

**Screenplay for the film "1950 — Viktor Abakumov. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze"** written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI.

### **Screenplay Summary:**

*The text traces the rise and fall of Viktor Abakumov, one of Stalin's most ruthless security chiefs, against the backdrop of the "Leningrad Affair" and the broader machinery of Stalinist terror.*

*In 1950, a show trial is held in Leningrad against leading party and state officials from the city (Kuznetsov, Rodionov, Voznesensky, Popkov, etc.), accused of forming an anti-Soviet group as early as 1938. The trial follows the pattern of the 1930s: confessions obtained under torture, accusations of treason, sabotage, and economic wrecking. Six are sentenced to death. Present in the hall is the USSR Minister of State Security, Viktor Abakumov, who has overseen the case for a year. Under pressure from Stalin, he is supposed to have Kuznetsov charged with espionage, a capital offense, but he deliberately avoids this: an espionage charge would implicate his own ministry for having "missed" spies under its watch and could drag him down personally.*

*The narrative then turns to Abakumov's career. He enters the security organs in 1932, initially stagnates, and is caught using young women for sex and then filing denunciations under their names. Transferred to the Gulag administration, he is later brought back and promoted by Kobulov and Beria during the Great Terror. He becomes head of the NKVD in the Rostov region, receives rapid promotions and decorations, and then rises to Deputy People's Commissar of Internal Affairs. In 1941 he is put in charge of the Special Departments of the NKVD, responsible for political control of the Red Army; in 1943 this structure is turned into the SMERSH counterintelligence service, now formally under the Commissariat of Defense — that is, directly under Stalin. SMERSH combines harsh repression (surveillance of soldiers, on-the-spot executions, mass sentencing) with highly effective counterintelligence work against German services.*

*After the war, Abakumov participates in preparing the Soviet case at the Nuremberg Trials, while supervising an apparatus that runs secret poison and bacteriological laboratories using prisoners as test subjects and devising targeted assassination methods (including a planned attack on Tito). He is responsible for the deportation of Chechens and Ingush in 1944, and later for mass deportations from Western Ukraine and the Baltic states, as well as a new wave of arrests of "repeaters" — former Mensheviks, Trotskyists, and dekulakized peasants sent back to the camps. In parallel, he amasses the usual perks of the Soviet elite, as does his entourage, enriched with valuables looted from Jews killed in Nazi camps.*

*The text highlights several emblematic cases. One is the arrest of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg in Budapest by SMERSH in 1945; he disappears into Soviet prisons and dies there, likely murdered (possibly by injection in a special laboratory), while the USSR denies any knowledge of his fate. Another is the arrest and death of Professor Etinger, a prominent cardiologist and Beria's personal doctor. Etinger is tortured in a specially designed refrigerator-cell and dies in custody. His case becomes a key element in Stalin's antisemitic campaign: he is portrayed as a "murderer in a white coat," a stigma that spreads to Jewish doctors in general and prepares the ground for the later "Doctors' Plot." At the same time, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, once a prestigious body, is dismantled: its leader Solomon Mikhoels is murdered in a staged "accident," other members are arrested and tried behind closed doors, and antisemitism becomes state policy.*

*Molotov's wife, Polina Zhemchuzhina, is also arrested and exiled, partly as a way to pressure Molotov himself.*

*Eventually, factional struggles at the top of the regime turn against Abakumov. He is arrested and himself placed in the same refrigerator-cell he had used on his victims. The charges against him shift constantly: before Stalin's death he is blamed for not being harsh enough in the "Doctors' Plot"; after Stalin's death, for being too harsh. He is accused of heading a "Zionist conspiracy," of collusion with Tito, and later tried together with Beria. In 1954 he is executed.*

*What sets Abakumov apart from other heads of Stalin's security organs, the text stresses, is that he never confesses to any of the charges. Throughout the investigation and trial he insists that he acted on the orders of Stalin and the Central Committee, and that he could have no other kind of life. The story closes by returning to his beginnings: in 1921, his godfather, former drayman Fyodor Gnutov, now serving in special units (CHON) suppressing peasant resistance, visits the Abakumov family with herrings and vodka and persuades young Viktor to join the repressive apparatus. Promised boots, rations, and a "good life," Abakumov chooses a career in coercion — and remains in it until his own turn as a victim.*

## **Screenplay:**

### **1950 – Viktor Abakumov**

In the last two days of September 1950, in Leningrad, at the Officers' House on Liteiny Prospekt, a trial is underway in the so-called "Leningrad Affair."

