Goodbye, Uncle Joe: U.S. Reactions to the Death of Joseph Stalin

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Abstract

This article discusses contemporaneous U.S. reactions to the death of Joseph Stalin. It includes discussions of the reactions of the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. embassy in Moscow. It also discusses the reactions the mainstream American press, including the *New York Times*, news magazines and the liberal press. The Communist Party USA eulogized Stalin, following its longstanding pro-Stalinist ideology. The Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party condemned him as a dictator and betrayer of the Russian Revolution and Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Goodbye, Uncle Joe: U.S. Reactions to the Death of Joseph Stalin

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Joseph V. Stalin led the Soviet Union during his absolute rule from the 1920s to his death in 1953. He eliminated his rival Leon Trotsky through exile and assassination, forced collectivization, conducted the Great Terror, conducted the Winter War with Finland and led the country through World War II (the "Great Patriotic War") as an ally of the United States and Great Britain. The war caused devastating losses for the Russian people through the German invasion of European Russia and occupation of such area as Ukraine and the city of Smolensk. In the postwar era he effected Soviet expansion into eastern Europe, saw the development of the atomic bomb, and steered the country through the early years of the Cold War. On March 4, 1953, the Soviet press announced that Stalin had suffered a "brain hemorrhage, loss of speech, and paralysis of right arm and leg."[11] When his death was announced, the Soviet Communist Party's Central Committee eulogized him on March 5, stating:

> Comrade Stalin's death—the man who devoted all his life to the unselfish service of the Communist cause—is a tremendous loss to the party, to the workers of the Soviet Union and to the whole world. … The immortal name of Stalin will live forever in the hearts of the Soviet people and all progressive mankind.[2]

Much has been written about Stalin's death and its impact on Soviet internal affairs and foreign relations, including relations with the United States.[3] Using contemporaneous sources, this paper brings together for the first time the reactions to Stalin's death by U.S. government agencies and officials, the reactions of the

[1] "Stalin's Illness Similar to Paralysis that Brought on Death of Lenin," *New York Times* (March 4, 1953), 3.

[2] Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Central Committee, "The Death of Premier Stalin," *Current History* 24, no. 140 (April 1953): 247-248.

[3] For examples, see Joshua Rubenstein, "A Chance for Peace," in *The Last Days of Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 146-188 and Keith Larres and Kenneth Alan Osgood, eds., *The Cold War after Stalin's Death: A Missed Opportunity for Peace?* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2006).

U.S. mainstream media and the reactions of U.S. radicals.

The reactions of U.S. government officials and agencies centered around three major sources. The first was the attempts to formulate the State Department's plans to exploit Stalin's death. The second was the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The third source was the eyewitness accounts of Jacob Bean, the chargé at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and the senior diplomat at the embassy at the time of Stalin's death. Stalin's illness was discussed at a March 4 meeting of the National Security Council (NSC). The main topic of discussion was to "see whether and how … Stalin's illness could be best exploited for psychological purposes." The NSC agreed to the following: President Dwight D. Eisenhower would issue a public statement, the CIA would do a new Intelligence Estimate and the State Department would issue a statement on policy implications and a "plan for psychological exploitation of this event."[4]

Perhaps reflecting the tense relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the president's public statement on Stalin's illness was very brief and did not even mention Stalin's name. The statement referred to the "illness of the Soviet ruler" and that Americans are praying that "the Almighty will watch over the people of that vast country." He ended with a hope for a world of "peace and comradeship."[5] This brief public statement belied the government's ongoing preparations in anticipation of Stalin's death. These preparations dated back to the 1940s. An example of governmental thinking was a 1948 CIA paper entitled *The Succession of Power in the USSR*. The authors speculated on Stalin's ill health and the likelihood of Vyacheslav Molotov being his successor. The author considered that the "dominant criterion" for choosing a successor was "How well does it guarantee the safety of the present regime and the continuation of its present policies?" This paper acknowledged Stalin's suspicious nature and that "originality and initiative have been subordinated to obedience" and that the "aims of the Soviet system" would not change.[6] In 1952 departing U.S. Ambassador Alan G. Kirk reported that there was "no concrete evidence of the failing health" of Stalin.[7] Also in 1952, George F. Kennan, a former secretary at the U.S. embassy in the 1930s, became U.S. ambassador. He reported on rumors about Stalin's replacement. He surmised that the deaths of any of his successors (e.g., Georgi Malenkov, Vyacheslav Molotov, or Lavrenti Beria) would "have most unsettling and unexpected effects."[8]

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[4] S. Everett Gleason, "Memorandum of Discussion at the 135th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, March 4, 1953*," in U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the Unted States, Vol. 8, Eastern Europe, Soviet Union, Eastern Mediterranean* (Washington, DC: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1988), pp. 1091-1095; hereafter cited as *FRUS.*

[5] Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Messages Relating to Illness and Death of Joseph Stalin," *Department of State Bulletin* 28, no. 716 (March 16, 1953), 400.

[6] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *The Succession of Power in the USSR: Summary* (Washington, DC: The Agency, 1948).

[7] Alan G. Kirk," Memorandum of Conversation, by the Ambassador to the Soviet Union (Kirk), in *FRUS*, p. 963.

[8] George F. Kennan, "The Ambassador to the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Department of State," in *FRUS*, 1014-1015.

