



Portrait of Joseph Stalin by
F. Reshetnikov, 1948

THE DEFECTION OF A TOP SOVIET SPY

BY DAVID SHUB
TRANSLATED BY
GLORIA DONEN SOSIN

WALTER KRIVITSKY AND THE STALIN-HITLER PACT*

On August 23, 1939, just a week before Germany invaded Poland and ignited World War II, the world was shocked by the announcement that two sworn enemies—Hitler and Stalin—had signed a nonaggression treaty. But the news should not have been surprising. Many months prior, Walter Krivitsky, the top Soviet spy in charge of military intelligence in Europe, had defected from the Soviet Union and exposed the plot with a series of articles in the *Saturday Evening Post*.

When Krivitsky first arrived in the United States in late 1938, with Stalin's secret agents on his trail, he received help and guidance from the well-known journalist and Lenin biographer David Shub (1887–1975), a Russian Social Democrat and friend of the Mensheviks who worked for the Yiddish-language newspaper, the *Jewish Daily Forward* (*Forverts*). What follows is an edited excerpt from Shub's memoirs *From Bygone Days* (the thousand-page Yiddish original was published in two volumes in 1970), detailing Shub's early encounters with Krivitsky and Krivitsky's efforts to publish the above-mentioned articles. It is available in English for the first time thanks to the translation of Gloria Donen Sosin.

—Gene Sosin ('49)

On New Year's Eve, 1938, I worked late into the evening at the *Forward's* editorial office. I was all alone, engrossed in finishing an article that I had to leave at the printer's before going home, when someone knocked on my door. A tall man who looked like a detective in Western films stood before me. He gave me two opened letters from Paris—one addressed to me from Feodor Dan, one of the leaders of the Russian Mensheviks, and the second from Boris Nikolaevsky, the famous historian of the revolutionary movement. Both informed me that the person delivering the letters would be Walter Krivitsky, former leader of Soviet military intelligence in Europe. He had escaped from the Bolsheviks a few months prior, and had openly, in the Menshevik journal *Sotsialistichesky Vestnik* (*Socialist Herald*), written articles about why he had decided to break with Stalin and emigrate. The *Forward*, through Nikolaevsky, received proofs of these articles even before they were published in *Vestnik*. I had translated them immediately.

"Are you Krivitsky?" I asked the man.

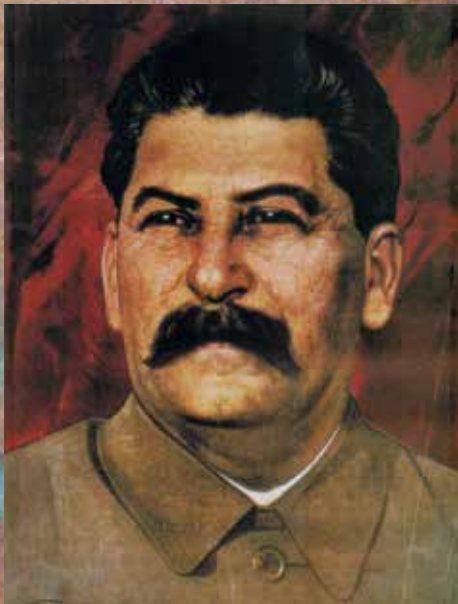
"No," he answered. "I'm a foreign agent."

"Then how did you come by these letters?"

"Krivitsky is a close friend of mine," the man responded. "The GPU informed American immigration officers that he is a Soviet secret agent, so when he got to Ellis Island they would not admit him. The American immigration officers are preparing to send him back to France. I was at Ellis Island today. He gave me these two letters and asked me to deliver them to you, and to tell you that tomorrow you must come without fail to see him on Ellis Island."

The following morning I went to Ellis Island. Krivitsky, his wife, and their little boy came out. Krivitsky was very thin and not very tall, and looked Jewish, although he spoke Russian without

*Excerpt from David Shub's *From Bygone Days—Memoirs: On the Revolving Stage of History—Recollections of People and Events in Russia and the West* (original in Yiddish, CYCO Press, 1970), © 1970 by David Shub. Published here with permission of Adam and Rachel Shub, all rights reserved.



