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Inside the ★  
Kremlin's Cold War

*From Stalin to Khrushchev*

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to the east of the Elbe River. Among Stalin's lieutenants, Zhdanov was responsible for shaping a Cold War mentality inside the Soviet Union as well as for Communist followers and sympathizers all over the world. He was a trumpeter of the Cold War in the Soviet leadership.

### Stalin's Most Favored Ideologist

Stalin liked Zhdanov more than anyone else in his inner circle. He even encouraged his only daughter, Svetlana, to marry Zhdanov's son.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the Zhdanov family seemed to embody what Stalin gradually grew to like and cultivate among his bureaucrats: blind loyalty, spineless obedience, and meticulous adherence to ideological dogma.

Andrei Zhdanov was born in 1896 in Mariupol, Ukraine, into a middle-class Russian family. His family was almost Chekhovian, passionate patriots of a small, cherry-blossomed town. Zhdanov's mother belonged to the nobility and graduated from the Moscow Musical Conservatory. His father, like Lenin's, was an inspector of public schools in the area. Zhdanov's three sisters, unlike Chekhov's heroines, plunged into revolutionary activities, motivated by the world war and the collapse of the Romanov dynasty. Two of them never married and devoted all their energy to the "enlightenment of the masses." Their influence on Andrei remained strong even later, when he built a career in the Party; the two women lived in his house, with his wife and son, until his death. Zhdanov never received a formal higher education; as in many Russian families like his, this was compensated by early random reading and pretensions to be "part of the Russian intelligentsia."

Zhdanov did not belong to the cohort of revolutionary heroes. At the end of the civil war he was only a young deputy of a local soviet in a town in the Urals. His career progressed quickly after that, however: from 1922 to 1927 he was a city administrator in the old Russian cities of Tver and Nizhni Novgorod and a delegate to congresses of the Communist party. He first attracted Stalin's attention with his fiery speech against Grigory Zinoviev, the leader of an anti-Stalin "Leningrad opposition" (the most threatening anti-Stalinist group in the Party, joined even by Lenin's widow, Nadezhda K. Krupskaya). In 1927 he became a secretary of the Central Committee. In 1934 Zhdanov replaced Sergei Kirov, after his mysterious assassina-

tion, as head of the Leningrad party organization, second only in importance to that of Moscow. In 1935 he became a candidate, and in 1939 a full member, of the Politburo. From 1941 to 1944, during the ferocious German siege of Leningrad, Zhdanov was in the city, both as a party secretary and as a political counselor of the Northwestern (later Leningrad) front. In 1944–1945 he was the Allied Commissioner in Finland. At the end of 1945, Stalin transferred him to Moscow, to the Central Committee apparatus. Zhdanov stayed there until his sudden death after two heart attacks in August 1948.

Some American historians have suggested that Zhdanov's rise and disappearance after the Second World War had something to do with the emergence of the Communist proselytes in the Soviet apparatus for the first time since the great purges of the 1930s. Stalin allegedly was under pressure from the new cadres, proud of the Soviet victory in the war and pushing a more radical, ideological line in domestic and foreign affairs.<sup>4</sup>

Ideology had several related functions in the Stalinist state. Its paramount goal was to promote the "monolithic unity of the Soviet people," that is, to suppress any antagonisms between state and society, authority and individual, and also between different groups within the USSR (interethnic tensions were just one of the potential powder kegs). Ideology also had a foreign policy function. In the framework of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm it was one more dimension of political and physical control. In the Socialist countries, the Soviet ideology imposed by Moscow and its puppet regimes strengthened Soviet influence over its territory, be it Poland or Hungary. Outside the Soviet camp, Soviet ideology was recruiting a "fifth column" for the purpose of undermining the enemy's control over Europe and Asia.

Thus, ideology to an extent had retained its revolutionary glory and importance. The ideologues did not fare quite so well. Bolshevism could be interpreted only in the form canonized by Stalin in the 1930s—all innovations were initiated by the pontiff himself, and even the leading ideologues, from Zhdanov to his successor, Mikhail Suslov, were just librarians responsible for finding the proper quotation at the right time and for keeping the credo in strict order. No creativity or ardor from an ideologue was tolerated. The keepers of the Bolshevik shrine were deprived of any true revolutionary passion and any real interest in ideology as such.

By 1947 it had become crystal clear that the Western leaders regarded their cooperation with Stalin during the war years as an unfortunate episode that was to be followed by considerable detachment. But "detachment" during the fragile peace of 1945–1947 had to be transformed into something more definite. Thus many Western intellectuals and propagandists, ranging from the Trotskyites and the anti-Communist Socialists to Catholic theologians, contributed to the ideological, cultural, and doctrinal justification for a Cold War. In the United States, the philosopher and sociologist Hannah Arendt, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the Socialist Norman Thomas, and many others finished what the diplomat George Kennan had started: they explained to a public that had been sympathetic to the Soviet Union as the main fighter against the Nazi threat or as an "interesting social experiment" that the Stalinist state and Hitler's regime had one common denominator—they were totalitarian states. The motto of the Western Cold Warriors became "free world versus totalitarianism."

Stalin clearly felt a need to resuscitate ideology as a prop for his regime and its foreign policy. An ideological component was required to give legitimacy both to the Moscow sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and to Yalta and Potsdam, undermined by the collapse of the Grand Alliance. Coordination among "fraternal" parties in the Cominform guaranteed Soviet domination much better than any system of bilateral state treaties, and at the same time dispelled negative associations with traditional imperialist practices, such as the domination of Poland by czarist Russia in the nineteenth century. But at the same time Stalin *did not* want the Cominform to be in any way an ideological headquarters of the revolutionary movement. The Yugoslav Communists tried to perceive it as such and were unceremoniously expelled from the Cominform in June 1948.

Stalin made sure that the ideology of his Cold War system of alliances would not dissent or deviate from the Kremlin's view. According to this view, the world was again, as in 1917, shattered by world war. The second phase of the terminal crisis of capitalism had begun. It was characterized by the world's split into two "blocs," one of imperialism and war, led by the United States, and one of peace, democracy, and socialism, led by the Kremlin.

The main paradox was that this new ideology was the product not of the zealous faith of "party resurrectionists," as one American

historian claimed, but of the meticulous work of gigantic bureaucratic machinery, manned by Soviet ideologists and propagandists. The distance between them and true Communist zealots supporting the Soviet cause over the world was immense. Even a very brief portrait of Zhdanov is enough to substantiate this point.