According to the pattern worked out in the big show trials of the 1930s, the defendants have already confessed to all the charges brought against them, namely that they — Kuznetsov, Popkov, Kapustin, Voznesensky, Lazutkin, Rodionov, Turko, Zakrzhevskaya, Mikheev — had joined together back in 1938 in an anti-Soviet group, were hatching treasonous plans, carried out wrecking and subversive activities, and caused economic damage to the Soviet state.

The reading of the verdict ends at 00:59 on October 1, 1950. Six of them are sentenced to be shot. After the verdict is announced, the guards throw white sacks over the heads of the condemned men, hoist them onto their shoulders, and carry them toward the exit of the hall.

Sitting in the hall is the USSR Minister of State Security, Abakumov.

He has been in charge of this case for a year. The main figures are the former Secretary of the Central Committee Kuznetsov, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR Rodionov, and the Chairman of Gosplan Voznesensky — all natives of Leningrad. All of them had once been promoted by Zhdanov, who had been dead for more than two years; Kuznetsov had essentially stepped into Zhdanov's place — Zhdanov, who in the postwar years had been the second man in the Party after Stalin. Back in 1946, under Zhdanov, Stalin entrusted Kuznetsov with supervising the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the Ministry of State Security (MGB). The rise of Kuznetsov is associated with the arrival of men from Leningrad to all sorts of top posts. The First Secretary of the Leningrad Regional Party Committee Popkov, who would later be tried in the

“Leningrad Affair,” boasted proudly on October 22, 1948 at a regional party conference: “In two years the Leningrad party organization has promoted 12,000 people into leadership positions.”

Kuznetsov made his career during the years of the Great Terror. In November 1937 the newspaper *Leningradskaya Pravda* wrote about candidate to the Supreme Soviet Kuznetsov:

“In his very first year in the Party, Kuznetsov actively exposed the subversive work of the kulaks. In 1929, comrade Kuznetsov was elected secretary of the district committee in the town of Luga. Comrade Kuznetsov entered into a struggle with the masked enemies in the district committee of the VKP(b), reported their subversive work to the regional party committee, and they were exposed as enemies of the people. Comrade Kuznetsov unfolded his abilities with particular force in the post of First Secretary of the Dzerzhinsky District Committee of Leningrad. With tireless energy, comrade Kuznetsov fought to expose enemies in the State Hermitage, in the Russian Museum. Intransigence toward enemies — that is the main trait of comrade Kuznetsov as a Leninist-Stalinist.”

Undoubtedly, Malenkov, Beria and Khrushchev are active opponents of the strengthening of the Leningrad group — especially given Stalin’s advancing age.

Last year, 1949, Stalin celebrated his 70th birthday.

After Zhdanov’s death, talk began to circulate about Kuznetsov as Stalin’s possible successor. For Stalin, any talk of a successor is talk of his own death.

The “Leningrad Affair” is Stalin’s own undertaking. In his entourage, everyone is his personal appointee. He shakes them up as he pleases. Without the slightest effort. Even with his old man’s hand.

The Minister of State Security Abakumov had been on friendly terms with the accused Kuznetsov when the latter was Secretary of the Central Committee. Their families were close. But in the course of the “Leningrad Affair,” Stalin demands of Abakumov that Kuznetsov be tried under the article “espionage,” that is, under a capital charge. Later, investigator Komarov will say:

“I reported to Abakumov the plan of the investigation and started to talk about espionage, and he began to reflect aloud: ‘They’ve long been in full view, constantly under MGB guard. If we start raising questions about their links with foreign countries, the Central Committee will laugh.’”

In reality, Abakumov knows full well there is nothing to laugh about. If Kuznetsov is accused of espionage, then the MGB — Abakumov’s own department — will be accused of conniving with spies. And Abakumov himself, the friend of Kuznetsov, will land on the same bench with him. That is precisely why Abakumov will ensure that the defendants confess to everything — except espionage.