Portrait of Joseph Stalin

Once I took him home with me to Seagate, and we chatted until three in the morning. He told me many very interesting things about Russia and Europe, things I had no inkling about.

a Jewish accent. He later told me that he was from a shtetl in Galicia. He studied in Vienna, served in the in the Austrian army during World War I, and was taken prisoner by the Russians. After the Bolshevik revolution in Russia he became a member of the Bolshevik Party and fought in the ranks of the Red Army against the Whites. Later he became the commander of the entire brigade. When the civil war ended, his aptitude for languages landed him abroad as a Soviet military intelligence agent. He had lived in various countries under several names and in time became the chief leader of Soviet military intelligence abroad. In Russia he was known by the name Walter Krivitsky, but his real name was Ginsburg.

Krivitsky's wife, Antonina, or Tania, as she was called, was a typical Great Russian—tall, blonde with blue eyes. She came from St. Petersburg and was the daughter of a Russian worker, an old Social Democrat. Both made a very good impression on me. They told me that they had been informed on, accused of being Soviet secret agents, and that the GPU had already tried to attack him twice.

Krivitsky asked me to make contact at once with William Bullitt, the American ambassador to France (and the first ambassador to the USSR after the United States recognized it in 1933, the first year of FDR's [Franklin D. Roosevelt] presidency). Bullitt was in New York at the moment; he had met Krivitsky in Paris and obtained his American visa for him.

"Bullitt will not allow them to send me back to France," Krivitsky said.

I went directly to my friend Joseph Shaplen at the *New York Times*. He had heard of Krivitsky and knew Bullitt well. He called Bullitt's secretary, who contacted Bullitt. In two days an order from the White House allowed Krivitsky and his family to leave Ellis Island.

The Krivitskys spoke German to each other and they went to live with a German-Jewish family in Washington Heights, where they were known as German-Jewish refugees. That very evening I visited them in their new home. We had a long talk about the situation in Russia and also about Soviet espionage and Soviet agents in America. Krivitsky spoke freely about this from the very beginning.

I visited him several times a week. And he would come to see me at the *Forward* office. A number of times we would sit in a nearby cafeteria and schmooze. I kept his identity a secret. Once I took him home with me to Seagate, and we chatted until three in the morning. He told me many very interesting things about Russia and Europe, things I had no inkling about. He asked me to propose to Abe Cahan [founding editor of the *Forward*] my writing a series of articles about the backstage happenings in contemporary Soviet Russia and about the secret activities of Stalin's agents abroad. But I didn't want to do that. I knew that

Cahan would gladly print them, but that he would pay Krivitsky four to five hundred dollars at most.

"I'm positive that an English-language paper or journal would give you three or four, possibly five thousand dollars," I told Krivitsky.

Joseph Shaplen tried to promote Krivitsky's articles to the managing editor of the *New York Times*, but the editor-in-chief wanted to see the articles first and in general was not taken with the proposal. Shaplen and I introduced Krivitsky to the famous American journalist, Isaac Don Levine [also a Russian émigré]. Levine spent an evening with Krivitsky, and he was convinced that Krivitsky's story would make a great, international sensation.

The next morning Levine drove to Philadelphia to see his good friend, editor of the popular national weekly magazine, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and told him all about Krivitsky. The editor of the *Post* already knew of him. He agreed to print a series of 10 articles translated by Levine, and to pay Krivitsky five thousand dollars per piece.

One day Krivitsky called me at the office and asked to meet me at once about a terribly important matter. I told him to meet me at four o'clock in front of a drugstore on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Forty-Second Street. When I got there, Krivitsky was waiting, and I realized that, perhaps, it was not an appropriate place to have an important conversation. I suggested we go to a nearby cafeteria. We went in and sat down near a table of four American girls. We talked freely without fear of being overheard. Krivitsky told me that Levine, who had promised to bring him a corrected rewrite of his article the day before, had suddenly disappeared.

"I think he wants to get out of having anything to do with me, he's fooling me, he wants to drag me down into the mud so I won't be able to crawl out," Krivitsky complained.

"He will surely get in touch with you. If not today, then tomorrow; take it easy," I tried to reassure him.

Suddenly, Krivitsky, who was sitting opposite me, said: "We've got to get out of here this minute; right there are some GPU agents."

I saw that three men now occupied the table where the young girls had been, but I could only see one of their faces. We got up at once and stood in the checkout line, when the man whose face I had seen came up to us and greeted Krivitsky.