Zhdanov belonged to the first generation of Soviet apparatchiks. Admiration and utter loyalty were his feelings toward Stalin that he shared with Khrushchev and hundreds of ranking party organizers in the 1930s. Initially just a young party idealist, Zhdanov was quickly disciplined by the deadly realities of Stalin's rule. He was extremely close to Stalin all the way through the bloody miasma of the great purges. His signature was next to Stalin's on a famous cable from Sochi in 1936 that unleashed the secret police on millions of new victims. Zhdanov's primary focus, however, was party propaganda and agitation. He helped Stalin to edit a new and falsified history of the Party entitled *The Brief Course*.

Zhdanov's papers reveal one important feature that he shared with many of his colleagues under Stalin: the bureaucratic perfectionism of a workaholic. His notes betray a man with a huge, almost oppressive, sense of duty and meticulousness. When Zhdanov was an Allied commissioner in Finland, he operated with mountains of Finnish statistics, driven by the duty to extract as much in reparations as possible from the defeated country. When he supervised Finland's politics, he turned into a walking encyclopedia of "who's who in Helsinki." He left many drafts of every policy: each of them written in longhand, every succeeding draft changed, reformulated.

People who worked with Zhdanov then and later could not remember anything remarkable, noteworthy, or anecdotal about the man. In Stalin's inner circle, however, he was regarded as "a man of culture." As part of his education, he learned to play the piano and the accordion, and from time to time would entertain the tyrant and his drunken guests. Zhdanov's early habit of reading Russian literature served him well when in 1946, on Stalin's order, he denounced two writers, the bearers of the free-spirit tradition of Russian literature, Mikhail Zoshchenko and Anna Akhmatova. Here as well, Zhdanov did not do his job perfunctorily; he dug deep into literary criticism, reading everything he could find on the two selected victims. No one else in Stalin's circle could do this work better.

Did Zhdanov remain as sturdy and one-dimensional as Molotov?

We know that he did not. He was not physically strong enough. The siege of Leningrad in 1941–1944, along with the years spent within Stalin's court, took its toll: from a vibrant, physically attractive person Zhdanov turned into an overweight, pasty-faced man, prone to severe asthmatic attacks.<sup>5</sup> Outward diligence, the working habits of a brilliant clerk, contrasted with sudden drinking bouts. He was a splintered person, pitiful or tragic. Zhdanov concealed his true disposition behind a turgid facade.

Stalin valued and liked Zhdanov's punctuality and perfectionism. But sometimes it irritated him, and he turned the "ideologically correct" Zhdanov into the object of his fits of rage. There are rare traces of this in the memoirs of Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva. "Once, shortly before Andrei Zhdanov's death," she writes, "knowing that the man suffered from recurrent heart attacks, my father, angered by Zhdanov's silence at the table, suddenly turned on him viciously: 'Look at him, sitting there like little Christ as if nothing was of any concern to him.' Zhdanov grew pale, beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead."<sup>6</sup>

Zhdanov's biggest feat in the service of Stalin's doctrine, the report on the international situation at the creation of the Cominform, he performed impeccably, with the maximum passion of which he was capable, although without any personal "theoretical" imprint: the pivotal ideas of the document had been formulated under Stalin's guidance. But again, that was what Stalin valued Zhdanov for.

For most of his career, Zhdanov was in charge of ideology. Ideology in all its terrifying splendor, a utopian teaching leading to Armageddon, could be guarded or regulated only by the supreme pontiff—Stalin. But ideology as a set of "correct" and simple clichés based upon well-developed institutions was Zhdanov's responsibility. He had to be both opportunistic, to find propagandist justifications for the realpolitik, and dogmatic—to preserve the original ideological credo, in spite of changing political winds and currents.

### On the Margins of Grand Diplomacy

Zhdanov's Cold War experience began in Finland, where he served as an Allied commissioner after the war. One year of negotiations with Finland, from October 1944 to November 1945, helped to shape what later became known as "Finlandization," the transformation of a

hostile country into something Stalin could be comfortable with, a friendly neighbor of the USSR—not a satellite, but not quite independent in the security sphere. The Finnish experiment, along with other scenarios, was very much on Zhdanov's mind in the months following the conclusion of his tenure there in November 1945, as he and other Soviet rulers, along with Stalin, searched for ways to deal with the countries that fell into the Soviet sphere of influence.

At that time Stalin was prepared to outline most of his general political goals and let others work out a policy. Probably influenced by Roman history, he appointed a proconsul to each new Soviet satellite. (The experience of the Russian empire was also not lost on him, since under the czars "the Polish kingdom," as a special case, was governed by an especially trustworthy person, a member of the royal family. Nicholas II had a proconsul in the Far East, Admiral Alexeev, during the active phase of Russian expansion in the area.) Stalin appointed other proconsuls besides Zhdanov: Voroshilov in Hungary, Zhukov and Semyonov in Germany, Vyshinsky in Rumania.<sup>7</sup> In Germany there was a group of proconsuls whom Stalin entrusted with the micromanagement of domestic situations; they were to use every means possible, including, of course, the Communist carpetbaggers trained in the Comintern schools and returned to their respective homelands.

The power of the proconsuls was curbed once the Stalin-Molotov foreign policy came into play. In January 1945, Zhdanov was conducting talks on a Soviet-Finnish settlement. His Finnish counterpart was Field Marshal Carl von Mannerheim, a former officer of the czar's court and a father of independent Finland. On January 18, Zhdanov informed Stalin and Molotov that Mannerheim agreed to sign a bilateral defense treaty, but "would defend the interior of the country himself." "He asked if there were standard treaties, and I replied that the one with Czechoslovakia might be taken as such. I am waiting for instructions."<sup>8</sup>

The Soviet-Czechoslovak treaty of alliance was a sign that, of all the countries in the Soviet sphere of influence, Czechoslovakia enjoyed the most favorable relations with Moscow. The treaty was a product of successful efforts by Eduard Benes to alleviate Moscow's concerns about the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London.<sup>9</sup> More important, perhaps, in 1944 Stalin had needed the Czechoslovak model to encourage other countries, particularly Hitler's allies, to surrender

to the Red Army on its march to the West. This was no longer necessary, especially not with prostrated Finland.

