**Screenplay for the film "1952-1953 — Stalin — Beria. 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 examines the final phase of Stalin's rule (1951–1953), marked by declining health, increasing paranoia, and the preparation of a new major purge targeting both the Soviet leadership and the Jews of the USSR.

By 1951–1952 Stalin suffers from hypertension and cerebral arteriosclerosis, which exacerbate his already pathological personality. He resurrects old political obsessions (such as Kerensky, whom the MGB is ordered to assassinate abroad) and launches in Georgia the so-called "Mingrelian Affair." Ostensibly an anti-corruption campaign, it rapidly becomes a political purge: dozens of Mingrelian officials are arrested, over 400 people removed from their posts, and more than 11,000 Mingrelians deported to Kazakhstan. Behind this stands a veiled attack on Lavrenty Beria, himself a Mingrelian. Stalin has Beria's relatives in Georgia placed under surveillance, yet cynically appoints Beria to head the Party commission investigating the Mingrelians – while already considering him a future victim.

At the same time, Stalin begins to mark out some of his oldest comrades as enemies-in-waiting. Molotov and Mikoyan receive their "black marks" as early as 1948. At the XIX Party Congress in October 1952 and the subsequent Central Committee plenum, Stalin publicly humiliates them, charging Molotov with capitulation to bourgeois ideology and "Zionism," and attacking Mikoyan for opposing a heavier agricultural tax, insisting that peasants "owe" the state. In a calculated gesture, Stalin asks to be relieved of his post as General Secretary, closely watching the hall's reaction. Malenkov, widely regarded as his heir apparent, panics and leads the chorus begging Stalin to remain, thereby proving his loyalty and answering Stalin's "test" correctly.

Concurrently, Stalin prepares a new major political show trial: the "Doctors' Plot." Drawing on the precedent of the Nuremberg trials of Nazi doctors and reviving a 1948 letter by cardiologist Lidiya Timashuk about the treatment of Zhdanov, he has Kremlin doctors arrested from 1952 onward. Under torture, they "confess" to having murdered leading figures such as Zhdanov and Shcherbakov and to having spied for American and British intelligence. Most of the accused are Jewish, and the press launches a ferocious anti-Semitic and anti-intellectual campaign. Timashuk is decorated and celebrated as a vigilant heroine, compared to Joan of Arc.

According to later testimony, the doctors' trial was scheduled for mid-March 1953, with public hangings planned in major Soviet cities. Simultaneously, a mass deportation of Jews to Siberia and the Far East was being prepared, cynically framed as "protection" from popular vengeance. New camps were under construction; Stalin reportedly remarked that only half the deportees needed to reach their destination.

Economically, the country is in disastrous condition: severe shortages of seed grain, dying livestock, and a rural workforce reduced to the elderly, as the young flee. Stalin's 1952 pamphlet *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* proposes to abolish commodity-money relations and shift to direct product exchange between town and country – an ultra-left, utopian scheme which figures

like Mikoyan and Beria consider dangerous. As longtime overseer of the Gulag and chief of the nuclear program, Beria understands both the structural weakness of the Soviet economy and the growing unrest in the countryside. To save himself from the fate Stalin seems to reserve for him, he considers a coup, relying chiefly on Malenkov and, more cautiously, on Mikoyan. Khrushchev, whom Stalin still treats favorably, is underestimated by virtually everyone, including Beria.

Stalin's death in March 1953 interrupts this entire scenario: the doctors' show trial and the Jewish deportation never happen. Beria swiftly moves to close the Doctors' Plot and Pravda announces the doctors' innocence. This reversal shocks society: many feel cheated or confused, having been mobilized into hatred; others, in a new tone, denounce the press and the security organs, demand control over the MGB and a review of past sentences.

The text ultimately suggests that the top Soviet leadership had already "said goodbye" to Stalin before his physical death: each was primarily focused on survival. Beria, with his control over the security apparatus and the nuclear projects, was ready to attempt a coup if Stalin had lived longer. In the end, it is Stalin's biological death that abruptly halts the escalating terror, while immediately opening a new phase of power struggle within the post-Stalin leadership.

**Screenplay:**

1952/1953 – Stalin / Beria

In February 1952, Stalin returned to Moscow from his southern dachas. He had spent seven months in the south. He had been absent from Moscow since August 1951. In his last years he suffered from hypertension and progressive arteriosclerosis. Periodically he experienced disturbances of cerebral circulation. The mental disorders caused by cerebral arteriosclerosis intensified the pathological traits that were inherent in Stalin's character from birth.

