

1 Early Career

According to his official biography, Nikolai Ivanovich Ezhov had the right proletarian origin. He was born on 1 May (19 April, OS) 1895 in the Russian capital St. Petersburg, the son of a poor metalworker, a founder. But during interrogation, after his arrest in April 1939, he stated that he had been born in Mariiampole, a provincial town in southwest Lithuania, not far from the Polish border (later Kapsukas) and at that time part of the Russian empire. He had moved to Petersburg only in 1906, when he was eleven years old. After the revolution he started to assert that he was born there.

Ezhov also confessed that his father had not been an industrial worker at all. On the contrary, having been called up for military service, Ivan Ezhov, a Russian from Volkhonshino village in the Krapivna district to the southwest of Tula, joined a musical detachment in Mariiampole, where he married the conductor's maid. After demobilization he became a forest warden and then a pointsman in the railway service. In 1902–3, according to his son's words, he kept a tearoom, in fact serving as a brothel. From 1905 to 1914, after the tearoom closed, the elder Ezhov worked as a house painter. Even worse from the proletarian point of view,

he was a small contractor who employed two wage laborers. Ivan Ezhov died in 1919, after some years of a debilitating illness.¹

Nor did the other half of Nikolai Ezhov's origins suit later requirements. His official biography fails to note that his mother, Anna Antonovna Ezhova (born c. 1864)—the conductor's maid—was Lithuanian. Ezhov himself acknowledged in a questionnaire in 1924 that since childhood he could make himself understood in Polish and Lithuanian as well as Russian; three years later such origins were no longer appropriate and he stated that he knew only Russian.²

Ezhov had a sister, Evdokiia, some two years his senior, and also a brother, Ivan, who was born in 1897 in Veivery, Mariiam-pole district.³ The two brothers did not get along well. Later, Nikolai told his nephew Viktor, Evdokiia's son, that Ivan, though two years younger, beat him up systematically, and once did so with a guitar in a street fight, an act that Nikolai never forgot. In 1939, during investigation, Nikolai related that before being called up for the army in 1916, Ivan had belonged to a criminal gang.⁴ In the autumn of 1938, in a letter intended for Stalin, he wrote that his brother had been a "half-criminal element" and that since childhood he had not maintained any ties with him.⁵

Nikolai Ezhov attended primary school (probably a parish school) for no more than a year; according to the data of his later criminal case, he had an "unfinished primary education." In 1906, at eleven years of age, he was sent to Petersburg as apprentice to a tailor. From 1909 on, he was an apprentice and then a metalworker at several Petersburg factories. He spent more than a year in Lithuania and Poland in search of work, holding jobs in Kovno (later Kaunas), as an apprentice metalworker at the Til'mans works, and in other towns as hired help to craftsmen.⁶

In 1914–15 he was employed in a Petrograd frame workshop, the Nedermeier and the Putilov works. At that time he took part in some strikes and demonstrations. In spite of his lack of schooling, he was rather well read and among workers had the nickname "Nicky the booklover" (*Kol'ka knizhnik*).⁷ In a questionnaire of the early 1920s he stated that he was "literate (self-taught)."⁸ In

connection with a strike at the Treugol'nik factory he was arrested and exiled from Petrograd. In 1915 (he was then twenty years old), he was called up for army duty, first in the 76th infantry depot regiment and then in the 172d infantry Libavskii regiment, but he was soon wounded on the German front near Alitus (just to the west of Vilnius) and sent on leave for six months. He returned to the Putilov works. Later in the same year he was called up again, assigned first as a soldier in the 3d infantry regiment in Novo-Petergof, and then as a soldier-worker in a noncombatant detachment in the Dvinsk military district. In 1916 he became a foreman in the Fifth Artillery Workshop of the Northern Front in Vitebsk.⁹

Later, a fellow soldier of those days described how Ezhov once, in some way having got hold of the right ribbon, had posed as a holder of the St. George Cross.¹⁰ During the 1930s, such an episode was not, of course, correct form, and this part of Ezhov's biography accordingly was painted in the style of revolutionary romanticism, emphasizing rebelliousness and punishment.¹¹ In the late 1930s, Aleksandr Fadeev was commissioned to write Ezhov's biography. He fulfilled the task, and the manuscript of a small book went to the publishing house. Although Ezhov was arrested before the biography could be printed,¹² part of Fadeev's manuscript was preserved among Ezhov's papers, under the title "Nikolai Ivanovich Ezhov: Child of Indigence and Struggle" (1937–38). "He was a small, dark-haired young man, with an open and stubborn face, with a sudden boyish smile and adroit precise movements of his small hands," Fadeev wrote. He goes on to say:

