jewish Post, one author remarked that:

there is a great difference between that time and that situation, and the potentialities for harm today. All thinking people then were anti-Nazi. No Jew could be a Nazi, therefore every anti-Nazi could be said to be, for the sake of the point involved, pro-Jewish.40

Indeed, no Jew could become a Nazi, but all Jews could conceivably become a communist. The enemy in 1952 and 1953 could be found within, and Jewish communists were seen as just that – foes disguised as friends.

Although some Jews hoped that the Prague trial and Doctors’ Plot would force Jewish communists to finally acknowledge that the Soviets were not simply capable of antisemitic excesses, but were presently engaged in doing so, they also believed that such transformations would be slow and arduous and met with opposition at every juncture. The faith that Jewish communists, fellow-travelers, and liberal sympathizers had in the Soviet Union’s unrelenting commitment to equality was, it was argued, more than a “misguided” political inclination. In

39 Syrkin, 5.
describing repeatedly the difficulty in drawing Jewish sympathies away from the Soviet regime, critics in essence acknowledged that the belief in communism involved whole identities and world outlooks. For the believing communist the personal and public were inseparable and as such, there was no life beyond one’s political identity. To admit that Soviet authorities were using antisemitism as state policy required a complete reexamination of one’s entire political philosophy and ultimately of one’s self. Hence it was felt that even the excesses of the Prague trial and Doctors’ Plot would probably result in few outright defections by Jews from the communist camp.

Writing in *The Jewish Frontier*, author Shlomo Katz exclaimed that, “A legend has been carefully nurtured throughout the world that the Soviet Union is an enemy of antisemitism. This legend dies hard. Even the trial in Prague will not destroy it.” In her article mentioned above, Marie Syrkin similarly wrote that, “For liberals each stage of the prolonged disenchantment which culminated in the Nazi-Soviet pact was pain as well as discovery. It seemed that after 1939 there was nothing further to suffer or to learn, but apparently un-confessed illusions still lurked, else the bewilderment would not be so general and complete.” The shock and dismay expressed by large sections of world Jewry at the events taking place in the East suggest that, while diminished from pre-WWII years, sympathies toward the Soviet Union still persisted in Jewish circles.

For some Jews, condemnation of Soviet antisemitism by known communist sympathizers was not enough. Condemnation without remorse over one’s failure to previously see Soviet iniquities only served to confirm in the public mind that Jews were concerned first and foremost with other Jews, and as such, only joined the anti-Soviet chorus when their own were at risk. Writing in *The New Leader*, well-known former fellow-traveler turned critic, Eugene Lyons set forth the following anecdote:

Some years ago, at Camp Tamiment, I found myself sharing a table with a prominent rabbi, renowned for his liberalism. Inevitably, Soviet Russia came up for table conversation and my appetite, normally first-rate, left me.

Yes, the rabbi conceded, the Soviet system has a lot of unpleasant excrescences and excesses which he, too, regretted. But wasn’t I "obsessed" by these surface phenomena while ignoring the essence, the better world in birth? After all, the principle of equality, in particular racial equality, had been established.

Lyons Continued:

In the last few weeks, this same rabbi has been issuing emotional and deeply sincere statements excoriating the Soviets for their orgy of antisemitism, calling upon the civilized world to protest and to resist the Red Hitlerism. But I have searched in vain for a word of self-rebuke, for an overtone of contrition over his many years of guarded approval of Sovietism. I could find little recognition on his part that antisemitism in the communist sphere is of a piece with the rest of the horrors of the Kremlin regime during thirty-five years of power.

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42 Syrkin, 5.
44 Lyons, 14-15.
Lyons concluded, “Perhaps, in his heart, this otherwise estimable rabbi suffers for his past complacency. But I believe he owes it to our co-religionists and to himself to face up candidly and openly, humiliating as it may be, to his sad delusions.”

As Lyons put it, “In relation to more than five million American Jews, the Jewish fellow-travelers and vague communist sympathizers have been a tiny handful... But, unhappily, the pro-Soviet handful did include rabbis, intellectuals, entertainers and businessmen whose achievements gave them importance far beyond their numbers. Upon them, primarily, rests the responsibility for the lie that ‘all Jews’ were pro-Soviet.” From this point of view, Jewish communists in the free world were not only guilty of participating in the destruction of Soviet Jewry, but of confirming some of the worst stereotypes held about Jews in the non-communist world. If Jewish communists condemned Soviet antisemitism without reference to other Soviet crimes, they ran the risk of confirming the belief that Jewish allegiances were fickle and that Jews valued Jewish lives above the lives of others.

Lyons did not doubt that the outbreak of overt Soviet antisemitism would cause a number of staunch communist sympathizers to rethink their political identities. Only the most devout believers, felt Lyons, could deny the stark facts before their eyes. “The Hitler-Stalin Pact [declared Lyons] cured many of these people: the outbreak of undisguised state antisemitism will cure most of the others.” That most of these individuals would protest Soviet antisemitism with little or no repentance was a sign that either they saw Soviet antisemitism as a new development independent of previous Soviet actions, proving that their faith in communism was after all inextricably connected to their Jewishness or that they were too ashamed and embarrassed to admit their folly in supporting Soviet communism. In either case, their outcries against Soviet antisemitism would be met with ridicule and fundamentally distrusted. Lyons concluded that the revulsion of the Jewish communists, “against the latest expression of the Kremlin’s nature will be considered hypocritical by many people unless they acknowledge their moral dereliction in failing to denounce the liquidation of kulaks, the man-made famine, forced labor, and the continuous system of purge.”

As opponents of communism awaited the flurry of public denunciations and defections by Jews from the Communist Party and among fellow-travelers, such public pronouncements were limited. Filling the pages of Jewish periodicals were appeals to Jewish communists and communist sympathizers to admit the error of their ways, and while a number of prominent fellow-travelers did denounce the Prague trial and Doctors’ Plot, their numbers were far fewer than anticipated. It is of course difficult to measure how many Jews altered their political beliefs in the wake of Prague and Moscow, but what is clear is that the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism engendered fierce political debates within Jewish circles.

When fellow-travelers did come out against the events taking place behind the Iron Curtain, their pronouncements were frequently of a dramatic nature. Denouncing the Soviet Union came at a steep personal price and, as such, took on the character of a shameful confession. As Toni Judt writes, “For many fellow-traveling intellectuals, to defend the

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45 Lyons, 14-15.
46 Lyons, 5.
47 Lyons, 14-15.
48 Lyons, 14-15.
credibility of the charges being made in Prague or Budapest was to place oneself firmly on the
good side of an insuperable barrier. To do anything less was to risk finding oneself in the other
camp, alone and without friends.” Among the strongest statements of disapproval came from
James Waterman Wise, well-known fellow-traveler and son of Steven Wise, founder of the
American Jewish Congress. Wise’s words were cited frequently and reprinted throughout
Jewish sources by individuals seeking to lure Jews away from the communist camp and to
demonstrate the hypocrisy of Jewish communists who remained loyal to the Soviet Union. First
published in the pages of the Jewish journal *Opinion*, Waterman Wise declared the following:

These lines are hard to write. They constitute not only the personal admission that I was
wrong, in a conviction earnestly held, but that the basis of that conviction was utterly
false. I refer, of course, to the status of Jews in the Soviet Union, and to Russia’s
adoption of antisemitism as a political instrument.

It will be said by some that I should wait before speaking; that all the evidence is not yet
in; that there still may be some adequate explanation; that the situation may prove less
terrible than it appears. I do not know. But I do know that I have already waited too long
to speak, that I cannot in conscience wait a moment longer. The fears as well as the
fate, the fears as truly as the terror, of my fellow-Jews in Russia compel these lines. No
future explanation, no disavowal, no reversal of policy can cancel the monumental
wrong which the Soviet Union has committed in recent months against its Jewish
citizens and their brothers in its Satellite states. It is an evil and monstrous thing which
cannot be condoned, nor ignored by honest men.

Anticipating the criticism mentioned above that his protestations might be discounted,
coming as they did when his own people were threatened, Waterman Wise further wrote:

It is perhaps relevant to add that I did not wait to break with Soviet theory as valid, and
Soviet practice as justifiable, until its present debasing anti-Jewish tactics. I spoke and
wrote in sharpest condemnation of the Soviet-Nazi pact, of the invasion of Finland, of
Russia’s responsibility for the Korean War.

What I failed to see and say, was that these actions stemmed inevitably from a political
philosophy which set store only by final results and not by finite individuals: which
envisioned grandiose social goals, but imprisoned innocent people who disagreed with
them; which held that man was made for the state, not that the state (if ever it was to
achieve a better world) must be made for man.

Waterman Wise continued:

I visited the Soviet Union almost twenty years ago. I was profoundly impressed there by
the equality both in fact and theory which Jews, together with other minorities, seemed
to enjoy. I wrote and spoke about what I saw. I praised it as an intimation of what might
happen in other countries under similar social and economic conditions. I spoke in
admiration of what had been done, not only to liberate Jews from antisemitism, but to
free Russia from racial prejudice.

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49 Judt, 117.
50 James Waterman Wise, Reprinted from *Opinion*, Der Tog 1 April 1953: 1.
51 Waterman Wise, 1.
Sometimes I was asked by readers and listeners, "How can you be sure that this will last? How can you tell that Russia will not someday revert to the Jew-baiting pattern of its Czarist past?" My answer was that if I were mistaken, that if Russia reverted to race hatred and pogrom politics, I would denounce such actions in the future as forcefully as I was praising its actions then.

That time, alas, has come. The Soviet Union has relapsed into the black barbarism of antisemitism. It has joined the bloody procession of the Spanish Torquemadas, of the Polish Black Hundreds, of the Nazi Stormtroopers in seeking to make Jews the scapegoats of its own crimes and failures.52

In condemning Soviet actions, Wise did not necessarily lend support to the type of anti-communist hysteria being promulgated by the likes of Joseph McCarthy. He thus concluded his piece:

A little late to say all this? Ought I not to have seen and understood long, long ago that any nation which treats human beings as means to "social" ends, would eventually find it "expedient" and "dialectically necessary" to sacrifice the classic victims of oppressors—the Jew? The answer is a humble and penitent "Yes." But it must not be a silent "Yes." Because the error of mind and heart which it confesses was not a silent error.

These lines are even harder to write because they may play into the hands of those who beat the war drums in our land, who seek to repeal America's freedom under the guise of defending it against communism. Let me, therefore, make clear that while castigating Soviet antisemitism, I am not a whit less opposed than before to Fascism and all its works that I abhor the witch-hunters, the professional Red-baiters, the "Drop-the–Atom bomb–Now" jingoists as much as I ever did. Moreover, as a lifelong liberal and progressive, I scorn to abandon that beleaguered camp by joining forces with its now menacing assailants. Their "patriotism" is the kind which would and will turn to race hatred at any profitable moment, as ruthlessly as has that of Russia's rulers. Yet the ghastly lesson of Soviet Jewry's fate—the latest but by no means the last link in a chain of cynical betrayals—must be both learned and taught. That lesson is that there are no short-cuts to the Good Society: no bypasses of the Rights of Man. For that way, whatever the vaunted goal and the rosy-tinted promises, lie human desolation and moral suicide. The alternative as simple, as trite, as old fashioned—as it sounds, Democracy, Democracy, and again Democracy — Government by the consent of the governed, today and here, not someday and somewhere; freedom, freedom and again, freedom — to strive, unafraid of being labeled Subversive or, Red or Socialist, for a better life for oneself and for peace and security for one's children. Equality, equality, and again equality—not by grace of a constitution which Commissars can twist into murderous mockery but by daily planning and toiling together for the good of all. In this, and this alone, let us put our trust.53

Wise's declaration embodied the difficulties that fellow-travelers faced in openly condemning Soviet policy. As Wise remarked, he had previously criticized the Soviet regime for

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52 Waterman Wise, 1-2.
53 Waterman Wise, 2-3.
various actions it took which seemed to clash with some of the basic tenants of socialist thought. In these criticisms, however, lay the conviction that what was at fault was man’s imperfect execution of an ideology. The ideology itself was not brought into question. The type of condemnation, such as that expressed by Wise, required a total rejection of communism as a political ideology and the admission that for years you were working against the very things for which you strove. Such admissions would undoubtedly cause irreparable ruptures among one’s social relations, while causing scorn among those who long tried to convince you of the error of your ways. Lastly, in denouncing the Soviet Union as undemocratic, the critic ran the risk of being automatically placed in the anti-communist, anti-liberal, and conservative camp. To profess liberal and progressive ideals while condemning Soviet actions placed the former fellow-traveler in a tenuous position between Left and Right.

In another scathing critique of the Prague Trial and Doctors’ Plot, Yiddish journalist and fellow-traveler, B. Z. Goldberg declared in the Yiddish daily, Der Tog, his particular disturbance over the Soviet use of the term “cosmopolitan,” employed widely in describing the Slansky defendants and the Moscow doctors.

what has the position [wrote Goldberg] of Israel to do with Jews in other countries? Why should a Jew in Prague or in Moscow have to feel insecure because the State of Israel has aligned herself with Washington?

Yesterday, it was Zionism. Today, it is the Joint. Who knows what it will be tomorrow. Which of our countries is not bourgeois nationalist? Why must we at this late date in the history of Jewish dispersion among the nations prove that in every country in which we live and of which we are a part, we are in every sense related to the general life of that country? We here have been faithful to our fatherland, the United States, no less than any other national group in America. Do we not condemn every act of betrayal and every traitor? Why then should we not accept the fact that Jews in other countries have the same attitude toward traitors.¶

Goldberg concluded:

Jewish history offers continuing proof that Jews have courageously sacrificed their lives even for those countries in which they have been persecuted.

I therefore repudiate the nonsensical charge that Jews are “cosmopolitans” by nature. On the contrary, they have always proved to be great patriots of the countries in which they have lived. [. . .] Those who accept the charge that the Jews in the East European countries are “cosmopolitans,” are repeating the antisemitic lie. And if a Jew is, according to his nature, a “cosmopolitan” in Prague or in Bucharest, why then can’t he be a cosmopolitan in London or in Washington? This is a false and dangerous idea.

Goldberg’s condemnation of the events taking place behind the Iron Curtain stemmed as much from his disbelief that the Soviet Union, committed as it was to racial equality, could engage in such overt and blatant antisemitism as his outrage over the type of antisemitic tropes being employed by the Soviets. Goldberg saw the Soviet portrayal of the Jew as inherently disloyal and a perpetual alien amid the nations in which they dwelled as having serious

¶ “Repudiation by Goldberg,” American Jewish Committee Yiddish Digest #820, 19 Jan. 1953, American Jewish Committee, RG347.7, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.

¶¶ Repudiation by Goldberg.
implications for Jews wherever they might live. Writing within the context of Cold War distrust and the continual search for internal enemies, Goldberg saw in the thinly veiled antisemitic trope of the cosmopolitan the potential for wide-scale, if subtle, growth in antisemitism beyond the lands in the East. While individuals on the Left and Right might continue to condemn the Soviet regime for its anti-democratic character, such individuals might find common ground in the belief that Jews were internal exiles, not to be trusted, and incapable of assimilating fully into the nation. What should have been a diplomatic conflict between the sovereign states of Israel and the Soviet Union, according to Goldberg, encompassed the whole of world Jewry because of Soviet attempts to portray the Jew as bound, above all else, to other Jews.

Though the above statements by Wise and Goldberg were strong and pronounced, they stood out more because of their scarcity rather than the messages they wished to convey. Attacks on Jewish communists and fellow-travelers as well as calls for their political repentance could be found daily throughout Jewish sources in the weeks and months following the Prague trial. The flurry of defections, public disavowals, and general wave of disaffection which was to beset loyal Jewish communists, however, did not come to pass. The political upheaval anticipated across a spectrum of Jewish entities was far less radical and dramatic than predicted. This is not to say that the Prague trial and Doctors’ Plot were not politically significant as far as Jews were concerned. To the contrary, the political fallout from the outbreak of overt Soviet antisemitism was swift and pronounced. It forced Jews to rethink their political identities vis-à-vis the Cold War and generally compelled Jews to face many of the challenges confronting Jewish communities in the years following the Holocaust and the creation of Israel. Notwithstanding, the fatal blow which many Jews felt the general wave of Soviet antisemitism would inflict upon Jewish loyalties to the Communist Party and the Soviet Union fell far short of its mark.

There are several possible explanations behind the notable dearth of public defections from the Communist Party and outrages against Soviet antisemitism by Jewish communists and communist sympathizers. In 1952, when the Slansky Trial commenced, the number of Jewish communists had already dropped significantly from previous decades. The Nazi-Soviet pact, the suppression of Yiddish culture, the limitations placed on Jewish immigration from the Soviet bloc to Israel, as well as other troubling realities of Soviet life had all contributed to a slow but steady decline in Jewish membership in the Communist Party and in the number of Jewish fellow-travelers. As such, by the time of the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot, only the most committed and dogmatic of individuals continued to support the Soviet Union and its brand of communism with unwavering and unquestioning zeal. Such individuals would and did believe the accusations levied against the Slansky defendants and the Moscow doctors and upheld the Slansky Trial as a paragon of Soviet justice. It was not until the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and Khrushchev’s admission of Stalin’s many crimes in the same year that such individuals began to publicly question Soviet practices.

It is also quite possible that the events of 1952 and 1953 did bring about decreases in communist membership. Quiet defections are difficult to track, and the Communist Party would not seek to advertise the dwindling of its ranks. Additionally, if someone left the Party, it is difficult to say why and to which political philosophies they may have then turned in the wake of their defection. Fellow-travelers pose an even more challenging case. Even if the outbreak of
Soviet antisemitism caused them to abandon or question their faith in the Soviet Union, the reasons for remaining silent were as numerous and perhaps even more compelling than those which might lead one to publicly declare their doubts and political reversals. With the Rosenbergs awaiting trial and McCarthyism well underway, it is understandable that individuals would seek to detach themselves as much as possible from communism even if their affiliation came in the form of denouncements and retreats from the Communist Party and Soviet Union.

Perceptions, however, are often as important as facts, and it is clear that a large number of Jews sought, in the wake of the Slansky Trial, to sever the still persistent notion that Jews and communism were strongly linked. If the relatively small number of Jewish communists did not come out against Soviet antisemitism and thereby admit, as was hoped, the error of their ways, then, at the very least, Jews could be shown as victims of Soviet rule, subjects of the same degradation as their non-Jewish neighbors in the lands behind the Iron Curtain. If the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism did not cause the staunchest of Jewish communists to renounce their political beliefs, then it certainly made it far more difficult for such individuals to continue in their public declarations of support for the Soviet Union.

**From the Communist Point of View**

The relationship between Jews and communism is historically complex and has varied dramatically according to time and place. Why so many Jews were drawn to communism, however, is in some respects a less complicated question. Communism, as Jonathan Frankel has written, “promised an escape from the realities of life within a minority marked off variously by ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic boundaries into a new world where all such boundaries would be eliminated.”\(^{56}\) Communism, in essence, offered a world free of antisemitism in which the Jew could prosper without fear of perpetual persecution and in which he/she could fully and equally participate in all aspects of society. Once the conversion had taken place and the Jewish communist had adopted communism as his/her new faith, it is debatable to what extent the Jewish communist continued to see him/herself as “Jewish.”

How the Jewish communist defined his/her Jewishness is a question which continues to spark debate among scholars. To be sure, the Jewish communist was secular, but secularity does not preclude Jewish self-identification. Ideologically speaking, the Jewish communist was concerned with the welfare of the working class and dismissed all other national, ethnic, and religious distinctions as products of capitalism. However, in practice, the feelings which Jewish communists had toward other Jews and his or her own sense of Jewishness is far more difficult to discern. Moreover, the relationship between one’s Jewishness and one’s communism was of an extremely personal nature and as such varied widely from individual to individual.

It is easy to dismiss the ways in which Jewish communists engaged with the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot as little more than party propaganda. Indeed, the line which most loyal Jewish communists took following these events reflected closely, if not precisely, that emanating from the Soviet world itself. Notwithstanding, there is much to be gained in exploring the manner in which Jewish communists discussed and thought about the problem of

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“Soviet antisemitism.” The arguments and proofs that Jewish communists set forth to discredit the claims that the Soviets were engaging in antisemitic activities reveals much about issues of Jewish identity in relation to the dramatic shifts in Jewish demographics following the Holocaust, the creation of Israel, and the Cold War.

The faithful Jewish communist took the accusations levied in Prague and in Moscow at face value. Indeed, he/she had no reason to think that they should do otherwise. The overwhelming majority of Jews and non-Jews alike viewed the accusations pronounced in Prague and in Moscow as wildly absurd. The believing Jewish communist, like their non-communist coreligionists, saw in the wake of the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot an excess of absurdity. It was not, however, the accusations levied against Slansky and the Moscow doctors which troubled Jewish communists. What they found ideologically and practically impossible, and thus absurd, was the notion that a state, in particular one that had outlawed antisemitism, should go to such great lengths to concoct a tale of conspiracy, espionage, and treason in order to rid itself of individuals who had fallen out of favor and much less to discredit an entire ethnic group. As one such individual declared, “It is hard to believe that 14 men, who possessed considerable ability and were noted public figures, would all confess to something for which they knew the penalty was death unless they were guilty of what they confessed. The only sane conclusion at which one can arrive is that these men confessed because they were confronted with irrefutable evidence of their guilt.” From this position of unquestioning belief, the Jewish communist presented a host of arguments to defend his/her ongoing faith in the Soviet Union and its role as the undeviating benefactor of the Jews.

Following the Slansky Affair, Jewish communists, at public meetings and in print publications, recounted eyewitness testimonies of how Jews in the Soviet Union and its satellites, far from suffering, were thriving as they had never done before in that part of the world. Jewish communists, upon visiting Eastern Europe, claimed that the Jews with whom they met lived a life free of antisemitism or any form of racial discrimination. When asked about the Slansky Trial, they praised the authorities for their commitment to justice and to ridding the new workers paradise of those who sought to destroy it. Writing in Jewish Life, a well-established Jewish communist publication, British Jew and outspoken communist Ivor Montagu described his experiences in the lands behind the Iron Curtain.

Within the last few weeks [wrote Montagu] I have traveled in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria, four peoples' democracies. Conditions are completely and entirely normal so far as their Jewish inhabitants are concerned. That is — far more secure, honorable and confident than in the bulk of the "Western" lands. This is the short answer to stories of "purges" and "pogroms" of "Jewish people panic-stricken with insecurity." These fantastic tales of horror are a complete fabrication, a cruel cheat. A callous game is being played with the feelings of Jewish people and others. The monstrous pretense of a wave of antisemitism in Eastern Europe has been spread because of the arrest and punishment of a handful of criminals, Jewish and non-Jewish. It has been spread to try to obscure the discovery that the American sabotage and

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terror machine has, with the collaboration of some Zionist officials, penetrated Zionist and Jewish philanthropic organizations and used them for its purposes. Montagu further exclaimed:

In the last few weeks, since the trial of Slansky and others in Prague, I have met rabbis. I have attended synagogue services, talked with Jewish citizens, both Orthodox and unbelieving, party and non-party, young and old, students and greybeards. I have talked to Jewish men and women, in humble jobs or prominent in public life.

Not only is there no alarm, no perturbation. There is no sign even of apprehension. The stories to the contrary are complete and utter rubbish.

The Jewish people I met talked of their work, their hopes, their plans, their children in perfect calm, just as they have done when I have met them in these lands before. Often the trials and arrests were never mentioned. They didn't happen to arise. If they happened to come up in conversation, they were discussed as something that would not, or could not, touch the speakers, as they could touch no honest man.

Montague sought to personalize his experiences in declaring that not simply had he been told that Jews thrived under Soviet rule, but that he himself, a Jew, had experienced no ill will or poor treatment, either as a Jew or a foreigner. He continued:

Something more. I have traveled in public transport in all these countries, shopped, visited theaters and sports arenas, chatted with passers-by. Nobody, from my appearance, could be under the slightest illusion respecting my Jewish origin. Sometimes I wore winter clothing borrowed from friends and then, at least before I spoke must have appeared a domestic citizen. When chatting, of course, my identity as a foreign Jew was clear. At no time, in no place, from anybody, did I, in either character, encounter the slightest constraint, the slightest discourtesy or hostility. Nor did I encounter any qualification in friendliness and helpfulness. On such a point a Jew cannot be mistaken.

I have stood with hundreds applauding a Jewish prima donna. I have clapped with thousands, cheering on a Jewish sports champion. Nowhere among any of these hosts was there the slightest sign of reservation in their admiration or encouragement. There could not be. For in these countries the Jew is a human being and human beings are respected.

Like many Jewish communists, in their efforts to defend Soviet actions, Montagu maintained that what posed the most dangerous threat to Soviet Jewry was that which threatened all Soviet peoples - i.e. the Cold War and the West’s attempt to undermine the progress of socialism. Montagu thus concluded:

Have Jews in these countries any worries? Yes. Certainly they have — but of a kind very different from that pretended in the falsehoods spread by the United States State Department. Their worries are of a kind from which these falsehoods are designed to distract attention.

59 Montagu, 20.
60 Montagu, 20.
I hear the voice of the chief rabbi of Bulgaria throbbing with indignation as he speaks of the release of the Nazi war criminals in the British zone of Germany and the evils this can portend for Jewry and the world. I sit, the supper things cleared away, with a Jewish friend in Stransnice, Czechoslovakia, his lovely fair-haired wife beside him and their bright four-year-old child playing on the floor. He asked: "How is the peace movement in Britain? Realize what it means for us here — the American bombers are less than a half-hour flight from Prague."

I hear again the glorious choral chant of the oldest Bucharest synagogue. The lamps cast exquisite shadows, the worshippers are rapt in the serenity of Sabbath evening service. Anger boils in me at the venality, the recklessness or the gullibility with which certain spokesmen in this country, Jewish and non-Jewish, risk the shattering of their peace and happiness by tearing up the Ninth Commandment — "Thou shalt no bear false witness" — in the interests of war.  

Present in Montagu’s words was not simply the anticipated condemnation of capitalist falsehood as compared to communist truths. As a believing communist, Montagu saw communist authorities as incapable of committing acts of willful injustice. The claims of western Jews that Iron Curtain Jewry was in grave danger had, of course, to have been fabricated. The fact that Montagu and others like him never considered the reality that Soviet Jewry could not express itself openly and freely is a testament to the blind faith that Jewish and non-Jewish communists alike held in the purity of communist ideas and practices.

What is worth noting in Montagu’s description of Soviet Jewry, however, is the romanticism with which he views them. Their lives are peaceful and free of antisemitism. They are free to worship and not worship according to their individual religious preferences, and these preferences, no matter what they might be, in no way hinder the individual from participating fully in society at large. The Soviet Jew has been freed from the trappings and challenges of self-identification omnipresent in the modern Jewish experience. He is neither Jew at home nor man in the street, but a human being and equal member of the first socialist empire in human history. His identity is not fraught with irreconcilable dualities. He is whole. In other words, the “Jewish Question” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been at last solved.