In 1952, Stalin suddenly remembered Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky, long since forgotten, the head of the Provisional Government in 1917. In 1952 Kerensky was living in the United States. According to information received by the MGB, the 70-year-old Kerensky supposedly intended to head a mythical Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations. In connection with this, the USSR MGB was given the task of organizing Kerensky's murder during one of his trips, either to Paris or to London.

The murder was to be carried out by an officer of MGB Bureau No. 1, Captain Khokhlov, together with a female employee of the bureau, Ivanova, who was to pass herself off as Khokhlov's aunt. The killing was to be done with a pistol disguised as a Parker fountain pen. According to the memoirs of the head of MGB Bureau No. 1, Sudoplatov, Captain Khokhlov refused to carry out the assignment, saying that his nerves were shattered, his hands were trembling, and he might miss and shoot the wrong person.

It was then decided to redirect the assignment to the combat group of Prince Gagarin, which at that time was occupied with probing approaches to NATO headquarters in Fontainebleau. However, at the last moment the MGB leadership decided it was inexpedient to "burn" Prince Gagarin's group. Kerensky was not killed.

In the autumn of 1951 Stalin made a tour of his residences from Sochi to Borjomi. With him was the head of his security, General Vlasik. Vlasik recalled:

> “In New Athos I was invited by Comrade Stalin to lunch. At the table were Beria and Poskrebyshev. Comrade Stalin asked for young wine to be brought. But the wine was served over-chilled, whereas, according to the leader’s instructions, it was to be stored at a temperature not lower than 13–15 degrees Celsius. The staff served the wine without checking the temperature. All this enraged Stalin extremely. After this incident, which I shall never forget in my life, I did not sleep for three nights. Until the end of the meal I sat at the table neither dead nor alive. I do not know how my heart stood it, I thought I would lose consciousness. I suffered terribly, because Comrade Stalin simply could not calm down, he kept being nervous. I thought it would be better to die on the spot than to go through such an agonizing ordeal.”

General Vlasik dates this episode to 17 November 1951. Immediately before that, on 9 November 1951, against the background of Stalin’s holiday in Georgia, a Central Committee resolution was issued “On Bribery in Georgia and on the Anti-Party Group of Comrade Baramia.” This was the beginning of the so-called “Mingrelian Affair.”

It was launched as a criminal anti-corruption case, but instantly turned political. Baramia, the second secretary of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party mentioned in the resolution, was of Mingrelian origin. Together with him, 36 people were arrested. More than 400 were removed from their posts. The overwhelming majority were Mingrelians. They were accused of links with nationalist émigrés and Western intelligence services.

From his dacha in New Athos, Stalin was in constant contact with the head of the Georgian MGB, Rukhadze, and with the new, just-appointed First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party, Mgeladze. Stalin demanded that “physical measures” be applied to the arrested in order to force them to confess to espionage.

On 16 November 1951, on the eve of the day when Stalin became enraged over the temperature of the wine served to him, a resolution of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) was issued, “On the Expulsion from the Territory of the Georgian SSR of Hostile Elements.” In accordance with the resolution, the roundups and deportations began. Eleven thousand two hundred Mingrelians were sent to Kazakhstan.

At this time Beria was in New Athos together with Stalin. Beria himself was a Mingrelian. His native village of Merkheuli lay quite near New Athos. The meaning of the “Mingrelian Affair” started by Stalin was obvious to Beria, although he probably did not know what Stalin had told the head of the MGB, Ignatiev. And Stalin had told Ignatiev: “Look for the big Mingrelian.”

Stalin remembered everything. In 1949, at the XIV Congress of the Georgian Communist Party, Beria was placed on a par with Stalin. At the elections to the Central Committee, Beria was unanimously elected an honorary member. At the vote on Stalin’s own candidacy there were many abstentions.

On Stalin’s orders, surveillance of Beria’s relatives in Georgia began. A listening device was installed in his mother’s apartment in Tbilisi. When the “Mingrelian Affair” began, Stalin appointed Beria head of the Party commission of inquiry and sent him to Tbilisi.

Beria carried out the functions assigned to him with a confident hand: he monitored the effectiveness of the purge, arrests, deportations, and also oversaw the closure of Mingrelian newspapers. Stalin’s intentions regarding Beria did not change because of this. Beria was the third

person from Stalin's inner circle whom Stalin, by 1952, had selected for elimination. The first two were Molotov and Mikoyan. Stalin had marked them out already in 1948.