The State Department organized a Working Group (Stalin) in 1951. The Working Group's most often cited paper at that time was *Program of Psychological Preparation for Stalin's Passing from Power*, issued in November 1952. This paper had a speculative and cautious tone as to how the Soviet populace would react, future Soviet government policies, new Communist Party leadership and how the West should react. One hope on Stalin's passing from power was the following: "It may touch off a split in the top leadership. It may also lead to the crystallization of present dissatisfactions among various groups in the Soviet population which feel themselves discriminated against."[9] In January 1953, Francis B. Stevens of the Office of Eastern European Affairs sent an addendum to this paper that demonstrated the uncertainty within the State Department. This addendum was full of such phrases as "cannot be foreseen," "impossible to issue intelligent standby instructions" and "not easy to predict." Stevens considered the usually routine issuance of an official condolence message on the death of a foreign head of state to be problematic. He listed three scenarios for such a message, including sending a message, omitting a message, and sending a message through "United States information media to the Soviet people" that noted Stalin's death, extended the "hand of friendship" and "inviting cooperation in seeking a peaceful and secure world." He listed the possible implications of each scenario.[10] This paper was based on a working draft from the CIA.[11]

In response to the March 4 directive of the NSC, the State Department issued an Intelligence Estimate, "Implications of Stalin's Collapse," on the same date. It stated the obvious conclusions that the "attack appears fatal," that it came as a surprise, that a new head of the Council of Ministers was needed, and that while the succession was unclear, there "will not be a struggle for the succession." It listed Georgi Malenkov as a "likely candidate" for leadership. It did not predict any "early changes in Soviet domestic or foreign policy."[12] On March 5 President Eisenhower issued a very brief message of condolence on the announcement of Stalin's death.[13]

Charles E. "Chip" Bohlen recently had been appointed as the new ambassador to the Soviet Union but was still in Washington, DC. Therefore, Chargé Jacob Beam was the senior member of the Embassy staff and sent communiqués on the situation in Moscow. Beam sent a communiqué with the announcement that the news of Stalin's illness had been suppressed for "at least two full days" and that there was "great confusion" among the ruling elite. He speculated that Stalin was soon to die and also speculated as to why there had been a delay in announcing his condition which was "actually unexpected and quite possibly unprepared

[9] U.S. Department of State, Psychological Strategy Board, *Program of Psychological Preparation for Stalin's Passing from Power*, in *FRUS,* 1059-1060.

[10] Francis B. Stevens, "Memorandum by Francis B. Stevens of the Office of Eastern European Affairs to the Deputy Director of the Psychological Strategy Board (Morgan)," in *FRUS*, 1071-1073.

[11] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, "Working Draft," The Agency, January 19, 1953.

[12] U.S. Department of State, Office of Intelligence Research, "Implications of Stalin's Collapse," in *FRUS*, 1086-1090.

[13] Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Message of Official Condolence," *Department of State Bulletin* 28, no. 716 (March 16, 1953), 400.

for." He further stated that in the announcement no one was singled out as his successor and that public reaction in Moscow was subdued. He concluded with a supposition that if Stalin's death had been "approaching for some time" and that "its development has affected Stalin's already abnormally suspicious mind," which could have been the cause of the "alleged doctors plot against the lives of the top Soviet leaders."[14]

On March 6 Beam reported on the subdued reactions of the public which he characterized as a "surprising lack of response." He also reported on the membership of the committee to organize the funeral.[15] On March 8 Beam wrote on "preliminary impressions on the consequences of Stalin's death and [the] character [of the] new government." He cited that a "natural and best balance" had been created in "assigning government and party leadership to Malenkov, security to Beria, foreign policy to Molotov and army affairs to Bulganin." He concluded that "Stalin's death strikes a blow to Soviet international Communist leadership" and wondered whether Chinese leader Mao Tse Tung would be "less tractable" while he was still depending on Soviet for support for the Korean War.[16] Beam's communiqué on the funeral included his impressions that it was a cut-and-dried proceeding and that prominence was given to representatives from China. He commented on the eulogies given by Malenkov, Lavrenti Beria and Molotov. In a footnote Beam believed Molotov was the only person to express genuine grief, stating that: "From his voice [it] was obvious, he was shaken, and [the] bulk [of] his speech was devoted to Stalin and his accomplishments."[17]

Back in Washington, the memoranda kept coming. Newly appointed Ambassador Bohlen sent a cautiously worded memorandum on March 7. He had been a chargé in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in the 1930s. He had witnessed the Great Terror and had attended the third Moscow show trial in 1938. Bohlen discussed the likely transfer of power and the opportunity to "stir up some development in China and the satellite states." He also stated the need to avoid a "direct frontal political or psychological assault on the Soviet structure of leadership" as he felt that it would have the effect of "consolidating their position and postponing the possibility of dissension in the top leadership."[18]

Bohlen then sent a sobering memorandum on March 10, "Policy Implications of Stalin's Death." He discussed the "Soviet system of control" which was tied to the "propaganda that created Stalin's mystique." He asserted that nationalism was a counterbalance to the "reality of naked Soviet imperialism in Eastern European countries," and he encouraged U.S. support of such nationalism. Regarding

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[14] Jacob Beam, "The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Beam) to the Department of State," in *FRUS*, 1083-1085.

[15] _____, "The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Beam) to the Department of State," in *FRUS*, 1099.

[16] Jacob Beam, "The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Beam) to the Department of State," in *FRUS*, 1103-1104.

[17] _____, "The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Beam) to the Department of State," in *FRUS*, 1105-1106.

[18] Charles E. Bohlen, "Memorandum by the Counselor of the Department of State (Bohlen)," in FRUS, 1100-1102.