The Finnish attempt to obtain an early, better deal in comparison with the general terms of armistice ran contrary to the Stalin-Molotov grand diplomacy in Europe. It would certainly have been a violation of the principle to settle a postwar world in the concert of three great powers, something that Stalin still highly valued. Zhdanov, who was on the margins of this grand diplomacy, failed to see this obvious fact. Therefore, Molotov sent him a terse reply: "You have gone too far. A pact with Mannerheim of the sort we have with Czechoslovakia is [the] music of the future. We have to reestablish diplomatic relations first. Don't frighten Mannerheim with radical proposals." And then: "You were too emotional."<sup>10</sup>

Zhdanov swallowed Molotov's remonstrations. "Finland is on probation," he told Mannerheim, "and it still cannot have relations of a different kind with the USSR." Of course, the whole Soviet-dominated zone from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea was on probation. But later, in 1948, the Finns escaped the common fate and did not become subdued satellites in the Soviet bloc. Zhdanov hardly played any role in this decision—its real underpinning was revealed by Molotov in his conversations with Chuev: "We did the right thing. It would have been an open wound."<sup>11</sup>

These words showed that the Kremlin leaders had learned a lesson from the Finns' stubborn and courageous resistance to the Soviet Army during the Winter War of 1939–1940 and come to the correct conclusion that the "Sovietization" of Finland would be a bloody, protracted struggle. There were too many "open wounds" already inside the Soviet Union, such as Western Ukraine and the Baltic, where the nationalist guerrillas had fought with regular troops for years.

Still, the activities of High Commissioner Zhdanov give another clue to the special luck of the Finns. His declassified papers contain hundreds of pages dealing with Finland's postwar economic life and politics. First and foremost, Zhdanov was responsible for the smooth flow of reparations from Finland to the Soviet Union. In 1945 the official Kremlin emphasis was still on the political alliance of all anti-Nazi forces, including the Social-Democratic and Agrarian parties. But, as a security measure, several key ministerial positions in the Finnish government were given, at Moscow's insistence, to the Communists. Zhdanov had a "special channel" to them, and advised them

how to preserve their power through various tactical alliances with other parties. In the process he got to know many bourgeois politicians: he preferred to deal with the most conservative among them (Mauno Pekkala, Urkko Kekkonen) rather than with Social Democrats (who were traditionally regarded as treacherous heretics, and once labeled “worse than fascists” by Stalin in the early 1930s).

From the very beginning Stalin, through Zhdanov, kept two options open: as long as Finland behaved well and fulfilled the reparations plan, a deal with the traditional, conservative leadership remained a preferred option. But he kept another option open as well—a possible Communist junta—in case things should not work out with the existing leadership. Relations between the two countries continued to go well, however, and, instead of a Communist coup, the Finns received a friendship treaty.<sup>12</sup>

In December 1945, the Generalissimo returned from his Black Sea dacha to Moscow and held a meeting of the Politburo, the first after a five-year interlude. At about the same time he summoned Zhdanov back from the margins of Soviet diplomacy. Zhdanov returned to his preeminent role of propagandist-in-chief.

Zhdanov’s administrative “empire” in the central party apparatus was greater than in the prewar years. Again he was responsible for institutionalized ideology. He presided over two departments of the Central Committee: the Department of Agitation and Propaganda and the Foreign Policy Department (the latter would change its name and even its functions in the future, and would eventually become known as the International Department). Included were Sovinformburo, with its experienced wartime staff in charge of the dissemination of all public information; the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS); some divisions of the Committee on Broadcasting; and a publishing house dealing with foreign literature. The structures of “public diplomacy,” extremely effective during the war, included the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the All-Slavic Committee, and the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad (VOKS).

The Foreign Policy Department in particular is worth examining in some detail. After Stalin decreed the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943, its staff continued to work in various Soviet state and party structures, mainly in military intelligence and propaganda. The central apparatus had been transferred to the Central Committee, but remained under the command of the former Comintern’s leader, the

Bulgarian Communist expatriate Georgi Dimitrov. In December 1945, the "Ghost Comintern" had become part of his administrative fiefdom. Dimitrov, who returned to Bulgaria to build a coalition government, was replaced by Mikhail Suslov and his deputy, Alexander Panyushkin, two Russian apparatchiks with no exposure to international Communist movements. They both reported to Zhdanov as their direct boss.

The Foreign Policy Department continued to run several secret "institutes" of the disbanded Comintern that maintained old operative and informational contacts with the world Communist movement. "Institute-205" dealt with the assessment and analysis of information. "Institute-99" specialized in the recruitment of cadres for operative Communist work among the POWs. "Institute-100" dealt primarily with radio broadcasting and maintained a network of radio agents scattered around Europe. The Foreign Policy Department and its old Comintern cadres could hardly constitute a bureaucratic rival to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs run by Vyacheslav Molotov, but in the field of information this was a very impressive complex.

The Comintern people had always been a very valuable part of Soviet political and especially military intelligence networks. The information from chiefs of Comintern stations and sympathizers around the world was not just an addition to the regular intelligence collected by MGB, GRU, and Soviet diplomats; those informers provided a fresh and different angle—reflecting the faith and illusions of various social movements primarily belonging to Popular Fronts.

In 1945, when Soviet leaders were busy haggling with the Allies over peace treaties, this network was almost completely disbanded and left without instructions. No coordination of activities existed among foreign Communist parties. Some of them, including the American and the British parties, had almost no ties with the Foreign Policy Department.

In 1946 the role of Zhdanov's bureaucratic empire was very limited as far as foreign policy was concerned. It published a top-secret bulletin of international information, a few copies of which were prepared by the secret "institutes" and reserved for those at the top of the central party apparatus. Zhdanov was personally responsible for the content and dissemination of this bulletin, but in all other respects he and his departments and secret "institutes" were completely subservient to the needs of foreign policy directed by Stalin

and Molotov. This was the pattern in the relationship between the Comintern and Soviet foreign policy before World War II, and the events in Iran, which coincided with Zhdanov's new nomination, demonstrated that the pattern had not changed.

Since czarist times the northern part of Iran (Persia) had been regarded by Moscow as part of a legitimate perimeter of security. The importance of Iranian oil, fisheries, and other resources was on the minds of the new Soviet rulers, who extracted many concessions from the weak Iranian government even before World War II. In August 1944 Lavrenty Beria signed and sent to Stalin and Molotov a memorandum about the growing importance of Middle East oil and the possible American-British struggle for it after the war. In 1944–1945 the Kremlin leadership attempted to use the presence of Soviet troops in Iran (made possible through a wartime agreement with the British to prevent Germany from penetrating into the Middle East) to secure these concessions, particularly on oil. But the Truman administration feared the Soviets might reach out as far as the Persian Gulf, and regarded a delay in the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Northern Iran as the first evidence of Stalin's aggressive intentions after the war.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, larger concerns about the security of the southern underbelly of the USSR could not have been far from the minds of Stalin and Molotov. But even so, they seemed to be content with manipulating the Iranian government rather than subverting it. They completely ignored the Iranian Communist party (the Tudeh), setting up a separatist puppet party of Iranian Azerbaijan (ADN). As events showed, Stalin was ready to trade the ADN and the Soviet presence in Iranian Azerbaijan for oil and other privileges. The Tudeh's influence in this region was effectively undermined.<sup>14</sup>

The old Comintern network had informants in Teheran, very close to the Tudeh, who tried to use this channel to change Moscow's policies. One agent, for instance, indicated the possibility of striking a deal with Shah Reza Pahlevi, who seemed then not hostile to the idea of a behind-the-scenes alliance with the Soviets and the Tudeh against Prime Minister Quavam. The Tudeh pushed for establishing a separate revolutionary government in Iranian Azerbaijan, along the lines of the base of the Communist party of China in Yanan. This information streamed into the Department of Foreign Policy and landed on Zhdanov's desk.