The fabrications about Soviet Jewry emanating from the West — and fabrications they surely had to be — arose not from genuine fear over the welfare of Iron Curtain Jewry, but rather from an unwillingness to admit that the answer to the Jewish Question lay not in the so-called Western democracies, but in the socialist lands of the East. Reluctant to examine the inequities in their own societies, Western Jews, according to their communist co-religionists, deflected their hypocrisies into false claims that their Soviet brethren were suffering an unthinkable fate. Soviet antisemitism was nothing more than a Western construct, created in desperation by Western authorities to distract its citizenry from their own problems.

In a particularly mocking account, Dr. Leo Katz, communist writing from Vienna, described his attempts to find the aftermath of the alleged pogroms taking place in the Slovak capitol, Bratislava.

61 Montagu, 20.
I decided [wrote Katz] to go to Bratislava to find the "evidence" of a "pogrom," even though I knew that pogroms had not, nor could they ever happen in the new Czechoslovakia. The newspapers had reported that the "evidence" of this "pogrom" could not be concealed. I got my visa immediately and a few days later I was walking the streets of Bratislava looking for the "pogroms."62

Katz further wrote:
I stopped a militiaman and asked him where I could find the broken windows. He couldn’t understand what I was talking about. Jews in Bratislava with whom I spoke about the matter laughed at me when I asked them about "antisemitism" and "pogroms." One Jew said to me: "Such an idea could only arise in a diseased mind." Looking for a "pogrom" in Czechoslovakia today is just like looking for the Nineveh, ancient capital of Syria, in contemporary Mesopotamia. It exists in the debris, not in reality.63

Just as many non-communist and anti-communist Jews felt that their communist co-religionists had been duped into thinking that the Soviet Union remained the indefatigable friend of the Jew and enemy of antisemitism, so Jewish communists believed that Jews in the West had been fooled by their capitalist leaders and fed lies about the status of Soviet Jewry in order to fuel Cold War tensions. In another account of personal encounters with Soviet Jews published in *Jewish Life*, author Kive Goldman wrote the following:

Since my return from my visit to the Soviet Union, I have often been approached with these questions: Did you see any Jews there? How do they live? What are they doing? Some questioners are impatient and it is also evident that they are worried about the status of the Soviet Jews.
I understand the source of this worry. They are victims of the ugly red-baiting of the Soviet Union in the past few years. Repeated fabrications about "antisemitism" and "deportations of millions of Jews" in the Soviet Union have had some effect. Even those who think of themselves as friends of the workers’ state have become disconnected by the vicious lies of the slanderers that have been spread to gain approval by the Jewish masses for war preparations against the Soviet Union.64

Part of the out-and-out lies being promulgated by western authorities, felt Jewish communists, was the notion that Soviet Jewry stood, if not in direct physical peril, on the brink of cultural extinction. In addition to the cries of pogroms and persecution, Jews in the West claimed that their brethren in the East were undergoing a process of forcible cultural assimilation by Soviet authorities, and as such, were being “eliminated” all the same. In response to such claims, Goldman recounted the following interaction:

Another Jew I met among the trade union leaders was a young woman from Odessa. She also was a member of the greeting delegation. I had a long discussion with her too about the role of the Jews in the Soviet Union. She spoke as a proud citizen of the Soviet Union. She said that as a child she had attended a Yiddish shule and still remembers a

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63 Katz, 7.
little Yiddish. But, she asked me, why should I separate myself from my fellow workers? In the factory, in the trade union movement, in the peace movement, in the club — everywhere, I am fully accepted and valued for by activities and for my contributions.  

Goldman concluded:

Yes, I saw Jews in the Soviet Union — free citizens equal with all. A few proudly say they are Jews. If others don’t bring it up, it is not because they are ashamed or try to hide it, but because they see no reason to differentiate themselves from the rest of the population. Everyone there is equal. What’s the difference, Jew or non-Jew? This question is asked quite often. Even after only a short visit we could see the truth of such a question.

According to Jewish communists, Iron Curtain Jewry had nothing to fear because those found guilty at the Slansky Trial and the accused Moscow doctors were charged as agents of a Zionist conspiracy. Zionism and Jewishness were entirely separate entities. Not all Jews were Zionists, and as such, the enemy in question was of a political and ideological nature rather than a racial one. In this respect, Jewish communists were not alone in their beliefs that Zionism and the creation of Israel had complicated questions of Jewish identity the world over. As mentioned previously, non-communist, anti-Zionist forces, ranging from such individuals as William Zuckerman to the leadership of the American Jewish Committee, were all troubled by Zionism’s attempts to co-opt Jewish representation in matters global and domestic.

In order to defend themselves against claims that Soviet Jewry was under attack both physically and spiritually, Jewish communists proclaimed that the Soviet Union’s quarrel with the new State of Israel did not extend to the Jewish people as a whole. Zionists, they claimed, were responsible for making the interests of Israel one and the same with the rest of diasporic Jewry. The truth, according to Jewish communists, was that Zionism was an ideology which falsely brought Jews into conflict with the rest of the working class and attempted thereby to disguise and deflect class antagonisms with superficial questions of national identity.

At a rally of Jewish workers organized by the Communist Party in Stepney, London, Mr. Jack Gaster, Jewish communist and legal activist, declared, “Zionism tried to tear out” the Jews from their countries of origin and give them a false allegiance to Israel. The loyalty of a working Jew was not to Israel but to his class. While their grievances differed ideologically, the fears of Jewish communists surrounding Zionism and the new Jewish state were shared by other diasporic Jewish bodies who collectively clung to their specifically non-Israeli Jewish identities and felt that Israel ought to have jurisdiction only over those Jews dwelling within Israeli borders. Where Jewish communists and non-communists differed is that the Jewish communist viewed the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot as isolated events in which a group of guilty men had been brought to justice, and the non-communist Jew, while rejecting Israel’s authority in all matters Jewish, nevertheless viewed the events of 1952 and 1953 as an attack on Jews where ever they might live.

Believing the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot to be fair and just, Jewish communists never doubted the claims of Czech and Soviet authorities that Zionism, and not Jewishness, was the

65 Goldman, 26-7.
66 Goldman, 26-7.
matter at hand and only a small number of Zionists at that who had participated in acts of espionage and treason. In their estimation, Zionists were not only responsible for the treasonous behavior revealed in Prague and in Moscow, but for turning a “Zionist issue” into a “Jewish” one.

In a letter published in *The Jewish Chronicle*, well-known Jewish communist Hyman Levy attempted to explain how Zionism, far from freeing Jews from persecution, had in fact only placed Jews in an even more precarious state than they had been before the creation of Israel.

Sir, – [wrote Levy] As one who has given a great deal of thought to the origins of antisemitism, may I direct your attention to a relatively new feature of this problem as it affects Jews who are domiciled everywhere except in the State of Israel, and who do not intend to emigrate to that country. Every person who calls himself a Jew thereby admits at least a genealogical distinction between himself and his non-Jewish neighbor: and to a certain extent also a difference in values. Anti-Semites in the past have seized on this to insist that Jews are therefore torn by a dual loyalty. Today, the existence of the State of Israel, and the propaganda of Zionists in every country on behalf of that State, tend to sharpen this difference, and to unsettle those Jews who are unable to resolve it.  

Levy continued:

This mental confusion is now being accentuated by the current assertions that Zionists speak on behalf of Jews everywhere, and that any disagreement with political Zionism and its methods must be interpreted as an attack on Jewry. This insidious method of splitting the allegiance of Jews from the country in which they are domiciled must be seen now as a dangerous and antisemitic feature of the present situation. How dangerous it is can be recognised by watching the financial and therefore political alignment which Israel now finds herself compelled to adopt vis-a-vis the U.S.A., to whom she is becoming increasingly tied, on the one hand, and vis-a-vis the U.S.S.R. on the other hand, to whom she is becoming increasingly hostile.  

Levy thus concluded:

As Israel is becoming so embroiled, the Zionists, by sharpening this “divided allegiance” are dragging Jewry everywhere into the maelstrom. This is a situation fraught with the greatest danger for Jews in every country. It follows now that as soon as a political trial, in which Jews are involved, takes place anywhere, the fact that they are Jews may become a matter of political significance; and the very last people in the world who would be entitled to complain of this are the Zionists, who are responsible for making their Jewishness a political issue.  

For Zionists, the politicization of Jewishness was indeed the goal. Jews constituted a nation, and as such, were entitled to direct their own destiny, political or otherwise. As a sovereign nation, felt the Zionists, what happened to Jews in one country inevitably affected Jews in another. How specific Jewish communists thought of their Jewishness is difficult to say. On the one hand, their communism required them to abandon their religious convictions and

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69 Levy, 16.  
70 Levy, 16.
adopt an entirely secular way of life. Secularity, however, did not prevent one from maintaining some type of Jewish identity. Some of the most fervent Zionists were secular in practice and in outlook. It was not even impossible to embrace communist ideology in conjunction with Jewish nationalism as seen in Israel’s Mapam party to be discussed in the next chapter. For the Jewish communist, however, there were no distinctly Jewish matters. What truly mattered were only those issues which affected the working class, regardless of nationality or ethnic composition. Antisemitism was, in this view, a product of class conflict and simply another mechanism with which the owning classes sought to divide and control the working class.

To the Jewish communist, the cries of antisemitism issuing forth from the West were little more than feeble efforts by corrupt authorities to convince a highly vulnerable Jewish population still recovering from the aftermath of the Holocaust that only in the western camp could Jews and the State of Israel truly flourish. To stress this point, the Morgen Freiheit, Yiddish communist publication, issued a pamphlet to inform Jews of the manner in which western authorities were abusing their plight.

In connection with the trial in Prague [declared the Freiheit], there has been unleashed the wildest hate-orgy against Czechoslovakia, against all the other East European Democratic countries, and against the Soviet Union. They look for antisemitism in those countries where antisemitism is a crime against the state, where it is being completely rooted out; but they overlook it where it flourishes freely—in Western Germany under the protective wings of Washington officials, or here in our own country where it is manifested in various ways, both subtle and brazen.

The answer is quite clear: economic interests which they try to cover up with "Jewishness." 71

In conclusion, the Freiheit boldly declared, “Every honest Jew must come to the conclusion that the hysterical cries of those who, unfortunately, hold the reins of the Israeli government, about alleged antisemitism in the socialist countries, are detrimental to the interests of the State of Israel, and can only bring harm to the masses of Jews wherever they may be. These rantinas can only help the warmongers to undermine the fight for world peace, and transform the Cold War into a flaming world conflagration.” 72

In this political paradigm, it is quite feasible to see the trial of fourteen men, mostly Jews, accused of participating in a Zionist-led conspiracy as nothing more than an isolated case of treason. Quantity alone does not antisemitism make, and to the believing communist, the crimes for which Slansky and his co-defendants were accused were not only believable, but not surprising if Zionism was the driving force behind their criminal behavior. The only thing to do was to commend the Czech and Soviet authorities for catching the criminals before their plans were hatched. Thus, with unswerving certainty, the Jewish communist could write, “To describe the prosecution of a handful of terrorists and traitors to their country as ‘a wave of antisemitism,’ in these circumstances, merely shows that anti-Soviet propaganda is no more

71 “The Big Lie Revived: What is really behind the shouting about “antisemitism” in the Socialist countries?” Morgen Freiheit, 1953, RG1247, Box 18, Folder 214, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
72 “The Big Lie.”
fastidious about its methods than it was at any time since 1917—but perhaps, also, that it is more desperate.”73

Crucial to communist defenses of the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot was the notion that anti-Zionism and antisemitism were entirely distinct from one another and that the former did not indicate the latter. In his lengthy article first published in *Jewish Life*, and then distributed separately as a pamphlet, Jewish communist and literary scholar Louis Harap wrote that:

It is no secret that communists have always opposed Zionism as a reactionary ideology. The anti-Zionism that has emerged from the Prague trial is nothing new. Much as it may horrify many well-intentioned followers of Zionism, what was exposed was that Zionist organizations and individuals lent themselves to treasonable activity against the Czechoslovak people under the instigation primarily of U.S. intelligence.74

Opposition to Zionism as a “bourgeois” ideology was a defensible if not requisite position of all communists, Jewish or otherwise. Antisemitism was a form of race discrimination and inherently contrary to the aims of communism. To the faithful communist, both Zionism and antisemitism, though distinct entities, were capitalist in extraction and as such, equally reprehensible to the true communist.

As previously discussed, in the years following the creation of Israel, a host of Jewish organizations strove to curtail Israel’s monopoly in representing Jewish interests. They struggled to maintain their identities as American, British, or French Jews while acknowledging that Jews held common interests across national boundaries. Many such organizations supported the new Jewish state and encouraged their constituents to do so likewise. Support for Israel, however, was not indicative of deep Zionist convictions, and such Jewish entities as the American Jewish Committee and the Anglo-Jewish Association along with their communist brethren, sought to underscore the reality that not all Jews were Zionists.

Harap thus asserted:

Zionism is an ideology that is held by some Jews—and, it must be emphasized, opposed for a variety of reasons by many others, including certain Jewish religious groups, thousands of Israeli citizens and even by bourgeois assimilationists among wealthy Jews all over the world (for instance, the American Jewish Committee) and also by communists. Hence, it is simply untrue to equate anti-Zionism with antisemitism, for what anti-Zionism opposes is an ideology and not Jews as such. To hold otherwise is to assert something as absurd as, “anti-Republicanism is anti-Americanism” or “anti-Jim Crow is anti-American” or to be “anti-Tory is to be anti-British” or “anti-Malanism is anti-South Africa.”75

Despite his vehement opposition to Zionism, Harap declared that the trial of Slansky and his co-defendants was not an attack on Zionist ideology, but rather on misdeeds that certain individuals committed as Zionist agents.

One thing should be clear [declared Harap] at the outset. The conspirators were punished for deeds, not thoughts. The deeds, whose actuality was bolstered by evidence and documents and witnesses, which led to the confessions, were directly

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75 Harap, 7.
intended to inflict damage on the people’s Czechoslovakia. Hence it is contrary to fact to say, as did The New Republic (December 8, 1952), that “the trial serves warning on all Jews who remain under communist rule that from now on Zionism, even Jewish activity, is a crime punishable by death.” Zionist belief and other bourgeois-nationalist opinions are not unlawful in people’s Czechoslovakia; sabotage and espionage are unlawful—as they are in capitalist countries—even if perpetrated under the shield of Zionism.\(^7\)

According to Harap and other Jewish communists, it was not Soviet authorities which had singled out Jews as a population. The Slansky defendants constituted a small group of individuals whose ethnic identities bore no consequences for others of their race or creed. To the contrary, it was the Zionists who in their efforts to politicize Jewishness rendered any action, criminal or well-intentioned, taken by a Jew to be a “Jewish action.” It was therefore Zionists, not communists, who transferred the guilt of a few Jews to innocent Jewish populations.

Additionally, in decrying that Soviet authorities had adopted antisemitism, Harap and others like him believed that Jewish entities were attempting to render Jews above the law. In doing so, such individuals, not Soviet authorities, were setting Jews apart from society at large. “Do Zionists [wrote Harap] who are caught in a crime have immunity? Is a Jew exempt from legal prosecution for specific crimes because he is a Jew?”\(^7\) The emancipation which Jews enjoyed under Soviet rule entitled them to the full and equal protection of the law as well as subjecting them to the same punishments as their non-Jewish compatriots. To further illustrate his point that Jews enjoyed total equality in the lands behind the Iron Curtain, Harap declared:

Consider: Jews occupy some of the highest and most important positions in the socialist countries. What antisemitic government has ever placed Jews in the highest posts? What sense can there be in the accusation that these countries are “officially antisemitic”; more, that they have now stepped into Hitler’s shoes in relation to the Jewish people?\(^7\)

Jewish communists frequently cited the names of Jews who occupied important posts in the satellite governments as well as in the Soviet Union. They listed the names of Jewish recipients of the coveted Stalin Prize and generally of the disproportionate contribution of Jews to developments in Soviet ruled lands as compared to their relatively small numbers.

In spite of Harap’s thirty page pamphlet, outlining the many reasons why the Prague purges were not antisemitic, for most Jewish communists, one reason alone sufficed. “The widely publicized charge [wrote Harap] that Jews are being used as a “scapegoat” is false, for one reason, because the alleged need for it does not exist.”\(^7\) Harap made this clear at the outset of his long defensive treatise. Soviet authorities were not using Jews as scapegoats because there were no shameful circumstances in the Soviet lands for which a scapegoat was required. If problems existed, they must be the result of intentional sabotage from without by culprits seeking to undermine the socialist paradise. There could be no scapegoats because the Party was incapable of committing mistakes for which they then needed to assign blame. As

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\(^7\) Harap, 9.
\(^7\) Harap, 16.
\(^7\) Harap, 8.
\(^7\) Harap, 2.
Heda Margolius Kovaly, wife of Rudolf Margolis — one of the eleven Slansky defendants condemned to death — wrote in her memoirs, “Communism was the eternal ideal of humanity, we could not doubt the ideal, only ourselves.”

When Soviet authorities announced in April 1953 that the Doctors’ Plot had been fabricated by corrupt officials who had managed to enter the Party ranks and that the doctors were to be released, Jewish communists believed the matter of Soviet antisemitism to be unequivocally resolved. In another article, published in May, 1953, Harap proclaimed:

The announcement from Moscow on April 4 that the accused doctors were freed and cleared of all charges had the effect of a pin stuck into an inflated balloon of "Soviet antisemitism." The whole campaign carried on so violently and vociferously for months was suddenly and completely deflated. It was impossible any longer to assert that a government that openly acknowledged false accusations and expressed its unequivocal condemnation of an attempt "to inflame feelings of national antagonism" could be charged with "antisemitism." The campaign has been stopped dead in its tracks.

Harap further wrote that:

[The Soviet Union] does not hesitate to expose a threatened miscarriage of justice even if perpetrated by officials in the highest places. Nor does the Soviet government regard it as sufficient to free the falsely accused: it also prosecutes those state officials who were responsible, itself an unprecedented event... [W]hen has our government ever acknowledged a racist or political frameup and righted the wrong by imprisoning those guilty of infringing the rights of the victims?

Much of the debate surrounding Jewish reactions to Soviet antisemitism arose from the uncertainties in Jewish representation and in centers of authority in the years immediately following the Holocaust. Jewish groups vied for the right to speak for world Jewry generally and in particular, for those Jewish populations, such as Soviet Jewry, which were believed to be without a voice. It was ultimately a battle of who knew what was best for the Jews. Though the communists maintained that their allegiances lay with the working class, they too participated in the battle to win Jewish minds.

Harap concluded:

The leadership of Jewish organizations, especially, do not serve the Jewish people by persisting in gross misrepresentations of the Prague trial and the reversal in the doctors' case. Jacob Blaustein president of the American Jewish Committee, is misleading the Jewish people and not helping them to understand these events and to draw true conclusions from them when he says that the freeing of the doctors was "tactical, not fundamental, and an act of temporary strategy" (New York Times, April 10). For the basic conclusion that must be drawn from the exposure of the false charges against the doctors is that no one can attempt to foment "national antagonism" in the Soviet Union and get away with it. [. . .] Instead of making false charges of "antisemitism" against the socialist countries and calling evidence to the contrary a "tactic," Jewish leaders and

other American leaders should urge decisive handling of our own racists and anti-Semites. The American people should not be deceived by the propaganda about "Soviet antisemitism" but should see to it that the perpetrators of racism and antisemitism at home are called to account.\(^{83}\)

To explain how individuals such as Harap persisted in their loyalties to the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Democracies in the face of what seemed to be stark evidence of an officially sanctioned antisemitic agenda as nothing more than blind faith is to miss the complex relationship that communists, Jewish and non-Jewish, had with the Party and communist ideology. As Tony Judt has written:

> We forget, if we are not careful, the charged atmosphere of these years and the complicated and multiple motives people had for choosing to remain on the Left—and thus, for many, on the side of the communists, however uncomfortable the outcome. This alone was sufficient to promote an unhealthy self-censorship, blinding men and women to the evidence before their eyes. But because we are dealing here with people for whom simple denial was not sufficient, they sought to justify their allegiance and their continuing faith through a complex of arguments and explanations, addressed, one sometimes feels, less at their readers than to themselves.\(^{84}\)

Similarly, to dismiss the Jewish communist’s inability to discern what was to others the blatant anti-Jewish activities of Stalin in his final months ignores the role which Jewishness and Jewish identity played in the lives of Jewish communists. The adoption of communist ideology did not mean the end of one’s Jewish identity. Jewish communists published in specifically Jewish periodicals, associated with other Jewish communists and communist sympathizers, and continued to remain engaged in Jewish affairs. To be sure, some Jewish communists joined the Party in order to deny or negate their Jewish origins. However, many others continued to hold some type of Jewish self-identification. They yearned for a world not in which Jews would cease to exist as a people, but in which “being Jewish” simply wouldn’t matter.

**Conclusions**

The wave of Soviet antisemitism embodied in the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot affected Jews far beyond the reach of Soviet rule. Jews in the non-communist world were deeply engaged with events taking place behind the Iron Curtain. They believed the Prague Purges and Doctors’ Plot to be a “Jewish matter,” or at the very least, a situation that concerned Jews directly across the globe.

Political affiliations often guided the ways in which Jewish populations weighed and considered the news emanating from the East. Traditional opponents of communism, such as some Zionists, socialists, liberals, and conservatives, all found in the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism yet more proof of communism’s hypocrisy and ideological corruption. The ways in which such groups condemned the rise of antisemitism in the Peoples’ Democracies and in the Soviet Union varied according to their specific ideological grievances and historical precedents. A shared disapproval of Soviet actions, however, did not mean that Jewish groups set aside

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\(^{83}\) Harap, “Release of the Moscow Doctors,” 5-7.

\(^{84}\) Judt, 114.
their political differences in a unified effort to save Soviet Jewry. To the contrary, Soviet
antisemitism was for many Jews a political moment in which whole ideologies were at stake.

Though concern for Soviet Jewry was undoubtedly paramount, the political
ramifications of Soviet antisemitism among Jews had more to do with circumstances and
realities in the West than events taking place in the East. The adoption of antisemitism by
Soviet authorities could have a range of implications for Jews in the non-communist world. It
could serve to sever the mental link that many held between Jews and communism or
conversely, it could strengthen the notion that Jews were disloyal, traitorous, and purposely
segregated themselves from the societies and nations in which they dwelled. In the wake of
Prague and Moscow, Jewish groups sought to direct the flow of public opinion and in doing so,
use Soviet antisemitism to bolster the status of Jews in Cold War politics.

If Jews could in reality do little for their co-religionists behind the Iron Curtain, then they
could, at the very least, turn the crisis of Soviet antisemitism into a political victory for Jews in
the West. Zionists could openly and boldly declare their allegiance to the western democracies.
The Soviets, in their view, had left them little choice. Bundists, Jewish labor, and liberals more
generally could at last differentiate themselves from the communists who they vehemently
opposed, but with whom they were often associated. If orchestrated correctly, Jews could be
shown as communism’s latest victim and in doing so, put an end once and for all to the myth
that in every Jew lurked a communist. This mission was to be as much an external endeavor in
changing public opinion as it was an internal campaign to convince Jews of communism’s, as
they viewed it, degeneracy.

Jewish communists, in their attempts to defend Soviet actions, were reviled as much as
the Czech and Soviet authorities responsible for carrying out the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot.
They were viewed as traitors to their own people, to freedom and democracy, and ultimately to
their own deluded consciences. While Jewish communists were wrong in their assessment of
conditions for Jews behind the Iron Curtain, their convictions grew out of a genuine belief that
Jews thrived in communist societies. Like their non-communist co-religionists, they believed
that they knew what was best for the Jews. To be sure, their relationship with Judaism and
Jewishness was complex and fraught with contradictions, but their support for the Soviet Union
derived in part from a desire to rid the world of antisemitism and all forms of racial hatred. In
the wake of the Holocaust, these sentiments would be undoubtedly amplified. Despite the fact
that Soviet authorities downplayed the uniqueness of Jewish suffering during the Second World
War, Jewish communists, in the West, as Hasia Diner has argued, also co-opted the Holocaust
as part of their strategy to defend their ongoing belief in the Soviet Union.85

The tragedy of the Holocaust and the creation of Israel compelled many Jews to speak
out and wield whatever political influence they possessed. Politics was, for some, the only
viable weapon they had in the face of the potential catastrophe presented in Soviet
antisemitism. Some turned toward the new State of Israel as the legitimate political voice of
world Jewry. Others felt that the Jewish state had complicated the ways in which Jews could
respond to specifically Jewish crises. The political fallout from the Slansky Affair and Doctors’
Plot, though international in scope, was for Jews a moment of personal introspection. Some

85 Hasia Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence After the
political identities were put to the test, others were reaffirmed, while others still were discredited and vehemently attacked. In the face of the existence of a sovereign Jewish nation, a socialist paradise, and an abundance of thriving democracies, Jews continued to engage with and consult a host of political philosophies as they sought to resolve the important issues of their day.
Chapter Four: The “State” of the Trial

In the 1949 era we had to rely upon the good will of political figures and diplomats to make our case heard. We still cherish and treasure their good will, especially now that its gift is not bound up in immediate political exigencies. But for political action, we now rely upon the State of Israel.¹

The most important political drama of the year, as far as Israelis are concerned, took place outside Israel, not within. The Prague "trial" of communists was a grave blow to Israelis, a blow as terrible as Hitler murdering the Jews…²

The Slansky Trial was in every respect a transnational Jewish affair. It aroused a host of intense reactions across a wide spectrum of Jewish communities. Whether religious or secular, Zionist or anti-Zionist, communist or socialist, liberal or conservative, Jews, both as individuals and as communal agents, viewed the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism as an important, if not critical, moment in the lives of post-Holocaust Jewry.

The events of 1952 and 1953 brought into sharp focus some of the fundamental challenges confronting Jews in the years immediately following the Second World War. Jews were in many respects engaged in the process of reshaping their identities in the wake of genocide and with the realization of a sovereign Jewish state. The crisis was simultaneously a moment of internal and external turmoil, affecting Jews on the personal, communal, national, and international level.

Jews were, of course, no strangers to crises, and as such, possessed a host of historical precedents upon which they could draw as they sought to cope with the situation of Jews in the East. The Holocaust, however, as previously discussed, greatly altered the meaning and impact of antisemitism, especially when exercised at the state level. Though some Jews called for caution in evaluating the meaning and scope of events taking place behind the Iron Curtain, many more felt that the Nazi genocide had turned such things as “time” and “careful introspection” into luxuries that world Jewry could not afford. No longer could Jews claim ignorance or dismiss antisemitic rhetoric wielded by a totalitarian regime as little more than political pandering. Too many Jews and non-Jews alike had failed to see that Hitler had meant what he said, and as a result, a number of Jews felt that there was no reaction too extreme when confronting antisemitic outbursts.