He was a small Petersburg workman, very restrained and modest, with a clear, calm, and firm look from under his dark, beautiful eyebrows. He loved reading and poetry and now and then scribbled a few lines himself. He was a thoughtful and cordial friend, a good chap, in leisure time loving to play the guitar, to sing and dance, fearless in front of the authorities. Among his comrades he enjoyed a great deal of love and influence.¹³

Rather a similar description was that of A. Drizul, who knew Ezhov as a fellow workman at the artillery workshop No. 5. In



N. I. Ezhov (right), Vitebsk, 1916. (Memorial collection)

an interview with Isaak Mints of the Institute of Party History, Drizul described “Kolia” as “a smart, lively chap,” “loved by all, sharp in conversations with other workmen.” According to Drizul, Ezhov had been active in the Red Guard even before joining the Party, but he was “not much of a platform speaker.” Drizul added: “He was a painstaking orator, a characteristic he kept to this day. He did not like to make speeches.”¹⁴ This is how the Institute of Party History edited Drizul’s recollections: “Many workers . . . knew Nikolai Ivanovich as a cheerful, sociable person, in conversations knowing how to put before them political questions of the most vital importance and finding convincing, correct answers to them. . . . His characteristic was—‘fewer words, more deeds.’”¹⁵

In his work of 1937, *The Great Socialist Revolution in the USSR*, Mints further glamorized Ezhov’s past: “The Bolshevik fortress in Vitebsk was the Fifth Artillery Workshop of the Northern Front. It employed N. I. Ezhov, who had been dismissed from the Putilov works together with a few hundred fellow workers for their struggle against the imperialist war. Ezhov was sent to the army, to a depot battalion.” After a strike, Mints went on, Ezhov was “thrown into a military convict prison, a penal battalion.”¹⁶ In actual fact, there is no evidence that he took part in any soldiers’ strike or rebellion.

Some present-day authors do continue to suggest that Ezhov’s class instincts were formed in a highly politicized environment, at a time of increasing tension between workers and employers. R. W. Thurston, for example, suggests: “Perhaps this background made Ezhov less tolerant of managers and bureaucrats, on whom the Terror of the late 1930s fell particularly harshly.”¹⁷ O. V. Khlevniuk, however, rightly points to the fact that Ezhov’s later activity was not in the first place directed against the so-called economic specialists and that in several cases he even defended them.¹⁸ (For example, in 1933 he is said to have defended coal enterprise managers, who in some regions were sacked too frequently, strongly interfering with coal extraction.)¹⁹

Ezhov’s association with the Communist Party is equally un-

clear. His own testimony suggested that on 5 May 1917, following the February revolution, he joined the RSDRP(b), Lenin's Bolshevik (or Communist) Party; in a questionnaire of the early 1920s he reported that he had been a Party member since then.²⁰ Evidence from the Institute of Party History indicates that on 3 August 1917 he joined the Vitebsk organization of the RSDRP (Internationalists); the United Internationalists, to whom the Vitebsk organization belonged, were an intermediate group between Bolshevism and Menshevism.²¹ At any rate, Ezhov did become the leader of the Party cell of artillery workshop No. 5, and from October 1917 to January 1918, he was assistant commissar and then commissar of Vitebsk station of the Riga-Orel railway line, organizing unit cells.²² With respect to the February and October revolutions of 1917, in the questionnaire of the early 1920s he responded that he "very actively participated in both of them," and in another questionnaire he stated that during the October revolution he took part in "disarming Cossacks and Polish legionaries."²³ Mints exaggerated: "Lively and impetuous, he plunged into organization work from the very beginning of the revolution of 1917 on. Ezhov created a Red Guard, himself picked participants, himself instructed them, and obtained weapons."²⁴ In any case, his active participation in the revolution of 1917 in Petrograd is a legend.²⁵

