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## 'Secret Pogrom' brushes truth behind inquisition

REVIEWED BY JASON R. KOEPKE

The secret trials by the Soviet government against 15 Jews, mostly writers and poets, in the summer of 1952 for anti-Soviet crimes is a tragic lesson in the internal contradictions between revolutionary zeal and the rule of law and even more importantly, Soviet identity and (in this case, Jewish) ethnicity.

### Book Review

**Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-fascist Committee.** Edited by Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov. Translated by Laura Esther Wolfson. Illustrated. 527 pages. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. \$35

support against the Nazis who invaded the Soviet Union the previous year. The Jewish Anti-fascist Committee raised awareness of the Soviet situation, and Nazi atrocities against European Jewry by sending arti-

cles to British and American newspapers, hosting foreign Jewish visitors, contacting Jewish-American leaders and, during an American tour, by holding rallies.

With the war wrapping up, the committee strayed from their original course towards only semi-related work, including suggesting the establishment of a Soviet-sponsored Jewish republic in the Crimea, becoming inescapably involved in the political waves of Israel's creation, working to assist Jewish refugees, and addressing anti-Semitism within the Soviet Union.

After the war, Stalin tightened the noose he had allowed to loosen to wage total war against Germany. The Jews were some of the first victims of this period and their story is told in "Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-fascist Committee."

Joshua Rubenstein, one of the book's two editors, lays out an easy to read, yet factually rich, history of the period and committee that primarily prepares the readers for the testimony of the 15 defendants, which makes up the vast majority of the book.

Rubenstein's success in crafting a well

Please see *Secret Pogrom*, Page 20.

## 'Secret Pogrom:' Truth about trials

*Continued from Page 6.*

written history of the committee, however, is met with incompleteness, as he spends most of his time attributing developments between the committee and the Soviet government to anti-Semitism, rather than exploring the much more complex and convincing fact that reconciling one's ethnic identity, in this case Judaism, with Stalin's Soviet Union is impossible.

The testimony brings this to light as each defendant to some degree recants their forced confessions and convincingly argues that they are by and large not guilty, despite the fact that they all realized that speaking of and promoting the Jewish cause was nationalist and anti-Soviet.

Several defendants said that even if their actions were anti-Soviet, they were closely supervised and approved of by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So how could legal actions during the war now be illegal? Such questions partially reflect the naivety of the defendants (i.e., they had all been in the Soviet Union during the show trials, where once important and trusted Communists were embarrassed and found guilty of anti-Soviet crimes), but also illustrate the contradictions that exist in a society guided by the "rule of the party" (i.e., the Communist Party has, is, and will always be right), but establishes a judicial system that prides itself on the "rule of law." Rubenstein again fails to explain

the contradiction, let alone offer analysis, and instead he casually chalks up the entire situation to Soviet anti-Semitism and the fact that the Soviet Union is not a "normal" country.

Such sentiments are by-products of superficial observations of the destructive brute force by which the Communists achieved power.

The Communists' well-known brutality in some way makes the mostly ardent defense of the 15 accused committee members all the more interesting. Why was it that these 15 Jewish defendants failed to cave into their Soviet handlers and accept guilt, as happened during the political trials of the 1930s? While no single reason is sure to answer the question, the biggest factor may be the reawakening of each member's Jewish identity as a result of many significant developments. In a way, this trial and its court testimony is the government's attempt to kick the knees out from a Yiddish culture recently reinvigorated because of the committee's actions, the war, Nazi-orchestrated genocide, and the creation of Israel.

Because of these historically important events, especially to the world Jewish population, the book stands out as an important text despite Rubenstein's missed opportunities.

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