It was then sent to Molotov, who was very angry at the Tudeh's intervening in Soviet foreign policy. In February 1946, on Molotov's explicit orders, the officials of the Foreign Policy Department secretly brought to Moscow a very active leader in the Tudeh, Avanesian (Ardashir). They explained to him that the Tudeh's proposals were "mistaken and harmful": the Kremlin would not tolerate any autonomy of or initiative from its Communist allies as far as Soviet policies in the Middle East were concerned.<sup>15</sup>

Avanesian still hoped to revive the old Comintern network in the Middle East. On May 27, 1946, he sent a report to Zhdanov and Suslov in which he proposed "having representatives from the Foreign Policy Department in each country in order to maintain through them contacts with Communist parties and groupings."<sup>16</sup> This idea clearly interfered with the Stalin-Molotov centralized diplomacy.

Stalin and Molotov rarely shared their strategic deliberations with Zhdanov. They dismissed the timid attempts of Zhdanov's subordinate Mikhail Suslov to gain access to more sensitive information on international affairs, in addition to inadequate and ideologically biased party sources, and to start the campaign of "screening" Soviet diplomatic cadres abroad. Having met with cold disapproval in the Kremlin, Zhdanov never pursued that line. As a result, the functionaries of "party diplomacy" remained, in Suslov's words, "virtually without access to the materials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs."<sup>17</sup>

Still, it is instructive to read Zhdanov's bulletins of international information, for they reflect the common wisdom, level of knowledge, and ideological stereotypes regarding international affairs and leaders among the rest of the high Soviet elite outside the narrow policy-making and intelligence-procuring circles. In the summer of 1946 the bureau issued a reference book on world leaders with the following descriptions:

*Truman, Harry:* Under heavy influence of reactionary imperialist circles of American monopoly capital striving to achieve U.S. world domination . . . Started his working life as a small clerk [then was] the owner of a haberdashery shop . . . [A promoter of] the bloc with British imperialist circles.

*Byrnes, James:* Under his guidance a comedy was played out about the alleged "interference" of the USSR in the domestic affairs of Iran . . . At the Paris peace conference he is continuing the policy of

ensuring the interests of American aggressive circles, directed against the USSR and other democratic countries.<sup>18</sup>

These sharply negative characteristics of American policy-makers contrasted with the more tolerant portraits of some “realistically minded” European politicians—among them Jukho Paasikivi of Finland, George Bidault of France, Jan Massaryk and Eduard Benes of Czechoslovakia. Describing the orientation of Prime Minister Benes of Czechoslovakia, however, the bulletin’s editors noted that he “sur-reptitiously supports and covers reactionaries,” and that he “advocates a pro-England orientation, although officially he comes out for the cementing of friendship with the USSR.”<sup>19</sup> The inimitable party clichés disseminated by Zhdanov and his staff later grew into the full-fledged Cold War mentality of the Soviet elites.

Some in the West had long believed that Stalin started the Cold War as a pretext for domestic repression, to fan the mood of so-called Soviet patriotism. Documents from Zhdanov’s files, however, show that the main thrust of the campaign for “Soviet patriotism” against pro-Western “cosmopolites” initially had nothing to do with plans for confrontation with the West. Rather, in 1945–1946 Stalin was looking for an ideology for domestic consumption that would help him both to eradicate Western influences spread during the war and to extract more resources from the impoverished and exhausted USSR and its people. In other words, it looked as if Stalin and Zhdanov had carefully read George Kennan’s “long cable” of February 1946 and started to eliminate those “seeds of decay” on whose growth and proliferation the American diplomat laid a principal hope in his fervent desire to see Stalin’s state crumble and disappear.

Thus Zhdanov, with his jeremiads against wayward composers, writers, and poets, remained on the margins of grand diplomacy, managed, as before, by others. On April 18, 1946, he held the first postwar conference of the Central Party apparatus on propaganda. He unleashed the Department of Propaganda of the Central Committee against literary journals. On April 26, Zhdanov repeated the performance at another session devoted to the situation in cinematography.<sup>20</sup> Then it was the composers’ turn.

The universalist language of Marxism-Leninism was not a sufficient booster for domestic mobilization and propaganda. So much of the campaign, orchestrated by Stalin and Zhdanov, found its food in the

annals of czarist Russia. The propaganda about the Russians as “senior brothers,” the leaders of all Slavs as well as all other, “smaller” peoples of the Soviet Union, was nothing but a secularized version of the czarist myth about “god-bearing people” (*narod bogonosets*) and the official Pan-Slavism of the 1870s. Rooted in xenophobia, which was instilled by Stalin and his apparatus of terror, this propaganda was sure to erect a Great Wall between the Soviet people and the West.

The first victims of the new Russian patriotism were Jews. In the spring of 1946 Stalin ordered the cleansing of state structures, from intelligence and the security police to propaganda and education, of Jewish cadres. On June 1, 1946, Suslov, responding to commands from the top, reported to Zhdanov that “the staff of authors and technicians in the Sovinformburo is cluttered with unqualified people without political clearance.” He suggested bringing new people into the Sovinformburo and “Institute-205.”<sup>21</sup> He also advised against using the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, created during World War II to marshal support for the USSR among the world’s Jewish population, in field propaganda in Poland, Austria, and Rumania, given the “considerable demonstrations of anti-Semitism there.”<sup>22</sup> The heads of both institutions, Solomon Lozovsky and Boris Geminder, were Jews. About the same time, Zhdanov summoned Boris Ponomarev, a Russian and party propagandist who organized the wartime broadcasting beamed on the Resistance movement in the “Slav” countries. “We want to send you to the Sovinformburo. [The head of the Sovinformburo, Solomon] Lozovsky turned it into some kind of synagogue,” Zhdanov told him.<sup>23</sup>

