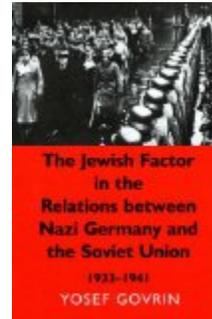


Yosef Govrin. *The Jewish Factor in the Relations Between Nazi Germany and The Soviet Union, 1933-1941*. London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2009. xiii + 143 pp. Illustrations. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85303-768-2.

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## Stalin, Hitler, Jews, and Geopolitics

Yosef Govrin joined the Israeli Foreign Ministry in 1953, and although he served in various posts including Australia and Latin America, his experiences in Moscow and Eastern Europe are most closely connected to his scholarly career. Coinciding with Leonid Brezhnev's ascent to power, Govrin became First Secretary in Moscow (1964-67). For nine years (1976-85) he directed Israel's Ministry on Eastern Europe and then became ambassador to Romania from 1985 until the collapse of the Ceausescu regime in 1989.

Govrin's diplomatic career continued into the 1990s with additional ambassadorships until his retirement in 1996. Since then he has been a research fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the institution from which he earned his BA, MA, and PhD degrees. His scholarly career has produced several books related to his area of expertise: *Israeli-Soviet Relations 1953-1967: From Confrontation to Disruption* (1998); *In the Shadow of Destruction: Recollections of Transnistria* (2007); and *Israeli-Romanian Relations at the End of the Ceausescu Era: As Observed by Israel's Ambassador to Romania 1985-1989* (2002).

*The Jewish Factor in the Relations between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union 1933-1941* is a 2009 English translation of the book published in Hebrew in 1986. Fortunately Govrin utilizes material in the version under review not available when he first published this work; the English edition has benefited from the publication of doc-

uments from the late 1980s and the 1990s that emerged from *glasnost* and from Soviet archives. Nevertheless, Govrin makes it clear that he stands by his original work: "The additional material and revised remarks that have been included in the present addition do not fundamentally alter the final conclusions drawn in the Hebrew edition of this book" (p. xii).

In the preface, Govrin explains how the book is organized: "Based on German and Soviet sources, the first section of this book examines the Jewish factor in Nazi ideology and foreign policy towards the Soviet Union, and its significance in the political and military events that made Hitler decide in favour of a Non-Aggression Pact with the Soviet Union, and twenty-two months later, to violate it. The second section goes on to examine the place held by the Jewish factor in Soviet political consciousness, according to which the Nazi leaders of Germany formed their own judgment of its significance for the Soviet leadership and internal Soviet policy" (p. xii).

Govrin sets out to explore how actions and policies aimed at or involving Europe's Jewish population formed relations between the Nazi and Soviet regimes. The first chapter on the ideological principles that drove German foreign policy does not surprise the reader—the chapter uses *Mein Kampf* (1925) to indicate that German foreign policy would be based a set of assumptions that included: the preservation of the purity of the Aryan race through the destruction of the Jewish people, the unification of

all Germans, and the conquest of *Lebensraum*. In addition, Govrin quotes Hitler in 1937 to reiterate this concept: “The Jewish question is therefore at the same time one of the most significant problems of German foreign policy” (p. 5).

Govrin follows this discussion with a short chapter that repeats familiar Nazi diatribes against Jews as the cause of all world problems. Here the author points out that Jews were blamed for democracy and capitalism on one hand as well as Marxism and communism on the other. Again using *Mein Kampf*, Govrin quotes Hitler as warning of the coming struggle: “If with the help of his Marxist creed the Jew is victorious over the other peoples of the world, his crown will be the funeral wreath of humanity” (p. 11).