From Mikoyan's personal notes:

> "In December 1948, after Stalin returned from vacation, I, together with other members of the Politburo, went to see him at the Near Dacha. The conversation was quite peaceful and pleasant. Suddenly, in the middle of dinner, Poskrebyshev rose from his place. Poskrebyshev, head of the special department of the Central Committee, was in fact Stalin's secretary. He stood up and declared: 'Comrade Stalin, while you were resting, Molotov and Mikoyan here in Moscow were preparing a conspiracy against you.'
>
> I shouted, 'You scoundrel!' and grabbed a chair to throw at him. Beria held me back. Molotov sat like a statue. The others were silent as well. Apparently, all this had been planned, and Poskrebyshev was merely carrying out an assignment from Stalin. Stalin then turned the conversation to another subject."

By 1948, Molotov's wife had already been arrested and exiled. In 1952, for those standing near Stalin, the situation was becoming unbearable. Stalin was ready to begin a new purge. He did not wish to leave behind potential critics of his system of governing the country. First in this line stood Beria, the holder of exceptional information in all areas of both internal and foreign policy.

Given the age difference between Beria, Molotov, Malenkov and himself, Stalin understood that they would outlive him. And so they had to be liquidated now. The actions of the entire top leadership would be unpredictable if he, Stalin, began to decline rapidly.

And then came the visit of his personal physician, Professor Vinogradov. That visit took place in January 1952. Vinogradov discovered a sharp deterioration in Stalin's state of health and wrote in his medical file that a strict regime was necessary, with complete withdrawal from any activity. Stalin flew into a rage. It was Vinogradov's last visit. Stalin ordered his own medical file to be destroyed.

Moreover, Stalin, the leader of a country with nuclear weapons, refused medical assistance altogether.

Meanwhile, according to the recollections of Konstantin Simonov, at the XIX Party Congress in October 1952 Stalin appeared vigorous:

> "Stalin gets up from behind the presidium table, walks around it and, with a brisk, slightly waddling gait, not so much goes as almost runs down to the rostrum. He speaks calmly, unhurriedly."

He modulates his voice masterfully, in his own style, and gestures in a measured way. In substance his speech at the congress is unremarkable and brief. What is noteworthy is something else. At the closed session of the congress, a new Central Committee was elected. The Central Committee nearly doubled in size.

The members of this last Stalin Central Committee – Suslov, Grishin, Zimyanin, Kapitonov, Kuznetsov, Patolichev, Gromyko, Epishev, Ustinov – would remain in power under Khrushchev and form the basis of Brezhnev's ruling group. Standing somewhat apart in this line of Stalin protégés,

outside of ideology, were the economists Kosygin and Baibakov. Brezhnev also became a Central Committee member in 1952.

On 16 October 1952, the post-congress Central Committee Plenum took place. It lasted just over two hours. Of that time, an hour and a half was taken up by Stalin's speech. Central Committee member, academician A. I. Rumiantsev, recalled:

> "Stalin entered the hall to stormy applause. Approaching the table, he said in a muffled, unfriendly voice, with a strong accent: 'What are you clapping about? What is this, a session of the Supreme Soviet or a peace rally?'
>
> Stalin said that the international situation was serious. That he was old and the time was approaching when others would have to do his work. And then Stalin began to talk about Molotov. It was a squall of accusations – capitulation before bourgeois ideology, weakening of the party, aiding Zionism. Stalin was openly coarse: 'Comrade Molotov has such respect for his wife, Comrade Zhemchuzhina, that no sooner do we make a Politburo decision on this or that important issue than it becomes known to Comrade Zhemchuzhina. And she is surrounded by friends who cannot be trusted.'"

Molotov's wife had been exiled in connection with the so-called case of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the JAC.

In August 1952 the trial of the JAC members ended. The committee had been created by Stalin at the beginning of the war, in 1941, to secure material aid for the USSR from international Jewish public opinion. The JAC, headed by the famous director Solomon Mikhoels, fulfilled its task.

After the war, the Jewish Committee, under its authoritative leadership, acquired a human-rights character. On Stalin's orders, Mikhoels was killed in 1948.

Thirteen leaders of the JAC were shot on 12 August 1952. However, it proved impossible to stage a major public trial out of the JAC case: the defendants did not confess to espionage.