The Slansky Affair and the general wave of Soviet antisemitism which followed, however, possessed an historically unprecedented dimension. The new State of Israel turned what would have been the dominion of Jewish organizations and individual Jewish leaders into a matter of state. The ways in which Jews living in Israel and Diasporic Jewry experienced the Prague purges and the Doctors’ Plot were in many ways similar. Like their diasporic counterparts, Israeli Jews feared for the safety and welfare of their co-religionists in the East. They too approached the problem of Soviet antisemitism through a host of ideological channels and as a result, held varying opinions as how to best tackle the crisis at hand.

Jews living in the new State of Israel, however, found themselves not merely attacked as Jews, but as Israelis. Slansky and his co-defendants stood accused as agents of Israeli espionage. They were said to be spies working on behalf of the Israeli, American, and British governments as part of a Zionist-led conspiracy to cripple socialism in Czechoslovakia and generally destabilize the newly formed Soviet Bloc. The Israeli legation in Prague was described as having facilitated the conspiracy and of having generally abused its diplomatic status. Not all Israelis were Zionists, but their national affiliation alone drew them into the crisis at hand in a far more personal way than even Zionists in the Diaspora, who felt similarly attacked for their Jewish identity and their Zionist ideology. As one Israeli commentator put it, “If Jews elsewhere were shaken by the Czech ordeals, Israeli Jews were positively horrified and outraged. [...] all Jewish events register more violently in Israel then elsewhere, there being a strong qualitative and quantitative concentration of Jewish feeling in this country; and everything that happens to Jews, Hitler or Stalin, Mussolini or Gottwald, is projected super life size on to the screen of Israel’s political Cinerama.”

The crisis aroused by Soviet antisemitism posed significant challenges to the new Jewish state. Just as Jews in the Diaspora struggled to understand their relationship to Israel and the role this new Jewish entity would play in Jewish affairs more generally, there existed no consensus within the state apparatus and in Israeli society at large as to what extent the new Jewish state was obliged to represent or even capable of representing Jewish interests in the Diaspora. The Zionist movement had achieved its goal of creating a Jewish nation-state, but Jewish nationality remained a complicated reality. In the case of the Slansky Trial, Israeli authorities were directly implicated in the charges. In the Case of the Moscow Doctors, Zionism, the U.S., and the Jewish philanthropic organization of the American Joint Distribution Committee were named as part of the conspiracy. The charges raised in the Doctors’ Plot refrained from directly mentioning the State of Israel. As such, Israeli authorities struggled to understand what responsibilities, if any, they had concerning non-Israeli Jews.

It was crucial for Israel to maintain diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union if it was to have any hope of intervening on the part of Iron Curtain Jewry. As a result, Israeli authorities encountered the frustrations and limitations of diplomatic norms. Sovereignty had afforded the Jewish people a level of political agency they had not known in the Diaspora. Sovereignty and political power, however, did not ensure complete freedom of action. As a relatively new and small state, Israel found itself highly restrained both geographically and ideologically. The situation of Iron Curtain Jewry not only forced the new Israeli state to grapple with the limits and character of its power in global Jewish affairs, but brought to the forefront its restrictions as an agent on the international scene. “Situated in the most crucially sensitive spot of the clashing interests and competitive expansion spheres of the West and the East [declared one Jewish commentator], Israel now finds itself in a situation fraught with great difficulties and acute danger. Tragically, this situation is the infliction of geography and history, congenital facts, as it were, which cannot be changed.”

3 “Communist Jew Bating Hits Israelis.”
4 Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, “Comments and Opinions: Israel Between the West and the East,” The Jewish Spectator April 1953: 3-4.
As well as having direct and immediate international implications, the rise of Soviet antisemitism also proved domestically challenging for the new Israeli state. Though small in number, Israeli state authorities were unsure of how to deal with the Israeli Communist Party who in the wake of the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot was seen to be in the service of an increasingly hostile state. Just as Soviet authorities accused Jews of having “cosmopolitan” tendencies because of their connections with other Jews internationally, Israeli leaders saw Israeli communists as potentially working on behalf of another state whose interests seemed increasingly in opposition to that of Israel and the Jewish people more broadly. More difficult, however, within Israeli society at large was the situation of Israel’s Mapam Party who maintained its dual adherence to Zionism and revolutionary socialism. While not formally members of the Communist Party, they supported the Soviet regime and attempted to serve as a bridge between Zionism and communism. Moreover, they had played an important role in the founding of the Jewish state and held significant sway within the Kibbutz movement. In the first elections to the Israeli Knesset held in 1949, Mapam received the second largest percentage of votes after Mapai (Social Democrats) and held 19 seats in the new parliament. Though their numbers dropped somewhat in the second Knesset elections to 15 seats, they remained an important political voice throughout the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot. More than any other political entity, Israel’s Mapam Party found in the events of 1952 and 1953 an irremediable turning point. Their ideological beliefs were shaken to the core, and most of them were forced to choose between Zionism and communism.

Reaction to Prague

The Israeli government and the population more generally lost no time in reacting to the Slansky Affair. Just days after the trial opened in Prague, the Knesset held a session to debate the meaning and consequences of the Slansky Trial. According to one Israeli commentator, “the Knesset was crowded and tense as it had not been for many months, and in the dark, cold and rainy streets outside, people stood glued to the sidewalks to snatch some of the words of speakers which might be carried beyond the precincts of the House.” Israelis awaited the response of their government to the accusations raised against it during the trial. In another account, Commentary contributor, Mark Alexander, wrote that:

Large crowds pressed around the radios in cafe and restaurants, and in the dining halls of the kibbutzim. The latest news from Prague became the sole topic of conversation. By eight or nine on Sunday morning, and on subsequent days, most newspapers were sold out... it became obvious that citizens of Israel looked to their government for an unambiguous answer to this new attack on the Jews.

As the Knesset began to address the situation aroused by events in Prague, several themes quickly emerged. Shock over the trial stemmed in part from the falsehoods pronounced against the government of Israel and that such accusations came not from a traditionally hostile nation, but from the Czechs who were viewed as historically democratic, philosemitic, and early

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5 Knesset Elections Results-First Kneset, Mar. 2012
supporters of the new Jewish state. Also prominent in the early debates about Prague were wide-scale criticisms of Mapam, who upheld the guilty verdict of the Slansky defendants while rejecting the guilt of Mordechai Oren, Israeli citizen and Mapam delegate detained by Czechoslovak authorities and deeply implicated in the Slansky anti-state conspiracy.

On November 24, 1952, Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett declared before the Knesset a scathing condemnation of the trial that had just begun in Prague. Sharett began, “The entire world stands these days once more aghast at a farce in the form of a legal trial performed this time on the stage of a Czechoslovak court. Leaders of a party and heads of a regime who but yesterday stood at the helm, shaping the policies of their country and dominating her destinies, are today exhibited as a treacherous band of conspirators, swindlers, and saboteurs.” Sharett did not hesitate in denouncing the trial as “antisemitic.” He continued:

In one respect the shameful spectacle constitutes an innovation. The majority of the accused are Jews, and the prosecution has spared no pains in highlighting their racial origin and in tracing their alleged crimes to this prime cause. The indictment, the court proceedings themselves, as well as the publicity given to the trial in the official Czechoslovak press, are all permeated with a spirit of rabid anti-Semitism. The staging of the trial is replete with propagandist effects of anti-Semitic incitement in the undiluted tradition of Nazism. The prosecution has unfolded a dark screed of criminal plotting, of acts of conspiracy and subversion, which these Jewish enemies of the Czechoslovak people have either perpetrated or sought to perpetrate.

Finally, Sharett took up the accusations raised against the Israeli government. He declared:

libelous allegations have been made against Ministers and accredited representatives of the Government of Israel, charging them with having conspired with the enemies of Czechoslovakia, both within the country and outside, and seeking to encompass the destruction of her economy and to undermine her security. The Government of Israel holds it utterly superfluous to attempt any detailed and factual denial of the tissue of libels and fabrications regarding activities of its members and emissaries, produced by the fertile imagination of the Czechoslovak Secret Police and Public Prosecution. These slanders are self-contradictory in the light of simple reason. Their falseness is obvious to the naked eye, denied as they are by patent facts.

In addition to expressing his indignation at the accusations levied against the government of Israel, Sharett declared his sadness and shock, felt widely throughout Israeli society, that the perpetrators of this latest anti-Jewish activity were not traditional enemies of the Jews, but the highly esteemed Czechoslovak people.

Israel [declared Sharett] has always entertained a sincere sympathy for the Czechoslovak people. Israel has sought to establish and foster friendly relations with the present Czechoslovak State. Israel obtained valuable aid from Czechoslovakia during her War of Liberation for which she paid in full. This was arranged with the full knowledge

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9 “The Prague Trial,” Jewish Agency Digest.
10 “The Prague Trial,” Jewish Agency Digest.
and authority of the heads of the Czechoslovak State, some of whom still occupy high
seats of power.\footnote{11}{“The Prague Trial,” Jewish Agency Digest.}

Sharett continued that the military aid which Czechoslovakia had given to the Israeli
government in its early days of existence had been mutually undertaken by representatives of
Czech and Israeli authorities and that no deception or “trickery” had taken place during the
transaction. “None of these operations [argued Sharett] was carried in the dark; they were all
carried out in broad daylight. [. . .] it was an arrangement freely entered into for mutual
benefit.\footnote{12}{“The Prague Trial,” Jewish Agency Digest.}

Concluding his speech, Sharett exclaimed:

History has already passed judgment upon those regimes that had resource to the
bogey of antisemitism in order to divert the attention of the masses of their people
from their own troubles and the failures of their rulers, and to turn their hatred towards
the Jews chosen as scapegoats. The liberation of Czechoslovakia from Hitler's Storm
Troopers stands desecrated before the whole world by this attempt to revive his vile
spirit within her borders.

This campaign of vilification is calculated to serve as a threat to the Jews of
Czechoslovakia and of the neighbouring countries. Its object is to discredit the State of
Israel in their eyes and to stamp out from their hearts their Jewish pride. It seeks to
make them hated by the masses around them and to provide in advance justification for
any future acts of discrimination and persecution of which many may become victims.
In this hour our hearts are with the multitudes of our Jewish brethren, cut off from the
main body of the Jewish people, and from any contact with the State of Israel — those
who are forced to bear the burden of their destiny in isolation and solitude. Our voice
may not reach them, but our hearts are heavy with anxiety for them, for their well-
being, and their future fate.

The Prague trial has cast a dark, ugly blot on the glorious record of friendship between
the peoples of Israel and Czechoslovakia. It has imposed a heavy, a grievous burden on
the memory of the Jewish people.\footnote{13}{“The Prague Trial,” Jewish Agency Digest.}

On the following day, November 25, 1952, the Knesset passed a resolution with
overwhelming support. In the resolution, the Israeli government expressed "its sense of shock
at the trial now proceeding in Prague, which has struck at the Jewish people, is attempting to
bring into disrepute the good name of the State of Israel, is undermining the traditional
friendship between the Czech people and the Jewish people, is endeavouring to besmirch the
Zionist Movement — the liberating movement of the Jewish people — and is exploiting the
Jewish origin of the accused as a foul and dangerous means of propaganda."\footnote{14}{“The Prague Trial,” Jewish Agency Digest.}

During the same
Knesset debate, Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, denounced Mapam for its inconsistencies
and hypocritical stance regarding the Prague trial. While he strongly disapproved of the attitude
taken by Israel’s Communist Party regarding the Slansky Trial, he maintained that they were at
least consistent in their beliefs. They accepted both the guilt of Slansky and his co-defendants
as well as that of Mapam delegate, Mordechai Oren. Mapam, on the other hand, argued Ben-Gurion, maintained Oren’s innocence simply because he was one of their own. They supported, according to Ben-Gurion, those aspects of Soviet rule which they deemed acceptable and rejected those which did not fit into their world view.

Diplomatic events unfolded quickly throughout the month of December. On December 6 the Czechoslovak government asked for the recall of Ariye Kubovy, Israel representative in Prague and Warsaw. Three days later, Poland followed suit and named Dr. Kubovy persona non grata. In its official note to the State of Israel calling for Dr. Kubovy’s exit from Prague, the Czechoslovak government declared:

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Czechoslovak Republic and Israel in 1948, the activities of the Israel Legation in Prague as well as those of its members have far exceeded the limits set for diplomatic activities by international law and established usages.

The members of the Israel Legation have ignored the principle that their mission in Czechoslovakia consisted solely in representing the State of Israel and the interest of its citizens. In contradiction of this principle and of international usage, the members of the Legation of Israel arrogated to themselves the right to intervene systematically in the affairs of Czechoslovak nationals, claiming as a basis for this that it was a matter of persons of the Jewish faith. This inadmissible and grave interference on the part of the Legation of Israel in the internal affairs of Czechoslovakia not only did not cease, but became even more frequent and unheard of after the arrival of the Minister of Israel, Dr. A. Kubovy.  

In addition to accusing Dr. Kubovy of attempting to assist Czech Jews in their efforts to emigrate to Israel, the Czechoslovak state further stated that Mordechai Oren, Mapam delegate in Eastern Europe, had admitted to attempting to conceal the espionage activities of Slansky and his co-defendants on Kubovy’s orders. As a result, the Czechoslovak note concluded, “In view of the above, the Government of Czechoslovakia sees itself obliged to declare that Dr. Kubovy is considered persona non grata and demands his immediate recall from the post of Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of Israel which he occupies in the Republic of Czechoslovakia.”

In its official response to the Czechoslovak note, after refuting the accusations made against Kubovy and the Israeli government, Israeli authorities declared that:

The Government of Israel rejects unreservedly, and with the utmost vigour, the note of the Czechoslovak Government demanding the recall of Dr. Kubovy, as devoid of foundation and based on allegations contrary to the truth. The Government of Israel holds that the behaviour of Dr. Kubovy was scrupulously correct and highly appreciates the good sense and devotion which he applied to the discharge of his task.

The Israeli retort continued:

As has been pointed out, the note of the Czechoslovak Government is largely based on "evidence" heard in the course of the Slansky Trial. The Government of Israel cannot,

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16 “Exchange of Notes with Prague.”
17 “Exchange of Notes with Prague.”
therefore, conclude the present note without, expressing its amazement and indignation at some of the salient features of this trial — the charges hurled against the State of Israel, its Government and its Diplomatic representatives, the slanders cast upon the Zionist movement, and the patently anti-Semitic character of the proceedings. The Czechoslovak judicial authorities and organs of information found it necessary to underline the Jewish origin of most of the accused; to announce that a certain person "admitted" his Jewish origin, as though this were something reprehensible; and to elicit from some of the accused statements attributing the crimes with which they had been charged to their Jewish origin. The indictment, the so-called admission and evidence, as well as the prosecutor summary, read like a new edition of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," fabricated in their time by the secret police of Tsarist Russia. Zionism — the movement of the liberation of the Jewish people, renowned for its constructive character — was represented through all the phases of the trial as a reactionary force of the most pernicious kind, bent upon dark and subversive plotting.

At its conclusion, the note proclaimed:
The people of Israel, in common with Jews throughout the world, have always been animated by feelings of sincere friendship for the Czechoslovak nation, of deep sympathy for its struggles for freedom; and of joy in its liberation. At the same time, the leaders of modern Czechoslovakia — Masaryk, onward — have upheld Zionism as one of the most progressive and creative movements of the present era, and gave full support of its aim of achieving for the martyred Jewish people security and freedom in its own country. Those at present at the helm of the Czechoslovak Republic expressed profound understanding for the tragedy inflicted upon the Jews of Europe by Nazi barbarism and hailed the emergence of the State of Israel as a great act of restitution and liberation. During its War of Independence, Israel received invaluable help from Czechoslovakia, the moral and practical importance of which is in no way diminished by the fact that it was duly paid for. Such having been only so recently the attitude of Czechoslovakia to Israel, it is profoundly regrettable that during the past two years the notes of the Czechoslovak Foreign Affairs and the administrative and judicial decisions of the Czechoslovak authorities reflected utterly different, and ever less friendly conceptions. [...] The people of Israel are deeply shocked by the brutal affront thus caused to its national self-respect and by the violent hostility with which its feelings of friendship towards the Czechoslovak people have been reciprocated.

Despite the hostile tone of both notes, Israelis and Jews more generally continued to attribute the Slansky Trial and the request for Kubovy’s recall to the country’s communist leadership rather than the Czech people. The Czech people were often described as victims of the same totalitarian rule which resulted in the Slansky Trial and the falsehoods laid against the Jewish people, the Zionist movement, and the State of Israel. Just a day after the Czech note, declaring Kubovy persona non grata, was received, the Israeli legation in Prague cabled the following to the East European Division of the Israeli Foreign ministry:

18 "Exchange of Notes with Prague."
19 "Exchange of Notes with Prague."
the Czechs are clearly extremely sensitive to charges of antisemitism, and that Israeli and Western opinion errs in thinking that the general public in Czechoslovakia accepts the trial at face value and believes in the truth of the charges. According to information available to the Legation, the overwhelming majority of the public reacted with sneers and derision and is amazed that the country has sunk so low as to have to make use of the weapon of antisemitism. The Legation staff asks that this point be stressed in all of the propaganda directed against the trial.20

Though recent scholarship, such as that conducted by Kevin McDermott21, demonstrates that antisemitic sentiments were far more widespread among the Czech population than previously believed to be, Jews, at the time of the Slansky Affair, tended to draw a line between the Czech people and the communist state which ruled the country. While vociferously condemning the Czechoslovak authorities in one breath for the antisemitic character of the Prague trial, Jews, in the next moment, could lavishly praise the Czech people for their historic commitment to building democracy and for their equitable treatment of the Jews. If the Czechs themselves were not to blame, then the obvious question remained – who was responsible for the crisis at hand? It did not take long for Jewish entities in the Diaspora and in Israel to conclude that Moscow had been intimately connected with the events taking place in Prague.

Speaking at the Jewish Labor Committee’s December 21 rally to protest the Prague trial, Adolf Held, JLC Chairman, boldly declared:

the trial was held in the Czech language, the decision was written in the Kremlin. Although the sentence was carried out in Prague, the orders came from the hands which shook Von Ribbentrop’s in 1939. [...] The doomed died not for their real crimes against their people, but for their complicity in failing to carry out properly the enslavement of their own people.

We do not shed tears for those who were hanged in the Czech prison. They helped create the atmosphere for their own doom. They signed their own death warrants when they delivered the young, vigorous Czech Republic of Thomas Masaryk and Eduard Benes to the Soviet Union.22

Though he questioned to what extent Soviet authorities were aware of the trial’s antisemitic and anti-Israel character, Kubovy stated in a telegram to the Israeli Foreign Ministry just one day after the trial had opened that he did not doubt that the trial had been closely coordinated with authorities in Moscow.23 At this stage, Israeli authorities, while suspicious of Soviet involvement in the trial, refrained from directing any criticisms toward the Soviet Union itself. Until the announcement of the Doctors’ Plot on January 13, 1953, the matter remained one between Israel and the Czechoslovak Republic.

22 Speech by Adolf Held, Jewish Labor Committee Rally 21 Dec. 1952, Jewish Labor Committee, Box 62, Folder 2, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
23 A. Kubovy (Prague) to the East European Division (Israel), 21 Nov. 1952 in Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel, vol. 8, 300.
Although Israel-Soviet relations remained relatively cordial until January 1953, the Prague trial placed increasing levels of strain on relations between Israel and the whole of the Cominform world. In a telegram issued to its missions abroad, the Israeli Foreign Ministry set forth a series of instructions concerning how Israeli diplomats were to comport themselves in the presence of Cominform diplomats. Israeli diplomats were to avoid contact with Soviet and satellite representatives within the limits of normal diplomatic courtesy, and if given the opportunity, were to express Israeli displeasure at the trial in Prague.

Soviet authorities were aware of the growing anti-Soviet sentiment spreading throughout Israel. In a transmission dated December 8, 1952, Soviet ambassador to Israel, Pavel Ershov, wrote to the U.S.S.R. Foreign Ministry, “During the past week the anti-Soviet and anti-communist campaign in Israel has intensified. The reactionary press publishes articles against the Soviet Union every day.” He reported that Israel’s Mapai Party had organized hundreds of rallies throughout the country in protest of the Prague trial of, as Ershov put it, “the gang of conspirators and agents of American imperialism.” He also relayed that a mock trial had been held in Tel Aviv in which the U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia, and the Communist Party of Israel were all tried and found guilty of heinous crimes against the Jews and humanity in general. Except for Al Ha Mishmar and Kol Ha’am, the official organs of Mapam and Israel’s Communist Party respectively, condemnations of Czech and Soviet leaders could be found daily throughout Israeli periodicals.

Though Israeli authorities remained publicly silent on the matter of Soviet involvement with the Prague Affair, the sentiment that what had transpired in Prague had been either directly ordered or, at the very least, sanctioned by Moscow, grew increasingly pronounced as 1952 came to a close. Even before the announcement of the Doctors’ Plot, Jews grew anxious regarding Israel’s stance on how to proceed as far as the U.S.S.R. was concerned. In a communiqué between Abba Eben, head of the Israeli delegation to the U.N., and Ben-Gurion, Eben set forth the question as to whether Israel should condemn Soviet antisemitism as a permanent ideological shift and thereby compare it to that perpetrated by the Nazis or to condemn the Prague trial as an isolated incident of antisemitism. Eben argued that both actions would have serious diplomatic implications for the young Jewish state, but that the latter stance would afford Israel a marginally freer position vis-à-vis the Cold War. In condemning Soviet authorities as inherently antisemitic, Eben feared that Israel ran the risk of declaring, even if unofficially, its loyalties to the West. Ben-Gurion agreed with Eben’s analysis and in doing so, attempted to, at least nominally, maintain Israel’s neutrality in the struggle between East and West.

The Doctors’ Plot

Before either Eben or Ben-Gurion could make their views known to the public at large, they were confronted with, as far as the State of Israel was concerned, an even graver situation. On January 13, Soviet authorities reported that they had uncovered a treasonous plot in which

25 A. Eben to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jan. 1953 in Documents on Israeli-Soviet relations, 849.
nine Moscow doctors had conspired to murder Soviet leaders in their care. Six of the nine doctors were of Jewish descent and were accused of having acted on behalf of the U.S. government and the American Joint Distribution Committee. The Joint was a Jewish relief agency that had not operated in the Soviet Union since the 1930s and had ceased its operations in all the satellite countries except Hungary. The plot also accused well-known Yiddish actor and head of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, Solomon Mikhoels, murdered by the Soviet secret police in 1948, of having been one of the conspiracy’s leaders.²⁶

In both the Prague and Moscow cases, Israel found itself in an exceedingly complex diplomatic position. In the wake of the Slansky Trial, Israel was obliged to respond to the accusations levied by the prosecution. Israeli officials and representatives abroad had been directly implicated as part of the anti-state conspiracy for which the Slansky defendants had been condemned. Though Israeli authorities suspected that the Soviet Union was intimately connected with the events in Prague, lack of direct evidence to support this suspicion prevented the Israeli government from officially voicing this belief. When news of the Doctors’ Plot reached the non-communist world, Israeli authorities again found themselves limited in their ability to respond. Even though the Doctors’ Plot arose within the Soviet Union itself, and as such, Israelis ought to have been able to direct their indignation at the U.S.S.R., the Plot did not implicate Israeli authorities directly. Zionism, the United States, and the Joint Distribution Committee all figured prominently in the conspiratorial actions of the accused doctors. Unlike the Prague trial, however, in which the Israeli delegation in Prague and Israeli citizens were specifically named, the Doctors’ Plot did not point any accusatory fingers at the State of Israel or its representatives. As such, the course and character of Israel’s response was uncertain.

The Prague and Moscow Affairs required the new Jewish state to define its role vis-à-vis Diaspora Jewry. Just as Jews in the Diaspora struggled to understand the role that Israel would play in their lives, opinion was divided as to Israel’s obligations toward non-Israeli Jews. No single or clear answer existed to the question of to what extent “Jewish” issues were automatically “Israeli” issues. As a result, debates raged over how the Jewish state ought to proceed following the announcement of the Doctors’ Plot.

On January 14, just one day after the plot was announced, W. Eytan of the Israeli Foreign Ministry cabled Israeli missions abroad with the following:

> note that Israel is not mentioned in the Soviet announcement. No Israeli representative should come out with any statement or official reaction for the time being. [. . .] For your information, Israel is not interested in being drawn into an open conflict with Soviet Russia because it is of vital importance to maintain our position as fully as possible in Moscow and in the capitals of the satellites.²⁷

Disagreements arose between the Israeli legations in Moscow and in the satellites and the government of Israel regarding how Israel ought to proceed in the matter of the Doctors’ Affair. Israeli representatives in the Soviet Bloc argued that Israeli authorities would do well to tone down criticisms of the Soviet Union in Israeli society at large and tread very carefully in what was said about the Soviet world. In a top secret communiqué between Shmuel Eliashiv,

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²⁶ Mikhoels was reportedly killed in an automobile accident at the time of his death, but had in fact been murdered by Soviet authorities.

Israel’s Minister in Moscow, and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Eliashiv proposed a program of caution and careful investigation. While he did not doubt the plot’s anti-Jewish character, he simultaneously noted that other causes, besides naked antisemitism, might lay behind the Doctors’ Plot. He argued that the antisemitic nature of the Moscow conspiracy might be tangential to larger struggles among the Soviet leadership. Similarly, he suggested that the plot might be an excuse for the government to increase police surveillance over the population as a whole. Eliashiv ended his cable with a call for caution and patience. “One can, I think [declared Eliashiv], draw the conclusion that as long as they have not explicitly involved Israel, we, as a state — the government, the Knesset, and the legation — must refrain from reacting. Something may possibly happen here, which would dictate a forceful reaction on our part. It is also possible that this may result in a severance of relations, or in reciprocal reduction of staff of the legations to a bare minimum. But we must not rush ahead and we have to be very circumspect about doing things which may evoke a direct attack on Israel here.”

Despite Eliashiv’s hopes that Israeli-Soviet relations might be salvaged, his more dire predictions would soon be realized.

On 18 January the Knesset convened to discuss the wording of Israel’s official response to the Doctors’ Plot to be made public the following day. While the majority of representatives condemned the Case of the Moscow Doctors as anti-Jewish, debates raged over the content of Israel’s forthcoming refutation. Among the most controversial issues were whether Israel should demand that the Soviet Union permit its Jewish citizens to emigrate, whether Israel should take official actions against Israeli communists, and whether Israel should raise the question of Soviet antisemitism at the U.N.

As Israeli authorities attempted to formulate Israel’s role in the emerging crisis of Iron Curtain Jewry, they drew heavily upon historical precedents, both recent and distant, to bolster their claims. On 19 January tensions ran extremely high as Israeli representatives to the Knesset set forth their respective views of the situation taking place in the East. Speaking for a large section of Israel’s socialist and progressive parties, Meir Argov, Mapai leader of the house, declared that the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot closely resembled the Damascus blood liable of 1840 in which a number of members of Damascus’s Jewish community were accused of committing ritual murder against a Christian monk.