Zhdanov and his people knew that Western societies were demobilized and did not represent a threat. The American economy was heading for a postwar slump, and Truman was not up to the formidable tasks that faced him.<sup>24</sup> When Winston Churchill made his “iron curtain” speech in Fulton on March 5, 1946, Zhdanov’s secret bulletin presented the speech as a failure. It “fell short of evoking in the masses of the American people (except for its reactionary minority) the kind of response Churchill expected . . . Americans quite sensibly discerned in the speech . . . an appeal to maintain and restore the might of the British empire with support from the United States.” The party and military informers reported negative reactions to Churchill’s speech in Germany, Poland, and other European countries.<sup>25</sup> Stalin evidently shared this estimate. On March 14 and 23, Stalin ridiculed Churchill

in interviews, claiming that he was running against the trend of history. "It is necessary," Stalin said, "for the public and the ruling circles of the states to organize a broad [program of] counterpropaganda against the propagandists of a new war and for the safeguarding of peace."<sup>26</sup> This was a clear directive to Zhdanov's apparatus. At that time, however, Stalin still felt no need for an overarching ideology of confrontation—a Soviet analogue to Kennan's "containment" or Churchill's "iron curtain" speech. The Kremlin's foreign policy was still based on the assumptions of the *realpolitik*, balancing among powers, and trying to use British-American contradictions. Zhdanov and his ideological bulldogs had already been barking loudly—but Stalin still kept them away from the international arena.

### Why the Cominform?

Two factors prompted the establishment of the Cominform: the Soviets' perceptions of a threat from the West to their zone of security in Europe, and the conviction of Stalin and Molotov that the Soviets could manage this zone only with iron ideological and party discipline. The events of 1946–1947 that shaped and rocked the Communist movement in France and Italy, the Balkans, and the Soviet "security zone" of Eastern Europe explain to a large extent the emergence of the "Soviet camp" and the sudden demand for a unifying ideological message for this camp—the demand that brought Zhdanov to prominence.

In the Balkans, the lack of coordination between the activities of indigenous Communist movements and Moscow's foreign policy contributed to misunderstandings and conflicts of interest between the Kremlin and the Yugoslav leadership, as well as to Stalin's suspicion of, and then fury against, Tito.

In 1945–1946 the Yugoslav Communists, bolstered by their victories over Germany and its satellites in the Balkans, acted in the area with little or no restraint from Moscow. At first Stalin supported the ambitions of the Titoists, recognizing their predominant role in the Balkans. In 1946 he agreed that Yugoslavia should eventually annex Albania. Free for a moment from his insecurity, he seemed to trust Tito. Belgrade became the second most important hub of the Communist network after Moscow. When Italian, Greek, and often French

Communists reported to Stalin and Zhdanov, they had to communicate through Belgrade or use Yugoslav messengers.

Nor was Stalin dismayed at first by the conflict between the regional ambitions of Tito and his comrades-in-arms and Soviet postwar peace goals. There were mutual goals, to be sure, when Molotov supported Yugoslav claims on the area of Trieste, the territory disputed between Yugoslavia and Italy. At that time Stalin and Molotov wanted to "punish" Italy, using it as a bargaining chip against the Allies' interference in Eastern Europe.

Revolutionary guerillas in Greece, supported by Belgrade, were only a minor nuisance to Stalin in 1945–1946. As early as the fall of 1944 Stalin observed "the percentage agreement" with Great Britain, according to which London had a right to impose order on the Greek peninsula. Later he forbade Dimitrov to grant exile to the defeated Greek guerillas, probably since he did not want to give the British a reason to argue against Soviet domination in Eastern Europe. The Soviets seemed to be content with probing the British influence in the Balkans, most likely knowing that it was coming to an end.<sup>27</sup> In any case, in November 1946 Zhdanov did not mention Greece in his address on the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

There is no indication that Zhdanov's Foreign Policy Department and other party propaganda structures had daily contact with Belgrade. This is all the more remarkable, given that many Soviet and Yugoslav Communists had developed strong mutual sympathies. The siege of Leningrad and the guerilla battles in Serbia evoked common memories of the hardships and horrors of war. The youngest member of Stalin's Politburo and head of the State Planning Committee (Gosplan), Nikolai Voznesensky, and his brother were acquaintances of Milovan Djilas, then Tito's close lieutenant. Some attempts at collaboration were evident between them on various "theoretical" and practical questions of "Socialist construction."<sup>28</sup>

The Pan-Slavic campaign Zhdanov sponsored in the Russian part of the Soviet Union also made him look to the Serbs in the Yugoslav leadership as friends and propagandists of the historic Russo-Serbian alliance. In a word, Zhdanov was the man who could find a common language with the Titoists and prevent a conflict between them and Stalin. But Stalin never even let him try.

Meanwhile, the crisis in the Balkans began to evoke security concerns in Moscow. In Greece the Communists (KKE), rearmed and

instigated by the Yugoslavs, resumed the civil war against the British-backed government. The Titoists bragged about the impending fall of Greece in the presence of Western diplomats and politicians.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps people in Belgrade and the Greek Communists believed they could appeal to Stalin's revolutionary instincts. Nicos Zachariades, a dedicated Stalinist from the KKE, went to Moscow via Belgrade and Sofia to talk Stalin into supporting this venture.

But by the time Zachariades arrived in Moscow, Harry Truman had already made a dramatic address on March 12, 1947, to both Houses of the U.S. Congress asking for emergency aid and military involvement in Greece and Turkey to save those countries from imminent Communist takeover. The Truman administration feared that the Greek Communists would align Greece with the Soviet Union. Any suggestion that it was Tito, not Stalin, who operated behind the scenes would have been taken at the time as a bad joke.<sup>30</sup> But it was clear in Moscow that the Yugoslavs imprudently triggered the U.S. intervention in the Balkans.

Zachariades met Zhdanov on May 22, 1947. The Greek Communist painted an overly optimistic picture of the civil war and was quick to dismiss the importance of the Truman Doctrine. American involvement would be "as bankrupt" as the British had been. He complained then that the Soviets could have been more active in Greece. "The [Soviet] embassy is silent." The All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad (VOKS), over which Zhdanov had control, "is of no help." Zachariades reminded Zhdanov that Russian and Greek Orthodox hierarchies had their ties, too. "One can do something through the Church," he begged.<sup>31</sup>

Zachariades tried hard to persuade Zhdanov that Soviet aid to the guerillas would tip the scales in the Communists' favor. Heavy artillery was needed to drive the government troops out of the cities. Knowing well how cautious Stalin was, he promised that the Greeks "would do everything themselves": given Soviet financial aid, they could buy and ship illegally the required weaponry from Palestine, Egypt, and France.