Govrin moves toward his primary thesis in subsequent sections on German foreign policy. How could Germany, which had clearly established its hatred for the Jewish people and at the same time linked the Soviet Union with a supposedly Jewish ideology, eventually sign a treaty with that same enemy state? The author makes it clear, again using numerous examples and quotations, that Hitler disliked the Soviet Union and its leaders. This view was based on Hitler’s identification of Jewish control with the Bolshevik Party, as well as his clear determination to target the Soviet Union for the *Lebensraum* he had promised the German people. Nevertheless, Hitler approved the signing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in 1939. Beginning in April-May 1939, Hitler reconsidered his rigid approach. He made the decision to attack Poland despite the Anglo-French promise to defend that nation. Hitler understood that he had to avoid a two-front war, but he was not prepared to negotiate with the Soviet Union until M. Litvinov, “the symbol ... of Jewish domination over the Soviet leadership,” was removed from office (p. 32). That action came early in May, and Hitler also recognized that many Jewish Bolsheviks had been purged from their leadership positions. On the eve of the signing of the Non-Aggression Pact, Hitler asserted: “Litvinov’s dismissal was decisive” (p. 33). For Germany, Litvinov had represented Jewish Bolshevism while V. Molotov stood for a more traditional Pan-Slav-national Russia. Hitler could accept a treaty with a non-Jewish Soviet Union, but Govrin goes on to argue that Hitler was only buying time in the east—as long as the Soviet Union existed it posed an eventual threat to Germany.

Turning to Soviet foreign policy, Govrin points out that throughout the 1930s the USSR pursued a two-

pronged approach: “striving towards rapprochement [with Germany] ... and working to establish a defensive front by means of an alliance of the anti-Fascist countries” (p. 67). Litvinov led the latter effort while other Soviet diplomats continued to send signals to Germany seeking a normal working relationship. In this regard Govrin points out that Stalin personally did not comment on the anti-Fascist program adopted by the Comintern Congress in 1935, suggesting that he was prepared for a deal with Germany while Litvinov publicly criticized the Nazi government.

Returning to his theme of the Jewish factor in these relations, Govrin draws an interesting correlation between Soviet condemnation of Germany’s persecutions of Jews and the nuances of Soviet foreign policy. He indicates: “From the beginning of 1939 until the concluding of the Non-Aggression Pact, the amount of news on the persecution of Jews markedly decreased” (p. 76). Further, Govrin argues that the silence maintained by the Soviet Union in this area during the duration of the Soviet-German alliance proves that the Jewish factor was central to relations between the two powers.

Govrin concludes his discussion with interesting chapters on the military purge of 1937 and the firing of Litvinov in 1939. The events of 1937 removed several Jewish officers from top positions in the Soviet military, while the removal of Litvinov was announced by Stalin himself (in contrast to his silence on the Popular Front policy). Govrin’s final statement, contrasting the Jewish factor in the mind of Hitler compared to that of Stalin, presents a provocative conclusion to this brief but challenging book: “Comparison of the Jewish factor in Nazi policy towards the Soviet Union with its role in Soviet policy towards Nazi Germany demonstrates that, in Hitler’s mind, it occupied a central place, while by contrast, for Stalin the Jewish factor played a tactical role, an element that was open for exploitation in the development of Soviet foreign policy towards the Third Reich” (p. 111).

While Govrin effectively cites German and Soviet documents to support his argument, he overstates his case in a few instances. Govrin presents the dictators as driven by ideology (especially Hitler) rather than political or military considerations. Govrin should balance his argument with three additional points: Hitler’s understanding of the “two-front war” dilemma that Germany had to resolve if the stalemate and collapse of World War I were to be avoided; Stalin’s reaction to the Munich Pact, when the Soviet Union was ignored despite treaties with

France and Czechoslovakia; and finally Stalin's calculations early in 1939 after England and France guaranteed the integrity of Poland. From the Munich Pact through the guarantee to Poland, political and military reality took precedence over the Jewish factor. As soon as war became inevitable in the spring of 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union desperately needed each other. Any Soviet foreign minister closely allied with the policy of collective security, Jewish or not, had to be removed as a signal from Stalin to Hitler, and Hitler had to respond in order to win the war—one front at a time. Nevertheless, Govrin's work serves an important role in reminding the reader of the centrality of the "Jewish factor" in Hitler's mind and the ruthless calculation of Stalin's policies.

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