Argov argued that the Damascus Affair, “showed that all sections of the Jewish people were bound to each other and united by one and the same fate; it rallied European Jewry and non-Jewish liberals for the fight against calumny and injustice. Anyone reading the account of the doctors’ arrest, in Pravda and Izvestia, can easily identify the Damascus style…”

Argov further declared that the Doctors’ Plot represented only the final straw in a decades’ long process of Soviet Jewry’s cultural, spiritual, and religious annihilation at the hands of Soviet authorities. He described how the Soviet regime had closed Jewish schools, newspapers, and cultural and religious institutions and had generally severed Soviet Jewry from the main body of the world’s Jewish population and were attempting to do likewise in the satellite nations. Hence, Argov vehemently stated:

29 “In the Knesset,” Jewish Agency Digest of Press and Events 30 Jan. 1953: 393.
The terror of this regime has reached its peak, with the libel against Jewish doctors allegedly connected with an international Jewish organization. If this had happened in the days of the Nazis, what should we have called it? And when it happened in the days of Damascus and Dreyfus — what was our name for it? [. . .] If in, the days of Damascus they had argued that the seven accused who had confessed to their "guilt" were Turkish or Syrian subjects under the sovereign justice of Damascus rule alone — would that have been enough? [. . .] When in Germany they forced the yellow badge upon us, when they staged the first auto da fé of books, when they blew up synagogues — in the name of the law — was there one amongst us who argued that the Jewish citizens of Germany were Germany's business and that the judgment it passed upon them was just? Throughout Argov's speech, communists interjected with shouts of, “The Soviet Union destroyed Fascism, it saved millions of Jews. What account have you with the Soviet Union?” and “It's a lie, from beginning to end.” Argov finally concluded:

We cannot engage the Soviet Union — we lack the area, the population, the equipment — We shall fight her with the conviction in our cause, with the truth of our souls, with the tragedy, of the scattered Jewish people, with the purity of the unity of world Jewry. [. . .]

The Knesseth has only one demand, one and only one solution for the scattered of Israel: Let them come to their homeland. For since Damascus, an historic and decisive fact has been established: the State of Israel. Its gates are open to all these "spies," doctors, engineers, the Jewish intelligentsia of the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary, Romania. Let them come to us. Communists jeered at what they considered to be Argov’s pathetic attempts to combat the might of the Soviet Union. They shouted “Stronger powers than you are unable to do it,” and generally mocked Argov for intimating that Israel had any hope of “defeating” Soviet intentions.

Argov’s dramatic declarations were in large measure meant for domestic consumption. In comparing the crisis of Soviet Jewry to previous episodes of persecution, Argov, in one stroke, painted the events of 1952 and 1953 as both commonplace and unique as far as Jewish history was concerned. In describing the similarities between the accusations levied against the Slansky defendants and the Moscow doctors and well-established antisemitic tropes, Argov situated the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism within a Jewish historical context. In highlighting the existence of a Jewish state, Argov differentiated the crisis of Soviet antisemitism from previous tragedies to beset the Jews. If nothing else, Israel was compelled by the precedents of history to act on behalf of all Jews, especially those beyond its borders who faced imminent danger and were unable to defend themselves. Israel, according to Argov, could not dither in its response if it was to uphold the Zionist vision of Jewish self-determination.

In addition to boldly pronouncing Israel’s commitment to the protection of Jews wherever they might live, Argov’s speech was intended to indict an internal as well as external enemy. To a great degree, his condemnatory words were directed more at Jews, members of Israel’s Communist Party and sections of Mapam, who continued to publicly maintain their support for the Soviet Union and the Peoples’ Democracies. As in the Diaspora, Jewish

30 “In the Knesset,” 393.
31 “In the Knesset,” 393.
communists and Soviet sympathizers were reviled as traitors to the Jewish people. In the case of Israel, however, supporters of the Soviet regime were viewed with increasing amounts of suspicion. Unlike in the Diaspora, where Jewish communists were described as traitors to their heritage, Israelis who openly affirmed their support of the Soviet Union were seen as potential fifth columns, actual traitors to an actual state. Following the announcement of the Doctors’ Plot, debates raged throughout Israel regarding the activity of Maki, Israel’s Communist Party. Not a few Israelis came to see members of Maki as agents of a hostile regime dwelling within their midst, and as demonstrated in Knesset debates, within Israeli trade unions, and throughout Israeli publications, called for serious restrictions on Maki’s ability to organize and act within Israeli society. Others, while suspicious of Maki’s intentions, nevertheless felt that such a move would only further provoke Soviet enmity toward Israel.

The fury which Israelis felt toward Israeli communists and some members of Mapam was evident during the January 19 Knesset debate. Following Mr. Argov’s speech, Mr. Shmuel Mikunis of Israel’s Communist Party rose to speak. His presence was met with general uproar, and the Prime Minister and other Knesset members left the room. As Mikunis began to discuss the “gang of traitorous doctors,” the audience expressed its extreme indignation. The Speaker of the House, after quieting the hall, asked Mr. Mikunis to withdraw his words, arguing that such statements could not be uttered in the Israeli Knesset. Eventually Mikunis withdrew his inflammatory words. As tensions between Israel and the Soviet Union grew, Israeli communists and Soviet sympathizers became increasingly marginalized. The Israeli communist newspaper, Kol Ha’am, was banned for ten days, and a vote was taken by the Histadruth to ban the communists. The sentiment that Israeli communists were enemies of the state, working on behalf of a hostile regime grew increasingly widespread as Israeli-Soviet relations rapidly deteriorated.

Addressing the Knesset on January 20, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion urged his fellow parliamentarians to recognize that, while condemnation of Maki might provoke Soviet authorities, Israeli communists were nonetheless subjects of Israeli law. They might act on behalf of the Soviet regime, but members of Maki were Israeli citizens. He therefore declared: It is true that Maki identifies with the Soviet Union and accepts its orders — whatever they may be — with no hesitation and criticism. It is also true that the Soviet Union, by these or other means, fosters communist movements everywhere and looks upon them as its henchmen, agents, spies, supporters and disciples. But the Soviet Union (and this goes for any other country) has no right to intervene in the internal affairs of the State of Israel, and Maki is a part not of the Soviet Union but of the State of Israel. Its members are bound by its laws (at least, they should be), and enjoy its privileges. And it is no concern of the Soviet Union whether Maki is legal or banned.32

Ben-Gurion further proclaimed:

The democracy in which we believe also obliges us to suffer communist anti-democratic propaganda and I would categorically oppose any restrictions on or discrimination against the communists, though I am aware of their deceitfulness and their threat. I was

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even always opposed, and I am also opposed today to their expulsion from the Histadruth because of their communist beliefs.

But one must distinguish between communist ideology and collaboration in vilification of Israel and the Jewish people. Russia and any other country “may” make hostile moves against another state. But this is not permitted to the citizens of the state itself. Hostility by residents of Israel against the state or against the Jewish people is a crime which must not be suffered. Restraint in this case — means relinquishing the state's sovereignty and responsibility.

And I cannot understand how the State of Israel can permit — without endangering its existence and rejecting its mission and its very nature — the existence of an organization which stands for hatred of Israel, and assisting alien forces (not organizations and not states) to disseminate the poison of a blood libel against Israel and against Zionism and against Jewish organizations. [. . .] We are powerless to prevent this heinous crime against our people by the authorities in Prague, in Romania and in Russia. But are we also powerless to act against traitors and fifth-columnists in this country. 

Ben-Gurion’s words captured the deep frustration expressed by a number of Jews, both in Israel and the Diaspora, that in combating Soviet antisemitism, the enemy was to be found within their own ranks. Ben-Gurion all but affirmed Israel’s practical inability to intervene on behalf of soviet Jewry, but it could exert power over the small number of Jewish communists who called Israel their home. What Israel could not achieve internationally, it could carry out with some degree of success domestically and thereby demonstrate, even if only symbolically, that it would not be cowed by Soviet authorities.

In his official response to the Doctors’ Plot, Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett echoed Ben-Gurion’s declaration that Israel would tolerate no action taken against the Jewish people, whether those actions were taken by a hostile state or an internal agent. His statement was read before the Knesset at its January 19 session.

Sharett declared:

On 13 January, an official communiqué was issued in Moscow concerning the detention of nine Soviet physicians, seven of whom bore recognizable Jewish names, for having ostensibly plotted and carried out abominable and shocking acts of murder at the instigation of a respected American Jewish organization, which was depicted as being a band of bloodthirsty spies. 

[. . .] This time, too, as in the Prague trial, the accusations are quite untenable. [. . .] It was no coincidence that eleven of the fourteen defendants in the Prague trial were Jewish, or that only Jewish witnesses were called in this trial. The prosecution emphasized this endlessly, drawing far-reaching conclusions from this fact. Nor is it a coincidence that seven of the nine accused in Moscow and two of their alleged "controllers" are Jews. 

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33 Ben-Gurion, 855-858.
34 Only six of the nine doctors were Jewish.
35 Address by Moshe Sharett before the Knesset, 19 Jan. 1953 in Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel, vol. 8, 28-30
In this first official response by Israel to the Case of the Moscow Doctors, Sharett made it abundantly clear that the government of Israel viewed the Slansky Trial and the Doctors’ Plot as events linked by the overt adoption of Soviet antisemitism. Despite urgings from Eliashiv to proceed with caution and refrain from condemning the doctors’ conspiracy as solely intended as an anti-Jewish measure, Sharett further declared before the Knesset:

The fact that outside the borders of that bloc the communiqué issued in Moscow is received as a total pack of lies is proof that this initiative by the authorities is meant for internal consumption only. One may conclude that its objective is, first, to sow panic in the large Jewish community of the Soviet Union and in those of its allies, and second, to prepare the masses in these countries for the possibility of official action against the Jews.  

Sharett’s statement set forth Israel as the undisputed defender of the Jews. While opinions varied throughout Israeli society concerning Israel’s role in diasporic affairs, Sharett exclaimed that, “The State of Israel cannot stand silent in the face of any attempt by any political actor whatsoever to denigrate the name of the Jewish people or in face of the threat to Jewish communities, wherever they are.” As he did so following the Prague trial, Sharett expressed that Israel had little choice in the matter. The Soviets, in defaming its Jews, the Zionist movement, and threatening the lives of its Jewish citizens, was compelled to defend the rights and safety of its “nationals.” As such, Sharett further proclaimed:

The Government of Israel has always viewed its friendly relations with the Soviet Union as one of the mainstays of its international status and as a valuable asset for the entire Jewish people. It observes with deep regret and serious concern the malignant policy of hostility towards Jews that has been officially adopted by the Soviet Union, a line that must awaken the sharpest indignation and condemnation on the part of the State of Israel and the Jewish people throughout the world.

Sharett concluded his statement by declaring that Israel would raise the matter of Soviet antisemitism before the U.N. and take all actions necessary to curb the activities of any hostile agents working against the interests of the Jewish people. This final comment was directed at Maki and sections of Mapam who continued to voice their support of the Soviet regime.

While many applauded Sharett for his bold refutation of the Prague trial and Doctors’ Plot and his declaration that Israel would not waver in its efforts to protect world Jewry, others feared that such claims would only confirm among Soviet authorities that Jews were irremediably cosmopolitans. Such individuals feared that in highlighting its responsibilities in the lives of diasporic Jewry, the State of Israel would only lend credence to the myth of Jewish disloyalty and further alienate Jews within soviet society.

Like Sharett, Ben-Gurion believed it Israel’s moral and rightful obligation to intervene on behalf of Soviet Jewry. Acknowledging Israel’s military inferiority to that of the Soviet Union, Ben-Gurion argued that words and world opinion were the only weapons available to the new state in defending the rights of Jews in the Diaspora. He acknowledged the concerns of some of

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36 Address by Sharett, 28-30.
37 Address by Sharett, 28-30.
38 Address by Sharett, 28-30.
his colleagues that in openly condemning Soviet authorities, Israel might aggravate the situation of Soviet Jewry. Notwithstanding, he declared:

I am [ ] aware of our powerlessness against this giant — and yet we cannot let this pass without reacting. There is some measure of conscience in the world, there is public opinion, and though Russia provokes and scorns the most powerful country in the free world, America, that does not mean that it is entirely indifferent to world public opinion; otherwise, it would not have joined the United Nations. On the contrary, it makes great efforts to win over public opinion — among the peoples of Asia, Africa, America, and also Western Europe. [. . .] And just as we may not boast and pretend to a greater weight and power than we [actually] have, so we must not undervalue ourselves and must proclaim who we are and wherein lies our strength. Our qualitative weight is many times greater than our quantitative weight. Both the State of Israel and world Jewry constitute a tremendous moral power, and if we can employ it in the right direction and in efficient ways, then even gigantic and brutal Russia will not be able to ignore it. And this is not only a matter of expediency. There are moments in a nation's life when an ethical command has to be obeyed even if no practical advantage can seemingly come of it. We must not be silent now. And what we began to do yesterday in the Knesset — we have to continue doing with perseverance and resolution...

Ben-Gurion was all too aware of the significance of the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot for the new Jewish state. Israeli authorities were acutely cognizant of their inability to exert any real influence over the lives of Soviet Jewry. If the Soviet Union had decided to launch an anti-Jewish campaign against its Jewish population, then Israel could do little to stop it. In its early years, however, the Jewish state did have a national image to maintain. Individuals, such as Ben-Gurion, believed the State of Israel to be responsible for all Jews, irrespective of their citizenship and whether or not they wished to be represented by Israeli authorities. Israel was to hold a monopoly, or at the very least, a strong controlling interest in world Jewish affairs. As such, its handling of the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism as seen in the Slansky and Doctors’ Affairs was paramount. In this respect, official Israeli responses to Soviet antisemitism reflected less the plight of Soviet Jewry than it did Israel’s desire to assert its claims on Jewish representation throughout the world.

To what extent Israeli words and declarations had any bearing on Soviet actions is difficult to say. What is clear, however, is that Soviet representatives in Israel paid careful attention to Israeli reactions to the Prague trial and Doctors’ Plot. In a report on the political situation in Israel, written by Soviet foreign officials, at the end of January 1953, the following message was conveyed:

A new stage in anti-Soviet hysteria began with the publication in the Soviet press on 13 January of the official report exposing the group of doctors who conducted terror, by medical means, against the leaders of the party and government and Soviet army commanders. The fact that some of these criminals are Jewish served as a pretext for vicious attacks on the U.S.S.R. [. . .] The objectives of this new anti-Soviet campaign are as follows:

39 Ben-Gurion, 855-858.
1) to convince the U.S., and particularly the new Republican administration, that the government of Israel is firmly on the side of the U.S. and that they can fully rely on its support in the execution of their aggressive plans in the Near and Middle East, and can continue to use Israel as a centre of espionage in the countries of the socialist camp.
2) to increase the activity of American Jews in fund-raising and other forms of assistance to Israel. The demand for Jewish emigration from the U.S.S.R. under circumstances in which immigration to Israel is being reduced because of economic difficulties, is merely demagogic, and is calculated to reinforce Israeli requests for “assistance.”
3) to strengthen the quite shaky position of the Mapai Party in Israel and to represent it as the chief advocate of the Jews and the chief fighter for Zionism and immigration.
4) to divert the attention of the Israeli population from the economic difficulties, which have recently increased markedly.
5) to use the increased nationalist feeling in the country in order to intensify the attack on the rights of labour, progressive organizations and above all the Communist Party of Israel.40

The reasons set forth by Soviet officials to explain the explosion of anti-Soviet sentiment following the Prague and Moscow cases closely paralleled those set forth by Israeli authorities to explain the outbreak of antisemitism within the Soviet Bloc. Both regimes believed that the slanderous campaigns underway in the other’s government and general population arose from an international desire to court certain populations and as a domestic tactic intended to distract society from the failures of government and particular political parties. Moreover, both believed that the other was using the events of 1952 and 1953 as pretexts to publicly air long held sentiments of distrust and dissatisfaction.

As far as can be discerned from their official communiqués, Soviet representatives in Israel fully believed in the veracity of the guilt of Slansky and, though they had not yet been tried, that of the Moscow doctors. As such, Israel’s dramatic refutations and accusations of Soviet antisemitism were viewed as further proof of that government’s ideological corruption. The more Israel denied the recent events behind the Iron Curtain, the more Soviet representatives in Israel believed in Israeli culpability in both the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot. Despite rising tensions, Soviet representatives in Israel, Bazarov and Shchiborin, in a message sent to Andrei Vyshinsky, Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, on January 24, declared, “In our view, we would do better to wait and see the outcome of the current hubbub in Israel.”41

The Bombing at the Soviet Legation

On February 9, 1953, Soviet official in Israel P.I. Ershov cabled the following message to the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

At 22.35 on 9 February a powerful bomb exploded on the grounds of the legation. All the glass windows were shattered as well as the window frames and the doors on the

40 Excerpt from the Political Report of the USSR Legation In Israel, 31 Jan. 1953 in Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 869-870.

41 Bazarov and Shchiborin to A. Vyshinsky, 24 Jan. 1953 in Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 862.
ground floor and first floor and some on the second floor. The wives of the minister and superintendent and the chauffeur Grishin were seriously injured; they were taken to hospital by ambulance. The legation building was damaged. […] Levavi, the deputy director-general of the Foreign Ministry, and Bentsur, the head of the East European Division, arrived within half an hour.

They tried to offer their regrets, but I did not accept their apologies and said that the explosion was a result of systematic anti-Soviet campaign and the purely perfunctory protection of the legation […]. This act of terror and sabotage against the Soviet legation in Israel is a result of the anti-Soviet campaign that has recently been conducted by the Israeli government. I ask for your permission to visit Sharett tomorrow and express an extremely stern and decisive protest. I think that after this incident we should break off diplomatic relations with the government of Israel.42

From the time of the explosion, relations between Israel and the Soviet Union deteriorated rapidly. On the following day, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the following note of apology to the U.S.S.R. legation in Tel Aviv:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs
1. Extends to the legation of the Soviet Union the deep regrets and apologies of the government of Israel for the vile crime which was perpetrated last night against the legation, its staff and its residence.
2. Declares the readiness of the government of Israel to pay compensation for the injuries and the severe damage caused.
3. Informs the legation that the following statement was published last night by the government of Israel: The government expresses its horror and revulsion at the criminal attack perpetrated tonight against the Soviet legation in Tel Aviv. Every decent citizen abhors this insane act which has harmed not only a foreign diplomatic mission but also the very soul of the state itself. Every effort will be made to expose the malefactors and once exposed they will be brought to justice immediately and duly punished. The government expresses its deep sorrow and regrets to the minister of the Soviet Union and to the staff of the legation, and in particular to those who have been injured and who are now receiving medical treatment.
4. Requests the legation to permit police experts to examine the site of the explosion in the legation courtyard as soon as possible, in the hope of finding some fragments or other clues which will facilitate the exposure of the criminals who perpetrated this despicable act against the legation.43

On February 10, Ben-Gurion, before the Knesset, condemned the bombing as a criminal act, harmful not only to its intended target, but to the State of Israel as well. He declared:

The hooligans who committed this dastardly crime are more the enemies of the State of Israel than haters of a foreign State.

if self-styled Jewish patriotism was the motive of their foul deed and if their intention was to fight for the honour of Israel — then let me say that it is they themselves who

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43 Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to U.S.S.R. Legation in Israel, 10 Feb. 1953 in Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 875.
have profaned by this senseless crime the honour of Israel. The State of Israel maintains and will continue to maintain normal relations with every peace-loving country. The missions of States, both great and small, who are accredited to our country, enjoy a special status of honour, safety, and privilege, in our midst, not only in virtue of international and Israel law and custom but also in virtue of their being the guests of the nation and the State. He who harms them harms first and foremost the honour and prestige of the State of Israel. Our State is based on the rule of law and only the responsible chosen representatives of the State may determine its domestic and foreign relations. The criminal and wicked act committed in the legation courtyard last night undermines the sovereignty of the State of Israel and besmirches the honour of the Jewish nation.\textsuperscript{44}

Though fully condemning the bombing, Ben-Gurion also made it clear in his speech that the Soviet legation had declined increased police protection offered by Israel preceding the bombing, and that Minister Ershov had denied access to the legation building to Israeli officials immediately following the explosion. After Ben-Gurion's speech, members of Mapam and Maki called for a no confidence vote for the current government and blamed the explosion on the government's inflammatory remarks regarding the Prague Trial and Doctors' Plot as well as the government's inability to ensure internal security.

In his report to Moscow concerning Ben-Gurion’s speech to the Knesset, Ershov declared that, “Ben-Gurion's statement is an obvious attempt to absolve his government from responsibility for this act of sabotage. [. . .] Ben-Gurion's statement is an attempt to exonerate the government a priori if the criminals are not arrested, which is quite possible.”\textsuperscript{45} Ershov similarly dismissed a personal note from Ben-Gurion in which he expressed his apologies over any injuries that his wife and legation staff received, as feeble attempts to prove Israel’s innocence in the matter. Ershov further stated that Israel had never offered sufficient police protection. He implied that the Israeli government had attempted to use police presence as a means of infiltrating the Soviet legation. As a result, he refused to allow plain clothes members of the secret police to enter the legation immediately following the bombing and anticipated that Israeli authorities would claim that the Soviets were intentionally slowing the progress of the bomb investigation.

Following the bombing, Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora overwhelmingly expressed their indignation over the explosion at the Soviet legation. Their condemnation of the bombing filled the opinion pages of Jewish periodicals across a spectrum of political affiliations. Like Ben-Gurion, they condemned the bomb as a violent attack whose outcome only brought shame to the new state and to the Jews as a whole. A small number of individuals, however, especially after the Soviet Union broke off relations with Israel, suspected that the Soviets themselves had planted the bomb. Such individuals believed that a regime capable of launching the trial in Prague and the impending trial of the Moscow doctors was surely capable of endangering the welfare of its own citizens to achieve desirable political ends. No evidence exists to prove that either Israeli or Soviet authorities had any foreknowledge of the bomb. The perpetrators were

\textsuperscript{44} “In the Knesset, Soviet Legation Bomb,” \textit{Jewish Agency Digest of Press and Events} 20 Feb. 1953: 479.
\textsuperscript{45} P.I. Ershov to US.S.R. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 Feb. 1953 in \textit{Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations}, 879.
never found, a fact which remained a severe impediment as Israel and the Soviet Union attempted to reestablish diplomatic relations during the summer and fall of 1953.

The Rupture

On February 12, three days after the explosion at the Soviet legation, the Soviet Union severed diplomatic ties with the State of Israel. Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Vyshinsky, called the Israel Minister in Moscow, Shmuel Eliashiv, to his office where he personally handed to Eliashiv the official Soviet note declaring its intentions to sever relations. In his diary, Vyshinsky recalled that, upon receiving the news, “Eliashiv argued that the statements of the government of Israel expressing regret for the terrorist act were not empty words but expressed the sincere conviction of the Israeli people.” In response to Eliashiv’s pleas, Vyshinsky stated, “I answered that the Israeli people and the government of Israel were completely different. There was no doubt at all that the terrorist act committed against the legation of the U.S.S.R. in Israel was the direct result of an unbridled and hostile campaign against the Soviet Union which had been conducted in Israel at the direct instigation of the Israeli government. The government of Israel bore complete responsibility for this criminal act.”

In its official note to the State of Israel, the Soviet Union declared:

On 9 February, with the blatant connivance of the police, criminals detonated a bomb on the premises of the Soviet legation in Israel. [. . .] On 10 February, the president and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent letters to the Soviet legation, in which they apologized for this evil deed, declared that the Israeli government condemned this criminal act, and said that measures were being taken to find and punish the criminals. However, in light of the well-known and indisputable fact that representatives of the government of Israel are party to the systematic kindling of hatred and incitement of hostile activities against the Soviet Union, it is perfectly clear that the statements and apologies of the government of Israel for the terrorist act of 9 February on the premises of the Soviet legation are merely a ruse, designed to cover up the traces of the crime committed against the Soviet Union and to avoid responsibility for this villainy, which rests on the government of Israel. It is not only articles published in the press of the ruling parties of Israel which aim to provoke trouble, but also speeches made in parliament by representatives of these parties and members of the government of Israel, in particular, the speech of 19 January of this year by Minister of Foreign Affairs Sharett, openly instigating hostile acts against the Soviet Union.
The terrorist act which took place on 9 February demonstrates the absence of the most basic conditions for normal diplomatic activity by the representatives of the Soviet Union in Israel.
In view of what has been said above, the Soviet government is recalling the minister of the Soviet Union and the personnel of the Soviet legation in Israel and is breaking off relations with the government of Israel.

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46 Meeting of Vyshinsky and Eliashiv, 12 Feb. 1953 in Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 882.
Simultaneously, the Soviet government declares the impossibility of permitting the continued presence of the Israeli legation in Moscow, and demands that the personnel of the legation leave the territory of the Soviet Union at once. 47

If Jews had feared for the safety of their co-religionists behind the Iron Curtain before the Israeli-Soviet rupture, their fear and anxiety grew dramatically after the Israeli legation closed its doors in Moscow. The Israeli legation in the Soviet Union, limited though it was in its capacity to assist Soviet Jews, served as a bridge between Eastern and Western Jewry. Jews believed that the severance of diplomatic relations by the Soviet Union was, in large measure, an attempt to cut Soviet Jewry off from the rest of the world’s Jewish population. Others feared that without the presence of the Israeli legation, Soviet authorities could more freely and with greater secrecy carry out persecution of its Jewish citizens. The rapidity with which the Soviet Union decided to sever its diplomatic relations with Israel suggested to a number of Jews that the bombing incident had served as a welcomed pretext for a long desired outcome.

Some Jews speculated that the beginnings of the rupture could be traced back much farther than the Slansky Affair. Such individuals referenced the virtual stoppage in emigration of Soviet and satellite Jewry to Israel in 1949 and 1950 as well as the disappearance and unknown fate of a group of well-known Yiddish writers. Though Jewish communists and Soviet sympathizers argued that Israel owed its existence to the Soviet vote in the U.N. as well as indispensable aid from the satellites, not to mention the role the Soviet Union played in liberating the labor and death camps, most Jews came to see Soviet support of Jewish nationhood as a temporary aberration driven by political expediency. As one editorial in The Jewish Frontier declared:

In order to understand the Soviet move, it is necessary to consider it within a broader context. The diplomatic break with Israel is part of the renewed communist attack on the entire Jewish people and is not guided by any rational political considerations. The Soviet accusation that the Israeli government engineered the explosion and was directly responsible for it belongs together with the other accusation that Joint Distribution Committee hired Jewish doctors in Moscow to murder Soviet leaders. The recall of the Soviet ambassador from Tel Aviv, is thus an anti-Semitic gesture, not an act of political displeasure.