Zhdanov's response was a firm "no." "There are still big battles ahead," he said. Using the language of the combatants for world revolution in the 1920s, he implied that the Greek Communists were just a small flute in the Red orchestra of the future, conducted by the powerful Soviet Union. "The big reserve has to be spared for big

business." "Not everybody realizes," he continued, "that one has to pick a moment to unleash all the forces of the USSR." Zhdanov then said that he understood the impatience of the Greek Communists. He stressed that they should be "the fighters for a national idea" against the corrupt regime, bought by the Americans and the British, thus playing down the Communist component of the Greek leftists' offensive and enhancing their role as the bearers of progressive nationalism.

Zhdanov seemed to fear becoming involved with the Greek Communists, but also with the Yugoslavs. It would be embarrassing and harmful for the Soviets if it became known that they were aiding the guerillas. "Sometimes indifference can be a more considerate thing than attention," he said to Zachariades.<sup>32</sup>

Zachariades decided to appeal directly to Stalin. There are no records of this meeting, but immediately after it the Soviets asked the KKE to send a wish-list of armament needs. From Belgrade another Greek party leader informed the comrades in Athens that there were reasons to be "completely satisfied" about the meeting. On June 16 a special courier of "Institute-100" brought a letter of Zachariades from Belgrade with a joint request from him and the Yugoslavs to send much more than had been promised in Moscow: rifles and machine guns, mountain and air-defense guns, millions of rounds of ammunition.<sup>33</sup>

This time Stalin allowed them to force his hand. Was it because he did not want Tito to look like a good revolutionary supporting the Greek leftists, while he himself, Stalin, was actually forsaking the Communist cause? If so, it did not add sympathy to the Stalin-Tito relationship.<sup>34</sup>

Stalin's ideas about Tito's Yugoslavia, whatever they were, remained hidden and did not affect Soviet policies until the summer of 1947. Until then Stalin tolerated the special role of Belgrade and the growing informal influence of the "Yugoslav model" on other East European Communists, especially in Bulgaria and Hungary. Zhdanov and Suslov, however, may have been given some instructions on how to handle Yugoslavia and its influence, since they systematically discouraged all attempts to implement the idea of "Slavic solidarity" in any specific form, be it the conference of "friends of Slavs" or a confederation of the Danube countries.

From July 30 to August 1, 1947, Dimitrov and Tito met in Sofia and issued a joint declaration about their intent to conclude a bilateral

Yugoslav-Bulgarian treaty of friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance. Neither Stalin nor Zhdanov and Molotov were informed. This time Stalin reacted sharply. In a ciphered cable flashed to Belgrade and Sofia he denounced the meeting as a mistake that might be used by “reactionary British-American elements” in order “to expand military intervention in Greek and Turkish affairs against Yugoslavia and Bulgaria.” He made a particular point of the fact that neither culprit had consulted the Soviet government.<sup>35</sup>

This Yugoslav-Bulgarian declaration appeared even before the peace treaty with Bulgaria was implemented on September 15. Stalin had other plans for the order and hierarchy of relations between the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe. Tito inadvertently intervened in Stalin’s domain just at the time when the dictator, his xenophobia returning, was seeking to deflect the effects of the Marshall Plan on the Soviet sphere of influence.

It was at this moment that Stalin began to get impatient with the anarchy and the nationalist deviations in the European Communist movement. And Zhdanov’s time had come. In May 1947 Zhdanov was forced to focus attention on an area that had not been his concern at all—Western Europe. French and Italian Communists, increasingly isolated in their coalition governments, suddenly decided to go into opposition—without any prior consultations with Moscow. The reaction in the Kremlin was one of disbelief and consternation. It was Zhdanov whom Stalin asked to send an urgent letter to Maurice Torez, General Secretary of the French Communist party.

The Soviet leadership, wrote Zhdanov, cannot understand “what has happened in France” and “what motives guided the Communist party.” “Many think that the French Communists coordinated their actions” with Moscow, he wrote in a draft of the letter. “You know this is not true. Your steps were a total surprise to us.”<sup>36</sup> The chief of the “Ghost Comintern” admitted his ignorance of the situation. He was asking for information in addition to what he could cull “from the mass media.” This remarkable admission highlights how sporadic communication between Moscow and the West European Communists was.

From Stalin’s viewpoint, the Western European countries were closing their ranks, supported by U.S. resources, while the Soviet strategic rear in Central Europe and the Balkans was in turmoil. Sometime in August he summoned Zhdanov to his vacation site in Ritsa, near the

Black Sea, and instructed him to work out, in complete secrecy, the blueprints of a new organization—the Information Bureau of the Communist Parties. To the foreign Communists it was announced that an emergency conference of “some European parties” would be held in the fall. After reading the Yugoslav and Soviet records, one historian came to the conclusion that Stalin and Zhdanov wanted “to invite them to a seemingly innocent meeting and then ambush them by imposing something quite different on them.”<sup>37</sup> The most important months in the Cold War history of Europe were about to begin. These would also be the last months of Zhdanov's life.

Zhdanov's report to the conference of the European Communist parties and the emergence of the Cominform in September 1947 have often been regarded as a clear example of Stalin's dual approach to foreign policy. There is little evidence that before the Marshall Plan Stalin had any master plan for immediate expansion. He had to digest what he had already gained during the war. But later, when the Americans were aiming at the whole of Europe, how did Stalin's foreign policy change? Did he want first of all to organize Eastern Europe? Or did he seriously expect to use the Cominform to revive “party foreign policy” and to take advantage of the political and economic chaos in Western Europe to get the Americans out of there?

The newly available Russian sources suggest the emphasis was on the former: building up the Soviet-led bloc. This was the practical thrust of the “Six Points” formulated by Zhdanov in his memorandum to Stalin in early September for the upcoming conference in Poland. Zhdanov suggested that a report on the international situation should be “devoted primarily to”:

1. an analysis of the postwar situation and the unmasking of the American plan for the political and economic subjugation of Europe (the Truman-Marshall plan);
2. the tasks of organizing forces for counteraction to new plans of imperialist expansion and for the further strengthening of socialism and democracy on both a national and an international scale;
3. the increased role of Communist parties in the struggle against American serfdom;
4. The decisive significance of the USSR as the most powerful force and a reliable bulwark of the workers of all countries in their struggle for peace, socialism, and real democracy;

5. a critique of errors committed by some Communist parties (French, Italian, Czechoslovak, and so on), in part because of a lack of communication and cooperation;
6. the urgent necessity of coordinating the actions of Communist parties in the modern international situation.<sup>38</sup>

Stalin's decision to boycott the Marshall Plan meant for the Soviet Union the end of a wait-and-see attitude toward neighboring countries and, for the "transitional" regimes in Eastern Europe, a death sentence. Seemingly, Stalin faced a simple choice—to create a bloc using either formal diplomatic or "formal-ideological" instruments: proclaiming a Warsaw Pact in 1947 or restoring the new Comintern. He did neither. Instead, he chose another route that fit his needs remarkably well: he used the common ideology of Communist parties to organize Eastern Europe into a "security buffer" for his state.