Molotov's wife, Polina Zhemchuzhina, would be returned from exile to Moscow in early 1953, and then arrested again. The goal was to beat out of her testimony against her husband and to use it during the planned trial of Molotov.

Stalin continued his speech at the plenum:

> "Now about Comrade Mikoyan. He, it seems, is opposed to raising the agricultural tax on the peasants. But the muzhik is our debtor. We gave the collective farms land. Therefore the peasants must pay their debt to the state. What is it that Mikoyan doesn't understand here? Who is he, our Anastas Mikoyan?"

Molotov and Mikoyan came to the rostrum and defended themselves. Konstantin Simonov, present at the plenum as a candidate member of the Central Committee, wrote:

> "Molotov and Mikoyan spoke, and it seemed to me that these were not men, but white masks, very similar to their faces and at the same time quite unlike them, no longer alive. Stalin was deliberately beating his long-time comrades-in-arms. Stalin was striking in order to knock out of action his potential successors. And he wanted everyone present at the plenum to understand this."

Stalin again came to the rostrum and suddenly said:

> “I ask to be released from the duties of General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU. I am already old. I do not read papers. Elect another secretary for yourselves.”

Stalin spoke these words looking out over the hall. Behind him sat the Politburo. Malenkov, who was chairing the plenum, stood. Simonov wrote:

> “The expression on Malenkov’s face as he stood behind Stalin, his gestures, his eloquently raised hands were a direct plea to everyone present to reject Stalin’s request at once.”

Malenkov, who had delivered the main report at the congress and presided over most of the Central Committee sessions, was clearly the candidate for the post of General Secretary, for Stalin’s post which Stalin supposedly wanted to vacate because of age and exhaustion.

Malenkov immediately understood that Stalin had no intention of relinquishing the post of General Secretary, that this was a test, a probing of the ground. And had Stalin sensed that there were people in the hall ready to support his request, the first to answer for it would have been Malenkov. With his head.

At first a voice from the presidium was heard: “No, we ask you to stay.” Then the whole hall began to hum: “No! We ask you to stay!”

Stalin stood for a long time, peering into the hall, then waved his hand and sat down.

Stalin did not utter Beria’s name at the October plenum of the Central Committee. At that time Beria was supervising the project to create the hydrogen bomb. The completion of the work on the Soviet hydrogen bomb would be reported to Stalin at the beginning of 1953. At the end of 1952 the bomb did not yet exist. This was precisely why Stalin’s decisive game against Beria was postponed.

Stalin feared a conspiracy and a coup. He probed, marked out possible instigators. And he fenced himself off from a coup.

He began to play his favorite combination for eliminating his closest associates, only lightly tinted with the realities of the Cold War. This combination would become known as the “Doctors’ Plot.”

Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Central Committee member Malyshev wrote in his diary about Stalin’s speech at an enlarged session of the CPSU Central Committee Presidium on 1 December 1952. Stalin said then:

> “Every Jew is a potential agent of the United States. There are many Jewish nationalists among the doctors.”

At the end of the summer of 1951, Stalin was vacationing in New Athos. Mikoyan was in Sukhumi. Malenkov – in Myussera. Bulganin – in Sochi. Mikoyan recalled:

> “Once we were all at Stalin’s dacha for dinner, all the comrades named. The conversation touched on various topics. Everything was going well. Around four in the morning bananas were brought to the table. I must say that Stalin loved bananas very much. After the war he even ordered that small consignments of bananas be brought to Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. It was very difficult to ship such small consignments of bananas, but they managed.”

So, that evening at the dacha in New Athos, at four in the morning, Stalin took a banana, tasted it and was displeased with its flavor.

> "Why is that?" Stalin asked. "For so many years we received bananas and it was never like this. That means the minister is working badly?"

Mikoyan began to defend the Minister of Foreign Trade, Menshikov. Stalin demanded an investigation and the search for those responsible. The next day Beria already knew about the "banana case."

A few days later, Mikoyan again came to see Stalin. Stalin immediately started talking about the bananas again, demanded the dismissal of the Minister of Foreign Trade, Menshikov, and that his deputy, Kumykin, be appointed in his place.

When, in Moscow, Mikoyan summoned Kumykin and told him about the appointment, Kumykin's face changed and then he burst into tears:

> "Don't ruin me, I don't want to be a minister, help me get rid of this appointment."