As far back as January 10, 1939, Stalin had signed a cipher telegram addressed to the secretaries of regional and republican party committees. The telegram stated:

“The Central Committee of the VKP(b) explains that the use of physical methods in the practice of the NKVD was permitted starting from 1937 with the authorization of the Central Committee. The Central Committee of the VKP(b) considers that physical methods must necessarily continue to be applied against the enemies of the people who refuse to disarm, as a completely correct and expedient method.”

In 1950, Stalin’s document has lost none of its relevance. Iosif Turko, who was tried in the “Leningrad Affair” and survived, recalls how the investigation proceeded in Abakumov’s

department:

“Office No. 31 — that is the office for preliminary torture. The real torture is in Office No. 4. An absolutely empty room. Only a fireproof safe. On it some strange objects. Instruments of torture. Investigator Komarov, in a blue shirt, open at the neck, is sitting in an armchair. His feet are resting on another chair. He jumps up and for starters hits me so hard that blood comes out of my mouth.”

Major-General Gennady Kupriyanov, another defendant, recalls:

“Tortures can be individual. They are ordered by the investigator and the prison’s ‘overseer.’ They had all the instruments of torture — from medieval pincers to modern electrical devices. I remember the torture called ‘the ram’s horn,’ which was used on me quite often. They bent me into a half circle, tied my heels to the back of my head. My hands were tied there as well — it made a ram’s horn. I lay on my stomach; a pack of guards kicked me either in the head or in the legs. And I rocked on my stomach from side to side, like a paperweight. They had knocked out my teeth even earlier. Sometimes the drunken investigators played with me like with a ball.”

Investigator Ryumin, who later will denounce Abakumov, shouts at the wife of the accused Kapustin:

“Sign it, or I’ll put you in the electric chair.”

Kuznetsov’s wife is kept in shackles, then shoved into a shower and scalded with boiling water.

Before starting torture in his own office, Abakumov would spread a stained cover on the floor so that the prisoners’ blood would not soil the carpet.

When Abakumov himself is arrested, he writes a letter to Stalin:

“I live and work guided by your thoughts and directives, Comrade Stalin. I assure you, Comrade Stalin, that whatever assignment you may give me, I am always ready to carry it out under any conditions.”

At one of his first interrogations, Abakumov says:

“I had shortcomings and failures in my work. But I was always in full view of the Central Committee of the VKP(b). They knew, day by day, what was going on in the Cheka.”

Stalin signs the document on physical methods in 1939, two months after appointing Beria to the NKVD. Beria brings with him Kobulov. Kobulov brings with him Abakumov. Kobulov had noticed Abakumov when he was the assistant head of a section in the Second Department of the GUGB (Main Directorate of State Security of the NKVD).

The Second Department was called the operational department. Its employees conducted searches, made arrests, carried out surveillance and installed listening devices. A lively job, especially at the height of the Great Terror. Abakumov was a strong man, and the work matched his physical abilities.

He had been in the organs since 1932. For six years, his career did not move. In 1933 his performance review read: “He has a strong inclination toward operational work.” Later it was revealed that he had been recruiting young women, amusing himself with them in safe houses, and then writing reports in their name accusing various “enemies of the people.” Abakumov was transferred to the central administration of the Main Directorate of Camps — the Gulag. From there, in 1937, he returned to the GUGB. And in 1938, Kobulov took him along on a trip to Rostov-on-Don. After taking over the NKVD, Beria was purging the regional departments. Kobulov’s commission had come precisely to carry out such a purge. Along the way, Abakumov also selected young women for his boss and the members of the commission. Soon, Abakumov became head of

the NKVD administration for the Rostov region. He received an out-of-turn rank of Senior Major of State Security, with two rhombuses in his collar — equivalent to a division commander. In 1940 he was awarded the Order of the Red Banner. Next came the post of Deputy People's Commissar of Internal Affairs of the USSR.

Abakumov rose together with Beria. But he was not Beria's man. Abakumov quickly understood that in the Stalinist state you could only bet on one person — Stalin himself. This showed a well-developed instinct for self-preservation.

The first person to proclaim a “Many Years” blessing for Stalin was the protodeacon of the Church of St Nicholas in Kuznetsy, Father Iakov Abakumov, at the Epiphany Cathedral. The liturgy was celebrated on November 4, 1941.