The crux of the matter is that the Soviet Union never recognized Israel the Nation even though it had extended a temporary and frigidly formal recognition to Israel the State. [. . .] Considering possible future relations between Israel and the Soviet Union it is necessary to bear this crucial factor in mind. The U.S.S.R. has on occasion condescended to use Jews when it suited its convenience. But there can be no serious relations between a Jewish republic and the Soviet Union before the latter first recognizes the Jewish people. 48

On February 16, Ben-Gurion delivered an impassioned speech before the Knesset regarding the break with Moscow. He denied outright the claim made by Moscow that Israeli police forces had looked the other way, thus permitting the explosion. He maintained again

47 Note from U.S.S.R. Government to Israel Legation in Moscow, 12 Feb. 1953 in Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 882-3.
that the government of Israel had offered police protection to the legation and that the Soviet minister in Tel Aviv had rejected this offer. Ben-Gurion then went on to site incidents in which other Soviet ministers had been attacked in foreign lands. He referenced cases that had taken place in Warsaw and Riga in the 1920s and 1930s and remarked that the Soviet Union had not severed diplomatic ties with Poland and Latvia as a result. Ben-Gurion also rejected the Soviet claim that Sharett’s speech on January 19, in which he addressed the matter of the Doctors’ Plot, had in any way incited violence against the Soviet Union. He declared:

Not a single word or allusion in it may be said to constitute direct or indirect incitement to hostility towards the Soviet Union.

In that speech the Foreign Minister rejected—as was his political and moral obligation—the fabrications published in the Soviet press about Jewish physicians who ostensibly carried out abominable and shocking acts of murder in the service of a large and respected American Jewish organization and of international Zionism. On that occasion the Foreign Minister rightly stated that the Government of Israel could not remain silent while others attempted to denigrate the name of the Jewish people. In Israel we are not prepared to adopt the custom that accused persons confess to crimes they did not commit.\footnote{Ben-Gurion’s Speech to the Knesset, 16 Feb. 1953 in \textit{Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel}, Vol. 8, 90-94.}

Ben-Gurion further proclaimed:

No country is as anxious for peace in the world, peace among all nations, with no exceptions, as is the State of Israel. It is avid for peace not only because of its Jewish heritage, which mandates this, but also because of the condition of the Jewish people in the world, dispersed in both east and west, and because of the vital needs of the State of Israel to develop its land and absorb masses of immigrants—a task that can be successfully accomplished only in conditions of world peace.\footnote{Speech by Ben-Gurion, 16 Feb. 1953.}

Ben-Gurion continued by asserting that Israel did everything in its power to protect the lives and well-being of all the diplomats on Israeli soil. He condemned the use of any and all violence against such diplomatic entities regardless of motivation and intent. He again claimed that the Soviet Union maintained diplomatic relations with some of its chief enemies, such as the United States and Yugoslavia. As a result, Ben-Gurion asserted:

We can find no justification for the severance of relations in any act by the citizens of Israel and its government. Nor can we find any precedent for such a rupture in the practice of government of the Soviet Union in its dealings with other countries that, like us, have a democratic regime.

To our regret, we cannot consider the note delivered to our minister to Moscow as anything other than a further step in the campaign of hostile vituperation against the State of Israel, the Zionist movement, and world Jewry, which has been conducted in the Soviet press for some time now, and which takes the shape of an official demonstration of hostility in the Slansky Trial in Prague and in the libel published in Moscow on 13 January, which has continued unabated since then.\footnote{Speech by Ben-Gurion, 16 Feb. 1953.}
As Ben-Gurion ended his speech, he drew a distinction between his indignation as an Israeli statesman and his indignation as a Jew over the recent rupture. As the former, he expressed disappointment over the abandonment of diplomatic precedents and felt that his state had been unfairly slighted. As the latter, he experienced a grave type of terror over the fate of his co-nationals for whom he could do little to help in their time of need. The creation of a Jewish state should have made a difference as far as Jewish persecution was concerned. Ben-Gurion’s invocation of history was as much a sign of Israel’s strength as it was its weakness in its ability to serve world Jewry. He therefore concluded:

I would be failing of my moral duty if I failed to add to these remarks I have made as Prime Minister on behalf of the Government a few words in a more modest capacity of longer standing, which is more important and exalted in my eyes: that of a member of the Jewish people.

During its long journey across the stage of world history, over four thousand years, in most of the countries of the world, east and west, north and south, our people have encountered unceasing manifestations of hatred and hostility, slander and incitement, persecution and torture, extermination and massacre. But its spirit has not flagged, its determination has not weakened, and its faith has not been broken.

Is there anything we have not been accused of over the generations, from that time until this very day? Is there any pretext for which Jewish blood has not been shed? The blood of the millions slaughtered and incinerated by the Nazi murderers and their allies in the various countries of Europe still cries out to us. [. . .]

I may not know the exact motives and intentions that lie behind the anti-Jewish campaign that began in Prague and continues, through the instrumentality of all the prodigious means available to totalitarian regimes, in many other countries. But as a Jew, taught by long and bitter experience, I cannot fail to be aware of the horrible and terrifying consequences of an anti-Jewish campaign for millions of our people, the remnant of European Jewry, and perhaps not only for them. It is precisely from here, the one tiny stronghold of Jewish freedom and independence, that I must sound a warning and call to the Jews of the world, and also to human conscience wherever it exists—and it does exist in every country and nation—and also to the rulers of the mighty power that is the Soviet Union.

An anti-Jewish campaign—whatever its domestic justifications—poses an enormous danger to the safety, dignity, and lives of millions of people merely because they are Jewish.

Let not the Jews be silent in countries where they are permitted to voice their protests, out of human dignity and Jewish loyalty, against the slanders and libels leveled against the State of Israel and Zionism—the Jewish people's movement of liberation and rebirth—against Jewry, its organizations and eminent figures, its scholars and its leaders, in east and west.

And let not the voice of human conscience be silent this time. The evil that will befall millions of Jews will spread like a pestilence among other nations as well.

I call on the leaders of the Soviet Union, with all modesty as an Israeli and with full vigor as a Jew: Observe, also with respect to Israel and Jews, your declarations about the right to self-determination and about brotherhood and peace among all peoples.
May the voice of human conscience be heard throughout the world and not disappoint.\footnote{Speech by Ben-Gurion, 16 Feb. 1953.}

To be sure, Ben-Gurion’s words were politically motivated. The fall-out of the rupture between the Soviet Union and Israel would ultimately weigh heavily upon his own Mapai Party. Political theater aside, however, his final appeal captured the fear and anger circulating throughout Israeli society following the outbreak of overt Soviet antisemitism. If the Soviet Union wanted to carry out mass extermination of its Jewish citizens, there was little the new State of Israel could do to stop it. This was of course not lost on its leaders and its population at large. Powerlessness, however, compelled the new Jewish state to call upon its only true defense in a case such as that posed by the crisis of Soviet Jewry — namely, international alliances.

Also noteworthy was the reality that Ben-Gurion drew a distinction between his Israeli and Jewish identities. In doing so, he suggested that the two, while perhaps not exclusive or contradictory, were nevertheless different. He seemed to imply that as an Israeli his indignation over events taking place behind the Iron Curtain, while valid, had to be of a tempered nature. As a Jew, however, there were no limits to his anger and fear surrounding the situation of Soviet Jewry. His appeal as both Israeli and Jew suggested that the interests of both were united, but that only the former could act in an official capacity on behalf of the latter.

Following his speech, a tense debate in the Knesset ensued. Throughout the debate, the matter of Israeli neutrality emerged as a key circumstance of the present situation. As Ben-Gurion stated in his speech, because Jews remained dispersed throughout the world, in lands on either side of the Cold War, Israel had attempted to maintain neutrality in the struggle between East and West. Some members of the Knesset argued that the time for neutrality was over, and that only with the support of the United States could Israel have any hope of helping their co-religionists in the East. Others, such as members of Mapam, expressed regret that the current crisis arose, in large part, due to the fact that Israel had for years been gradually affirming its support for the West. They claimed that the breaking of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Soviet Union was the result of overt attempts by the Israeli government to court American support and more importantly, American finances. Mapamniks suggested that the only solution to the crisis at hand lay in Israel’s absolute recommitment to neutrality in global affairs. The communists blamed the rupture solely on the government of Israel and claimed that Israel had but one choice – to throw in its lot with that of the Soviet Union.

To defend his party’s decision of attempting to increase American support for the new Jewish state, Sharett declared that in America, its large Jewish population served as an asset. In the case of the Soviet Union, its Jewish population was viewed as a liability. If Israel were to grow and fulfill its Zionist mission, he claimed, the financial and political support of American Jewry was indispensible. He further asserted that no one in his party wished to deny the help that Israel obtained from the Soviet Union and the satellite nations in its creation and early survival. Rather, he stated, “But much as a baby should be grateful to the midwife, it cannot live
on that gratitude; it must get sustenance to be able to grow. Israel could not finance its immigration and development by Soviet votes in the Security Council and Assembly.”

As previously mentioned, the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism and the eventual break in diplomatic relations between Israel and the Soviet Union had little to do with the domestic situation in Israel. The Soviet Union undoubtedly looked upon Israel's increasing reliance upon the West with displeasure, but it is doubtful that this influenced the rupture in any significant way. As scholars such as Uri Bialer and Yaacov Ro’i have argued, the rise of Soviet antisemitism resulted from a complex interaction of Soviet domestic and foreign policies as well as decisions taken personally by Stalin in his final months. The demise of Israeli “neutrality,” though surely viewed unfavorably by Soviet authorities, played only a tangential role in the events of 1952 and 1953.

Jews, Israel, and the Cold War

Even before the Soviet Union broke off relations with Israel on February 12, 1953, Jews in Israel and in the West felt that the growing enmity between these two states had dramatically altered the position of Israel and the Jewish people in the Cold War. Though tensions between Israel and the Soviet world had been growing for some time before the advent of the Slansky Affair and it seemed that Israel was moving ever-closer to the West, Israel attempted to maintain an image of non-identification in the struggle between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Following the Prague trial, the Doctors’ Plot, and the diplomatic rupture between Israel and the Soviet Union, Jews came to believe that the decision between East and West had been thrust upon them by Soviet aggression. It was felt that Israel and Jews more generally had no choice but to side with the west in the face of overt Soviet antisemitism and hostility toward the new Jewish state.

The manner in which this shift in Cold War alliances was perceived varied. Some Jews welcomed the end of Israeli neutrality, while others viewed it as yet another moment in which Jews had been robbed of political agency. Others still speculated that the outcome of Israel’s identification with the West would depend on a host of factors to be determined by the actions of both Jewish and non-Jewish actors in the Cold War.

Whether or not the end of Israeli neutrality, though thoroughly apparent well before 1953, was viewed with optimism, skepticism, or lamented all together, most Jews felt that their ability to negotiate vis-à-vis the two world powers had been greatly circumscribed. Writing in Der Tog, S. Margoshes, in his daily column, declared:

it is evident that, with the Jews as well as the State of Israel having been driven into the anti-Soviet camp by the fierce unilateral action of the Soviet Union, World Jewry has, in effect, lost its bargaining position. For Jews no longer can choose between the two world blocs now contending for power: the choice has been made for them by the

53 “In the Knesset,” 27 Feb. 1953.
Soviet attacks upon Israel and the Jewish people. A similar situation was faced by the Jews the world over during the Hitler period and with disastrous results. Conversely, Margoshes argued that where the Soviet rupture had weakened the position of Jews and Israel in the struggle between East and West, Arab populations had gained the upper hand. It was often expressed that the Middle East remained an open battleground between Western democracy and Soviet communism. As such, Jews felt that in being forced into the Western camp, Israel’s loss had become the Arabs’ gain.

Writing in *The Jewish Frontier*, Middle East specialist Mark Alexander, thus declared: If the Cold War will go on, the Middle East might be expected to become one of its most important, probably its decisive battlefield. In western and southern Europe the frontiers between West and East are clearly defined. Any serious border violation would lead probably automatically, to a new world war, and there is no convincing evidence that Russia would be interested to provoke such a major incident with all its likely results at the present time or in the near future. But the situation is altogether different in the Middle East. Most countries there have no military alliances either with the West or the East; there have been frequent and extreme changes of governments and coup d’état’s, and the internal situation in many countries is far from being stable. Soviet chances to enhance its prestige and influence in this part of the world would therefore appear incomparably greater than in Europe.

Whether or not Soviet authorities would court Arab populations was irrelevant for many Jews. What mattered was that the Arab lands still had the luxury of non-alliance, and Israel did not. In severing diplomatic relations with Israel, the Soviet Union had not only denied Israel access to a large segment of world Jewry, but it had denied Israel a crucial choice on the international stage. It was, above all else, this deprivation of choice that caused some Jews to both fear and lament the break with the Soviet Union.

The Soviet move [declared one Jewish author] marks a major turn in Soviet policy. Its effects are already plain for all to see. At a stroke it has placed Israel irrevocably on the side of the West: indeed it has so circumscribed Israel’s diplomatic initiative as almost to put her in the position of a client status vis-à-vis the Western Powers. Correspondingly the Soviet move has strengthened the hands of the Arabs. Their field for diplomatic maneuver has been widened. They can flirt with the Russians if only to blackmail the West into giving them more arms for their war of revenge against Israel—and more concessions that will put Israel at the mercy of the Arabs.

Taking place at the height of the Korean War, it was not surprising that some Jews saw the situation of Israel as similar to that of Korea. As one editorial in *The Jewish Frontier* declared:

The Soviet break with Israel, and its subsequent propaganda barrage against it, has placed Israel in the unenviable position of potentially becoming a West Asian Korea. The parallels in the situation of the two countries are not far-fetched. Both Israel and South

Korea are surrounded on land by enemies. Both are the targets of implacable communist hostility.\textsuperscript{58}

Though some Jews regretted the end of Israeli non-alliance and others saw it as an opportunity for Israeli growth, few differed in the belief that Israel’s situation now depended in large part on actions taken by the U.S. and the Arab states. Concluding his article, the above editor wrote, “Some important questions at once come to mind: What will the Eisenhower administration do in this situation? Will it extend quick and substantial aid to the one truly democratic state in the Middle East? Will it say firmly to the Arab countries that the time has come for them to cease playing Russia’s game by maintaining political turmoil in a sensitive area of the globe, and to sit down at a peace table with Israel?”\textsuperscript{59}

In his article mentioned above, Dr. Margoshes also recognized the key role that the U.S. would now play in determining the position of Israel on the international stage. He wrote:

> Whether or not the West, and particularly the United States will take advantage of this situation to the hurt of Israel remains to be seen. If the nobler side of human nature asserts itself then the Soviet’s fury against the State of Israel and the Jews generally will result in increased sympathy and aid to Israel on the part of the democracies. If, on the other hand, the baser side will prevail, there will be a definite tendency to take Israel and Jews generally for granted and to follow an appeasement policy towards the Arabs, who are still in a position to choose between Western democracy and Soviet totalitarianism. The next few weeks or months will show on which course America has embarked and also which side of America’s nature has gained the upper hand in the conduct of American foreign relations.\textsuperscript{60}

Jews feared that the U.S. might not view a close alliance with Israel as an asset, but rather spurn it as an impediment to winning over Arab loyalties. It was therefore felt that while it was clear that Israel had no choice but to side with the West, it was in no way certain that the U.S. would welcome an Israeli alliance. If the U.S. decided that its relationship with the Arab population of the Middle East was more valuable than that offered by Israel, then the fledgling Jewish state would find itself in an exceedingly isolated position. In this dire situation, Israel would have neither the support of the U.S. nor the Soviet Union while being surrounded by a set of hostile governments all seeking to bring about its destruction.

Not all despaired, however, in the face of Israel’s seemingly ever-deteriorating position vis-à-vis the Cold War. Some argued that as the only outpost of true democracy in the Middle East, the United States would be obliged to come to Israel’s aid. As reported in an editorial in \textit{Pioneer Women}, Israeli Ambassador to the U.N., Abba Eben, declared, “Israel incurs the hostile menace of totalitarianism precisely because it brings the contrary doctrine of liberty into an area which seemed safe for despotism. The fact that Israel’s security is thus threatened as a result of Israel’s devotion to the democratic cause imposes a solemn moral obligation on the leading democratic states in the world. When small countries adopt resolute democratic

\textsuperscript{58} “Aid to Israel,” \textit{The Jewish Frontier} Mar. 1953: 4.
\textsuperscript{59} “Aid to Israel,” 4.
\textsuperscript{60} Margoshes, 20 April 1953.
attitudes, they may justly expect that the dangers they thus incur will be offset by the increased solidarity of their democratic friends with them.\textsuperscript{61}

In a communiqué between Arye Levavi, Deputy Director General of the Israel Foreign Ministry, and Walter Eytan, Director General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Levavi questioned the accuracy of the widely held sentiment that the Soviet break had weakened Israel’s diplomatic strength. He asserted:

The opinion prevails that the shift in Soviet policy regarding Israel necessarily weakens our position vis-à-vis the West. Thus, communist policy demonstrates now that Israel has no alternative but to side with the West, while the Arabs are free to manoeuvre and the West is therefore obliged to appease them in order to prevent the spread of communist influence among them. I think that this thesis is open to argument from many aspects.\textsuperscript{62}

Levavi set forth the following explanations as to why Israel’s diplomatic situation was not as bleak as many believed it to be. He cited the reality that long before the severance of relations, Israel’s economic dependence on the West was well-known. In this respect, Israel had long since been allied with the West despite its claims of neutrality and non-identification. He continued to argue that despite fears that the Soviets would use their attack on Israel and the Jewish people as a means of courting Arab support, no evidence could yet be found to confirm such claims. Levavi further contended that there was very little appeal of communism among Arab populations. He felt it very unlikely that a communist regime would be able to seize power even in the most unstable of the region’s countries. Among Israelis, however, there existed a sizable population that either currently and actively supported the Soviet regime or had previously done so. He felt that the Soviet campaigns against Slansky and the Moscow doctors had done a great deal to weaken the influence of Soviet ideology among Israelis, but given the right circumstances, such attitudes could again change. If the U.S. decided to support the Arabs at the expense of Israel, wrote Levavi, then it is quite possible that Israelis could see the events of 1952 and 1953 as temporary hitches in an otherwise robust relationship between Israel, the Jewish people, and the Soviet Union. He similarly speculated that the Soviets would be all too ready to seize upon any such change in Israeli sentiment.

Levavi thus argued that if this reality were made known to the U.S. and other western powers, they might be persuaded to act on behalf of Israel and accept its alliance as a strong foothold in the Middle East rather than an inconvenient liability. While Levavi maintained that the Israeli rupture with the Soviet Union had indeed confirmed Israel’s position within the Western camp, he nevertheless saw it as a moment of opportunity in which Israel could strongly state its case before the U.S. and West more generally. He thus concluded:

Possibly, if we put forward such considerations, even if it is done in an unassertive way and as a matter for speculation — we shall be pointing to that aspect of the situation which is often overlooked by Western statesmen. We shall restore the balance where necessary and work for the creation of a conceptual political climate more favourable for dealing with our various concrete aspirations in this sphere.\textsuperscript{63}


\textsuperscript{63} Levavi to Eytan, 868.
Echoing these sentiments, journalist and well-known Christian Zionist, Pierre Van Paassen, declared in an open letter printed in *The Reconstructionist*:

We all know that the people of Israel, in their immense majority, are on America's side in the colossal tug of war between the U.S.S.R. and our own country. Why then does the Israel foreign office not frankly acknowledge the existence of this state of affairs? Why keep up the foolish and dangerous game of playing off, quite like the Arabs incidentally, our State Department against the Kremlin? I think America and the ZOA [Zionist Organization of America] deserve better from Israel than that!64

Van Paassen continued:

We hear it frequently said that Israel is "a bulwark" or "an advance guard" of American democracy in the Near East. Do we ever take into account that under Israel's policy of non-identification, a Soviet speaker in Moscow might, with almost equal justification, say that Israel is a bulwark of Soviet democracy?65

In Paassen's view, Israel’s policy of non-identification was, as he put it, “ambiguous, unrealistic and downright infantile.” Like Levavi, Paassen saw the severance of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union as an opportunity for Israel to proclaim its values and fundamental commitment to democracy. He viewed the policy of non-alliance as the largest impediment to Israeli growth and expansion. Paassen argued that Israeli identification with the West would free Zionist actors in the United States and elsewhere to confidently state that they worked as a friend of the U.S. and the west and not a potential foe. He believed that overt identification with the West would inevitably increase funds from the Diaspora as more Jews saw their donations as acts of patriotism rather than furtive acts of which they felt ashamed. He further declared:

Now that the Prague trials, as you say, have exploded a myth, and Mapam's position is so seriously compromised that the Messrs. Ben-Gurion and Sharett need no longer fear it or cater to its whims and wishes, cannot Israel at last make the gesture of dropping or rendering inoperative the policy of non-identification, and, without fear or wordy manifestoes or arriere-pensees, enter the Western system of which America is the builder and conductor? Do you not think that such a move on Israel's part would have the effect of enormously stimulating Zionist activity in this country and, what is still more important, accelerate the sale of Bonds for Israel?66

Paassen similarly argued that the end of Israeli non-identification would encourage Jews in the Diaspora to make Aliyah. With an Israel clearly aligned with the west, they could view Aliyah not as an act of betrayal, but as lending support to the democratic cause. He proclaimed:

With Israel integrated into an American-sponsored system and sharing the high-minded concern of our government for raising the status of the backward areas of the world, halutziut from this country would no longer be a matter to be mentioned only in fearful whispers. Nobody would dare to say that it is un-American for young Americans, Jew or Christian, to give up, say two years of their lives, school or career, to go out there and

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65 Van Paassen, 11-18.
66 Van Paassen, 11-18.
help build a real outpost of American democracy, or help make Israel become the spearhead of America's drive for a more human civilization in that part of the world.67

Not everyone, however, shared Dr. Van Paassen’s optimism regarding Israel’s forced alliance with the West. Directly following his letter in their January 23 issue, The Reconstructionist printed the following rebuttal:

There is a basic assumption [declared the author] in your contention that Israel should take the initiative in attaching itself to the West under United States direction which is without foundation. You assume that the United States would respond favorably to an offer of alliance. There is no question that the United States would like to see the whole Middle East allied with it against the communist Axis. So would we. So, no doubt, would Israel, as was indicated by its offer in the U.N. Assembly to negotiate peace and to cooperate economically with its Arab neighbors to their mutual advantage in a regional alliance oriented to the West. But that does not mean that the United States would want to have Israel join as an ally of the West if the Arab nations keep out of such an alliance.68

The author went on to further exclaim that far more was at stake than the loss of Israeli neutrality. Nearly three million Jews lived in the countries behind the Iron Curtain. Severance of relations with the Soviet Union meant severance of relations with this large and important section of the world’s Jewish population. The author further refuted Dr. Van Paassen’s claims:

Nor do you seem to understand the motives of Israel in wanting to maintain some measure of diplomatic intercourse with Russia. You are, to be sure, quite right, in assuming that the Kremlin regime will not permit Jews to leave Russia or any of the satellite countries. [. . .] Nevertheless we can understand why Israel should want to maintain formally correct diplomatic relations with communist regimes both on grounds similar to those that prompt the United States in doing so—to keep a number of listening posts behind the Iron Curtain—and to do whatever is or may become possible to help Jews who have been trapped in those lands.69

The rebuttal finally concluded, “I believe that if you will weigh the question in the light of the foregoing considerations, you will find that the policy of non-identification is not one of cynical expediency involving a sacrifice of principle, but one that tries to be realistic in adapting means to ends in the pursuit of ideal values.”70

The severance of diplomatic ties between the Soviet Union and Israel and the identification of Israel with the Western powers did not affect the State of Israel alone. Some Jews, outside the State of Israel, expressed their concerns that the crisis of Soviet antisemitism had altered the position of Jews vis-à-vis the Cold War the world over. As was the case with the position of Israel following the Soviet rupture, the change in the political status of the Jews was welcomed by some and condemned by others.

Writing in Der Tog, B.Z. Goldberg, known Soviet sympathizer, declared:

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67 Van Paassen, 11-18.
69 “A Reply to Dr. Van Paassen,” 17-18.
70 “A Reply to Dr. Van Paassen”, 17-18.
The situation of the Jews during this period of the Cold War grows worse from year to year. For a while, it looked as though the Jews were involved in the Cold War only as citizens of their own countries — Western Jews with the West and East European Jews with the East. Even Israel kept aloof for awhile, not going all out either to the West or the East, although it was inclined to favor the West. The Jews have now been involved as Jews in the Cold War. Israel, of course, has gone over to the West, but Israel is a government and a country and governments conduct themselves as they deem appropriate and as circumstances force them. Bigger states than Israel have been unable to withstand the pressures and have had to yield either to one bloc or to the other.\(^{71}\)

As Jews struggled to understand their changing role in the Cold War, the complexities of Jewish nationality, both in historical context and in reference to the State of Israel, emerged as a central theme. Some, such as Goldberg, lamented the reality that the Soviet Union, through its accusations of Jewish cosmopolitanism, had rendered Jews a politically distinct group. The Soviets, though themselves denying the existence of a “Jewish nation,” had torn Jews from their specific national contexts and placed them in the struggle between East and West as an entity apart. In Goldberg’s view, such a reality placed Jews in a far weaker position within their specific countries of residence. They now stood before the world not as citizens of one country or another, but as a group with agents on both sides of the Cold War.

For different reasons, anti-Zionist and general Jewish commentator, William Zuckerman, likewise condemned the lack of differentiation among various Jewish populations as a serious crisis of world Jewry. Unlike Goldberg, however, Zuckerman placed the blame for this unwelcomed reality not on the Soviet Union, but on the new State of Israel. Writing in his publication, *The Jewish Newsletter*, Zuckerman declared:

> The attempt made since the emergence of the State of Israel to identify the State with all the Jews of the world has not only hurt Israel by arousing the fears of its Arab neighbors, but it has become a source of new grave complications, confusions and dangers for the Jews outside Israel. Already it has borne bitter fruit in the East European countries by endangering the position of the Jews there. It may well produce similar results in Western countries, including the United States, with a change in the political world situation.\(^{72}\)

Zuckerman continued:

> Israel should, of course, get all the moral, financial and political aid that the democratic world can give to a small democracy attacked by a big totalitarian bully. But it would be a fatal mistake for the democratic world and for the Jews to treat the Israeli crisis as if it were the crisis of the Jewish people all over the world, as was the case under Nazism, and as Stalin would have us believe that the case is now.\(^{73}\)

Zuckerman concluded:


\(^{73}\) Zuckerman, 2 Mar. 1953.
This calamity can and should be avoided by every means at our disposal. The initiative in the task should be taken by non-Zionist American Jews by clarifying their position for themselves and by declaring to the world that Israel and the Jewish people outside its borders are separate and distinct entities, politically and otherwise. That Israel’s political problems are its own and that Jews of the world bear no responsibility of any kind for them.\textsuperscript{74}

Zuckerman fully acknowledged that the situation of Soviet Jewry was grave, and that Israel’s position in the Cold War had indeed changed as a result of the rupture with the Soviet Union. He maintained, however, that Jews could best serve Soviet Jewry and the new Jewish state not as one monolithic Jewish entity, led by Israel, but as citizens of their own countries. Their interest in Soviet Jewry and Israel ought to arise not from their commitment to Israel, but from their humanitarian commitment to the values of democracy and freedom. By identifying themselves with Israel and even with the plight of Soviet Jewry, Jews in the Diaspora, according to Zuckerman, were only helping to foster notions of Jewish disloyalty. In doing so, Jews not only helped to weaken their position vis-à-vis the Cold War, but within their own countries of residence. He felt that both the State of Israel and the Soviet Union were attempting to sever the ties that Jews had with other countries in order to distinguish Jews from other groups, and as a result, Jews, urged Zuckerman, had to resist the temptation of seeing the crisis of 1953 as a specifically “Jewish issue.”