Even before Stalin decided to boycott the Marshall Plan, Zhdanov expressed uncertainty and fear about the impact of U.S. economic aid on the geopolitical orientation of Finland. On June 30, 1947, Zhdanov told the Finnish Communists Ville Pessi and Hertta Kuusinen that the Finnish Communist party should intensify a struggle for national independence against the threat of "economic enslavement to America." American credit to Finland, he said, had to be unmasked as a result of the "collusion of the Finnish bourgeoisie with American imperialist circles."<sup>39</sup>

On July 1, 1947, the day Molotov walked out of the conference in Paris, Zhdanov taught the Finnish Communists a new line on "bloc" politics: "Communists will gain nothing through peaceful cooperation within a coalition. On the contrary, they may instead lose what they've got." "It is impossible to avoid bloodshed in relations with one's partners," he continued, if they are opposing more radical means of political mobilization. "One has to act so that Communists, instead of awaiting a strike, strike first." When the Finns dared to say they lacked hard evidence of U.S.-Finnish "collusion," Zhdanov scoffed at this punctiliousness: "How Truman intimidated you! If you keep following this rule—that you should use only decent means with the enemies who use dishonest means—then you will never win . . . Paasikivi [the prime minister of Finland] must have sold friendship with the Soviet Union for the first ten billion [dollars] the Americans had promised him."<sup>40</sup> Later, in August, Zhdanov warned the Finnish

Communists that the Americans, if unopposed, might buy Europe wholesale, and that foreign Communists were blind enough to overlook this fact.<sup>41</sup>

Zhdanov had real reasons to be worried. Only under strong Soviet political pressure did the government of Finland prudently decide against any participation in the Marshall Plan, to the great satisfaction of Moscow. But Finland's defiance of Moscow grew so rapidly that in 1948 Stalin and Molotov had to accommodate the Finns to make them accept what Mannerheim had wanted from the very beginning: "the Czechoslovak model of the defense treaty with the USSR." The tragic irony was that by that time Czechoslovakia's independence had been crushed and the country transformed into a Stalinized Soviet satellite.<sup>42</sup>

At the conference in Szklarska Poremba in September 1947, Zhdanov focused his attacks on "the errors" of the French and Italian Communists, who proved unable to fight back when faced with the offensive of the Right, supported by Americans. "Do you have a plan for a counteroffensive against the . . . government of [Alcide de] Gasperi [the Christian Democratic Prime Minister of Italy]?" Zhdanov asked Luigi Longo of the Italian Communist party. "Or do you intend only to defend your rears and retreat, till they, perhaps, will ban you altogether? . . . de Gasperi carried out a coup against the biggest party in the nation, and you leave the field without battle!" Longo lamely cited the "objective difficulties" of fighting against government forces, but Zhdanov pressed on: "Does the Communist party of Italy believe that general strikes, militant demonstrations of workers, the struggle for the return of Communists to the government—that this is 'adventurism'?" Zhdanov's fiery comments were in sharp contrast to Stalin's efforts in 1945 to check radical impulses among French and Italian Communists. In 1947 the revolutionary-imperial doctrine was back, hope for cooperation with the Western leaders over the heads of the Western Communists proved to be unrealistic, and Moscow needed the ideological "fifth column" in Western capitals—just as the classical mode of Stalin's doctrine suggested.

The instructions from Moscow to West European Communists, relayed by Zhdanov and Malenkov, were "to destroy the capitalist economy and work systematically toward unity of live national forces" against American aid. The focus of party work had to be the creation of combat units and warehouses of arms and ammunition.

Through August and September, Zhdanov worked hard on a text

of his report on the international situation, which he presented to the conference at Szklarska Poremba on September 25. The most famous thesis of the report was that the world was now divided into “two camps”—which was an objective fact by that time, for Stalin and the West had proved to be unable to maintain the integrity of 1941–1945. The phrase strongly implied that there would be no neutral parties in the Cold War. Foreign Communists, who in 1944–1946 were quite autonomous in charting their national ways toward a “new democracy,” were suddenly forced to return to the ranks under Stalin’s command, to oppose the common enemy. Drafts of Zhdanov’s speech in his personal archives in Moscow tell only part of the story of how the speech was drafted. In its earlier versions the words “two camps” were missing. Who added these crucial words? The most probable explanation is that Stalin introduced this concept—thereby giving a required rigidity to the future structure of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.<sup>43</sup>

All conference participants understood the implications of Moscow’s ultimatum. Jacques Duclos, a French Communist leader, returned to Paris to tell his colleagues (some of whom reported it back to Zhdanov and Stalin through the Yugoslavs) that he “faced an alternative—to subdue or to break off.”<sup>44</sup> The steel discipline of the Communist movement came to be applied to the relationships among states. Thereby Stalin’s doctrine became a truly international phenomenon that soon would become embodied in the Soviet bloc.

The idea of the Information Bureau of Communist Parties was another surprise that Stalin and Zhdanov had prepared for East European Communist parties. The conference participants did not even know that this organization of the Cominform was on the agenda. The Poles, when they learned about it, were defiant. A Polish participant at the conference tried to argue that perhaps the whole shift of tactics was erroneous and that it would be better to maintain national People’s Fronts, that is, alliances with Social Democrats and Labourists. Zhdanov snapped back: we in Moscow know better how to apply Marxism-Leninism.<sup>45</sup> On September 25, Zhdanov and Malenkov (together again, each reluctant to assume full responsibility) telephoned Molotov, who instructed them that the meeting must by all means adopt a decision on the establishment of an Informburo. And Stalin pressed further: the new structure should be fully vested with control over European, and primarily East European, parties.