Actor of the Maly Theater and future warden of the Church of the Dormition in Mogiltsy Anatoly Svetsitsky, who was present at the 1941 liturgy, recalls: “Father Iakov began: ‘To the God-protected Russian land, to her authorities and armed forces, and to her supreme Leader — many years!’”

Father Iakov was the full brother of Beria's deputy, Viktor Abakumov. At the beginning of the war, from July 19, 1941, Abakumov headed the Directorate of Special Departments of the NKVD. But in April 1943 the Directorate of Special Departments was transformed into the Main Directorate of Counterintelligence SMERSH. SMERSH stands for “Death to Spies.” It was transferred to the People's Commissariat of Defense. From that point on, Abakumov answered not to Beria, but directly to the People's Commissar of Defense — Stalin. Abakumov was now a deputy to Stalin.

From the very start of the war, Abakumov was in demand.

Stalin did not trust the military command, especially during the retreat. The Special Departments of the NKVD were the customary intermediary between Stalin and the army. They had existed even before the war, from 1919, when Trotsky and Dzerzhinsky created them as a means of constant control over the army's mood.

The experience of agent work in the army was thoroughly developed. There was a dense network of informers — “secret collaborators.” Their task was to spy on the troops and collect compromising material on the command staff.

During the war they permeated the army at all levels, from top to bottom. Abakumov provided Stalin personally with almost daily reports on the behavior of those in the highest military leadership. The special officers sent their own commentaries and evaluations of how combat operations were being conducted. They had the right not only to make arrests, but to carry out on-the-spot executions. They handled the mail censorship of Red Army soldiers' letters. The letters were treated as a crucial source of information. At the height of the fiercest fighting at Stalingrad, from July 15 to August 1, 1942, more than 67,000 letters were examined in General Chuikov's 62nd Army. The soldiers knew their letters were being read. Sometimes nerves gave way and words slipped out about how unbearable things were, or they simply complained about food. The Special Departments documented these statements; the authors were equated with deserters and traitors, subject to immediate arrest and execution. At Stalingrad, the special officers were reading letters that soldiers wrote just before going into what would be the last attack of their lives.

A secretary of a military tribunal recalls a case. From the Special Department, the tribunal received the case of Olga Pecherskaya, twenty years old. She was accused of having been recruited by German intelligence while in captivity, for espionage behind the Soviet lines. She was shot. The

accusation was based exclusively on her own words. She was obviously mentally ill. With burning eyes, she would talk incessantly about how she had fallen in love with a German officer and he had taught her ciphers. Then she would switch to talking about literature, about Turgenev. Even the reading of the death sentence did not break her out of this delirium. The secretary further writes: "I knew that in the late 1930s, against the background of the terror, a particular kind of psychosis appeared, when patients felt themselves to be agents of foreign intelligence services."

That said, during the war the special officers in tandem with the military tribunals were less ferocious than in the late 1930s. Stalinism retreated before an obvious fact: the lives of the condemned were needed at the front. The military tribunals sentenced 994,300 people. Nearly a million. For almost 400,000 of them, the execution of the sentence was postponed until after the war, and they were sent to penal units.

In addition, the severity of the repressive policy during the war depended on the overall situation at the front. In the bitterest period of retreat, the sentences were almost exclusively death sentences. When the offensive began, for treason — Soviet soldiers who had gone over to the enemy — the sentence was ten years in the camps, with postponement and assignment to a penal battalion.

Still, there were always different kinds of people. From the recollections of SMERSH officer Major-General Ivanov:

"In May 1942 on the Crimean front, the wounded were being ferried to the Kuban bank. The sight was horrifying. The sea was filled with corpses. The crowd was pressing forward. I myself hadn't slept for three days. Then they carry some colonel on a stretcher, shouting: 'It's the wounded division commander.' Something pricked inside me. I order them to cut the bandages. No wound. I draw my pistol. Before my eyes, the colonel instantly turns gray. I lean down and whisper: 'Listen, I'll shoot wide, but you fall into the water. If you're lucky, you'll get out.'"