Where individuals such as Zuckerman encouraged Jews to stand up proudly and boldly as citizens of the various countries in which they dwelled, others lamented that Jews too readily embraced other national identities over their Jewish ones. Writing in \textit{The American Zionist}, historian Salo Baron expressed his extreme dismay over the end of Jewish neutrality in the contest between East and West. Additionally, he lamented the lack of Jewish unity surrounding the crisis of Soviet Jewry and the status of Israel. He felt that Jews were approaching the situation at hand not as Jews, but as Americans, Brits, Israelis, etc...

Baron seemed almost nostalgic in lamenting the loss of Jewish neutrality. He wrote: In our divided world any attack on the Soviet Union and its satellites, is not only stamped by communist propaganda the world over as “war-mongering,” but it allies the attacker even against his will with the western coalition. The Jewish people as such, dispersed over the whole globe, is naturally enough reluctant to be drawn into the struggle between these world-powers. Like India, Pakistan or the Arab nations, the Jews may reason that somehow, sooner or later, they too will be drawn into the vortex of this world conflict. But they are doubly reluctant to hasten that day, when they remember the lessons of their entire history that their very survival sometimes depended on their not having aligned themselves exclusively with one side of clashing imperialisms or world outlooks. At the same time the Jews know, of course, that they cannot remain quiescent in the face of endless communist-provocations. […] To remain passive is impossible; to raise one’s voice, be it on the Jewish issue alone, makes’ one immediately a partisan in the imperial struggle. That is why Jewish public opinion seems so bewildered and speaks with so many tongues.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{74} Zuckerman, 2 Mar. 1953.
Baron attributed the loss of Jewish neutrality in the Cold War not to the Soviet Union nor to the State of Israel. Rather, he argued that it was the modern experience of world Jewry which had rendered neutrality impossible. Baron wrote that because Jews in the modern era identified chiefly with the nations in which they dwelled, they were inevitably drawn into national struggles as both citizens of those countries and as Jews. He asserted:

Such are the deep perplexities confronting the Jewish communities throughout the western world, and particularly in the United States. These perplexities are indeed, to a large extent, a reflection of the "split" communal personality of the Jew in the Emancipation era. After all, most western Jews today are not exclusively or even primarily Jews, as their ancestors had been through twenty-five centuries of Exile from Ezekiel to Mendelssohn, but rather primarily Americans or Englishmen, Canadians or Frenchmen, Argentineans or Russians. Not only the man on the street, but also the Jewish communal leader or intellectual spokesman, acts and thinks primarily as a member of the larger national entity amidst which he lives. He normally reacts to the great dangers menacing his particular country as do most of his fellow-citizens of other faiths.76

In Baron’s estimation, the gravest situation confronting world Jewry was that they failed to see the events of 1952 and 1953 as a “Jewish issue.” They sought to solve it not as Jews, but as modern nationals. In doing so, they, not Israel or the Soviet Union, placed themselves on the frontlines of the Cold War. Baron criticized those Jews who welcomed the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism as a moment to prove their national loyalties and to disprove the popular notion that all Jews were communists. He argued that such individuals failed to see the true gravity of Soviet antisemitism for Jews across the globe. They viewed it as a public relations windfall — a moment to improve the image of Jews in the West rather than the threat to the safety of all Jews where ever they might live. Baron urged his co-religionists to study well the lessons of Jewish history — to recognize that even carefully crafted public relations would do little to sway the committed anti-Semite from his/her racist path. He argued that the only true defense Jews had against antisemitism was a thorough knowledge of and commitment to their heritage. He thus concluded:

Only a Jewish community cognizant of its millennial tradition, determined to weather whatever storms it might encounter in its historic procession, equipped with a staunch will to survive under all circumstances, and constantly refining the tools for such survival which have been forged in the crucible of untold sufferings throughout generations — only such a community will be able to confront the new challenge with deep concern, but also with perfect assurance concerning the ultimate outcome.77

Though he did not mention the American Jewish Committee directly in his article, it was among the most fervent advocates of using Soviet antisemitism to further the interests of Jews in the United States and the west more generally. It is therefore not surprising then that John Slawson, AJC executive, published a refutation to Baron’s take on the situation of Jews and the Cold War. Slawson presented Baron’s arguments as outdated and argued that because the situation of modern Jewry differed from that of previous generations, responses to

76 Baron, 21-24.
77 Baron, 21-24.
antisemitism had to reflect the needs not of the historical Jew, but of the modern one. He wrote:

I am confident Professor Baron did not mean to imply that Jews (“the world Jewish community”) are, can be or should be a kind of Third Force, neutral as between the Soviet empire and the free world. The problem confronting Jews today is not what it was in the Middle Ages, when our ancestors looked upon Edom and Ishmael, Christianity and Islam, with equal coolness. After all, it is not a question today of a mere clash of interest between two imperial powers or militant philosophies, neither of which has any moral superiority over the other. The free world, led by the United States, stands for the hope of democracy and human decency, and for much of its reality. Communism, as the world has learned from actual experience, means the midnight knock on the door by the NKVD; it means slave labor; it means a corruption of the intellect and the spirit more degrading and more arbitrary than we would have once been able to imagine; and now we know that it also means anti-Semitism. It has meant genocide for others in the Soviet empire, and may well mean genocide for the Jews. Slawson argued that Jewish identification with the West was not the result of any type of expediency or even the modern complexities of Jewish life. He felt that identification with the West was ideologically, if not physically obligatory for the Jews who, as he saw it, thrived only in democratic societies. If organizations such as his own attempted to utilize Soviet antisemitism to improve the status of Jews in the United States, then so be it. They did so to gain the support of the world’s democratic forces for “Jewish causes.” In attempting to divorce Jews from communism, they hoped to arouse sympathy for Soviet Jewry and, in doing so, urge western authorities to see Soviet Jews as victims of communism, rather than its chief architects. Slawson concluded, “Let us cultivate our heritage, by all means. Let us also know what the true situation is today behind the Iron Curtain, understand its causes, and recognize the enemy when we see him.”

The United Nations and the Reversal of the Doctors’ Plot

As Jews attempted to understand the character and consequences of the rapidly unfolding crisis of Iron Curtain Jewry, they frequently remarked that it was not the existence of a Jewish state alone that marked the current crisis as distinct from previous episodes of Jewish persecution. In addition to the State of Israel, the United Nations had come into being, and many Jews hoped that this new international body would have some success in stemming the tide of Soviet antisemitism.

World-wide protests [declared one editorial in The Jewish Frontier] are in order. But protests alone are not enough. Today there exists an instrument of international authority competent to deal with such cases that was not in existence when the Nazis came to power. We are, of course, referring to the United Nations. The League of Nations of 1932 was a weak farce. Some of the greatest powers of the world did not belong to it. The United Nations, though far from being all-powerful, is in a much

79 Slawson, 24.
stronger position to act. The United Nations must, without delay, give this matter its attention. The Soviet Union should be asked to allow a U.N. commission to examine at first hand the plight of the Jews in the communist countries and to recommend redresses of wrongs already committed and measures to prevent the further obliteration of the two and a half million Jews. Failure to cooperate on the part of the Soviet Union and its satellites should be followed by appropriate disciplinary measures. There may still be time to salvage something from the wreckage of the Jewish communities behind the Iron Curtain. Delay would be fateful. The world must not remain silent.

Before the explosion at the Soviet legation and the subsequent severance of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Soviet Union, Israeli authorities threatened to raise the matter of Soviet anti-Jewish activity before the U.N. General Assembly. Views differed as to how Israeli representatives ought to present the matter — i.e. whether or not to accuse the Soviets of planning genocide against its Jewish population or whether they should only address the antisemitic character of the Prague trial and Doctors’ Plot and highlight the inherent dangers to Soviet Jewry therein. Raising the situation of Iron Curtain Jewry before the U.N. found broad support within Jewish communities both in Israel and elsewhere. Jews hoped and, to a degree, believed that despite its posturing to the contrary, the Soviet Union was highly conscious of and sensitive to external criticisms. As such, the U.N. offered another channel through which Jews could voice their concern for their co-religionists in the East and, in doing so, gain broader support for their cause.

At the end of March 1953, just a few weeks after Stalin’s death, the situation of Iron Curtain Jewry remained uncertain. With Stalin’s death, Jewish leaders and Israeli authorities hoped for a change in Soviet policy toward its Jewish population, but nevertheless continued to fear for the lives of their co-religionists under Soviet rule.

On March 24 Israeli representative to the U.N. and future Prime Minister Golda Meirson (later Meir) made it clear that her delegation would raise the matter of Soviet antisemitism before the U.N. as part of its forthcoming debate on matters of world peace and the prevention of international conflicts. Meirson declared:

It will be recalled that earlier in the course of this session the delegation of Israel stated its intention to raise issues of deep gravity affecting friendly relations among nations. My delegation will at that time present to this General Assembly the record of the policies of anti-Jewish incitement adopted by the Governments of the Peoples’ Republic of Czechoslovakia, the U.S.S.R. and other states allied with them, of which the Slansky Trial is but one manifestation.

Meirson delivered her speech following the Czechoslovak representative Vaclav David who maintained that both the American government and Zionist agents had attempted to disturb the Czechoslovak economy through acts of espionage. In response to Mr. David’s remarks, Meirson proclaimed:

The representative of Czechoslovakia referred in the most limited and indeed most discreet terms to the recent proceedings in Prague which have engaged the attention of the entire world. He felt apparently that it would be unwise to expose that macabre show in all its sinister detail to the examination and judgment of this enlightened forum of international opinion. He contented himself with but passing references to the Slansky Trial and to Zionists as elements in the conspiracy of which he complains. The Czech Government, however, on its own home ground felt less timid. It attributed in the most flamboyant terms widespread criminal and subversive activities to an international Jewish conspiracy involving the Zionist organization, Jewish relief agencies, prominent Jews in various countries and even the State of Israel itself.

Israeli authorities recognized that world opinion was perhaps its most critical and practical weapon in its struggle to protect Soviet Jewry. While the new State of Israel could provide military protection for its inhabitants against Arab aggression, its military prowess could achieve little when it came to the Soviet Union. As a result, words and the ability of Israeli and Jewish authorities to wield them in rallying support for the Jewish cause was the only viable defense available to Jews. Certainly the State of Israel enabled Jews to speak with a more official voice on the international scene. The voice of Israel alone, however, could do little to save the lives of Iron Curtain Jewry.

This reality, however, did not stop representatives of Israel from doing all they could to raise awareness of the plight of Soviet Jewry among more powerful nations. In his speech before the U.N. on April 16, Abba Eben, head of the Israeli delegation to the U.N., passionately proclaimed:

Israel will speak with a special sense of intimate responsibility on behalf of Jewish security and honor whenever they are threatened. We are sons of the Jewish people whose collective efforts, sacrifice and longings have been invested in the pride and agony of Israel's rebirth, the consummation of an ancient people's immemorial dream. It is the haunting tragedy of our modern history that this proud fulfillment of the Jewish destiny came too late to be witnessed by so many millions of our martyred people. The power and influence of a small country such as ours are not great, and we may not always be sure of effective results in invoking international support of the universal conscience on behalf of the security and life of threatened communities. But fidelity to our past, remembrance of our recent anguish, and our basic solidarities and ideals forbid us to be silent on such an issue as this.

Before the Israeli delegation to the U.N. could raise the matter of Soviet antisemitism as Meirson declared it would, Soviet authorities exonerated the Moscow doctors of the crimes of which they had been accused. On April 4, 1953, Pravda published an article in which the Doctors’ Plot was retracted and pronounced a complete violation of Soviet justice. The article claimed that high-ranking Soviet officials had conspired, through illegal measures, to extract false testimonies from the accused doctors and incite race hatred in direct violation of Soviet law. The doctors were proclaimed innocent and would be freed accordingly. The Pravda article

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82 Statement by Meirson, 24 Mar 1953.
83 Statement by Abba Eben before the Political Committee of the 7th Session of U.N. General Assembly, 16 April 1953.
hailed the reversal of the Doctors’ Plot as an example of the Soviet Union’s commitment to justice and to the weeding out of corrupt influences even at the highest levels of government.

The announcement of the reversal of the doctors’ case was welcomed by Israeli authorities and Jews more generally. They hoped that the retraction indicated a change in Soviet policy toward its Jewish citizenry and that the about-face signaled the possibility for the resumption of Israeli-Soviet relations. In an official press release, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the following response to Moscow’s proclamations of the doctors’ innocence:

The government of Israel learned with great satisfaction of the official statement issued in Moscow to the effect that the libel against Jewish doctors has been proven false and that the alleged “confessions” by the doctors had been extorted by unacceptable means. This, in effect, is an unqualified endorsement of the stand taken in this matter by the government of Israel in the Knesset on 19 January 1953.

In connection with the doctors, false accusations were leveled against Jewish organizations the world over, such as the Joint and the Zionist Organization, and libel against the doctors served as the basis for an anti-Jewish campaign which included the severance of relations with the State of Israel.

The government of Israel hopes that rectification of this injustice will be consummated by putting an end to the anti-Jewish campaign, and it would welcome the resumption of normal relations between the Soviet Union and Israel.84

Though Jewish and Israeli authorities looked upon the official retraction with optimism, they nevertheless remained cautious regarding the status of Soviet Jewry. They felt vindicated by the Soviet admission that the plot had been entirely fabricated, but asserted that the Soviet reversal did not go far enough in its recompense to the Jewish people. Czech and Soviet authorities continued to uphold the verdict handed down in the Prague trial and, in doing so, undercut their claims of contrition in the Case of the Moscow Doctors. It was also felt that Soviet authorities had far more to answer for than the Prague and Doctors’ Affairs alone. The status of Soviet Jewry still remained in the balance according to a wide spectrum of Jewish opinion.

In her April 13 address before the U.N. Golda Meirson declared that:

the Government of Israel has observed the recent Soviet statements with deep satisfaction and relief. [. . .] The Soviet Government’s full, frank, and vigorous refutation of the charges, published in connection with the alleged crimes of Soviet doctors at the behest of Jewish organizations, fully confirms and justifies the indignant reaction which the original charges and consequent press campaign evoked in my country, in Jewish communities abroad, and amongst free governments, legislatures, and public bodies throughout the world.85

Meirson continued, however, that the Soviet reversal, welcomed though it was, did not address the fundamental issues surrounding Soviet Jewry. It did not address, for example, the systematic suppression of Jewish culture and religious practice in the Soviet Union and the inability of Soviet Jews to emigrate to the new State of Israel. Meirson argued that, “The best assurance for the avoidance of such issues would be to allow those communities a normal

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84 Press Release by Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4 April 1953, Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations: 890.
degree of self-determination, both in respect of their communal and cultural life and in the freedom to come and join in the collective effort of the Jewish people to restore its national life in Israel.”

Meirson remarked that she was treating the matter at hand in a far less grave manner than she would have if the Soviets had not officially reversed the charges in the Doctors’ Plot. She maintained, however, that the status of the Jews in the Soviet orbit remained a serious situation not only for Jews, but for the whole of the world. She also argued that the reaction of Israel and Jews more broadly to the claims made by Soviet authorities against Jews, the State of Israel, the Zionist movement, and the Joint in connection with the doctors’ case was commensurate with the perceived threat to the lives of Soviet Jewry endemic to such provocative statements. She proclaimed that the recent Holocaust and loss of six million Jews fully justified the fierce indignation and fear expressed by Jews across the globe.

Despite the refutation of the Doctors’ Plot, the Israeli delegation at the U.N. decided to raise the matter of Soviet antisemitism as it related to that entity’s discussion of issues of world peace and international conflict. Though the Soviet reversal altered the tenor of the Israeli claims, they nevertheless felt it the U.N.’s obligation to address the anti-Jewish activities of the Soviet Union as a direct threat to world peace.

In his April 16 speech before the General Assembly, Abba Eben set forth the basis of the Israeli argument connecting the plight of the Jews with global stability. He stated:

The plea that a discussion of anti-Jewish incitement does not belong to a debate on world peace and international friendship has a peculiarly insensitive ring. Anyone with recent memories of the European Holocaust must know how intimately and organically the doctrine of the world Jewish conspiracy has been connected with the threat of war. It is a doctrine which lives and breathes in close association with international tension. There is no logic of the mind or spirit which can ever reconcile this prejudice with any progressive or peace loving intention. [...] History has proved that minority persecution and international aggression so often stand or fall together as a single cause.

Like his non-Israeli co-religionists in the United States, such as the American Jewish Committee and the Zionist Organization of America, Eben attempted to portray the recent Holocaust of the Jews not as a separate episode of unparalleled persecution, but as part and parcel of the Second World War. In his estimation, the plight of Soviet Jewry was not a “Jewish” issue alone. It was intimately connected with the progress of world peace. Failure to recognize it as such, argued Eben, would undoubtedly lead to further conflict and unrest across the globe. He therefore appealed to the nations of the world to recognize that their interests and those of the Jews were one in the same.

Eben and his fellow delegates feared that following the official retraction of the Doctors’ Plot the U.N. would lose interest in the plight of Jews behind the Iron Curtain. He therefore had to stress to the General Assembly the universal danger present in Soviet antisemitism and that its effects still persisted despite the official reversal. Eben argued that one only had to listen to the speeches made by Iraqi, Syrian, and Lebanese delegates at the General Assembly to recognize the long-term impact of the Soviet campaign against Israel, the Zionist movement,

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86 Meirson, 24 April 1953.
87 Statement by Eben, 16 April 1953.
and the Jews. Eben stated that the Arab countries had well imbibed the myths of world Jewish conspiracy so recently broadcast to the world by the Soviet Union. He believed that Arab leaders had adopted and adapted the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” in their struggle against the State of Israel and had only found encouragement by the recent claims of Soviet authorities. He declared:

It is all very well to turn anti-Jewish incitements on and off like a tap; but in the mean time they have a dire effect on the political and moral atmosphere in the Middle East. This brings us back directly to the international significance of the Prague trials and the original Moscow accusations. Let us assume at the very best that the Moscow statement and the recent cessation of open and official anti-Jewish incitement in communist countries denotes an intention by these governments permanently to abandon the course upon which they appeared to be set a few weeks ago. We still say to them that about the results of the original libels, their effects in the Middle East, the contagion which has spread into the very heart of our region. Can we be consoled if the doctrine of the world Jewish conspiracy is now banished from Pravda and Izvestia only to find a sounding board, in far worse form, at Arab desks in the United Nations? Is there no responsibility here to remove the consequences which these ill-starred policies have produced in the Middle East where tensions were at a sufficiently high pitch without this addition?  

According to the Israeli delegation, as expressed by Eben, refutation alone was not enough. Soviet accusations against the Jews had already borne negative consequences for the State of Israel and thereby increased the instability of the whole Middle East. Additionally, they had offered no assurances concerning the improvement of the situation of Soviet Jewry. Eben stated that refutation was only the first step in a process of reconciliation between Israel and the Soviet Union. If the bridge were to be gapped, Soviet authorities would have to take far more responsibility for their actions as regards the Jews, the State of Israel, and the Middle East.

In a communiqué between the Israeli delegation to the U.N. and the Israeli Foreign Ministry, the delegation relayed that they had discussed at length the consequences of raising the matter of Soviet antisemitism before the U.N. General Assembly in spite of the Soviet repudiation of April 4. They recognized that such a move would undoubtedly anger Soviet authorities and deflate before the world Soviet claims that the Peoples’ Democracies and the Soviet Union were the unequivocal bearers of truth, peace, and justice. It was agreed upon that such concerns “must not prevent the Israeli delegation from fulfilling its historic mission as the emissary of the Jewish people.” As a result, the delegation decided that it was in their best interest to make the plight of Soviet Jewry known before the General Assembly in an effort to equate Jewish interests with that of other powerful nations. The delegation argued that:

[O]ur cries of hurrah on 4 April were likely to create the feeling in Moscow that these unresolved problems did not comprise a test of the relations and that the release of a number of doctors was sufficient for us. The delegation was unanimous in its opinion

88 Statement by Eben, 16 April 1953.
that it is necessary to express our refusal to see in 4 April total salvation. If the Soviets are sincere in their desire to redress the injustice, then we should expect to see on their side enhanced efforts at reconciliation...  

Indeed, from the time of the Soviet retraction to the resumption of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Soviet Union in December of 1953, reconciliation depended in large part on who would take the first steps and the extent to which Israeli and Soviet authorities would admit to their respective culpability in the events which led up to the eventual severance of diplomatic relations in the first place.

**Resumption of Diplomatic Relations**

Throughout the spring and summer months of 1953, Israeli and Soviet authorities carefully tested the diplomatic waters as both entities explored the resumption of official Soviet-Israeli relations. On June 2, Soviet ambassador in Sofia read before the Israeli Chargé d’Affaires and the First Secretary of the Israeli legation in Bulgaria a statement in which he stated that the U.S.S.R. would be willing to consider resumption of normal diplomatic relations. He set forth two conditions that would dictate the Soviet decision to resume official relations with Israel. Firstly, the Soviet ambassador stated that the matter of the legation bombing remained unsettled. He declared that Israel owed a full account of its investigation efforts in this regard and a full report on any progress it had made in apprehending the individuals responsible, as he put it, for this act of “terrorism” against the Soviet Union. Secondly, the ambassador stated that Israel must demonstrate its commitment to maintaining friendly relations with the Soviet Union in deeds as well as words. He declared:

The renewal and maintenance of normal relations between the U.S.S.R. and Israel are inextricably linked to Israel’s position on military pacts and agreements directed against the Soviet Union. If the Israeli government wishes to affirm its statement on relations with the Soviet Union, it must, for the sake of peace, promise to refrain from participation in alliances and agreements directed against the Soviet Union. The decision as to whether the appropriate conditions prevail for the renewal of diplomatic relations depends on Israel's attitude to the aforementioned problem. The Soviet Union, which actively supported the establishment of the State of Israel, affirms its desire to maintain friendly relations with Israel.  

On June 5, W. Eytan cabled the Israeli legation in Sofia and instructed Gershon Avner, Chargé d’Affaires to seek out the Soviet ambassador and relay to him that Israeli police had conducted a thorough investigation of the legation bombing. They had detained scores of individuals who they believed might be complicit in the crime committed against the U.S.S.R. As yet, they had not been able to apprehend those responsible for the explosion. They had concluded that the culprits had not acted on behalf of a larger organization. They were individually motivated and had successfully covered their tracks. Israeli police, despite any significant leads, were continuing the investigation and hoped eventually to apprehend those

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90 Israel U.N. Delegation to W. Eytan, 893-895.  
91 Soviet Ambassador in Sofia, Mikhail Bodrov, to Israeli Chargé d’Affaires, Gershon Avner, and First Secretary of the Legation, Ben-Zion Razin, 2 June 1953 in *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations*, 901.
responsible. Furthermore, regarding Israel’s “friendliness” toward the Soviet Union, Avner was directed to state the following, “With regard to the future relations between the U.S.S.R. and Israel, the government of Israel does not consider that maintenance of diplomatic relations between any two countries should be conditioned by the attitude of either on current international issues. At the same time I have been instructed to place on record the fact that no military pact whatsoever exists between Israel and any other power, and that Israel has no intention of concluding or adhering to any such pact. Israel harbours no hostile intent towards the U.S.S.R. and will under no circumstances be a party to any aggressive design or action against it.”

By mid-July, notes had been exchanged between Moshe Sharett and Vyacheslav Molotov, then Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, in which both countries expressed their official desires to resume diplomatic relations. By the end of 1953, normal diplomatic relations had been restored between Israel and the Soviet Union. Legations opened in Tel Aviv and in Moscow, and though many issues continued to plague Israeli-Soviet relations, most welcomed the restoration of normal diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Upon his return to the Soviet Union, Shmuel Eliashiv reported on the status of the Jews in the Soviet Union as far as he was able to discern it. He reported the following:

At the beginning of 1953 the mood was heavy; there was a sense of depression; Jews tried to stick together, not to raise their voices. There was an unsympathetic atmosphere around them. It was not felt at all or was felt only slightly in educated circles and in places with a large number of Jewish workers, but it found greater expression among the masses. In Moscow the Jews would hear threats that they would all be expelled from the capital. One person said that the term of abuse “Jewish doctor” was used among children, similarly to the epithet “Fritz” during the war. At the same time, [ . . . ] there were also other manifestations. Precisely because the Jews felt uncomfortable, many non-Jews tried to display friendship towards them. And this, too — in spite of all the differences — was reminiscent of what had occurred during the war... The severance of relations with Israel was also bitter news for the Jews and exacerbated their feelings at that time. Later on, with the freeing of the doctors, great relief was felt. Everything passed like a nightmare, and the Jews do not at present feel any ill will towards them.

Eliashiv reported that Jews still faced limitations on their ability to participate in forms of Jewish cultural and spiritual life, but that overt statements against the Jews and the State of Israel no longer appeared in the press and in official Soviet communications.

The Crisis Within

Although the challenges brought about by the advent of overt Soviet antisemitism, within Israel, were primarily manifested as an international conflict between two sovereign states, Israeli society and Israeli politics went through a period of deep turmoil and upheaval following the Prague and Moscow Affairs. As was the case in Jewish communities outside of

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92 W. Eytan to the Israeli Legation in Sofia, 5 June 1953 in Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 902.
Israel, Israeli communists were reviled for their slavish adherence to Moscow and, by extension, for their betrayal to the Jewish people. The Israeli Communist Party (Maki), however, was relatively small and wielded little influence in the lives of most Israelis. Despite their largely inconsequential role in Israeli politics, they were viewed as a potentially dangerous internal threat. Unlike the situation of Jewish communists in the Diaspora, Israeli communists, in supporting Soviet attacks on Israel and the Jewish people, were regarded as enemies of the state. As they continued to voice their support for the accusations against Slansky and the Moscow doctors, they came to be seen as a fifth column who desired above all else that Israel become a Soviet outpost in the Middle East. As a result, heated debates ensued throughout Israeli society addressing the future of the Israeli Communist Party.

A host of measures were put forth to limit Maki’s activities. Some suggested that the party be expelled from Israel’s labor movement. Others believed that Maki’s publications ought to be dramatically censored or banned altogether. Others still felt that, as an enemy force, Maki should be banned outright. As a democratic society, most rejected the latter suggestion, but nevertheless found Maki to be an intolerable presence in Israeli society and were at a loss as to how to deal with them.