Krivitsky turned pale and said to him, "Did you come here to shoot me?"

The agent responded, "Are you out of your mind? Do you want to have a little chat?" [Both men used the familiar "you," *tya*.]

Krivitsky thought for a moment, then said, "Fine, let's go outside."

Krivitsky and I went onto the street. The man had gone back to get his coat and hat from the cafeteria. We waited five or ten minutes.

"You see," said Krivitsky, "He's not coming out. He must be telephoning Moscow about what to do with me."

Krivitsky told me that the man, who had been his closest aide, was one of the most eminent Soviet secret agents. Now he was responsible directly to the chief of the GPU-NKVD.

"He's been sent to New York to find me and see what I'm doing."

The man suggested taking a taxi and going to a hotel where they could talk, but I told Krivitsky we should not go to a hotel, but instead head to the third floor of the *New York Times* building, without telling the Soviet agent that we were going to see Shaplen.

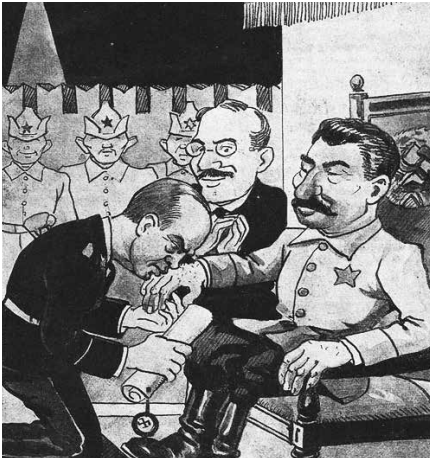
Krivitsky, the Soviet agent, and I went up to the newsroom. There I found Shaplen and told him what was happening. Shaplen found a separate room for Krivitsky and the Soviet agent. They must have talked for more than an hour. Krivitsky told me that the agent's name was Byeloff. [In Krivitsky's own memoir he writes that the man was Sergei Basoff, an agent of Soviet military intelligence living in the United States as an American citizen.] He told Krivitsky that after Krivitsky's escape, Stalin ordered the murders of his two brothers-in-law, and a couple of his wife's other relatives, who had all been Communists.

"You better not go to that cafeteria anymore; 'our' people are always there," Byeloff told Krivitsky before we left.

Krivitsky got the impression that Byeloff had been sent not to kill him, but to find out about his plans and report back to Moscow. "And I think he's calling there right now and telling him the content of our conversation," he said.

Meanwhile, Shaplen came over and said that we should not leave the office until he finished work, and that Isaac Don Levine and two more of his friends—left-wing journalists Benjamin Stolberg and Susan La Follette, who had already met with Krivitsky several times—would join us. Shaplen suspected that the other GPU agents were waiting at the entrance to the *Times* building and that they would try to kidnap Krivitsky. About an hour later the others arrived at the office and the six of us descended to the street. Three of them encircled Krivitsky while Isaac Don Levine and I brought up the rear. A tall man who looked Latvian stood outside at the

"I think he wants to get out of having anything to do with me, he's fooling me, he wants to drag me down into the mud so I won't be able to crawl out," Krivitsky complained.



Left to right: “The Prussian Tribute in Moscow,” a cartoon about the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, printed in *Mucha Warszawska* on September 8, 1939; Joseph Stalin and German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop in Moscow after signing a nonaggression pact between Germany and the USSR, August 23, 1939; portrait of Joseph Stalin

entrance to the *Times* building. Levine went up to him and asked what he was doing.

The man, flustered, responded in a strong Russian accent, “What business is it of yours? I’m waiting for a friend of mine.”

Meanwhile, Shaplen, Stolberg, and La Follette led Krivitsky away. They all got into a car and went off to Shaplen’s house. Levine and I also went there as arranged.

Levine had brought with him the two rewrites of Krivitsky’s articles about Stalin’s role in the Spanish Civil War. He had deleted several parts, and rewritten others, and wanted to show them to Krivitsky, but Krivitsky wanted Levine to read the entire article to him. It was already late and Levine was anxious to get home. He told Krivitsky that no new changes could be made—only a word here and there—since he had to have the corrections delivered to the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* by eleven the following morning. Krivitsky insisted that he had to reread the entire article carefully. Levine went home, and Shaplen read the article while I translated it into Russian for Krivitsky sentence by sentence.