From the recollections of a frontline pilot:

"I don't know, maybe in the infantry the special officers did have important functions, but in aviation? What is a special officer supposed to do in aviation? Prevent flights to the enemy? Anyone who wanted to fly to the Germans could do it very simply: take off and surrender. In our division, I know of no such cases. Almost all of us pilots carried a grenade on us in case of capture. In aviation, no one respected the special officers. Almost everyone feared them, but no one considered them human beings, they were idlers."

More from pilots' memoirs:

"In 1944 we had a special officer in our regiment, Captain Korneyev. I once said to him: 'What will you tell your children after the war you did at the front?'"

Abakumov's SMERSH was a multifaceted organization. One wing of the special officers-smershevtsy was engaged in murky, amateurish or openly punitive work. The other wing consisted of professional counterintelligence officers. They played successfully against the German special services. The Germans were unable to carry out a single major intelligence or sabotage operation. Including a plot to assassinate Stalin. The Chief of Staff of the German High Command, Field Marshal Keitel, would say:

"During the war, the information from our agents concerned only the tactical zone. We never once received data that had a serious influence on the development of military operations."

Keitel wrote this while awaiting execution of the death sentence from the Nuremberg trial. Abakumov was a member of the commission supervising the preparation of the indictment

materials for the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. The commission was headed by Vyshinsky. The SMERSH investigative team worked in Nuremberg parallel to the group of the USSR prosecution. The SMERSH officers guarded the Soviet section of the prosecution, participated in interrogating the prisoners and selecting witnesses of Nazi atrocities. The counterintelligence team was headed by Deputy Chief of the SMERSH Investigative Department Likhachev. Already at the preliminary stage of the Nuremberg trial, Likhachev reported to Moscow that the prosecutors “weakly parry the anti-Soviet attacks of the defendants, in particular Göring, Jodl, Keitel and some others.” Likhachev’s memoranda were so active that the prosecutors asked the USSR Prosecutor General Gorshenin “to put a stop to these rumors, as they create a nervous atmosphere and hinder the work.”

Against the backdrop of the Nuremberg trial, in addition to denouncing his colleagues in the prosecution, Likhachev managed to coerce a young female interpreter into a sexual relationship and forced her to have an abortion. The procedure went badly. Rudenko reported the incident to the USSR prosecutor’s office. Likhachev was expelled from Nuremberg and given ten days under arrest.

The Nuremberg International Military Tribunal over the main war criminals paved the way for another twelve trials. One of them was held from December 1946 to August 1947 — the “Doctors’ Trial,” dealing with Nazi doctors who conducted experiments on concentration-camp inmates. Back in September 1945, Grigory Mayranovsky had been sent to Germany with his assistants. Since 1938 he had headed a poison and narcotics laboratory in the NKVD. After the war he was sent to Germany with the task: “To find German specialists and become acquainted with the level achieved by the Nazis in a similar field of activity.”

On his return, Mayranovsky reported that “the results achieved by the German specialists are significantly below ours.”

Indeed, Mayranovsky’s superiors had set him more complex tasks than those given by the Nazi leadership to their doctors. In both Nazi Germany and the USSR, experiments using mustard gas were conducted on prisoners. The Nazis first conducted such an experiment at Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1939. Mayranovsky started earlier. The Nazis used the gas Zyklon-B for the mass extermination of people in death camps and did not hide this. Mayranovsky’s job was more difficult than that of his Nazi colleagues: his task was to ensure that the poison could not be detected in corpses.

Under Abakumov, an organizational restructuring took place. The poisons and narcotics laboratory, formerly part of the 4th Special Department of the NKVD, became Laboratory No. 1 in the MGB’s Operational Technology Department. In the USSR the laboratory of death had been created as early as 1926 for terrorist operations abroad. The substances developed there were tested on prisoners. Outwardly, it all looked like a doctor’s visit: “What are you complaining about?” — and then the “medicine” was administered. If the person did not die immediately, a second dose was given.

Later, poisoned bullets were developed. The Nazis had similar projects. From the Nuremberg trial materials: “On September 11, 1944, in the presence of SS Sturmbannführer Dr. Ding, Dr. Widmann conducted an experiment using poisoned bullets on five persons sentenced to death.”

In Moscow, the few MGB employees who had access to Laboratory No. 1 sometimes came there at lunchtime just to shoot for fun. For many years, the laboratory of death was located in central Moscow, on the ground floor of a corner house on Varsonofyevsky Lane.