In those circumstances, many people who soberly assessed the situation feared promotions as a death sentence. Mikoyan managed to send the former Minister of Foreign Trade, Menshikov, to serve as head of customs on the Amur. After Stalin's death, he would become ambassador to India and then to the United States.

In the autumn of 1951, the Minister of Health, Smirnov, came to Stalin's dacha in New Athos. He recalled:

> "We were walking in the garden, talking. Stalin pointed to trees where lemons and oranges grew. And suddenly, without any transition, he asked: 'Comrade Smirnov, do you know which doctor treated Dimitrov and Zhdanov?' 'I do,' replied Minister Smirnov, and he named Professor Kogan. 'Strange,' said Stalin. 'One doctor treated them, and both died.'"

Professor Kogan had indeed been the attending physician for Central Committee Secretary Zhdanov. Zhdanov spent the last month before his death in a sanatorium on Lake Valdai, on Stalin's urgent recommendation. There he was consulted by a group of doctors including the head of the Kremlin Medical and Sanitary Directorate, Egorov, Professor Vinogradov and Professor Etinger.

There, at Valdai in August 1948, this group of Kremlin consultant physicians differed in diagnosis from Dr. Lidiya Timashuk, head of the electrocardiography room at the Kremlin Hospital. Timashuk had performed an ECG on Zhdanov.

The disagreement with the team of doctors prompted Timashuk to immediately write a letter to the head of the Main Guard Directorate of the MGB USSR, General Vlasik. General Vlasik forwarded Timashuk's letter to the Minister of State Security, Abakumov. That same day Abakumov forwarded Timashuk's letter, with his own covering note, to Stalin. Stalin read it and wrote: "To the archives."

Timashuk was demoted. The doctors continued their work. Four years passed.

The idea of developing a "doctors' case" did not occur to Stalin in 1952. The phrase "doctors' case" or "doctors' trial" had most likely caught his attention at the time of the Nuremberg Trials.

In 1946, within the framework of the International Tribunal for Nazi war criminals, the case of the Nazi doctors-killers was heard. Stalin registered this and stored it in his memory.

In 1948, the letter by Dr. Lidiya Timashuk, an off-the-books MGB collaborator, concerning the treatment of Zhdanov was placed in the same archive of Stalin's memory.

In August 1952, Stalin pulled this letter out. Conversations with Timashuk began in the investigative department for particularly important cases of the Ministry of State Security.

In February 1952, the former deputy director of the government sanatorium "Barvikha," Dr. Ryzhikov, was arrested. He was accused of terrorist ties with the attending physician of Shcherbakov, Professor Etinger. By that time Professor Etinger had already been dead for a year, having died after torture in a refrigerator cell invented personally by the MGB chief, Abakumov.

Abakumov himself had already been arrested for participation in a "Zionist conspiracy." Although, as MGB chief, he had personally organized Mikhoels' murder and the trial of the JAC, he was accused of a Zionist conspiracy.

In 1952, Abakumov was also charged with concealing Dr. Lidiya Timashuk's letter, despite the fact that it was on Abakumov's note to Stalin that Stalin had written his resolution: "To the archives."

In 1952 they remembered Lidiya Timashuk again; she had taken part in the examination of Central Committee Secretary Shcherbakov's heart – he had died in 1945.

The point was that according to Kremlin practice, the internal organs of all deceased members of the country's leadership were preserved for seven years in containers with formaldehyde solution.

In 1952 a commission – or rather two commissions – examined Shcherbakov's heart and reached a unanimous conclusion: the treatment of Comrade Shcherbakov could be characterized as "criminal." In September the first group of Kremlin doctors was arrested.

In mid-October, the head of the Kremlin Hospital, Egorov, was arrested. Two weeks earlier, his wife had been arrested. In November 1952 it was the turn of Professors Vinogradov, Vovsi, Vasilenko, Kogan; in December, Professors Feldman, Temkin, Grinshtein followed.

In accordance with Stalin's instructions, torture was applied to all those arrested in order to accelerate the investigation.

Already on 4 December 1952, a CPSU Central Committee resolution appeared: "On Sabotage in Medical Practice."

The resolution stated:

> "Documentary data and the confessions of those arrested have established that a hostile group of doctors and Jewish nationalists was connected with the British and American embassies, acted on the instructions of American and British intelligence, and was preparing to carry out terrorist acts against the leaders of the Party and the government. The criminals confessed that they managed to kill Zhdanov and Shcherbakov."