In early 1918 Nikolai Ezhov joined his family in Vyshnii Volochek, Tver' province, where he got a job at the Bolotin glassworks. He became a member of the factory committee, and from June 1918 to April 1919 he was a member of the district committee and head of the Party club. He also worked in a battalion of special destination in Zubtsov in the same province, until May 1919, when he was called up for the Red Army. He served in Saratov in a depot electrical engineering battalion, where he presided over the Party group and was presidium member of the military district. Twenty years later, during interrogation, Vladimir Konstantinov, who had evacuated the battalion from Petrograd to Saratov, recollected how in 1919, after quartering, Ezhov, "an urchin with torn boots," was appointed political instructor (*polit-*

ruk). They became friends, serving together until 1921.²⁶ In August 1919, after evacuating to Kazan', Ezhov was appointed military commissar of the school of the Second Base of Radio Telegraph Units—which meant that he was charged with political work such as agitation. His biographer Fadeev again sparks up the image: he was actively engaged in battle, like the assault on Ivashchenko village, in which he was wounded by three shell-splinters, one of which pierced his jaw. “The severe injury disabled Ezhov for a long time. Throughout his life there remained a scar to the right of his chin”; and he describes a portrait of Ezhov of the time: “a still very young, black-haired chap with black eyebrows; a dreamy expression of his eyes with a strong curve in his lips—an inspired, strong-willed face.”²⁷

In February 1920 Ezhov was reprimanded by the military tribunal of the Depot Army, of which his base was part, for insufficient vigilance that had resulted in the admission to the school of a number of deserters. This misstep had no consequences for his



Radio technicians leaving for the front, Kazan', June 1920, with Ezhov in the middle of the front row. (Memorial collection)

career, however, and in May he was promoted to military commissar of the Radio Units Base in Kazan'.²⁸ Although his discipline and diligence in executing orders had already been noticed, still another stain was subsequently found on his reputation. After his fall, the Chekist S. F. Redens testified that Ezhov had on at least one occasion privately boasted about having come out against Lenin and having been an adherent of the anti-intellectual Machajski movement.²⁹ In 1936 in a registration form Ezhov stated that he had belonged to the "Workers' Opposition" within the Communist Party but had broken with it before the Tenth Party Congress of March 1921. Four years later, before the court, he admitted only to having sympathized with the Opposition, adding that he had never been a member and that after Lenin's criticism of March 1921 he had recognized its deceit and had lined up behind Lenin.³⁰

That was a good move, for in April 1921 Ezhov became a member of the bureau and head of the agitation and propaganda department of one of Kazan's district Party committees, and in July he assumed the same functions in the Tatar provincial Party committee. At about the same time, he was demobilized from the army³¹ and was then elected to the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the Tatar Republic. In August, suffering from work stress, he was granted a leave and the right to enter one of Moscow's sanatoriums for medical treatment; at the recommendation of the Central Committee, he was in the Kremlin hospital from 18 January to 13 February 1922, for treatment of colitis, anemia, and lung catarrh.³² By then, clearly, he was already fairly prominent, and in Moscow he probably associated with influential people from the Central Committee apparatus, like Lazar' Kaganovich and Mendel' Khataevich, people who had become acquainted with him in Belorussia.³³ It resulted in a responsible assignment: on 15 February 1922 the Central Committee Secretariat appointed him Secretary of the Party Committee of the Mari Autonomous Province.³⁴ Because this was an important assignment, it is conceivable that in this connection he had his first conversation with Stalin.

Ezhov's assignment in the small provincial capital, Krasnokokshaisk (now Ioshkar-Ola), got off to a bad start in March: the Bureau of the Provincial Party Committee only accepted him after an initial refusal, and I. P. Petrov, the chairman of the Provincial Executive Committee, from the very beginning was openly hostile, mainly because of Ezhov's dismissal of concern for the native language or culture as "national chauvinism." Ezhov's biographers agree that "the worst sides of his character revealed themselves," and they note his "lust for power, arrogance, rudeness." He showed a purely administrative attitude, refusing to take into account the national peculiarities of the province. Even an instructor from the central apparatus did not succeed in calming people's feelings.³⁵ In October 1922 Ezhov requested a leave of absence, again citing stress: "From the February revolution on I have not taken a holiday. In February of this year I was sent to the Mari province straight from the hospital. I have been worn out completely. At present I suffer from almost seven illnesses." The Bureau of the Provincial Committee complied with the request and granted him a leave of one month, plus an allowance of 300 million rubles (not a huge amount at the time) for medical treatment "in view of a number of serious illnesses." His place was filled temporarily by a colleague.³⁶ He had served in Krasnokokshaisk for only seven months.