Mayranovsky would be arrested in 1951 in the course of factional struggles inside the MGB. The charge: illegal possession of powerful substances. In 1951, when Abakumov himself had already been arrested, the leadership of the USSR would give preference to bacteriological methods of political murder. They planned to kill the Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito using aerosolized plague bacilli. Mayranovsky's colleague in the laboratory of death, the head of the bacteriological group Professor Muromtsev, was awarded the Stalin Prize.

Muromtsev would be discharged from the MGB on health grounds and appointed director of the Gamaleya Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology. When he became director, the well-known scientist and former prisoner, academician Zhdanov, submitted his resignation from the institute. According to eyewitnesses, another famous scientist and also former prisoner, academician Zilber, elder brother of the writer Kaverin, once simply walked into the director's office and locked the door from the inside.

Exactly what happened behind that door is unknown, but it is known that all the chairs in the office were broken.

During the war, Abakumov received three high command orders: the Order of Suvorov, 2nd Class (March 1944), the Order of Suvorov, 1st Class (July 1944) and the Order of Kutuzov, 1st Class (April 1945). The first military order was awarded to him for the deportation of the Chechens and Ingush in February 1944. After the war, Abakumov organized the deportation of the population of Western Ukraine and the Baltic states. From 1947, he conducted the so-called "repeaters," meaning that previously released Mensheviks, Trotskyists and dekulakized peasants were sent for a second term in the camps. At that time, Abakumov moved into a mansion at 11 Kolpachny Lane. Sixteen families were evicted from the house for his move. Two hundred workers were employed on the repairs. The accounting records of the 1st Department of the MGB Administrative Directorate, which handled the service's property affairs, were destroyed by order of Abakumov.

When he was arrested, they seized from him the standard set of items for a Soviet nomenklatura official — a large number of wristwatches, hundreds of meters of fabrics, suitcases of men's suspenders, refrigerators, furniture, cameras. In this regard, Abakumov favorably compares with the head of his secretariat, Major Zobov. During the search, Zobov was found to possess gold rings, earrings and brooches, rare men's and women's watches worth up to half a million rubles. The head of Abakumov's secretariat kept all this wealth in a string bag hanging on a nail in the pantry.

All these valuables, as it was established, had previously belonged to Jews killed in Nazi concentration camps. On January 19, 1945, in Budapest, employees of Abakumov's SMERSH arrested Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. From July 1944, in Hungary, then an ally of Germany, Wallenberg had been supplying Jews with Swedish passports, thereby saving them from death in Auschwitz. More than 20,000 people were saved personally by Wallenberg. A German attempt on his life had failed. Now he was arrested by Soviet counterintelligence. On February 6, 1945, Wallenberg was already in the internal prison of the NKVD. An attempt to recruit him was made. Wallenberg refused to cooperate. In May 1947, Deputy Foreign Minister and former USSR Prosecutor Vyshinsky wrote a memo:

"Comrade Molotov. Since the Wallenberg case continues to remain at a standstill, I ask you to oblige Abakumov to present a report on the substance of the case and his proposals on its liquidation."

On July 17, 1947, Wallenberg was found dead in his cell. The head of the medical unit of Lubyanka prison, Colonel of the Medical Service Smoltsov, added a note to the death report: “Reported personally to the Minister. Ordered that the body be cremated without autopsy.” One version of Wallenberg’s death is an injection administered in Mayranovsky’s special laboratory. To inquiries from the Swedes, the Soviet Foreign Ministry replied that Wallenberg was not in the USSR.

In November 1950, by order of Abakumov, the well-known cardiologist and personal physician of Beria, Professor Etinger, was arrested and sent to Lefortovo prison. In the course of the investigation, by Abakumov’s order, he was held for a long time in a refrigerator-cell, equipped with a pipeline system that pumped in icy air. The conditions in the two-square-meter refrigerator-cell had been discussed with MGB physicians. They expressed doubts but agreed with Abakumov’s decision. Professor Etinger died in prison in March 1951.

In 1950, the arrest by Abakumov of Beria’s doctor, Professor Etinger, was a move in Stalin’s game against Beria — more precisely, a backup move. In the future, Etinger’s case could be used easily against his patient, Beria. For now, Stalin keeps a pause with regard to Beria. Beria oversees the atomic and hydrogen projects. The Soviet atomic bomb already exists. The hydrogen bomb is now on the agenda. After that, they can turn to Beria. Abakumov’s deputy, General Pitovranov, confirms that Stalin gave the sanction for Etinger’s arrest.