China, Bohlen wrote that exploitation of any rift between China and the Soviets was complicated by U.S. support of Nationalist China (Taiwan). He itemized the following on Soviet policy: 1) "We have no indications that the situation is not well in the hands of the new rulers;" 2) The Russian people "are playing no part in the transfer of power," 3) The new leaders will "close ranks and present a united front;" and 4) The new regime will not be aggressive in terms of expansion but will "take great risks to avoid the physical loss of any territories or area." Bohlen concluded with these three cautionary "policy guidelines:"1) "Stand resolutely and firmly on all present positions in order to not show any weakness;" 2) "There would appear to be little advantage in stepping up cold war pressures;" and 3) "The State Department is examining urgently the possibility of some initiative … which might confront the new leadership."[19] During this time, the Korean War raged on. Paul H. Nitze, the director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff and a Cold Warrior, sent a memorandum on March 10, entitled "Exploitation of Stalin's Death." He concentrated on the implications of Stalin's death on ending the Korean War. He outlined steps to do so.[20]

At the same time, Walter Bedell Smith, a former Army general, sent a memorandum to the Acting Director of the Psychological Strategy Board. Drafted by Robert W. Tufts of the Policy Planning Staff, this memorandum was in reaction to the "Plan for Psychological Exploitation of Stalin's Death." This paper advocated a cautious approach to avoid an "aggressive heightening of cold war pressures" as had been stated in other memoranda. He advocated consultations with the United Kingdom and France. He opposed holding a special meeting of the foreign ministers of the U.K., France, and the Soviet Union. It concluded that a "sharp heightening of cold war pressures at this time would not be advantageous."[21]

In order to maintain a united front on the international scene, the State Department reached out to "certain diplomatic posts," stating that Kremlin leaders would be in a state of confusion and anxiety and that it "seems unlikely that [the] regime has been able to evolve [a] clear-cut succession plan." This document urged restraint and outlined a "list of themes" to be developed for the following areas: The Soviet orbit and China, European satellites and China and the free world. The outlined steps included planting doubts about the new Soviet leadership and about an uncertain future.[22] The following day another circular telegram was issued that outlined the following themes to be used in "all US information output" to "sow doubt about the new leadership." These themes were to question Malenkov's

[19] _____, "Policy Implications of Stalin's Death," in *FRUS*, 1108-1111.

[20] Paul H. Nitze, "Memorandum by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Nitze) to the Secretary of State," in *FRUS*, 1107-1108.

[21] Walter Bedell Smith, "Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Smith) to the Acting Director of the Psychological Strategy Board (Morgan)," in *FRUS*, 1111-1113.

[22] Lewis Revey, James Pratt and Couleter D. Huyler, "The Secretary of State to Certain Diplomatic Posts," in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, National Security Affairs*, 2, pt. 2 (Washington, DC: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1984), 1681-1684.

competence and the "possibility that there may be "another struggle for power."[23]

On March 10 Administrative Assistant to the President Emmet J. Hughes sent a memorandum in preparation a meeting of the NSC. It summarized the "division of opinion" within the State Department over holding a meeting with foreign ministers and illustrated contrasting theories of courses of action. The differences were summarized as one opinion "to exploit the deep and inherent weaknesses of the Soviet System, we cannot afford to fail to act affirmatively and quickly." The contradictory view was that "we can well afford to give the internal stresses of the Soviet system time to become acute … nothing is better calculated to increase Soviet nervous strain that studied American silence."[24]

U.K. Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Eisenhower corresponded on the possibility of such a meeting with both expressing doubts about including the Soviets. Eisenhower suggested that "your government and ourselves, and probably the French, should agree upon some general purpose and program."[25]

On March 12, the CIA issued a joint Special Estimate, authored by various departments within the Defense Department, entitled *Probable Consequences of the Death of Stalin and of the Elevation of Malenkov to Leadership in the USSR*. It started with a section on "the initial transfer of authority," noting that Malenkov's rise to power had gone with "remarkable rapidity and precision." However, the authors noted that a struggle for power could later take place within the Party and within the upper bureaucracy. In a section on the "probable consequences of [the] death of Stalin," the authors asserted that the "economic and military bases of Soviet power" were not immediately affected but wondered if the new leaders would be able to maintain these bases as effectively as Stalin had. The authors concluded that the "USSR is politically more vulnerable today." In a section on the effects of Stalin's death upon Soviet policies, the authors stated that the new regime would continue Stalin's policies ("unremitting hostility to the West") and portrayed Stalin as an "autocrat … ruthless and determined to spread Soviet power." Regarding the Soviet people, the authors asserted that Stalin's death will be a "psychological shock" but would have no effect on the new regime. The report included brief discussions on the effect of Stalin's death on Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, on international communism and on relations with Yugoslavia and China. The authors concluded that, unless there was a power struggle in the Kremlin, there would still be cohesion in the "Communist movement outside the Bloc" and that control of Eastern Europe would continue with the exception of Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia. The Soviets' relations with China would be affected by the increased prestige of Chairman Mao, and the Kremlin would deal cautiously with him. In the concluding section, the report stated that western

[23] Edward P. Montgomery and Couleter D. Huyler, "The Secretary of State to Certain Diplomatic Posts," in *U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, National Security Affairs*, 2, pt. 2 (Washington, DC: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1984), 1684-1685.

[24] Emmet J. Hughes, "Memorandum by the Administrative Assistant to the President (Hughes) to the President," in *FRUS,* 1113-1115.

[25] See Winston Churchill, "Prime Minister Churchill to President Eisenhower," in *FRUS*, 1115-1116 and Dwight D. Eisenhower, "President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Churchill," in *FRUS*, 1116-1117.