Instead of going straight to a health resort, however, Ezhov returned to Kazan', writing in a letter that he liked "Tatariia better than Marlandiia."³⁷ From there he went to Moscow, where in late October he attended a session of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets. (On that occasion a photograph seems to have been taken of Lenin, surrounded by a group of delegates, one of them Ezhov.)³⁸ The Central Committee authorities had agreed not to send him back to Krasnokokshaisk but rather, after a rest period of a month, to transfer him to another province or another branch. The expensiveness of Moscow during the NEP seemed shocking, and on 6 November he wrote that he "had already started to be pretty much out of commission" and was going to the North Caucasian health resort of Kislovodsk for

medical treatment, though he “did not have a red cent.”³⁹ On 28 November he was already in a Kislovodsk sanatorium, apparently having applied for an extension of his leave period; in a telegram of that date he asked the Central Committee authorities to let him know in case his request had been positively judged.⁴⁰

The request seems to have been granted, for on 1 March 1923, at a meeting of the Orgburo and the Secretariat of the Central Committee in Moscow (with Stalin present), Ezhov was appointed Secretary of the Party committee of Semipalatinsk province in the northeast of what was then called the Kirgiz (later Kazakh) Republic.⁴¹ Although Ezhov himself was not at the meeting, as in 1922, Stalin may have interviewed him in connection with the important appointment. Ezhov was granted nine days' leave to go to Krasnokokshaisk in order to hand things over, but instead he went again to Kazan', perhaps hoping to find work there.⁴² On 9 March, in a letter to his former colleague from the Mari provincial Party committee, P. N. Ivanov, he noted that he had heard that “you have sacked Petrov” but that to his displeasure an Orgburo commission had decided to send Petrov back to the Mari province.⁴³ Nine days later he wrote that he was going to Semipalatinsk.⁴⁴

All in all, Ezhov had stretched out his month-long leave to half a year. One gets the impression that in this period he was a rather bad functionary, sickly and not very hardworking. Not surprisingly, he was given bad references with respect to his work in the Mari province: “In a leading function, the absence of sufficient theoretical training and versatile practical skill make it impossible for comr. E. to orient himself straight away in an especially complicated situation. This is confirmed by the blunders made by him during his first time in the Mari province.” A “certain obstinacy, sometimes bordering on irascibility,” was established as a trait of his character. Because of insufficient theoretical training and “polished accumulated experience in leading work,” for the time being a promotion was not recommended. He only qualified for a provincial Party function as second or third in charge: organization or agitation head, or district secretary.⁴⁵

These recommendations were clearly not followed, however, for on 27 March Ezhov was confirmed as having arrived in Semipalatinsk and begun work as Party Secretary.⁴⁶ According to his biographers, in his new function he again behaved “high-handedly” in front of the secretaries of the district committees.⁴⁷ Fadeev says that in some districts anti-NEP sentiments prevailed. Advocates of equalizing “poor man’s communism” proclaimed the independent “Bukhtarma Republic”* in northeast Kazakhstan, and Ezhov quickly discovered that “among the provincial ‘leaders’ there were quite a few secret and overt enemies sympathizing with the insurrection and supporting it.” He went to the rebellious peasant districts without any military protection. The expedition was full of hardships, Fadeev wrote. The rebels were after his life. But in the end the insurrection was suppressed peacefully.⁴⁸ A photograph of the time shows Ezhov in front of a group of soldiers returning after the insurrection had been suppressed.

A year or so later, in May 1924, Ezhov was delegated to the Thirteenth Party Congress in Moscow.⁴⁹ The following month he was transferred to Orenburg to head the organization department of the Provincial Party Committee of the Kirgiz Republic, which looks rather like a demotion, except that in November of the same year the Orgburo appointed him Secretary of the Kirgiz Provincial Committee.⁵⁰ Here, too, he had a frustrating experience with the locals. As a former Gulag prisoner recalled later on, Ezhov was so unable to deal with the strong local Trotskiist opposition that he went into hiding in a saloon car.⁵¹ In April 1925, the Kirgiz Republic was renamed the Kazakh Republic and the capital was transferred to Kzyl-Orda. That summer, Ezhov became Secretary of the Regional Party Committee of the Kazakh Republic and head of the organization department. According to Fadeev, he proved himself a passionate opponent of concessions to foreign capitalists, such as the British businessman Leslie Urquhart. During the same time he taught himself Marxism-Leninism. Fadeev notes: “With the exceptional capacity for work characteristic of him, for nights he sat over his books in order to master the theory of

*Fadeev incorrectly calls it the Baturminskaia respublika.