There existed, however, in Israeli society another political party whose actions surrounding Soviet antisemitism aroused an even greater sense of tumult and indignation. More than the communists, Israel’s Mapam (united Workers) Party became the central focus of Israeli politics following the Slansky Trial and the Doctors’ Plot. Ideologically speaking, members of Mapam adhered to the tenants of Zionism and revolutionary socialism. They were fiercely loyal to the Soviet Union and to the new Jewish state. Where Maki exercised only marginal influence within Israeli political life, Mapam was seen as an important as well as powerful component of Israel’s political matrix. In the first Israeli elections of 1949, they constituted the second largest political party after Mapai and had gained 19 seats in the Knesset. At the time of the Slansky Trial, their numbers in parliament had dropped to 15 seats, but they continued to wield an important political voice within Israeli politics. Mapam had played an important role in the Yishuv and in the eventual creation and defense of the Israeli state. They were seen as Mapai’s (Israel’s prominent Social Democratic Party) chief rival and held significant influence within Israel’s Kibbutz movement. Because of its crucial role in Israeli life, all eyes fell upon Mapam in the weeks and months following the events in Prague and in Moscow. The attention directed at Mapam following the Slansky Trial resulted not just from its dual belief in Zionism and Soviet communism, though many speculated how Mapamniks would reconcile these two seemingly contrary paradigms in the wake of the anti-Zionist proclamations uttered in Prague. Mapam was involved in the Prague trial in a far more intimate way than any other Israeli political entity. Mordechai Oren, well-respected and well-liked Mapam leader and delegate in Eastern Europe, testified at the Slansky Trial that he had helped to facilitate the treachery of Slansky and his co-defendants. He claimed that he had acted as a liaison between the Czech traitors and the government of Israel to assist in the ultimate goal of ending communism in Czechoslovakia.

Oren was not a stranger whose testimony could be taken on face value. Many knew him personally and simply could not believe that he could in any way share in the guilt of the Prague defendants. Most members of Mapam were unwilling to accept Oren’s guilt, but equally unwilling to reject the trial as a whole. Their faith in the Soviet Union and the Peoples’
Democracies was such that they could not doubt the veracity of the testimonies of the Slansky defendants. The Soviet Union in which they believed was incapable of committing such a gross miscarriage of justice. At the same time, they were unable to explain Oren’s admission of guilt.

Chief among the criticisms hurled at Mapam following Prague and Moscow were the inconsistencies of its beliefs and the split character of its allegiances. Writing in The American Zionist, author Judd Teller wrote the following of Mapam:

How, it may well be asked, can considerable numbers of Israeli Jews, whose devotion to Zionism has been apparent in word and deed, behave so unrealistically as to sympathize with Russia either in the past or, stranger yet, in the present world crisis? The recent Slansky Trial in Prague is merely the latest in a lengthy series of episodes. [. . .] it must be noted that this curious split in affection and loyalties among the membership of Mapam is nothing new. The polygamous nature of Mapam has long been a domestic scandal.94

In even starker language, in an open letter to Mapam, published in The Jewish Vanguard, the author condemned Mapam’s ideological hypocrisy.

[T]here is a dybbuk in your soul, [declared the letter] and everything that has occurred in your party since Tnuva L’achdut Avoda united with Hashomer Hatzair to form Mapam has been an expression of that dybbuk.

It is the struggle between communism and Zionism — and you have as yet not been able to resolve this struggle.

In the past you have felt that there can be a compromise between your Zionism and your communism. You attacked institutions within Zionism which were not communistic, but you maintained that the principle of the ingathering of the exiles was “loyal to and in line with ideas of other world liberation communist movements.” You attacked Ben-Gurion for being friendly with the Western nations, which aided Israel, and you took your cue in world politics from Moscow, despising the West and mollifying the East, but never being recognised by the Cominform as one of its disciples. Whom will you follow now that the Cominform, through the Prague trials, has proclaimed Zionism an enemy of communism, a tool of imperialism, a wrecker of the economies of the Peoples' Democracies, a source of spies and saboteurs?95

As was the case with criticisms of Jewish communists outside of Israel, a sense arose that the time for decision was now. Mapam had to decide whether it was first and foremost a Zionist organization or an appendage of Maki and the Soviet Union. With the accusations levied in Prague and in Moscow against Zionism and the Jewish people generally, there was little tolerance for ideological ambiguity. An attitude of “you are either with us or against us” prevailed on both ends of the political spectrum. Mapam was called upon to declare once and for all with whom its loyalties lay – the State of Israel or the Soviet Union. Writing in response to Judd Teller’s article, Mr. Joseph Weiss, American Jewish Zionist, expressed his desire to remove Mapam from any representation in the Jewish Agency Executive. He argued that funds raised by American Jews for the State of Israel should in no way be given to an entity such as Mapam. He wrote:

We of the World Zionist Organization have no need and no desire to continue sitting together in common counsel with those who deny everything which is holy to us as Jews, Zionists, and believers in democracy. There is no reason why we should continue to have Mapam representatives as members of the Jewish Agency Executive, which is considered by Jews and non-Jews as the incarnation of the Zionist community all over the world. There is no reason why money collected by American Jewry, whom the Soviet-doctrinated Mapam settlements hold in such disdain, should be spent on Mapam kibbutzim, and for other Mapam activities. This applies to the funds of the United Jewish Appeal, as well as to the money derived from the Histadrut campaign of which Mapam is a beneficiary.

Only bold and determined action aimed at the complete isolation of Moscow satellites, including Mapam, will put two alternatives before this group — either to disown clearly and unmistakably, their Stalinist past and present, or to lose all ties with the World Zionist movement. 96

Weiss was not alone in his disdain for Mapam. Many came to see this odd political group as a liability both for the State of Israel and for the Zionist movement as a whole. It was frequently described as a source of shame and embarrassment within the Zionist movement — a blemish which could be neither excised nor covered up. The fierce anger directed at Mapam arose in part because of its unwillingness to condemn the Prague and Moscow Affairs as entirely false, while rejecting that part of the episode which they could not countenance — namely, the guilt of Mordechai Oren. However, more than its overt inconsistencies and ideological dualities, what infuriated and frustrated Zionists was not Mapam’s blind allegiance to Moscow, but rather its consistent contributions to the Zionist movement. Fellow Zionists could not understand how a party that had valiantly defended Israel both during the Mandate period and in its war with the Arabs in 1948 could continue to support a regime that openly condemned Zionism as a corrupt and disreputable ideology and which would not permit its Jewish citizens to emigrate to the Jewish national state.

Though Israeli communists were similarly attacked for their beliefs and named as traitors to the Jewish people, they were said, at the very least, to be consistent in their attitudes toward Zionism. Their allegiances were to the Soviet Union alone, and they had never professed otherwise. As one commentator wrote:

The CP is led by Jews but supported by Arabs, it is small, and nobody cares much about it. Its political stock is always low, because it is a stranger in the spiritual heritage of this country, which is Jewish nationalism and Zionism. The CP is but the Israeli arm of the Cominform. [. . .] Needless to say the blind and docile communists of Israel swallowed the Prague farce lock stock and barrel. Not so Mapam. It is an important party. Formerly important for its contribution, lastly important for its nuisance value. 97

Mapam’s contributions to Israel’s military victories were renowned. In his article mentioned above, Teller, while criticizing Mapam for its inability and/or unwillingness to see the disturbing truths before its eyes, wrote:

97 Communist Jew bating Hits Israelis.
Throughout the British mandatory rule of Palestine, Zionism could not have wished for a more devoted spouse than the section of the Yishuv which today constitute the Mapam party; no more tenacious halutzim could be found; and for constancy, courage and combatant cunning Mapam's striking force—the Pal mach—matched any of the several Zionist underground armies. [...] While Hashomer's romance with Stalinism has been pursued over many years, not once in all those years has it wavered in its dedication to Zionist pioneering—regardless of the Kremlin's denunciation of Zionism as a "tool of imperialism." 

In the open letter to Mapam, cited above, the author expressed similar sentiments. He exclaimed:

You are a movement which has deep roots in Israel. If you had no such roots, we would consider you on the same level as we do Maki, the Israel Communist Party, and with whom it is worthless to discuss anything. It means years of common struggle, sweat, and spilt blood for the establishment of a free Jewish State. We think we can still find a basis for discussion with what your kibbutzim represent in Israel and for Zionism. It is now entirely up to you. 

It was frequently declared that Mapam’s ideological idiosyncrasies had for too long been excused and tolerated. It had been forgiven its communism and its devotion to Stalinism because of the undisputed strength of its Zionist convictions. However, after the overtly anti-Zionist charges against Slansky and the Moscow doctors came to light, few could dismiss Mapam’s ongoing support for the Soviet Union as little more than the idealistic dreams of a naïve youth. As Teller wrote in his exploration of Mapam’s ideological path, Mapam’s troubling behavior “could all be dismissed as a harmless idiosyncrasy so long as the Yishuv had no voice in world affairs, and no frontiers and armed forces that might be called into play if the die were cast for a third world war.” In Teller’s estimation, with the creation of a Jewish state, Mapam’s ambiguities constituted a threat to Israel’s security and, to a degree, its sovereignty. Amid the condemnations and calls for Mapam to choose between the two poles of its ideological convictions were attempts to explain Mapam’s seemingly contradictory and baffling behavior. Teller thus wrote:

Regardless of its future, Mapam provides a rich vein for psychological research. How can this party, which has been in the forefront among the builders of the Jewish state and the fighters of its independence, countenance suggestions by Sneh and Riftin that when the time comes, Israel should surrender its independence to the Red Army? How can Hashomer Hatzair worship the Kremlin, which for over three decades has persecuted Zionists of every stripe, and none more harshly than the adherents of Hashomer? 

Teller continued:
If we are tempted to inquire, "But since these are intelligent men and women who read newspapers, magazines, and books, surely they must eventually realize how wrong they have been on many issues?" we must remember that the Faithful never put their faith on the same footing as other faiths and never face it with facts—for this would in itself be a lack of faith.  

Teller proposed several reasons for Mapam’s unwillingness to reject its Soviet convictions. He claimed that many of its members had lived under Tsarist rule and experienced persecution and pogroms supported by the state. The Soviet Union, while far from perfect, presented a regime that not only discouraged antisemitism, but made it illegal. Teller also argued that members of Mapam were accustomed to a strict regime of self-denial. As such, they were willing to give the U.S.S.R. the benefit of the doubt and believed that it was only a matter of time before Soviet authorities allowed Jews to emigrate to Israel. They believed that their self-sacrifice and patience would eventually be recognized and rewarded. Teller further suggested that members of Hashomer Hatzair, in particular, embraced the Soviet Union in part as a way to reject the middle class values of their parents. They held to the conviction that the Soviets were persecuting a class, the very class that they too had rejected.

Lastly, Teller declared that:

Hashomer Hatzair—it can also be argued—compromised its righteous feelings for the sake of the greater Zionist goal by sitting together in common counsel with such heretics and pagans as the Mapai, the General Zionists, the Mizrachi, and the insufferable Revisionists. It did not renounce its Zionism because of these reactionaries, and, analogously, it will not renounce the Fatherland of socialism because of the latter’s deplorable but transient aberrations.

In short, Teller maintained that after a lifetime of synthesizing often contradictory realities, members of Mapam, though dismayed by the outbreak of soviet antisemitism, nevertheless had developed finely tuned skills in absorbing such disappointments. As a result, the mass exodus from Mapam and the Communist Party that many anticipated, did not take place.

In his April 1953 article published in *Commentary*, Mark Alexander offered yet another interpretation of Mapam’s unwillingness to officially break with the Soviet Union. He argued that:

There was no mass exodus from Mapam or the Communist Maki after Prague. [. . .] But such shocks, we know from the past, generally have a cumulative and delayed effect. [. . .] [L]eaving the Communist Party is usually not the result of a single, sudden decision, but rather of a long process in the course of which several shocks have to be assimilated.

Alexander continued:

One should not belittle the dilemma of those whose faith in Stalin Communism had been shaken after Prague. In the last resort it was a question of choosing between right and wrong, but one’s whole life was involved, and not just one sphere of it. For the man in the kibbutz such a political decision meant that he had to leave and go look elsewhere.

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102 Teller, 14-16.
103 Teller, 14-16.
for a job, a house, friends. Even in town and village one's whole way of life would be affected by such a step, for pro-Stalinism has become a way of life everywhere. In addition to the all-encompassing reality stemming from one's decision to reject Stalinism, Alexander argued that there existed in Israel no suitable ideological alternative to which disillusioned Mapamniks might turn. In discussing the fate of Mapam, most authors, like Alexander and Teller, referred, in large part, to the Hashomer Hatzair section. As the younger generation of the party, they represented its future and that section that might still be able to recognize the error of their ways. Older party members were seen as a lost cause, too rigid and set in their ways to abandon a lifetime of Soviet support. Alexander wrote:

But where is the new faith to come from? Religion, as represented by ossified traditionalism, has no appeal for them, nor do they feel attracted by the crude chauvinism of the ultra-nationalist Herat. The General Zionists are "bad capitalists" and wicked "exploiters"; class interests would divide them from this party in any case. There remains Mapai with its democratic socialism, but where and when in the world was ever a younger generation enthusiastic about democratic socialism?  

Alexander continued:

Rarely has the situation of these young people been defined so straightforwardly. Their old faith is crumbling and they would be ready to accept a new one, but only if like Stalinism, it was an all-embracing secular religion that answered every question. They are much more interested in security and peace of mind than in independent thinking or questing for the truth. Because, argued Alexander, no other party or political movement could satisfy Hashomer Hatzair’s commitment to both Zionism and revolutionary socialism, they simply stayed put. Their reluctance to break with Moscow, however, did not mean that their faith was intact. Speculations abounded that though many Mapamniks and even some communists remained outwardly loyal to Moscow, their private convictions had been shaken. Alexander suggested that:

Privately, many—perhaps most—of the Israelis who defended Prague admitted that the confessions could not be taken at face value, and tried to find a more refined and sophisticated explanation: they upheld the accusations only in an abstract sense, while rejecting them literally. This was, of course, not an entirely novel procedure on the part of Soviet sympathizers. Nobody, however, could believe any longer in the absolute benefits of Stalinism; those who wanted to swallow Prague could say only that they thought the good in Stalinism outweighed the bad.  

Echoing Alexander’s remarks, author Aleph Sherman, also writing in *Commentary*, declared:

Yet it remains that the majority of Mapam, like the Mapam members at Am Ha-rod, have taken their first steps on a path that will lead inevitably to a complete break with Stalinist communism, and will face them also with a painful task of readjustment. They

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105 Alexander, 383-384.
106 Alexander, 384.
107 Alexander, 384.
108 Alexander, 382.
have had to jump from the 1930s to the 1950's in a matter of months. Whether Mapai can offer them enough positive values to help ease the process of this readjustment, and replace one set of functional beliefs by another, more valid one, remains to be seen, but it will require far more on Mapai's part than mere exposure of communist sins and crimes.  

Aleph also argued that another significant factor contributing to Mapam’s reluctance to break with Moscow lay in Mapai’s crude attempts to court Mapamniks in the wake of Prague. He and others felt that Mapai approached the matter with an attitude of “I told you so,” rather than one of reconciliation. In encouraging Mapamniks to abandon their revolutionary dreams, Mapai only succeeded in driving adherents of Mapam to more fervently and more boldly declare their commitment to revolutionary socialism. As a result, many adherents of Mapam declared that despite what happened in Prague, their revolutionary ideals would not be shaken. They pronounced that their belief in the veracity of socialism did not derive from any single event and therefore, no single event could sever them from their convictions. As such, “The party still tries to be [declared Mark Alexander] more papal than the Cominform pope...”

In the weeks and months following the Prague trial, Mapam attempted to defend itself on two fronts. On the one hand, it attempted to refute the charges raised at the Slansky Trial that one could not be a good socialist while also being a fervent Zionist. On the other hand, the party had to defend itself against attacks from within Israeli society and proclaim that one could be a good Zionist while upholding the values of revolutionary socialism. In short, they had to demonstrate to the world that Zionism and socialism were not simply compatible, but that the two ideologies were inseparable.

Mapam struck out sharply against the anti-Zionist accusations made in Prague and in Moscow. During the November 25 Knesset debate held to discuss the Prague Affair, Eliezer Peri, Mapam representative, read aloud the following:

The United Workers’ Party (Mapam) is shocked at the effort to involve in the Prague trial Zionism as a whole, for in its very essence Zionism is a movement to rescue and liberate the most persecuted of peoples in its historic homeland; the United Workers' Party vigorously rejects the general accusations leveled [sic] against Zionism. The fact that in Zionism, as in any liberation movement, reactionary elements are active is not enough to annul the progressive character of our national liberation movement.

Mapam did not attempt to deny that it too was in a struggle with the reactionary forces present within Zionism and who at the time were in control of the Israeli government. What it found objectionable in the claims pronounced at the Prague trial was that Czech authorities had condemned Zionism the movement and the ideology rather than some of its adherents who attempted, as they saw it, to corrupt Zionism’s true goals and character. Many members of Mapam had little trouble believing that Mapai, in its attempts to court the West, had indeed engaged in acts of espionage against the Soviet bloc. Mapam condemned Mapai’s social democratic brand of Zionism as much as any communist. What Mapam could not countenance

109 Aleph Sherman, “Kibbutz Ain Harot Faces Up to Prague,” Commentary March 1953: 263. 2
110 Alexander, 389.
was the absolute repudiation of Zionism’s revolutionary ambitions uttered by the Czech prosecution.

Adherents of Mapam made it clear that the Czech description of Zionism was entirely false. They stressed that Zionism was an inherently revolutionary movement and urged members of Mapam to redouble their ideological and practical work as the party sought to defend itself from within and without. In Al Hamishmar, Mapam’s party organ, an editorial declared:

*Rude Pravo*, the newspaper of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, proclaimed several days ago that Zionism is the number one enemy of the working class; that its fanaticism, its chauvinism and its racism constituted the source of the inhuman activities of the capitalists; that Zionism like anti-Semitism is the source of ugly corruption; and finally—:

"The State of Israel has become a military base against the Soviet bloc and against the enslaved Arab people." Before us is an attempt to invalidate Zionism, the liberation movement of the Jewish people, and the State of Israel, the principal instrument of Zionist realization. This is a total rejection, ideological, moral, and political. It must be admitted that Zionism has not been spoken of in this fashion since the establishment of the State, even in the Yevsektzian communist literature, which is rich in its slanderous expressions against it. In recent times, such words, in style or motivation, have not been used, and we must now arm ourselves with our best spiritual and ideological armor against this smear campaign which cannot be explained in any other way except as an attempt at total negation of the liberation movement of the Jewish people, the building of our national independence, and our concentration in our historic homeland.112

The editorial went onto declare that Zionism had brought about the rebirth and transformation of an entire people, and it had done this against all odds. The opponents of this rebirth, they argued were the reactionary forces of imperialism and capitalism as well as the socialist world which had not yet discovered the true revolutionary character of Zionism. The editorial continued:

We built a nation and we built a land in a revolutionary era in the lives of our people. We did not build enough, and we also did not gather enough Jews in this land. There remains a Jewish dispersion in the capitalist lands and in the socialist lands. But there was much magic in our revolutionary deed. It was the magic of the renascence of an ancient people through the renewal of its national and social existence. It was one of the great revolutionary actions of our generation, a generation of national and social revolutions. If we had been helped more, if enemies and opponents had not risen against us, we would have surely reached even greater achievements.113

Despite all of the impediments placed before the Zionist movement by the great powers of the world, the editorial further asserted:

Governments and regimes change, but states and nations exist forever. Zionism is a peoples’ movement, a national liberation movement. It changed petty bourgeois,

113 "We Will be Faithful to Our Vision."
isolated individuals and cosmopolitan intellectuals into a people rooted in the soil and the homeland, builders of a new nation and a new society.\textsuperscript{114}

Mapam argued that Zionism had done for the Jewish people the exact opposite of what Czech authorities had claimed during the Slansky Trial. Where the prosecution argued that Zionism had led Slansky and his co-defendants to act in a cosmopolitan and bourgeois character and to betray the interests of the masses, Mapam countered that Zionism had transformed Jews from internationalists into nationalists. It maintained that Zionism had made Jews recognize the strength and power of the masses over that of the individual. If Slansky and his co-conspirators had committed acts of treason, (and Mapam officially upheld their guilty verdict) they did so not out of Zionist convictions, but reactionary forces alien to true Zionism.

The article concluded that despite Czech efforts to vilify the Zionist movement, Mapam would not be deterred from its Zionist and its revolutionary path. “It is our lot in these days [declared \textit{Al Hamishmar}] to drink again from the cup of poison which we thought we had already drunk to the last drop. But the widespread and great deception which seeks to hide our Jewish, human, and Zionist character will not change our minds. We will not be pulled along by the dark wave. As before, we shall be faithful to our vision of peoples' freedom, of socialist building. We believe in the future of Zionism as the liberating movement of the Jewish people.”\textsuperscript{115}

Though Mapam vigorously rejected the anti-Zionism of the Prague purges, it tended to blame the Czech perception of Zionism on reactionary forces, as they put it, within Israel. It condemned the Czech authorities not for reviling the type of Zionism supposedly practiced by Slansky and his co-defendants, but rather that they had judged all of Zionism based on the actions of a few. Mapamniks stressed that Zionism had created a vibrant agricultural and working class within Israel. It cited the Kibbutz movement in which Mapam played a crucial role as one of the world’s greatest successes in collective living. Mapam believed that once the forces of reaction had been eliminated from Israeli society, the socialist bloc could not help but to see Zionism’s true revolutionary character. In its January issue of \textit{Israel Horizons}, organ of Hashomer Hatzair, an editorial pronounced:

\begin{quote}
In the State of Israel, the struggle between progress and reaction continues and will go on to higher levels. However governments come and go, the nation remains and goes forward. The people in Israel, people of toil and sweat, people of defense and pioneering, who build their homeland and their state under difficult conditions, and the millions of Jews dispersed around it in the Diaspora are not confused by false labels and calumny. They endured such things more than once in their past and they did not turn away from their path. Today, they fulfill a national, revolutionary and socialist task and will continue to fulfill it.\textsuperscript{116}

Though Mapam refrained from condemning the Prague trial as antisemitic, it nevertheless recognized the dangers in attempting to draw distinctions between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. In its evaluations of the Slansky Trial, Mapam stressed that it did not believe the Czechs to be intentionally pedaling antisemitism, but that they had failed to realize the
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\textsuperscript{114} “We Will be Faithful to Our Vision.”
\textsuperscript{115} “We Will be Faithful to Our Vision.”
\textsuperscript{116} “The Prague Trial,” \textit{Israel Horizons} Jan. 1953: 3-5.
creation of a Jewish state had dramatically blurred the distinctions between Zionist and Jew. As such, it argued, “It must however be stated that today, the concepts of Jew and Zionist have changed and identify in their broad sense the inhabitants of Israel and its builders, as well as the masses of Jews in the Diaspora who are closely bound to the Zionist enterprise and to support of the State of Israel. These latter are the overwhelming majority of Jews in the world.”117 In making such claims, Mapam expressed its fears about the anti-Jewish character of the Prague trial while skirting direct accusations of antisemitism.

Indeed, despite its fervent repudiation of the anti-Zionist proceedings of Prague, Mapam was not prepared to break with the socialist world. Amid its deep shock and disappointment at the news emanating from Prague, it urged that it would not condemn the Czechs and the Soviet bloc as a whole. Even though it completely rejected the testimony of Mordechai Oren, Mapam nevertheless continued to affirm its position within the pro-Soviet camp. At the November 25 Knesset debate, Eliezer Peri also declared:

The United Workers’ Party regards itself as an inseparable part of the world revolutionary camp, headed by the Soviet Union. We will stand without flinching at the side of the countries of socialism and popular democracy in their struggle to achieve socialism and in their self-defense against the enemy, domestic and foreign. No attacks nor vilification shall move us from our position, to which we have been faithful for a generation and a half through the severest of trials. With heads high and firm tread, with halutz devotion, we will carry out our Zionist, our labor mission just as we will keep faith with our revolutionary socialist program.118

Another editorial in Israel Horizons declared:

It is easy in these days to give vent to emotions and it is even easier to join in the hysteria, but it is very difficult in these tragic days for Zionism as a whole to call for a balanced political approach. It is political blindness for Zionism and the essential interests of the State of Israel to make generalizations and to extend the condemnations of the Prague trial to cover the entire policy of the Soviet Bloc regarding the most essential interests of Israel’s political independence.119

As fervent believers in revolutionary socialism, Mapam could not easily detach itself from the interests of the only self-proclaimed communist segment of the world. Just as it had learned to acknowledge that Zionism comprised reactionary forces, they conceded that similar forces could be present within the communist bloc. Mapam maintained that ideas and the people who acted in their name were not one in the same. Accordingly, just as Mapam defended its Zionism against the accusations of Prague, it likewise defended its revolutionary socialism to the wider Zionist world.

In its efforts to defend itself against claims of hypocrisy and ideological inconsistencies, Mapam declared that if hypocrisy be the crime at hand, then they did not stand alone in its guilt. The party argued that traditional opponents of Zionism came to the defense of Israel and the Zionist movement following the Prague trial in a manner that belied years of anti-Zionist or non-Zionist activity. These new-found defenders of Zionism, argued Mapam, condemned the

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117 “The Prague Trial,” 3-5.
118 “Dark Days Ahead for Mapam.”
Prague trial and Doctors’ Plot only to enhance their anti-communist status in the eyes of the Western powers. It claimed that cries of antisemitism and “Let My People Go” were disingenuous and only served to fan the flames of an already tense situation.

It is not from "love of Mordechai" [declared Israel Horizons] and Zionism that these things are said, but from "hatred of Haman." And who has not joined the chorus? Among them are those whose core of existence for decades was slander of Zionism and even of the State of Israel. Men affiliated with the Bund, of whom only pitiful remnants remain, have joined the pack. They do not realize how ridiculous they are, for it was these very men who for years argued in the very same way as the prosecutor in Prague that "Zionism is no more than the other side of the coin of antisemitism."

The assimilated Jewish circles in their various forms, who suffer from the permanent fear that someone will identify them with loyalty to the Jewish nation, let alone with the State of Israel or the Zionist movement have rushed to join the defense of the honor of Israel and Zionism. Who are they to protest against the Prague trials?

It was not traditionally anti-Zionist forces alone that Mapam criticized as it defended its ideological stance. Zionists too openly condemned Mapam as holding dual loyalties and supporting a regime which was openly hostile to the Zionist movement. Mapam found the criticisms of its fellow Zionists to be particularly hollow. Mapamniks argued that their more reactionary Zionist counterparts failed to see that Mapam’s dual belief in Zionism and revolutionary socialism lay at the foundation of its members’ military courage as well as its vigorous agricultural, industrial, and cultural productivity, and that Israel therefore owed much of its creation and survival to the Soviet spirit from which Mapam derived much of its outlook. Zionists who sought to either compel adherents of Mapam to abandon their pro-Soviet stance or isolate Mapam from the mainstream of Israeli life, argued Mapam leaders, did not fully grasp the extent to which Mapam was fundamentally integrated into all aspects of Israeli society.