European countries would "conduct the East-West struggle with greater hesitancy and caution," hoping for a "temporary relaxation of tensions."[26]

On March 11, the NSC met with the review of the CIA's Special Estimate a major topic. The CIA director was Allen W. Dulles, the brother of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Allen Dulles had been a career diplomat, State Department official, lawyer and OSS officer. He led off the discussion by wondering whether Malenkov would have a "personal dictatorship" or "some sort of committee control." He believed that the Kremlin would still control the satellite countries and would have to deal the Chairman Mao "with the utmost care and tact." President Eisenhower made the statement that, contrary to the thinking that Stalin maintained a one-man rule, he believed that the "Government of the Soviet Union has always been "something of a committee government" and that Stalin "would have sought more peaceful and normal relations with the rest of the world" on his own. Eisenhower further stated that the Cold War meant that "Stalin had had to come to terms with other members of the Kremlin ruling circle."[27]

The efforts to exploit Stalin's death continued through March during the finalization of the *Plan for Psychological Exploitation of Stalin's Death*. In a memorandum on March 18, the State Department recognized the "need for coordinated political, military and economic action in taking advantage of the situation that now exists."[28] The *Plan* was finally approved by the Psychological Strategy Board on March 19.

On March 20, Chargé Beam sent a report on Soviet media coverage of the new leaders, including efforts to build up Malenkov, the "necessity of rallying around [the] Central Committee of the Party" and a lessening of the Soviets' "hate America campaign."[29] In a brief memorandum to Paul H. Nitze from Carlton Savage of the Policy Planning Saff, Savage cited some agreement with the Soviets on the Korean War, a Soviet proposal for a conference for a peace treaty and the reunification of Germany, as well as other conciliatory gestures.[30]

The CIA issued a spate of memoranda and reports on the death of Stalin. It should be noted that that at that time, the CIA was a relatively new government agency. Its origins were in the World War II Office of Strategic Services (OSS), led by General William "Wild Bill" Donovan. When the war ended, the OSS was abolished, and the Central Intelligence Group under Rear Admiral Sidney Souers took its place. In 1947 the National Security Act created the CIA and was reinforced by the Central Intelligence Act of 1949.

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[26] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Probable Consequences of the Death of Stalin and the Elevation of Malenkov to Leadership in the USSR*, in *FRUS*, 1125-1129.

[27] S. Everett Gleason, "Memorandum of Discussion at the 136th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, March 11, 1953 (Washington)," in *FRUS*, 1117-1125.

[28] See James Cowles Hart Bonbright, "Memorandum by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Bonbright) to the Under Secretary of State (Smith)," in *FRUS*, 1133-1134

[29] Jacob Beam, "The Chargé in the Soviet Union, (Beam) to the Department of State," in *FRUS,* 1137.

[30] Carlton Savage, "Memorandum by Carolton Savage of the Policy Planning Staff to the Director of the Staff (Nitze)," in *FRUS*, 1138.

In addition to the previously cited Special Estimate, on March 18 it issued *Comments on 'Plan for Psychological Exploitation of Stalin's Death*. This paper was a critique of the original *Plan.* The authors asserted that the "basic objectives and strategic concept of the Communist ideology has [*sic*] not been altered" and that the free world was still in danger. The document suggested changes to be made to the *Plan*, considering the Agency's pessimistic assessment of the new Soviet leadership. The Agency assumed that the new leadership would try to "throw off balance western efforts to interfere with or impede the consolidation of the regime's power" and would test the West to prevent the "formation of a united western effort against the new Soviet leadership." This document also acknowledged the "absence of definite information" on internal conditions in the Soviet Union. The authors gave two opposing hypotheses on the opportunities posed by Stalin's death. The first had an optimistic take on the "ideological and mystical vacuum" that could lead to greater freedom in the Soviet bloc and a weakened central government. The pessimistic view was that the "new Soviet machinery" would grind on.[31]

On April 6 the CIA issued *Malenkov and Stalin's Death* which analyzed Stalin's actions at the Nineteenth Party Congress in 1952 during which he dissolved the Politburo, introduced a larger Presidium and spoke of a cautious approach to the West. The author noted that, as soon as he took power, Malenkov reversed these actions. As with other government documents, it was full of cautious guessing and speculation. The author urged that U.S. propaganda portray Malenkov and Beria as "murderers" and as politicians who are "staking the lives and interests of their peoples on the card of war." This document also broached the theory that Malenkov and Beria had ordered doctors to hasten Stalin's death.[32]

CIA memoranda continued to flow from March, 1953 through May, culminating in July's publication of *The Death of Stalin*.[33] The authors discussed his death as being unexpected, the mystery surrounding his death, his funeral, the "abortive Malenkov Build-Up," the reorganization of the Soviet government and the Communist Party and possible successors, briefly noting Nikita Khrushchev's increasing prominence. This report was based on the mining of official Soviet pronouncements, the realignment of various commissariats and the reassignment of different departments within the MVD (the secret police), especially the forced labor camps. The report ended with this assessment of Stalin's legacy: "It is the author's contention that Stalin was unable to contemplate anyone succeeding him. … The evil genius of Stalin … was moving against all his enemies … and perhaps he had planned to use Malenkov for this purpose and then discard him."[34]

The Voice of America (VOA) was the government's international broadcasting arm and was then under the State Department's International

[31] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Comments on the "Plan for Psychological Exploitation of Stalin's Death* (Washington, DC: The Agency, 1953).

[32] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Malenkov and Stalin's Death* (Washington, DC: The Agency, 1953).