The resolution stressed that the hostile group could have been decapitated in time if proper attention had been paid to the statement of Comrade Timashuk.

On 13 January 1953, Pravda published a TASS communiqué announcing the arrest of a group of doctors-saboteurs, together with an article entitled “Vile Spies and Killers under the Mask of Doctors”:

> “The whole world can now see the true face of these cannibals – the henchmen of the USA and England.”

The article emphasized that the United States had “spread their spies throughout the rear of the USSR.” In other words, it was not just about the Kremlin doctors. This was a mass, nationwide phenomenon.

Therefore, the article said, our people must fight carelessness. In parentheses, the word “gaping-mouthed” (rotoseystvo) was added as an explanation. This clarification was repeated several times in the text. It bore the mark of Stalin’s personal editing. The first time Stalin used this word he fancied, “rotoseystvo,” was at the Presidium meeting of 1 December 1952, when he was talking about the atmosphere that made it easy for American intelligence to work.

On 20 January, Lidiya Timashuk was received in the Kremlin by Central Committee secretary Malenkov, who, on behalf of Stalin and the Soviet government, thanked her for her vigilance. On 21 January, the newspapers published a decree awarding Lidiya Timashuk the Order of Lenin for her assistance in exposing the doctors-killers. In the press she was called “the great daughter of the Russian people,” and she was compared to Joan of Arc.

Back on 15 January, the newspaper Zvezda had come out with another article. Zvezda clarified that it was a plot of Jewish doctors. Again, there was mention of Anglo-American espionage. And again: carelessness (rotoseystvo) and chatter were footholds for enemies. Under any conditions under which a Soviet person worked, he was required by the Party to be cautious.

A mass psychosis began.

Every doctor was regarded as a potential killer. People everywhere refused medicines. In all institutions mass meetings were held demanding that the criminals be executed. Many participants at the meetings volunteered to serve as executioners. Among those who volunteered were members of the medical profession – doctors and even professors.

The son of the tortured Professor Etinger, the historian Yakov Etinger, later had a conversation with the former Minister of the Armed Forces, Bulganin. According to Bulganin, the trial of the doctors was scheduled for 12–15 March 1953. The condemned were to be publicly hanged in the squares of the largest cities of the country. A quota by city had already been prepared. Public hangings on central squares were to be witnessed by the inhabitants of Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Minsk and Sverdlovsk.

At the same time, amid the mass hysteria and readiness for pogroms, Stalin was seeking a way to enter history as the savior of the Jews from spontaneous popular vengeance. The idea of deporting the Jews emerged. The deportation was to be presented as an act of humanism – rescuing them from extrajudicial popular reprisal.

The Minister of the Armed Forces, Bulganin, confirmed the fact that a mass deportation of Jews to Siberia and the Far East was being prepared. New camps were being built in the East. During the deportation, train crashes and so-called spontaneous attacks on trains were planned. Khrushchev

recalled a conversation with Stalin on this subject. According to Khrushchev, Stalin said that only half of the deportees should reach their destination.

Pacifism – that is, love of peace – was not in fashion at all at that time. It was not encouraged. On the contrary, it was punished. The children's magazine Druzhnyye rebyata ("The Friendly Kids") was harshly criticized for publishing a poem by Veronika Tushnova, "The Dove of Peace." A simple, kind poem was branded pernicious for its inadmissible sentimentality.

On 1 January 1953, the newspaper Mariyskaya pravda published a short story, "The Peace Watch." A tractor driver, Vasya, "kept thinking how wonderful it would be to attach iron doves to the tractors. There would stand in a strict row the tractors ready for work, with big doves shining on the radiators." The story was criticized because it "educates the reader in a pacifist spirit."

In January–February 1953, the essence of Stalin's entire combination around the "Doctors' Plot" crystallized. Investigators beat out testimony about the arrested doctors' contacts with Molotov and Mikoyan. The picture had to be coherent. The main enemy was the United States. Their agents were Jewish professors, under the patronage of figures from the country's top leadership, plus a fifth column of Jewish doctors throughout the country, and indeed all Jews in general, as potential agents of US influence.

Thus, the "Doctors' Plot," apart from its antisemitic component, dragged along with it the complete and final elimination of Stalin's old entourage.

In many respects it was a repeat of Stalin's scheme of 1937. Then, too, leading figures were accused of espionage. Then, too, there were doctors, charged with having killed Kuibyshev, Gorky and Gorky's son. The old mixture was now diluted with antisemitism borrowed from Nazi Germany, and all of it was seasoned with the rhetoric of the Cold War.