Doctor Etinger treated and consulted the entire political and military leadership, figures of culture and art. Leading Western physicians had suggested nominating him for the Nobel Prize. Modern electrocardiography is based on his research. Doctor Etinger was a freethinker, non-party and careless in speech. He listened to foreign radio stations and retold what he heard to acquaintances. In 1949, he was dismissed from the 2nd Medical Institute, where he chaired a department and headed a clinic. Etinger also knew well the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC).

The head of the JAC, renowned theater director Solomon Mikhoels, had already been killed in 1948. The operation to murder Mikhoels was carried out by Abakumov on Stalin’s orders. Abakumov’s deputy Ogoltsov personally took part in the killing. A year after Mikhoels’s murder, the arrests of all members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee began. Stalin had a whole bundle of motives for physically destroying the members of the Jewish Committee he himself had created. First, the state of Israel, whose creation Stalin had actively supported in the hope of his own Middle Eastern prospects — that Israel chose not to orient itself toward the USSR but toward the United States. Stalin forbade Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel and simultaneously launched a campaign of open state antisemitism. The Jewish population of the USSR was declared a conduit of bourgeois, i.e. anti-Soviet ideology. Under these conditions, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee had to be destroyed. All the more so since, thanks to the considerable authority of its head, Mikhoels, it had begun to turn into an active human-rights organization.

Abakumov opened a case on a “Zionist conspiracy.” Doctor Etinger was arrested specifically in connection with this case. But not only that. Stalin had further plans for Doctor Etinger’s name and profession. He wanted to use them to carry out a grandiose provocation. Physicists, engineers, theater critics who were accused of cosmopolitanism, bourgeois influence and Zionism interested the broad masses very little. Stalin needed a mass shock — and he delivered it. Doctor Etinger was proclaimed a murderer in a white coat. This stigma was instantly extended by popular consciousness to all Jewish doctors, the very people with whom thousands of citizens came into contact daily, the people treating their children. That was the fear Stalin needed, the shock, the

guaranteed explosion of mass antisemitic sentiment. A powerful outburst of hatred that once again divided and corroded Soviet society.

Stalin remained true to himself throughout all his years in power. The search for enemies on class, and later national, grounds was his trademark method of governing the population. Hatred for an eternal enemy, constantly changing its appearance, was an excellent substitute for a piece of meat in the plate.

A month before Doctor Etinger's arrest, his adopted son, the future historian Yakov Etinger, had been arrested. He recalls:

“Lieutenant Colonel Ryumin interrogated me several times: ‘We are going to strangle all of you, you Jews. What the Germans didn't have time to do to the Jews, we will finish.’”

Ryumin would write a denunciation against Abakumov a year later. Ryumin would receive the post of Deputy Minister, then be arrested. Abakumov was arrested before the trial of the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee.

While he held his post, Abakumov had already extracted confessions from the prisoners. The case was then completed by another, new Minister of State Security, Ignatiev. He would complain to Beria and Malenkov:

“There are absolutely no documents confirming the statements of the arrested about the espionage and nationalist activity they allegedly conducted.”

Ignatiev's words meant that Abakumov, though acting in a traditionally bloody manner, had not succeeded in staging a spectacular public trial such as those of the 1930s. Still, this changed nothing. They simply made the trial of the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee closed to the public. During the trial, Abakumov was transported for interrogations from the internal prison of the MGB to Lefortovo and back. Immediately after his arrest, he had been taken to the special prison on Matrosskaya Tishina Street. It opened in 1950, while Abakumov was still head of the MGB. Matrosskaya Tishina was created specifically for high-ranking political prisoners. It was compact, designed for 35–40 people, plus 35 offices for investigators. The head of Matrosskaya Tishina never reported to Abakumov as Minister of State Security. This political prison was directly overseen by Central Committee Secretary Malenkov. For the arrested Abakumov — the man who had started the “Zionist conspiracy” case — the charge was participation in that very conspiracy.