Krivitsky was not pleased with Levine’s changes. He wanted to make edits and strike out some phrases entirely. We explained to him that this was technically impossible, but he didn’t want to hear it.

“If these changes aren’t made,” he said, “I’ll call the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* tomorrow morning, forbid him to print the article, and refuse to write the rest.”

For hours we argued with Krivitsky and told him that he could not break his contract with the *Post* and lose the opportunity to tell the world the truth about Stalin’s regime just for the sake of

some minor changes. We only gave in to changing several words and deleting a section that Krivitsky was particularly insistent about. He finally acquiesced, on the condition that Levine show him all future articles before setting them in type. In the morning Shaplen called Levine and told him about the changes that we had been forced to make. Levine was not at all pleased.

In a few weeks the article appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* and attracted a great deal of attention. Soon afterward, Krivitsky published an article detailing the longtime secret negotiations between Stalin’s representatives and official representatives of Nazi Germany. This caused an even greater sensation than the articles about Stalin’s role in the Spanish Civil War. However, both American liberals and the conservative American press were skeptical about Krivitsky’s revelations and did not want to believe him. Several months later, it turned out that Krivitsky was telling the truth. At six in the morning on August 24, 1939, the nonaggression treaty between the USSR and the Third Reich was announced on Moscow radio.

The Stalin-Hitler pact hit the world, and Jews in particular, like an earthquake. Many Communists and Communist sympathizers immediately left the Party and condemned Stalin and the Soviet regime. In late summer 1939, when France and England declared war against Nazi Germany, I, like many others in America and Europe, was convinced that Hitler would soon lose the battle. Only Walter Krivitsky, the former chief of Soviet military intelligence abroad, was pessimistically inclined. He did not think much of the French Maginot Line and the old French military leaders. He kept

on telling me that Nazi Germany possessed a larger and better battle-ready army than the French, and that the young German generals were much more capable than the old French and English ones.

“I assure you,” Krivitsky said, “that as soon as the Germans begin their military offensive on the Western front, they will be in Paris within thirty days.” He also predicted that Stalin would overtake the Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) within a few days’ time and would also try to occupy Finland. I did not want to believe Krivitsky’s prophecies, but when the Nazis swiftly occupied Belgium and Holland, and began their march on Paris, I began to think that perhaps Krivitsky’s estimate of the military situation was correct. If the Nazis occupied Paris, the first to be arrested would be leaders of the anti-Nazi Russian and German parties, Socialists, as well as enemies of Communism, Fascism, and Nazism. I felt we must help them get out of France as quickly as possible. □

Translator’s epilogue: In his memoirs, David Shub does not mention anything more about Krivitsky or his fate. But their contact continued in late 1939 and 1940, and Shub’s older son, Boris Shub, collaborated with Krivitsky on the spy-*cum*-defector’s book, *In Stalin’s Secret Service*, published in late 1939.

David Shub wrote in English, Russian, and Yiddish. He joined the *Jewish Daily Forward* as a member of the staff in 1924, a post he held for over 48 years. He wrote extensively about the Russian Revolution, including his acclaimed biography of Lenin. In addition to *Lenin: A Biography* (published in Yiddish in 1928; translated into English in 1948) and his memoirs *From Bygone Days*, his books include *Heroes and Martyrs* (1939), *Social Thinkers and Fighters* (1968), and *Political Figures: Russia, 1850–1928* (1969).

About the translator: Gloria Donen Sosin, M.A. ’49, and Certificate, Russian Institute, is a writer, translator, teacher of Russian, and specialist in Russian affairs.

Gene Sosin, B.A. ’41CC, M.A. ’49, Certificate, Russian Institute, and Ph.D. ’58, was a retired director of Russian broadcast planning at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. He passed away at age 93 on May 6, 2015, shortly after this piece was completed.

The couple met at Columbia in 1947, thanks to the GI Bill (Gloria had served in the WAC, and Gene in the Navy). In 1950 they were chosen to join the Harvard Refugee Interview Project in Munich, Germany, as team members of Columbia’s Bureau of Applied Social Research. (See Gloria’s book, *Red Letter Year—Munich 1950–51* and Gene’s *Sparks of Liberty—An Insider’s Memoir of Radio Liberty*.)



Top: David Shub; bottom: Gloria and Gene Sosin