Marx-Lenin-Stalin.”⁵² (In 1924, in a questionnaire, Ezhov had answered to knowing the basic Marxist literature; at one point, during two months, two evenings a week, he had participated in a Marxist self-education circle.)⁵³

Ezhov's career was on its way. In December 1925 he was delegated to the Fourteenth Party Congress in Moscow, finishing on 31 December, and on 18 January 1926 the Central Committee Secretariat informed the Kazakh Regional Committee that Ezhov was to attend a one-year course in Marxism-Leninism at the Communist Academy, where professional Party functionaries were being trained. Ezhov had returned to Kzyl-Orda after the Congress, and on 25 January, he left for Moscow, with new prospects for advancement.⁵⁴ Among his fellow students were his later close colleague E. G. Evdokimov and the future chief of the Red Army Political Directorate, L. Z. Mekhlis.⁵⁵ If Ezhov did indeed complete the course in early 1927, then there is a gap in our information about his activities during the first half of that year. According to his Russian biographers, in February 1927 he was appointed instructor of the Organization and Distribution Department (Orgraspredotdel) of the Central Committee.⁵⁶ It is also possible that during the first half of 1927 he prolonged his studies or, as in the months after his service in the Mari province, sickly and inactive, was awaiting a new appointment.

In early July 1927, when he underwent a koumiss cure in a sanatorium in Shafranovo near Ufa in the Urals, Orgraspredotdel was looking for him in connection with his appointment as its assistant head.⁵⁷ Only in mid-July he reacted, explaining the delay with an operation he had been undergoing in Ufa. Although the cure was to finish only on 1 August, he left for Moscow the following day.⁵⁸ The Orgburo confirmed the appointment on 15 July.⁵⁹ It implied an unusually fast promotion. According to Lev Razgon, it was Ivan Mikhailovich Moskvina, Razgon's father-in-law and Orgraspredotdel head since February 1926,⁶⁰ who “found, fetched, brought up, and fostered” Ezhov: he summoned the “quiet, modest, and dependable secretary of a distant Party committee” to Moscow and made him instructor in the Orgraspredotdel, subsequently assistant, and then his deputy.⁶¹ Ezhov

had, of course, gone to Moscow to study at least a year before his Orgraspredotdel appointment. It is beyond a doubt, however, that by then he had become acquainted with Stalin, for it was Stalin's practice to know his apparatchiks, especially at this level.

Ezhov was made deputy head of Orgraspredotdel in November 1927.⁶² In this important function he became initiated in the niceties of the Party's personnel policy. His department was engaged in the selection and assignment of nomenklatura personnel over the whole country and all branches; moreover, it checked the activities of the local Party organizations. In this capacity, he attended the Fifteenth Party Congress (December 1927) and the Sixteenth Party Conference (April 1929).⁶³ By now he was so highly respected that in 1928 the Secretary of the Tatar Provincial Party Committee, M. M. Khataevich, asked to be replaced by him: "You have in the Central Committee a tough guy, Nikolai Ezhov. He will establish order among the Tatars." Although the Central Committee seems to have complied with Khataevich's request, for one reason or another the new appointment did not materialize.⁶⁴

Nikolai Ezhov's name appeared in the central press for the first time in August 1929 as one of three authors—along with Lev Mekhlis and Petr Pospelov—of an article entitled "The Right Deviation in the Practical Work and the Party Swamp," published in the theoretical Party journal *Bol'shevik*. The authors pointed out that, in addition to the public ones, there were also secret Rightists in the Party—"Party swamp" meaning "Rightist practice in the everyday practical work." The fight was against not only known Rightists but also the Party swamp.⁶⁵

In December 1929 Ezhov moved from Orgraspredotdel to a new post as Deputy People's Commissar of Agriculture responsible for personnel selection, under Iakov Iakovlev.⁶⁶ For the first time he came to deal with real mass repressions. When in February 1930 the state security service OGPU began arresting and deporting hundreds of thousands of peasants who had been labeled "kulaks," the People's Commissariat of Agriculture did not stand on the sidelines. In June–July 1930 the People's Commissariat delegated him to the Sixteenth Party Congress.⁶⁷