[33] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Current Intelligence, *The Death of Stalin* (Washington, DC: The Agency, 1953).

[34] *Ibid.*, 21-22.

Information Administration. The VOA took a beating during the McCarthy era when it was accused of employing "subversives."[35] On March 6 the VOA issued a cautious statement that asserted that Stalin's death "should not result in a slacking of vigilance in the fight against communism." It also stated that his likely successors, Molotov, Malenkov and Beria, were "well-reared in the Stalin tradition of extermination and suppression."[36]

On April 23, 1953, the Subcommittee on Europe of the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs, held a briefing on the impact of Stalin's death on Soviet foreign and domestic policies. Mose Harvey of the State Department's Intelligence Division was the only witness. He began with some background on the agencies involved in analyzing the Soviets. He then tried to address to question of whether the Soviet Union was different after Stalin's death in regard to the transfer of power and any changes in Soviet policies. His statements were full of cautiousness and hedging as he plowed through what they knew and what they reported as speculation. He summarized the following changes: 1) A complete reorganization of the top leadership; 2) The publicizing of these changes; 3) An extensive amnesty; 4) The reversal of the Doctors' Plot; 5) The reorganization of local governments and Communist parties; 6) Reorganization of the police; 7) Any changes in Soviet conduct toward the outside world; and 8) New positions on prisoners of war in Korea. Harvey discussed Malenkov's position, the likelihood of his remaining in power. and stated that the Soviet system had not changed. In terms of foreign policy. Harvey reported that there were no changes in the Soviet line toward Indochina, Germany and Japan and that anti-American editorials continued to appear in the Soviet press. He closed his testimony with these conclusions: 1) There was no real power struggle for leadership; 2) There had been no break from Stalinism; and 3) No break in Soviet foreign policy. An extensive question and answer session followed.[37]

In concluding this section on official U.S. government reactions, it is worth noting that efforts to decide how to handle Stalin's death had been ongoing for several years and went into high gear to develop strategies to take advantage of his demise. This state of affairs was noted by President Eisenhower's admission at the March 11 NSC meeting: "The President told the Cabinet that *no specific plan for Government action or policy had been developed in advance,* despite continuous talk since 1946 about the possibility of Stalin's death."[38] [Italics added.]

Stalin's death was headline news around the world and led to extensive reviews of his life, career and speculation about his successors and their policies going forward. The *New York Times* predicted that Stalin's death would lead to a crisis in terms of finding successors in such a totalitarian state.[39] On March 6,

[35] U.S. Voice of America, Public Relations, "VOA Through the Years," accessed February 7, 2026, http://www.insidevoa.com/a/3794274.html.

[36] Voice of America, "VOA Says Stalin's Death Brings no Relief from Communism," *UPI's 20th Century Top Stories* (March 6, 1953). ProQuest Central.

[37] U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. *Selected Executive Sessions of the Committee, 1951-1956*, 14 (Washington, DC: Govt. Print. Off., 1980), 459-490.

[38] U.S. Department of State, "Editorial Note," in *FRUS,* 1098.

[39] "Crisis in Moscow," *New York Times* (March 5, 1953), 26.

1953, the *New York Times* published articles on Stalin's death, career, possible successors and foreign policy.[40] These articles had an overtone of his massive influence and on the fact that his likely successors were in place because they had shown absolute loyalty to him.

The U.S. government's lack of a definitive plan for any new policies following Stalin's death was revealed in a *New York Times* article that highlighted the lack of preparedness of the U.S. government. The article also reported on the need for a plan of psychological warfare strategy in order to "capitalize on any confusion or struggle for power that may develop in Moscow."[41] Its article on Stalin's funeral had a skeptical tone about public acceptance of the new leadership and analyzed the funeral orations by Malenkov and Beria, speculated on the possible rivalry between Malenkov and Beria, and reminded the readers that Beria was Georgian and that Stalin "the first Georgian … killed of four of the five other Communist leaders with whom he carried Lenin's coffin … twenty-five years ago."[42]

New York Times Moscow correspondent Harry Schwartz wrote a profile of Malenkov as the "epitome of the successful man in modern bureaucratic totalitarianism" who mirrored Stalin's "ruthlessness, industry, shrewdness, the ability to intrigue."[43] Schwartz also reported on the new hierarchy of leaders. As was the habit of Kremlin watchers, his observations were based on official announcements and photographs. He reported on their places in the official listing of members of the Communist Party's Presidium with Beria now as number two and Molotov seemingly demoted to number seven.[44]

The leading news magazines of the day devoted much space to Stalin's death. During this time the news weekly *Time* was published by Henry Luce whose anticommunist sentiments were well known and were reflected in its coverage of the Soviet Union. In a lengthy article *Time* portrayed Stalin as a ruthless killer as he rose to power and eliminated his enemies. This lead article termed him to be an "administrative genius" who built up the "Great Stalin myth" and that he was pragmatic enough to change during World War II in order to appeal to Russian patriotism. The article concluded with the portrayal of Stalin as a "man of ceaseless evil and immense success" who had created the "largest empire ever put together by any one man."[45]A sidebar article portrayed Malenkov in a bad light—"devious, inscrutable and cruel," "pale and pasty" who bested his rival Yuri Zhdanov to become a "comrade of Stalin."[46]A follow-up *Time* article was a

[40] See "Stalin Dies after 2-Year Rule," *New York Times* (March 6, 1953), 1, 8, "Stalin Rose from Czarist Oppression to Transform Russia into Mighty Socialist State," *New York Times* (March 6, 1953), 9, "Soviet Leaders," *New York Times* (March 6, 1953), 10 and "Kremlin's Foreign Policies Gave Soviet Union Great Rewards but Cost Has Been Heavy," *New York Times* (March 6, 1953), 11.