Addressing this particular issue, Mapamnik, Aryai Vineroth, in the pages of Israel Horizons, responded to the suggestion of the above-mentioned Joseph Weiss in The American Zionist, that Mapam be financially and politically marginalized within Israeli society. Of Mr. Weiss, Vineroth wrote:

I assume that he is a good American Jew, deeply rooted in Jewishness, attached with all the fibers of his being to Jewish culture and to the best of its history. Not only this, but the interest in Zionist matters Mr. Weiss expressed in his letter, convinces me that although perhaps he is not of the pioneering stuff which created the State of Israel, he is nevertheless a good Zionist. I am also certain that he is one of the bigger contributors to the United Jewish Appeal and the Histadrut campaigns, both of which he mentioned in his letter, and gives without stint above the tax-deductible level.

Moving on to Weiss’s suggestion that all funding be withdrawn from Mapam, Vineroth went on to describe the virtual impossibility and far reaching consequences of such an action. Vineroth wrote:

Now, let us examine how Mr. Weiss can achieve his aim of "complete isolation of Mapam." I don’t know if Mr. Weiss has visited Israel, but I hope that, as a devoted

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120 "New Defenders of Zionism and the Jews."
121 Aryai Vineroth, “Can Mapam be Isolated?” Israel Horizons May-June 1953: 19-23.
contributor—according to his own statement—to the UJA and Histadrut, he has done so. If he has, he must have had a difficult time swallowing what he ate and saw in Israel.\footnote{Vineroth, 19-23.}

Take the tomatoes, \[asserted Vineroth\] for instance, which were served to him at his hotel. These were not ordinary tomatoes. \[Based on official figures\] at least 50 percent of each tomato Mr. Weiss ate was produced and cultivated in one of the Mapam settlements. It is difficult, of course, to inform Mr. Weiss which part of the tomato is Mapam and which part he can eat. I am not an expert on such botanical intricacies, and I shall not try to be. I can merely advise him not to eat tomatoes at all while in Israel. It is becoming more and more difficult, as months and years go by, for a man like Mr. Weiss to choose between the treyf produce of Mapam kibbutzim and the kosher products of settlements of his own political orientation, if indeed he likes settlements at all.\footnote{Vineroth, 19-23.}

Under Vineroth’s sarcasm lay a serious reprimand of Mapam’s critics. In short, according to Vineroth, Israel would not exist without Mapam. Those who now composed the Mapam party had been among some of the bravest and most courageous fighters in Israel’s war for independence and were now among Israel’s most productive citizens. Zionists such as Weiss, argued Vineroth, could not understand how such exemplary Zionists who had proved themselves in both word and deed, could also lend their support to a political philosophy which they so vigorously despised. Rather than deal with the reality of Mapam’s importance in the creation and survival of the Jewish state, its critics sought to purge it so that they might continue to embrace a more romantic and sanitized version of Zionism.

Though Vineroth maintained that he had great respect for American Jewry, beneath his words lay a sense of marked resentment. While adherents of Mapam’s creed sacrificed their lives for the defense of the Jewish state, individuals such as Weiss, surrounded by their middle class American comforts, dared to criticize a political party of a state in which they did not live and probably never would. Though Weiss’s American dollars were greatly appreciated, they did not, according to Vineroth, entitle him to freely criticize internal Israeli affairs of which he knew virtually nothing.

Mapam did not deny that the Prague trials had come as a deep blow to its members. What outsiders failed to understand, argued its adherents, was that to them, upholding Slansky’s guilt while rejecting that of Oren did not constitute a contradiction in terms or a type of denial of the truth. They maintained that they were not after all communists in the sense of Maki. They could condemn features of communist rule while continuing to support the regime as a whole. The fact that they did condemn the anti-Zionist proclamations of the Slansky Trial was proof that they had not, as had Maki, relinquished their ability to think freely.

As previously mentioned, many of the attacks directed at Mapam focused on the party’s youth. Following the trial, a campaign to “save” Mapam youth was taken up by Mapai and other political parties from repeating the sins of their fathers. It was hoped by sections of Israeli society that the Prague trial would help to discredit the assertions of Mapam’s older generation that despite Soviet “misdeeds,” revolutionary socialism remained the correct path. Mapam
countered, however, that shocking though it was, Mapam youth had been fortified with the discipline to stick to their ideals and withstand “pretty words” from reactionary forces.

We cannot deny that the Prague trial, [declared another Mapam editorial] particularly Mordecai Oren’s involvement in it, descended like a terrible blow upon the heads of this youth, as indeed it shocked the whole community. Yet it would seem that Mapam Youth is, in greater part, immune to the far-reaching after-effects of such shock. The capacity for calm and collected analysis of political and social events is capable of preventing most of them from getting lost in what seems to others to be a blind alley. No member of Mapam has ever labored under the delusion that the traditional anti-Zionist policy of the communist world is incapable of producing bitter fruit in bad times. The party and its youth have nevertheless operated on the hypothesis that this policy is transitory, at least that it is susceptible to ups and downs and doomed to ultimate oblivion.\(^{124}\)

What Mapam’s critics viewed as ideological inconsistencies, Mapam saw as its vital strength. It worked for an ideal and did not permit the vicissitudes of everyday life and the transience of governments to divert it from its path. It recognized and embraced its imperfections, but to hypocrisy and betrayal it would not admit.

In spite of the deepening and widening opposition toward the government administration of Israel, [concluded the above editorial] the decisive factor in the thought and actions, in the character and destiny of Mapam youth has been and will continue to be its love for Israel Reborn, its boundless devotion to the Ingathering of the Exiles from all parts of the world, and the feeling of partnership in everything that is being created in Israel. This Hebrew youth—laborer, farmer or intellectual, who is the very embodiment of Zionist fulfillment, he and Israel are one and he will probably continue to seek a way to what is called "The World of the Revolution" braving the penalties and perils of isolation and ostracism. The aspiration toward this synthesis is truly hazardous and perplexing but will persist.

In conclusion, we must assume that Mapam Youth will continue to fulfill its role as one of the most constructive elements in the life of our people and our country. They will live in frontier settlements, work and labor and create and continue to embarrass and amaze people who cannot understand "how it is possible to do such good deeds while speaking such bad words." These people cannot rid themselves of amazement and embarrassment unless they can understand that the good deeds of Mapam Youth derive directly from the "bad words" about social revolution, brotherhood of nations, and peace.\(^{125}\)

Despite Mapam’s fervent claims to the contrary, most of its members, in time, were forced to choose between Zionism and communism. Following the Prague and Moscow Affairs, the party split. Members, though a relatively small minority, led by Moshe Sneh who refused to exonerate Oren were eventually expelled from the party. Sneh and his followers formed what they termed the “Left Brigade” of Mapam. Where the party once united individuals who sought to act on behalf of Zionism and communism, it found it increasingly difficult to accommodate communist ideals. Though Mapam vehemently denied that the events of 1952 and 1953 had

\(^{124}\) "Is Repentance Possible for Mapam Youth?" \(Israel\) Horizons Feb. 1953.

\(^{125}\) "Is Repentance Possible for Mapam Youth?"
issued them an irrevocable blow, reality did not bear this out. The world which accommodated the dual belief in Zionism and communism was indeed coming to an end, even if Mapam did not recognize it at first glance.

**Conclusions**

The Prague Trial and Doctors’ Plot were distinct for a host of reasons. They constituted the first instance of overt Soviet antisemitism though more subtle manifestations had existed for decades. They took place in a post-Holocaust era in which Jewish authorities had yet to formalize their positions among the drastically altered Jewish communities of the world. The Cold War was raging, and the cases of Slansky and the Moscow doctors drew Jews, throughout the world, into the struggle between East and West whether they wanted to or not. In addition to these significant circumstances, another potent reality existed which rendered the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism entirely unique. Jewish persecution was of course nothing new, but Jewish persecution with the existence of a sovereign Jewish state was something entirely unknown within diasporic history.

The Prague Purges and Doctors’ Plot were therefore not simply Jewish issues; they were matters of state. The crisis aroused by Soviet antisemitism forced Jews to grapple with their relationship to this new Jewish entity. Similarly, it compelled the new State of Israel to more accurately define its jurisdiction in diasporic affairs. Whether Zionist or not, the Prague trial made it clear that Israel had altered the position of Jews as agents on the international stage. The events of 1952 and 1953 by no means permanently delineated the boundaries between “Israeli” and “Jewish” authority, but they did force Jews both in Israel and elsewhere to recognize that neither was sure as to who held the final word in global Jewish affairs.

The Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot, as far as Jews were concerned, took place on a host of levels and in a variety of arenas. Jews in the Diaspora engaged with the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism as citizens of their respective countries and as Jews. Some of them also looked to Israel as the natural choice to defend the rights of Soviet Jewry. Others in the Diaspora rejected Israel as a representative in global Jewish affairs, and others still remained ambiguous or simply confused regarding the role the new Jewish state ought to play in the lives of diasporic Jewry.

For the new Jewish state, the outbreak of overt Soviet antisemitism represented a critical moment in which some of its leaders could demonstrate that Jews, throughout the world, fared better with the existence of a sovereign Jewish entity. Though in practice the State of Israel could do little on behalf of Iron Curtain Jewry, it nevertheless saw the events of 1952 and 1953 as an opportunity to assert Israel’s authority in global Jewish affairs. Despite its inability to exert any real influence over Soviet policy, Israel could present the matter of Soviet Jewry before the United Nations not as a minority desperately seeking the goodwill of larger powers, but as a sovereign and thus equal voice among other sovereign authorities.

The advent of soviet antisemitism also served to reposition Jews within the politics of the Cold War. It did so both on the personal as well as state level. Soviet hostility toward its own Jewish population, Zionism, and the new State of Israel left Jews with little choice in the struggle between East and West. Even though Israel had attempted to maintain a policy of non-identification in its early years, its preference for the West was widely known. Notwithstanding, sections of Israeli and diasporic Jewry argued that the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism denied
them a critical choice in the global arena. It was not so much the end of Jewish and Israeli neutrality in the Cold War that Jews lamented in the wake of Prague and Moscow, but that the issue had been forced by powers beyond their control. Though some Jews lamented the end of neutrality, others welcomed it. They hoped that with the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism, Israel could finally declare its open commitment to the West and bury once and for all myths about the close relationship between Jews and communism.

The Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot also held important implications for Israel’s internal political life. As was the case in the Diaspora, Israeli communists were met with vehement criticisms after their refusal to reject the accusations made against the Zionist movement by Soviet authorities. They were reviled as traitors to their own people, and in the new Jewish state, were seen as potentially hostile fifth columns. More importantly, however, was the situation of Israel’s Mapam (United Workers Party). Mapamniks believed in the virtues of Zionism and socialism. They were not members of the Communist Party, but held the Soviet Union and Peoples’ Democracies in high regard. They also saw themselves as integral components of the Zionist movement. Indeed, in early Israeli elections, they held the second largest number of seats in the Knesset after the Social Democrats. They had fought bravely in Israel’s War of Independence and ran a large number of Israel’s agricultural settlements. In the wake of Prague and Moscow, Israelis were truly baffled as to how this political party whose commitment to Zionism was undeniable could support a state that openly condemned the Zionist movement. Though Mapam continued to assert its support of the Soviet regime, the events of 1952 and 1953 shook its ideological foundations and ultimately forced most of its members to choose between Zionism and communism.

Whether in the Diaspora or in the State of Israel, whether Zionist or socialist, religious or secular, the wave of Soviet antisemitism which began with the Slansky Trial in November 1952 affected Jews in profound and lasting ways. As the most blatant act of state-sponsored antisemitism to take place after the Holocaust, it forced Jews to examine the ways in which they took collective action, to redefine centers of Jewish authority, to grapple with the role that the new Jewish state would play in diasporic Jewish affairs, and to rethink the ideological underpinnings of certain political philosophies. The Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot did not necessarily cause some of the fundamental challenges confronting Jews in the post-Holocaust era, but awakened Jews to the controversies which lay buried just beneath the surface. Though relatively short-lived, the intense wave of Soviet antisemitism of late 1952 and early 1953 brought to light issues which Jews would continue to face in decades to come.
Conclusion

The wave of overt Soviet antisemitism which began with the Slansky Trial on November 20, 1952 ended abruptly with Stalin’s death on March 5, 1953. To be sure, manifestations of Soviet antisemitism, both on the state and individual level, persisted, with varying degrees of intensity, throughout the duration of the Soviet experience. The intensity and blatant character of the antisemitism displayed at the Slansky Trial and in the Doctors’ Plot, however, was not to be seen again. Soviet Jews might encounter discrimination, be barred from specific occupations and positions in the government bureaucracy, and be suspected at times for being less than fully loyal Soviet citizens, but these manifestations of Soviet antisemitism were less systematic, and as a result, did not arouse the widespread indignation and fear of world Jewry as had the events of 1952 and 1953.

Despite its relatively short duration, the intense wave of Soviet antisemitism which took shape in Stalin’s final months proved to be a crucial moment in the lives of post-WWII Jewry. As the most blatant act of state-sponsored antisemitism since the Holocaust, Jews, across the globe and across a spectrum of political, national, religious, and social identities, necessarily came up against some of the most critical issues facing the world’s Jewish population in the years following the end of the Second World War. In addition to the dramatic changes in Jewish demographics wrought by the Nazi genocide of European Jewry, Jews had to grapple with the creation of a sovereign Jewish state, the emergence of American Jewry as a potent political entity in the international arena, as well as the role Jews would play in the increasingly hostile Cold War. Though the matter of Soviet antisemitism was itself a crucial concern of Jews throughout the world, its implications were far-reaching as Jews sought to reconstitute their identities after the Holocaust.

Jews engaged with the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism in a variety of ways and through a host of conceptual channels. In their efforts to understand the nature and consequences of Soviet antisemitism, Jews employed historical precedent, political ideologies, and their religious faith. As historians such as Hasia Diner have recently shown, Jews did not construct a “wall of silence” surrounding the Holocaust in the late 1940s and 1950s as previously believed. They engaged with it publicly and personally, and it informed a host of Jewish issues and debates in the years immediately following World War II. As such, the Holocaust, more than any other historical event, figured prominently as Jews sought to interpret the events taking place behind the Iron Curtain. Whether living in France, Britain, the U.S., or Israel, whether Zionist, Bundist, communist, or liberal, whether secular or religious, Jews could not help but see the advent of Soviet antisemitism as it related to the Holocaust.

Jews were no strangers to the burdens of history, but the Holocaust placed an unprecedented responsibility on the Jews of the world to intervene when Jewish lives were threatened. Hence, throughout Jewish periodicals, at public rallies, and in organizational meetings, Jews used the Holocaust as a way to understand events taking place in the East. Some Jews drew the conclusion that the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot closely resembled Nazi antisemitism and as such, feared the worst for the safety and welfare of their co-religionists in the East. Other Jews, while admitting that the situation of Soviet Jewry had indeed deteriorated, urged their fellow Jews to approach the matter of Soviet antisemitism with
caution and calm. There is no historical evidence to suggest that Stalin planned genocide for the Jews of the Soviet Union. Information about Iron Curtain Jewry, in the early 1950s, however, was limited, and the question of whether Soviet antisemitism signaled genocide loomed large as Jews struggled to make sense of this latest crisis.

Though debates surrounding the nature of Soviet antisemitism were vigorous and filled the pages of Jewish periodicals throughout the duration of the crisis, there was little Jews could do to intervene on behalf of their co-religionists in the East. Despite the existence of a Jewish national state, the creation of the United Nations, and the alleged potency of American Jewry, Jews remained powerless to assist their Soviet brethren. Powerlessness, however, did not mean defeat, and Jews across the globe took large scale collective action to make their indignation and fury over Soviet actions against its Jewish population heard. Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee, the Jewish Labor Committee, The various Zionist organizations of America, Britain, and France, as well as a host of non-affiliated national Jewish bodies organized public rallies, issued publications, appealed to official government and international entities, delivered religious sermons, offered up prayers, held public debates, and generally raised their voices against what they perceived to be the latest injustice to beset the Jews. Though separated by a supposed impermeable barrier, Jews in the non-communist world felt intimately connected to the situation of Soviet Jewry. As citizens able to express themselves freely, they felt it their duty to speak for and represent their fellow Jews in the East who, as they saw it, were without a voice and in dire need of a defender and protector.

In the weeks and months following the Slansky Trial, Jewish entities were in agreement that the safety and welfare of Soviet Jewry ought to be the primary goal of any action taken by Jews and non-Jews alike. Who, however, was best equipped to address the crisis of Soviet antisemitism was by no means universally accepted. As a result, Jewish organizations, to a degree, competed with one another to represent the interests of Soviet Jewry and to speak for the silent millions trapped in the lands in the East. Zionists, socialists, liberals, and even Jewish communists all believed that they knew what was best for the Jews, not only in the Soviet Union, but throughout the world. They all pointed to their historical records to defend their right to represent Jewish interests globally and to thereby discredit the competition.

Whether Jewish entities consciously saw themselves in competition with one another as they sought to take the lead in the campaign to save Soviet Jewry is difficult to say. What is clear, is that in the wake of the Holocaust, traditional centers of Jewish authority ceased to exist. Europe ceased to be the demographic center of world Jewry, ceding its position to the U.S. and Israel. As a result, a great deal of uncertainty prevailed surrounding questions of Jewish leadership and representation in matters of global as well as domestic import. Zionists as well as other Jews looked to the new State of Israel as the obvious choice in matters of representing Jewish interests. After all, argued such individuals, why else was a Jewish state created if not to protect, defend, and speak for Jews where ever they might live. Other Jewish entities, the American Jewish Committee foremost among them, declared that not only was Israel unauthorized to represent the interests of Jews in the Diaspora, but that the new state was ill-equipped to do so. In the early 1950s Jews in the Diaspora were uncertain as to the role that this new Jewish entity would play in their lives both personally and politically. Similarly, though many in the Israeli government expressed a moral obligation to represent Jewish interests throughout the world, the new Jewish state had yet to test its boundaries vis-à-vis
diasporic Jewry. The intense conflicts which arose between the State of Israel and Jewish organizations and entities following the outbreak of overt antisemitism reveals that a crisis in Jewish authority was apparent in the years following the Holocaust. Indeed, the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot caused Jews to question the very concept of a “world Jewry.” What was it, if anything, that bound Jews together across national boundaries, political divides, social disparities, and a spectrum of religious conviction? What role did antisemitism and the recent Nazi genocide play in causing Jews to take keen interest in the welfare of Jews in distant lands and with whom they shared little or nothing in common?

In addition to the key roles of the Holocaust and questions of Jewish representation, politics emerged as one of the most critical factors in how Jews interpreted events taking place in Prague and in Moscow. Traditional opponents of communism, such as Jewish liberals and socialists, viewed the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism as a lamentable, but opportune moment to put to rest once and for all sentiments that all Jews were communists and all communists were Jews. They hoped to use Soviet antisemitism as proof that Jews were victims of communism and no more susceptible to the Marxist creed than any other group. These same individuals also sought to use Soviet antisemitism to lure Jews with Soviet sympathies away from the communist camp. While traditional opponents of communism feared the outcomes of Soviet antisemitism, they nevertheless exploited it for their own political ends.

Though such groups hoped that the antisemitism seen in the Slansky Trial and the Doctors’ Plot would cause Jewish communists to rethink their political identities and ultimately abandon their communist convictions, it seems that most Jewish communists remained loyal to their Marxist convictions and to their faith in the Soviet Union. It was not until 1956 with the advent of the Hungarian Revolution and Khrushchev’s admission of Stalin’s crimes in his “secret speech,” to the Twentieth Party Congress, that Jewish communists began to question Soviet leadership. For the most part, Jewish communists took the accusations levied in Prague and in Moscow at face value or at the very least, believed that the Soviet regime had good reasons for conducting the Prague trial and Doctors’ Plot, even if these reasons were unknown to them. As Tony Judt has written, “1956 was a delayed response; it represented a sort of time-lapse in sensibilities, a decent interval between the death of faith and departure from the church. Most fellow-travelers, as their later recollections and memoirs suggest, passed through these years in a sort of twilight zone, in which their thoughts and their words bore only a tangential relationship to one another.”¹ Indeed, in their memoirs, many communists describe 1956 as the year in which they woke up from a decades’ long dream.

Jewish communists, like their non-communist co-religionists, believed that they too knew what was best for the Jews. They argued that the Soviet Union and its satellite nations had led the vanguard in combating antisemitism and had outlawed antisemitism and all other forms of racism in their legal codes. They truly believed that Jews faced more danger in the West than they did in the East. They looked at the Soviet Union as a place in which Jews could choose to be as “Jewish” as they desired and could simultaneously participate in all aspects of society as equal citizens. In other words, the Soviet Union had solved the “Jewish Question,” that had plagued Jews since the dawn of the modern era.

Though international in scope, Jews translated the crisis aroused by Soviet antisemitism into domestic and personal terms. Jews in the Diaspora interpreted the events of 1952 and 1953 according to their own national distinctions and sought to engage the crises of Soviet antisemitism as domestic agents. The Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot were, however, at their most fundamental levels, matters of state. Whether Jews in the Diaspora were prepared to cede their authority to the new Jewish state, they could not deny that the outbreak of Soviet antisemitism represented a grave diplomatic situation for the fledgling State of Israel. The Israeli government was directly accused of participating in acts of espionage against the Czechoslovak state during the Slansky Trial, and the Moscow Doctors were said to be Zionist agents working on behalf of the U.S., Britain, and Jewish philanthropic organizations. Even if some Jews contested Israel’s right to represent the interests of diasporic Jewry, few Jews argued against Israel’s obligation to defend its name and honor against Soviet accusations. Indeed, many of the same Jews who so vigorously argued against Israel’s authority in world Jewish affairs, called for Jews to lend financial support to the new Jewish state and decried the Soviet accusations as inflammatory and false.

The outbreak of Soviet antisemitism reverberated with intensity throughout Israeli society and held significant internal as well as external consequences. As in the Diaspora, Israeli communists were reviled not only as traitors to the Jews but to the state in which they dwelled. They were seen increasingly as hostile agents working on behalf of a foreign entity. The number of Israeli communists was, however, relatively small, and while the anger and outrage directed at them was rigorous and unyielding, they played a largely insignificant role in Israeli politics. More troubling was the situation of Israel’s Mapam party. Mapamniks who in the first Israeli elections constituted the second largest party in the new Jewish state, believed equally in the virtues of Zionism and communism. While they were not members of the Communist Party, they held the Soviet Union in high esteem and believed themselves to be an integral part of revolutionary socialism. They were fervent Zionists who had demonstrated their devotion to the new Jewish state in word and deed. They had fought valiantly in Israel’s War of Independence, and as a result, could not be so easily dismissed as Israel’s communists.

In the wake of the Prague trial and Doctors’ Plot, Mapam struggled to reconcile the two main components of its political ideology. Though its members initially sought to uphold their commitment to Marxist doctrine and affirm their faith in the Soviet regime and Peoples’ Democracies, the Party eventually split. Most members of Mapam had to choose between Zionism and communism, and except for a small number of individuals, the majority chose the former. Ideologically speaking, the outbreak of soviet antisemitism brought an end to a world which accommodated the dual belief in Zionism and communism.

It was not Mapamniks alone who felt that a choice was being foisted upon them. In its early years of existence, the State of Israel attempted to maintain some degree of neutrality in the Cold War struggle between East and West. For some neutrality meant maintaining equal partnerships with the countries of the East and West. For others, it meant remaining equally distant from the major Cold War powers. Because of its precarious position geographically, financially, and internationally, the young Israeli state sought to pursue as far as it was capable a policy of non-identification. Moreover, a large section of the world’s Jewish population dwelled in the lands behind the Iron Curtain. If Israel was to have any hope of maintaining contact with Jews in the East, then it would have to ensure good relations with the Soviet
Union. In the wake of the Slansky Affair and Doctors’ Plot, Jews, both in Israel and the Diaspora, felt that they had been robbed of a crucial political choice. Even though Israel had already begun to become more closely associated with the Western powers before the events of 1952, it was Israel’s choice to do so. The Soviets, in staging such blatant acts of antisemitism, had forced Israel into the Western camp. Some Jews welcomed this outcome as an opportunity for Israel to receive more reliable support from the U.S. Others, however, lamented the reality that even in a world in which Jews had a sovereign state, larger, more powerful states could still deny them their right to political agency.

On April 4, 1953 the Soviet government announced that the Doctors’ Plot had been found to be entirely fabricated and accordingly, rehabilitated the nine doctors accused of having committed acts of medical murder. The crisis of Soviet Jewry which began with the Slansky Affair just four months prior seemed to be at an end. Though Jews, to a large degree, remained suspicious of the Soviet regime in regards to its treatment of its Jewish population, they felt that the immediate crisis was over. The story of how Jews in the non-communist world attempted to speak and act on behalf of their co-religionists in the East, however, had only just begun.

In the 1960s and 1970s a large scale movement, initiated in the U.S., to save Soviet Jewry took shape. In 1970 and 1971 respectively, the Union of Councils of Soviet Jews and the National conference for Soviet Jewry were formed. Both organizations, though different in their political orientations, sought to protect the rights of Soviet Jewry and to enable Soviet Jews to emigrate. Though nearly two decades had passed since the Slansky Trial and Doctors’ Plot, these groups faced many of the same challenges as did their counterparts of the early 1950s. They encountered organizational competition and continued to engage in the ongoing struggle between Israel and diasporic Jewry as each sought to represent and speak for Soviet Jews.

Unlike their predecessors, the Soviet Jewry activists of the 1970s and 1980s had some degree of success in assisting Soviet Jewry to emigrate. This was due less from their abilities as a movement than from the particular realities in which they operated. They carried out their mission in a post-Stalinist world in which the Soviet Union had liberalized to a degree and in which the U.S. had more firmly established its commitment to the State of Israel. Notwithstanding, as Stuart Altshuler, former Soviet Jewry activist, has written, “It was a classic David-and-Goliath battle, with few odds makers giving David (Soviet Jews and their community activist allies) a chance. It was sheer chutzpah to believe that an organized protest movement could force one of the world’s most powerful nations to open its doors to Jewish emigration; however, that belief would ultimately be vindicated.”

Though perhaps less organized, more varied, and ultimately less successful than their successors, the Jews of the early 1950s were no less courageous in taking on the Soviet Union in the matter of its Jewish population. In the wake of the Holocaust, they felt it their moral obligation to act even if those actions would be fruitless. They set a precedent that Jews, whether in Israel or the Diaspora, would not remain quiet while their co-religionists, distant

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3 Altshuler, 12.
though they might be, suffered and faced bodily and spiritual harm. Their task was seemingly
insurmountable, but yet they persisted, and as they sought to give voice to the plight of Soviet
Jewry, they simultaneously found their own voices as well.
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