The key, though, was the promised finale – the punishment. Rumors that it would be public were already circulating. In the absence of mass entertainment – there was no television yet – and amid the poverty of everyday life, a free spectacle was suddenly expected.

And at the very peak of this anticipation and hysteria, Stalin died.

Even after Beria officially terminated the "Doctors' Plot" in April 1953, and Pravda announced that the doctors were innocent, the passions did not subside. The announcement in Pravda provoked a torrent of letters to the editorial office. The letters were compiled into summaries and, marked "secret," sent to the Central Committee. Most of the letters were anonymous.

> "The doctors-saboteurs, by their actions, enraged the entire Soviet people, and every honest person was filled with hatred toward them. And suddenly today we read that all these accusations were false. This announcement produced a feeling as if we had received a slap in the face – undeserved and unexpected. We had barely come out into the kitchen in the morning when everyone began talking about it, and everyone is indignant. All day long there is indignation everywhere. How can such doubts be sown among the people? Whom are we to believe after this?"

Another anonymous letter from Moscow:

> "You cannot so boorishly tear apart the well-known political orientation in the minds of our citizens."

A certain Moskalenko from Moscow wrote:

> “We simple people are simply amazed. There is no firm Stalin hand. The government announcement on the doctors’ innocence simply disorients the common people and provokes uncertainty and nervousness.”

Another anonymous letter from Moscow:

> “Are those unfortunate professors, if they turned out to be non-saboteurs, really worth so much as to disturb the minds of our workers to such a degree?”

And there were letters entirely new in spirit, unthinkable only recently:

> “On behalf of a group of worker-communists, we express complete distrust of the Pravda editorial board. For two or three years the newspaper has carried on a pogrom campaign, savoring Jewish names and proving, like a fascist rag, that Jews must be beaten. And now it prints editorials about the friendship of peoples. You are prostitutes and beasts. Get out. Fascists have no place in Pravda.”

And yet another letter:

> “Yes, the scandal with the professors turned out to be unprecedented. Moscow is as agitated as a beehive. The secret has become revealed. How could it happen that in Moscow, in the Ministry of State Security, executioners were operating? How could a dungeon of the fascist type exist in the center of the capital? How often one sees boar-like generals and colonels of the MGB, arrogant, with the air of being the salt of the earth. Placed in exceptional conditions, receiving unearned thousand-ruble salaries and pensions, cars, resort vouchers, apartments. There must be control over the MGB. There must be an immediate review of previous cases, exiles, sentences.”

And at the end of the letter there was a postscript: “All those gathered here want to sign, but many are still afraid.”

Those who formed the country’s leadership had taken leave of Stalin even before his physical death. Above all, Beria.

In 1953, Lavrenty Beria was 54. Stalin’s determination to liquidate him was obvious to him. He was far too experienced not to grasp this. And he had no intention of dying. He had taken part in, led, and carried out the repressions of the 1930s both in Georgia and in the country as a whole. He knew the mechanism of repression. It is hard to believe that with this knowledge he would meekly go to slaughter in 1953.

That meant that Beria could, and was prepared to, attempt a coup. It was his only chance – and no later than the beginning of the doctors’ trial. Beria had little time to gather supporters, about a month and a half. But the later experience of Khrushchev’s conspiracy against Beria himself shows that this amount of time was quite sufficient.

For many years Mikoyan had been friendly with Beria. At the 1952 plenum, Mikoyan had already received a black mark. He could expect arrest at any moment. There was another factor. Because of his positions, Mikoyan had a grasp of the Soviet economy, above all of the catastrophic state of the food supply.

Beria, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers and the man who possessed exclusive, real economic information via the NKVD–MGB, had, as the long-time master of the Gulag, a clear understanding that the Soviet camp-based economic system was incapable of competing with the

Western economies in the era of scientific and technological breakthrough. Beria also knew about the protest mood in the country.

From the everyday mail of the newspaper Socialist Agriculture, April 1952 – a letter from collective farmers in Kiknur district, Kirov region, Smirnova, Demintseva and Ovchinnikova:

> "In the kolkhoz there is nothing to sow, no seed, and of the labor force only old people remain, the young have scattered wherever they could. There is nothing to feed the livestock, and it is dying. We have lived to see the day when it is impossible to go on living. We will probably have to run away. Must we appeal to America?"