[41] Anthony Leviero, "'Cold War' Set-Up in U.S. Unprepared," *New York Times* (March 6, 1953), p. 13.

[42] "In Moscow's Red Square," *New York Times,* March 10, 1953, 28.

[43] Harry Schwartz, "Russia's New Boss Is Schooled in Dictatorship," *New York Times* (March 8, 1953), 3.

[44] _____, "Beria Is No. 2 Man in New Soviet List," *New York Times* (March 9, 1953), 5.

[45] "Death in the Kremlin: Killer of the Masses," *Time* 61, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 29-31.

[46] "The Man That Stalin Built," *Time* 61, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 31.

photo array of the new leaders and was followed by an article on "Stalin's Heirs."[47] A lengthy article on "The New Command" highlighted the smooth transition of power, recounted Stalin's career (a "killer of the masses" and the "most vindictive man on earth") and included a sidebar with brief biographies of Beria, Molotov, Nikolai Bulganin and Lazar Kaganovich and brief quotes from foreign leaders on Stalin's passing.[48] In a follow-up article on March 23, *Time* included photographs from Stalin's funeral and discussed Malenkov's first days in power. The reporter portrayed Eastern European leaders as a weak lot, quoted the reactions of Western European communist parties and reported on the Kremlin's "pampering" of Mao Tse Tung, portraying him as now the world's most preeminent communist leader.[49]

Newsweek also had several articles in its March 16 issue on Stalin's illness, death, the rise of Malenkov and implications for Soviet and U.S. foreign policy. The lead article related the chain of events leading up to the funeral. It listed the passing of power to several leaders.[50] A sidebar was a dour portrait of "Malenkov—Fat, 51, a Nonstop Haranguer." It chronicled his rise to power, calling him a "hard worker" and a prodigious orator."[51] A review of Stalin's life was included.[52] *Newsweek* published an opinion piece by W. Averill Harriman, a wartime ambassador to the Soviet Union. He wrote that he was sure that Molotov would not be the next Soviet leader, opined that the Soviet Union was going through a "period of heightened crisis" and that the U.S. should help "increase the strength of the whole free world."[53]

Another article chronicled the U.S. government's uncertainty as to how to react to Stalin's death and how to exploit it to Western advantage during the Cold War. It reported that "U.S. intelligence agencies were almost completely ignorant of the political situation inside the Soviet empire." The article described a meeting with President Eisenhower on sending a message of condolence that expressed regrets on his passing but pointedly separated Soviet citizens from the Soviet government. The reporter called the president's message "cold." The article ended with the future meetings to plan a course of action and Eisenhower's vague statements at a press conference that reflected the government's cautious attitude.[54] [This article echoed a *New York Times* article, previously cited.] Another article concerned the Voice of America's broadcasts about Stalin's death. As previously mentioned, during this time Senator Joseph McCarthy was holding his subcommittee hearings on communists in government and raked the VOA over the coals. The article discussed the VOA's broadcasts to Iron Curtain countries as it tried to find its way in exploiting Stalin's death.[55]

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[47] See "The News in Pictures," *Time* 61, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 32 and "Stalin's Heirs: The New Lineup," *Time* 61, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 33-34.

[48] "The New Command," *Time* 61, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 34+.

[49] "Watch on the Wall," *Time* 61, no. 12 (March 23, 1953), 27-32.

[50] "World Watching for First Move by New Red Chiefs," *Newsweek* 41, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 21-22.

[51] "Malenkov—Fat, 51, a Nonstop Haranguer," *Newsweek* 41, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 22.

[52] "The Myth of Stalin … A Communist Legend," *Newsweek* 41, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 24-25.

[53] W. Averill Harriman, "After Stalin, What?" *Newsweek* 41, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 28, 31.

[54] "Cold War, Ike, and Malenkov: Watch and Wait," *Newsweek* 41, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 34, 36.

[55] "Solo Voice!" *Newsweek* 41, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 38.

Newsweek columnists also speculated on Stalin's death. Ernest K. Lindley echoed the themes of uncertainty and caution. He recommended trying to "stimulate distrust between Moscow and its satellites" and putting pressure on China. He concluded that "American policy must be backed by great strength."[56] Economist Henry Hazlitt criticized past U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union, stated that the U.S. needed to know how to combat communist ideology and to know how to use this opportunity to "restore hope and peace in the world."[57] Veteran political commentator Raymond Moley put Stalin's death within the context of history, calling the Soviet Union a "malignant contraption" that now had the problem of the "maintenance of an overextended and precarious geographical and political monstrosity."[58] *Newsweek*'s March 23 issue documented the State Department's split between the advocates of the "wait-and-see" attitude and advocates for quickly using Stalin's death for a propaganda advantage. It also briefly discussed the Voice of America's plan to plant doubt in the satellite nations.[59]

Independent journalist I. F. Stone took a derisive attitude toward the U.S. government's timid approach to Stalin's death and wrote a pro-Stalin article. Stone called him "one of the giant figures of our time" and the "leader of something new in history, a party: a party in a new sense, like nothing the world has known since the Society of Jesus, a party ruling a one-party state." Stone concluded by urging that Washington and Moscow collaborate.[60] Samuel L. Sharp wrote in the liberal weekly *New Republic* that Stalin was a completely political creature, "always given to doubt and suspicion" and practiced "determined political manipulation."[61]