### Zhdanov's Last Target

The Titoists, unlike all others, enthusiastically supported the idea of the conference, and then the Informburo. Tito was at the head of the mailing list of the Kremlin for all things relating to the conference, coming before Dimitrov, Georgiu Dej (Rumania), Gottwald (Czechoslovakia), and Rakosi (Hungary).<sup>46</sup> Tito, Kardel, and Djilas took an active part in logistical efforts. During the conference Zhdanov worked hand in hand with the Yugoslav delegation, orchestrating a vicious "trial" of the French and Italian Communists. Zhdanov in his cables to Stalin saved his best compliments for the Yugoslavs.<sup>47</sup>

Yet beneath this smooth surface was Stalin's growing displeasure with Tito. He was already receiving, through Molotov, reports from Lavrentiev, the Soviet ambassador in Yugoslavia, about the complaints the Yugoslav Communists spread around on the insufficiency of Soviet support in Trieste and Macedonia. Initially, Stalin wanted Zhdanov to plan a strike in two directions at the conference in Poland. In addition to the rightist "mistakes" of the French, Italian, and Czechoslovak Communists (who betrayed their desire to take part in the Marshall Plan), another salvo was reserved for the "leftist mistakes" of the Yugoslav leadership.

In the first drafts of Zhdanov's report to the conference, the sins of the Titoists were described as "the criticism of allegedly inadequate aid that the Soviet Union provides for friendly states and the presentation of inordinate claims as to the size of this aid . . . the assertions that the USSR, reputedly for considerations of big politics, out of unwillingness to spoil relations with great powers, slackens up on its struggle to satisfy the demands of smaller countries, particularly Yugoslavia."<sup>48</sup> The Yugoslavs put their finger on a sore spot: Stalin's cynical disregard of national Communist movements in 1944–1946 and his preference for reaching an imperialistic agreement with the United States and Britain were a cardinal sin against the universal Communist cause.

Zhdanov wanted to rebuke the Yugoslavs for their "underestimation of the great meaning and role of the Soviet Union, which cannot and should not waste its strength, crucial for bigger battles." The conclusion of the passage left no doubt that Stalin inspired it: "The pretenses to make the Soviet Union support in all cases and under all

circumstances any demand [of a smaller state], even to the detriment of its own positions—those pretenses are unfounded.”<sup>49</sup>

Later Stalin decided to drop those charges. The Yugoslavs protected their flanks by resisting the Marshall Plan from the very beginning. In a familiar pattern, tested in his fight against opposition from various corners in the 1920s, the Kremlin tyrant reasoned that it would be easier to deal with “deviations” one by one, first using the “leftist” Yugoslavs in an effort to discipline the French, Italians, and East Europeans. But even Tito’s enthusiasm for the Cominform must have looked suspicious in Stalin’s eyes. No, he had not created this structure so that the Titoists could use it for the expansion of their influence and their “model.” On the contrary, he was preparing to use the Cominform against Tito.

From December 1947 Stalin began, step by step, to tighten the noose around Yugoslavia. On February 10, 1948, Stalin and Molotov lashed out at the Bulgarian and Yugoslav delegation for “reckless independent actions.” Then Stalin revealed that behind his lack of enthusiasm for the Greek civil war was his growing animosity toward Tito. He accused the Yugoslavs of being afraid of the Russian advisors in Albania (read: the Balkans), and expressed his lack of belief in any success of the Greek Communist party, issuing an instruction to stop aid to a guerilla movement in Greece—a blow to any imaginary vision of a Yugoslav-Bulgarian sphere of influence in the Balkans.<sup>50</sup>

Zhdanov was involved in this final stage of the drama, and there is no evidence that he or his “faction” expressed support and sympathy to the Titoists. In fact, Zhdanov brought to Stalin’s attention more proof that the Titoists were getting out of hand: their attempts to remove Soviet advisors from the Balkans in order to reassert their domination there. Zhdanov began corresponding with Tito and Kardel about this incident. After Stalin’s meeting with the Yugoslavs, Zhdanov drafted a letter to them, probably after consulting with Stalin. He reminded Tito and Kardel that they had approved enthusiastically the French and the Italians’ subjection “to the Bolshevik critique.” Why did the Yugoslavs not want to surrender now, to repent? Because “they began to think they were the salt of the earth” and considered themselves “exceptional.” Later Zhdanov would temper the language, but Stalin’s hatred for Tito was unmistakably there.<sup>51</sup>

Stalin, as a great psychologist of the intraparty factional strife of the 1920s, expected the Yugoslavs to give up rather than decide to break the ranks of the "united front of People's democracies and the USSR." In Tito's case, this plot backfired.

It has been proposed that the Stalin-Tito split led to the decline of the "Zhdanov faction" and perhaps to the sudden death of Zhdanov on August 30, 1948. In fact, Zhdanov's health was never strong after the war and began to fail quickly in 1947. After the creation of the Cominform he had to go to the Black Sea dacha, where he stayed until early December, often paying visits to the vacationing Stalin. His vicious treatment by the irritable and neurotic dictator did not aid his health. The voice of the man whose fiery speeches made foreign Communist veterans tremble became faint when near his boss.

Until his death Zhdanov persisted in a remarkably cheerful mood—his official trademark as propagandist-in-chief. On December 12, 1947, he received an Italian Communist and was feisty: What is the mood of the masses—ready for combat? Are they rushing forward to struggle? His assessment of the Cold War dangers also called for optimism. The West was barking, but could not bite, as "elements of blackmail prevail over the real preparation for war." "Everybody understands that we forced them [the imperialists] into defense." After the conference in Poland, the "situation changed in our favor, which gives us reason to look even more confidently toward our future."<sup>52</sup>

Rumors about Zhdanov's unexpected death at the age of fifty-four suggested that it was the work of Beria and Malenkov, his old rivals inside the Kremlin power circle. But the simple truth was that Zhdanov, suffering from grave cardiac atherosclerosis, died on August 31 as the result of two heart attacks he had while in a sanatorium far from Moscow. The Kremlin doctors, who flew to the sanatorium to help him, made an incorrect diagnosis, which contributed to his premature death.

If there was an overwhelming reason for Zhdanov's early death, it was the enormous stress of being a workaholic and the terrifying proximity of his master. Three years after Zhdanov died, Stalin managed to use him as a tool to discipline his lieutenants and terrorize the country. He blamed his death on a "conspiracy" of the Kremlin's doctors, and unleashed a vicious witch-hunt against the "Zionists" and "agents of foreign intelligence services."<sup>53</sup>

In a sense, Zhdanov's death had a symbolic meaning: the era of the faceless politicians, the valets of the master, was nearing its end. Other, more ruthless and robust players were to survive a few remaining years of terror and to attempt to construct the post-Stalin world. Two of the most intriguing figures among them were Lavrenty Beria and Georgi Malenkov.