It is certainly hard to suspect Beria of what is called a "statist" position. But pragmatically, for his own purposes, he was well capable of using the profound collapse of the economy as a trump card in the decisive game against Stalin. Mikoyan could help him in this. Mikoyan wrote in his memoirs:

> "In 1952, Stalin's pamphlet 'Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR' was published. In it he claimed that commodity-money relations in the economy had exhausted themselves, that it was necessary to move to product exchange between town and countryside. This was an incredibly ultra-left lurch. Stalin apparently seriously planned to build communism in our country during his own lifetime."

Stalin's new economic idea threatened complete chaos in the country. Further violence against the economy was becoming dangerous, and therefore pointless. Beria could – had to – talk over economic problems with Mikoyan, with Malenkov. Beria's actions after Stalin's death confirm this. And Mikoyan would cautiously support Beria even at the moment when Beria himself was arrested.

Besides that, Mikoyan's son had married the daughter of Central Committee secretary Kuznetsov, who was shot, together with others, in 1951 in the so-called "Leningrad Affair." Stalin certainly remembered this. The marriage of Mikoyan's and Kuznetsov's children took place when Kuznetsov had already been removed from his post. After Kuznetsov's execution, the marriage was not dissolved. Kaganovich said to Mikoyan: "Are you out of your mind?!"

As for Molotov, he was the main object of Stalin's anger at the 1952 plenum. Up to Stalin's death there was no confrontation between Molotov and Beria. Beria had nothing to do with Molotov's wife's arrest. Molotov valued Beria primarily for his energy.

Beria's son, Sergo Beria, said:

> "Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov (I myself heard the conversation at our house) suggested to my father that a military coup be staged."

Beria had a long-standing tandem with Malenkov, which was especially strengthened during the rise in Moscow of the Leningrad grouping, which would later be shot. It was well known that in 1953 Malenkov was the second man in the Party after Stalin. Beria was staking mainly on Malenkov.

Voroshilov had been going around with the stigma of "British spy" since the 1952 plenum.

Khrushchev Beria underestimated. And in this Beria was not original. No one at the beginning of 1953 saw Khrushchev as a potential No. 1. Khrushchev recalled:

> "In the last year of Stalin's life, Beria showed increasingly sharp disrespect for Stalin in a narrow circle. He spoke this way even in my presence. I must admit, this both offended and alarmed me. I regarded Beria's insulting outbursts against Stalin as a

> provocation, so that later he could present me to Stalin as an enemy of the people. I listened, I did not plug my ears, but I never got involved in these conversations. Despite that, Beria went on in the same vein."

Khrushchev had every right to suspect Beria of provocation. He wrote:

> "Beria was a master at this; he was capable of anything, of any vileness."

But Khrushchev was not among Stalin's potential victims. Khrushchev wrote:

> "Stalin treated me well, he trusted me and valued me."

All the other key figures of Stalin's entourage could no longer say anything like that about themselves at the beginning of 1953.

Stalin's hunt for those closest to him did not spare even the long-serving, dog-faithful chief of his bodyguard, Vlasik.

In 1952 an expanded Central Committee was elected, but these were new people, not yet personally tested by Stalin. They were ready to occupy leadership posts in the country, but those posts had to be vacated for them – by Stalin. And Stalin was aging. At that time the head of MGB Bureau No. 1, Sudoplatov, recalled:

> "It was the end of February 1953. The head of the MGB, Ignatiev, said that we were going to 'the instance,' that is, to Stalin. What I saw stunned me. I saw an old man. Stalin had changed greatly. Although he had always spoken slowly, now he pronounced words with effort, the pauses between them were longer. Apparently, the rumors of two strokes were true."

In this condition, Stalin was discussing nothing less than preparations to assassinate Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito.

Had Stalin not died at the time allotted to him by history, Beria would have proceeded to a coup. And it was not only a matter of having supporters. Beria was the only man in the country who possessed the means of nuclear blackmail in domestic politics.

Beria was more than just Stalin's viceroy in the atomic and hydrogen projects with all their military and human resources. In this sphere Beria successfully competed with Stalin himself. Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov recounted how his senior colleague, Academician Zel'dovich, would say: "Our Lavrenty Pavlovich."

In June 1953, just before his arrest, Beria would set this mechanism of blackmail in motion – now with the help of the hydrogen bomb. But that would be after Stalin. While Stalin lived, he outplayed Beria. Stalin died.