The pictorial weekly *Life* magazine also was owned by Henry Luce. It published a series of articles by Soviet defector Alexander Orlov in which he took a critical look at the personalities of the Soviet leadership and various Kremlin intrigues. In the last article in the series, Orlov wrote that he was not impressed by Malenkov ("a mere Party functionary … without a revolutionary past … and lacking the qualities … in a leader of a state"). Orlov believed that that Malenkov "had much to fear" and that an "inevitable purge will come."[62]

Isaac Deutscher, one of Stalin's best-known biographers at the time, authored an article in *The Reporter* on the succession of Malenkov to power and on Stalin's extension of communism into Eastern Europe. Deutscher surmised that there must be anxiety among "leading Stalinists" as to "whether the cult is not going to have its final revenge on them."[63] In the same issue Max Ascoli wrote a lengthy, thoughtful editorial, "Can We 'Coexist' with Malenkov." It had a "time will tell"

[56] Ernest K. Lindley, "The Effects of Stalin's Passing," *Newsweek* 41, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 45.

[57] Harry Hazlitt, Business Tides, *Newsweek* 41, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 89.

[58] Raymond Moley, Perspective, *Newsweek* 41, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 108.

[59] "Wait out or Pressure Reds," *Newsweek* 41, no. 12 (March 23, 1953), 23-24.

[60] I. F. Stone, "Washington after Stalin," *I. F. Stone's Weekly* 1, no. 9 (March 16, 1953), 1.

[61] Samuel L. Sharp, "Stalin's Place in History," *New Republic* 128, no. 11 (March 16, 1953), 8-10.

[62] Alexander Orlov, "The Ghastly Secrets of Stalin's Power," *Life* 34, no. 14 (April 6, 1953), 110-123.

[63] Isaac Deutscher, "The Legacies and Heirs of J. V. Stalin," *The Reporter* 8, no. 8 (April 14, 1953), 10-16.

attitude toward the new Soviet leadership and portrayed the "game of coexistence" as a struggle between communism and "democratic capitalism." In his opinion, coexistence meant strengthening the "unity of the non-Communist world."[64]

Bertram D. Wolfe was a founder of the Communist Party USA and remained a lifelong Communist. He had met Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin during a trip to the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Wolfe broke with Stalin and remained an anti-Stalinist. He published a long article in *Foreign Affairs* on the problems of Stalin's successors in which he condemned the Soviet system, including the "blood purges" and the Doctors' Plot. He concluded that the world was now a safer place while this "total dictatorship" went through "convulsive struggles" to reach success." He portrayed Stalin as "jealous, resentful, envious, capricious and suspicious."[65]

American radicals reacted to the death of Joseph Stalin based on their strong, ideological difference and expressed opposing views on Stalin's legacy. The leadership of the Communist Party USA was slavishly devoted to the Stalinist party line. Far fewer, the Trotskyists were devoted to Leon Trotsky's theories of world revolution and anti-bureaucracy sentiments. Both American Communists and Trotskyists had suffered during the 1940s with the passage of the Smith Act which outlawed advocating the overthrow of the U.S. government. Some of their leaders had been imprisoned, and membership had declined.

Nevertheless, the Communist Party USA was still active, and its National Committee issued a statement on Stalin's illness, stating that it felt the "deepest grief on the heavy sickness that has befallen Comrade Stalin," and that the world needed his "splendid leadership." The official Party newspaper *Daily Worker* published an editorial which claimed that collective leadership "would carry forward the great tasks of socialist construction and the maintenance of peace among nations."[66] The National Committee of the Communist Party USA issued another statement, "On the Loss of Stalin," which eulogized him as a "beloved and revered teacher, leader and guide to millions of working people around the globe." They vowed to realize his aims and predicted that "Stalin will live forever in the new world arising in the radiant tomorrow of a Socialist life for all."[66]

Political Affairs, the Party's journal of Marxist philosophy, devoted its April, 1953, issue to eulogies from prominent U.S. Party leaders, including William K. Foster and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Foster was a founding member of the American party and praised Stalin's "heroic revolutionary struggle and achievements," writing that his death caused grief to "countless millions of the world's toilers." Foster predicted that Malenkov's leadership would lead to a "rapid march forward into the Communism" that the "war-mad powers of capitalism cannot halt."[67] In florid prose, Flynn called Stalin "the best loved man on earth," praised his career, and wrote that his "deeds would live forever" in the bright future of the Soviet

[64] Max Ascoli, Editorial, *The Reporter* 8, no. 8 (April 14, 1953), 8-9.

[65] Bertram D. Wolfe, "The Struggle for Soviet Succession," *Foreign Affairs* 31, no. 4 (July, 1953), 548-565.

[66] "Communists of U.S. Voice Their Grief," *New York Times* (March 5, 1953), 11.

[67] Communist Party of the USA, National Committee, "On the Loss of Stalin," *Political Affairs* 32, no. 4 (April, 1953), 4-5.