Abakumov was charged with having “assembled in the MGB of the USSR a criminal group of Jewish nationalists in his striving for supreme power in the country, and with their help deceived and ignored the Central Committee of the CPSU.” In effect, Abakumov was proclaimed the head of the “Zionist conspiracy.” The death of Doctor Etinger as a result of torture in the refrigerator-cell was now interpreted by the investigators as a move by Abakumov to liquidate a valuable witness.

During the trial of the so-called “Zionist conspiracy,” the Military Collegium allowed itself to doubt the guilt of the defendants. This was an exceptional case in Stalinist justice. The Chairman of the Military Collegium, Cheptsov, proposed returning the case for further investigation. There was no additional investigation. The sentence had been determined in the Kremlin: 13 people to the highest measure of punishment. The only non-capital sentence went to one member of the JAC — the first woman academician, physiologist Lina Stern.

Through the interrogations and abuse at Abakumov's ministry on charges of Jewish nationalism passed also Molotov's wife, Polina Zhemchuzhina.

The formal reason for her arrest was her conversation in Yiddish with the Israeli ambassador in Moscow, Golda Meir. They had talked at a diplomatic reception at the Foreign Ministry on the occasion of the 31st anniversary of the October Revolution, on November 8, 1948.

In reality, the arrest of Molotov's wife was a step against Molotov himself. In March 1949 he was removed from his posts as Foreign Minister and First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, but left as an ordinary deputy. Molotov's wife was sent into exile.

In January 1953, when Abakumov was no longer in the MGB, she was again arrested and taken to Moscow. Stalin planned to use her in the trial of Molotov and Abakumov. That trial never happened because Stalin died. This saved Molotov.

After his own arrest, Abakumov would be put for a long time in the refrigerator-cell he had devised himself, where he himself had put Doctor Etinger and where the latter had died.

After the refrigerator-cell, Abakumov wrote to Beria and Malenkov:

“Something unbelievable was done to me. They brought me into a refrigerator-cell. I never knew there were such refrigerators in Lefortovo. I have never seen such brutality. They barely brought me back. I kept asking who had allowed this to be done to me. They answered: ‘The leadership of the MGB.’ I ask you, Lavrenty Pavlovich and Grigory Maksimilianovich, to return me to work. Respectfully yours, Abakumov.”

It is known that besides Doctor Etinger, Abakumov had also sent actress Tatyana Okunevskaya into the refrigerator. From Okunevskaya's memoirs:

“I'm in the refrigerator. In the corner there is a tiny folding triangle; it's impossible to sit on it, you either slip off or freeze to the wall. Investigator Sokolov says quietly: ‘You have to sign everything. Don't pretend to be Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya. We break people much more important than you. We break marshals.’”

Okunevskaya was arrested on a false charge by personal order of Abakumov. The real reason for the actress's arrest was that she had not yielded to the Minister's desires. Investigator Sokolov, who interrogated Okunevskaya on Abakumov's orders, later joined the investigative team on Abakumov's own case.

The charges against Abakumov would keep changing. They would first try him under the “Doctors' Plot”: at first, until Stalin's death, because he had been insufficiently harsh, and after Stalin's death — because he had been too harsh. Then they would declare him an accomplice of Yugoslav leader Tito. Later, after Beria's arrest, he would be tried together with Beria.

In 1954 he was shot.

From all the other heads of the security organs who operated during three decades of Stalinist lawlessness and terror, Abakumov differs in one respect: during the investigation and trial he did not admit a single one of the charges. He always said that he had acted on orders of the Central Committee and Stalin. And that there could be no other kind of life for him.

In 1921, to the Abakumov family, who lived near the Khamovnichesky barracks, came former drayman Fyodor Gnutov. Gnutov was the godfather of the Abakumovs' son Viktor, the future Minister of State Security. Gnutov came bringing treats — a couple of herrings and a bottle of vodka. It turned out that he had such riches because he was in the CHON, the Special Purpose Units engaged in crushing peasant anti-Bolshevik resistance. Gnutov said: “I can feel any kind of counterrevolution a verst away in my heart.” He invited his godson to come serve under him.

“Why,” said Gnutov, “should he go to a factory? Let him come to us, to the CHON. They’ll give him boots, a ration, he’ll live the easy life.” And so Viktor Abakumov went.