Union.[68]

The monthly *New World Review* (formerly *Soviet Russia Today*) published a eulogy by its editor Jessica Smith who cited the National Committee's statement, previously mentioned, and called Stalin's illness and death a "tragedy for all democratic humanity," and she sent a message of "deepest grief."[69]

The Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) wasted no time in vilifying Stalin, its ideological enemy who had exiled Leon Trotsky and had ordered his assassination in 1940. *The Militant*, the Trotskyist weekly newspaper, published a spate of anti-Stalin articles in its March 9 and March 16, 1953 issues. Following Leon Trotsky's anti-bureaucracy philosophy, these articles pictured Stalin as a creature of the bureaucracy and often cited Trotsky's past criticisms of Stalin. The March 9 issue included a lead article by Joseph Hansen which called Stalin the "Kremlin's high executioner." Hansen also criticized U.S. reactions to Stalin's death and urged "Imperialist powers" to keep their hands off the Soviet Union so that the Soviet people could "raze his police regime to the ground."[70] In the same issue Art Preis called Stalin a "betrayer of revolution, accused his regime of "naked brutality" and called Stalin the "Bonaparte of the rising bureaucracy." He stated that Stalin "left a Soviet Union exuding the stench of the secret police and concentration camps."[71]

The March 16 issue of *The Militant* included another lead article by Joseph Hansen in which he alleged that the new rulers were trying to play to the Soviets' "entrenched bureaucratic caste," the "workers and peasants" and the "Imperialist foe headed by Wall Street." Hansen again criticized Western reactions to Stalin's death.[72] In a speech delivered in New York City, leading Trotskyist George Clarke claimed that Stalin must go down in history as a "usurper, a hangman, hated and despised," and he proclaimed the "coming vindication of Trotskyism as the "science of working-class victory."[73]

Writing under the pseudonym Albert Gates, Albert Glotzer wrote a lengthy article in the Trotskyist *New International,* in which he claimed that Stalin had wiped out "every trace of the old party." Glotzer also catalogued Stalin's historic mistakes and personal failings, including his "personal cruelty, his sadism and his envy." He termed him to be the "hangman of the Russian Revolution" who created a "new industrial slave society under a totalitarian police regime."[74] [Glotzer had been the stenographer during the Dewey Commission hearings with Trotsky in 1937.] In October 1953, the National Committee of the SWP issued

[68] Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "He Loved the People," *Political Affairs*, 32, no. 4 (April, 1953), 43-47.

[69] Jessica Smith, "Stalin and His Heritage," *New World Review* 21, no. 3 (March, 1953), 3-10.

[70] Joseph Hanson, "Stalin's Heirs Continue Dictatorial Kremlin Rule," *The Militant*, March 9, 1953, 1, 3.

[71] "Art Preis, "Stalin—Betrayer of the Revolution," *The Militant* March 9, 1953, 3.

[72] Joseph Hansen, "Malenkov Pledged to Follow in Dictator Stalin's Footsteps," *The Militant*, March 16, 1953, 1.

[73] George Clarke, "Stalin's Role—Stalinism's Future," *Fourth International* Vol. 14, No. 1 (January-February, 1953), 5-13.

[74] Albert Gates, pseud., "Stalin's Place in History: Assessing the Social Role of the Great Assassin," *New International* 13, no. 3 (May-June, 1953), 144-167.

a long memorandum on the "Rise and Decline of Stalinism." It includes many criticisms of the bureaucracy, the belief in the world revolution and predicted that Stalinism "has irretrievably entered upon its period of decline" and that the "post-Stalin regime is no longer able to rule." In a section on the events since Stalin's death, the SWP stated: "Stalin's death unquestionably released a flood of hope among the people that with the death of the dictator they would get a new deal."[75]

The aftermath of Stalin's death brought about a rapid series of events, including the abrupt end of the Doctors' Plot. In 1952 Stalin accused nine doctors of poisoning prominent Soviet leaders, including Politburo member Andrei Zhdanov, in 1948. By the time of Stalin's death 15 doctors had been arrested, imprisoned, and awaited trial. The surviving doctors were freed. Stalin's fellow Georgian Lavrenti Beria, head of the MVD and part of the ruling triumvirate, was purged. Arrested in the summer, he was tried, convicted, and executed with six of his associates in December, 1953. Malenkov himself was removed from leadership in 1955 and removed from the Presidium in 1957.

In conclusion, the authors consider that it is obvious that the United States had no definitive plan for capitalizing on Stalin's death, due to the lack of inside knowledge and the division between the "act now" and "wait and see" advocates. They knew Stalin's vengeful and distrustful personality but not what the new regime would do. In spite of the "confidential," "secret" and even "top secret" designations given to meetings and memoranda to formulate policy, these divisions and the lack of a clear grasp of the internal workings of the new leadership were reported by the press, so the public knew as well.

Ambassador Bohlen's insights may be emblematic of U.S. thinking at the time of Stalin's death. Newly arrived as ambassador and writing from Moscow in July, 1953, Bohlen stated the following premises: "The Soviet Union remains a totalitarian police dictatorship, reinforced by a highly integrated ideology and consequently basically continues to regard all countries and organizations which it does not control as basically hostile and no change in this respect can be anticipated as long as the basic structure of Soviet society remains unaltered."[76]

After his time in public service, Bohlen wrote a thoughtful autobiography, *Witness to History*, which included his conclusions about the enigma that was Joseph Stalin. He portrayed Stalin as the "vengeful Georgian" who surrounded himself with "lackeys" and who "did not need thinkers, he needed executioners." Bohlen wrote: "Judged by his actions, I believe he ranks high on the list of the world's monsters. … Stalin gave me the impression of a man to whom pity and other human sentiments were completely alien."[77]

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[75] Socialist Workers Party, National Committee, Memorandum of the Socialist Workers Party National Committee on the Rise and Decline of Stalinism, October 5, 1953. Accessed March 11, 2026, Marxists Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org.

[76] Charles E. Bohlen, "The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Bohlen) to the Department of State," in *FRUS,* p. 1193.

[77] _____, *Witness to History, 1929-1969* (New York: Norton, 1973), 338.

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