In several articles of this period Ezhov corroborated his radicalism. In March 1930 he published "The City to the Aid of the Village," an article dealing with the mobilization by the November 1929 Central Committee Plenum of 25,000 workers in order to collectivize agriculture—a demonstration, he pointed out, of the aid of the working class to the kolkhoz movement.⁶⁸ Another article that appeared in the autumn of the same year, "Kontrat'evism in the Struggle for Cadres," advocated the training of proletarian specialists, in spite of the strong opposition from "bourgeois" specialists, who preferred the education of "universal" specialists instead of specialized specialists, or technicians; according to Ezhov, this was precisely what the proletarian state needed.⁶⁹ An article in *Pravda* in March 1932, "Some Questions with Respect to the Training and Placing of Cadres," continued Ezhov's radical views on education. He was pleased to establish that the old-fashioned universities were a thing of the past. Because of the need to train economic and technical cadres, they had made way for specialized institutions of higher education that were indissolubly related to production and within three to four years trained engineers in a definite speciality: "Our institutions of higher education have been transformed into a sort of factory, and carry out the orders of the economy to train the necessary specialists."⁷⁰

Ezhov returned to the Party apparatus in November 1930 as head of the Distribution Department or Rasedotdel, one of the two departments resulting from the division of Orgrasedotdel.⁷¹ This was a key position with control over the selection and assignment of Party personnel. On 21 November—one week after his appointment—he was received by Stalin in the Kremlin.⁷² He was clearly admitted to Stalin's inner circle. Four days later, at the suggestion of his direct chief in the Central Committee apparatus, L. Kaganovich, the Politburo allowed him to attend its meetings and to receive all materials sent to Central Committee members.⁷³ In other words, Ezhov, though not a Central Committee member, was, like Politburo members, informed about state and Party matters.

On 9 November 1931 he was again received by Stalin, accompanied by Kaganovich, V. Molotov, and K. Voroshilov; among the others present were OGPU deputy chairman Genrikh Iagoda, E. P. Berzin, and S. A. Bergavinov.⁷⁴ As a result, two days later Stalin signed a Politburo decision on the mining of gold in the far north. The Dal'stroi state trust was to be organized under the direction of Berzin, supervised by Iagoda, in order to speed up the exploitation of gold mining on the upper reaches of Kolyma River. Bergavinov, as First Party Secretary of the Far East, was to explore the possibilities of using icebreakers; Ezhov, together with a few others, was to "work out privileges to be enjoyed by both deported prisoners and volunteers for good work in Kolyma (reduction of their terms of punishment, rehabilitation, security for the families of volunteers, increase of salary, etc.)."⁷⁵ This was the origin of the infamous forced labor system in Kolyma.

After the meeting there was a characteristic incident. When Ezhov left the Kremlin, together with Iagoda and Bergavinov, Iagoda offered the other two a lift in his car. On the way Ezhov, who was dressed in an ordinary summer coat, got very cold. Iagoda protested indignantly that Ezhov's coat was too light: while money was spent for his treatment, with his sick lungs he dressed like that! Ezhov answered that he had no winter coat. Then Bergavinov thought that in that case he should receive fur for a coat. Within two weeks he was sent some strips of squirrel fur, without any account. Apparently, the Central Control Commission heard about this, after which Ezhov sent a note to Matvei Shkiriakov of the Commission explaining that the fur lay unused in his apartment and that he was prepared to yield it any moment.⁷⁶

The episode should be considered against the background of Ezhov's health problems. Earlier, in June of 1931, the head of the Kremlin Medical Directorate had reported to Kaganovich and Postyshev that Ezhov suffered from tuberculosis of the lungs, myasthenia, neurasthenia owing to work stress, anemia, and malnutrition. He needed an immediate sick leave of two months, to be spent in a sanatorium in the south, like Abastuman (Georgia) or Kislovodsk.⁷⁷ In November of the next year the same functionary

informed the Central Committee that Ezhov had moreover contracted angina and suffered from sciatica. He needed an urgent checkup in the Kremlin hospital and a diet in order to be able to return to work soon.⁷⁸

In Kazan', no later than in June 1921, Ezhov had married Antonina Titova, a lower Party functionary, who was a few years younger than he. She accompanied him to Krasnokokshaisk and Semipalatinsk, but in the summer of 1923 she left for Moscow to study at the Timiriachev agricultural academy. In late 1925 the two reunited in Moscow. With them lived Ezhov's mother, who was then in her early sixties, and two children of his sister, Evdokiia, the teenagers Liudmila and Anatolii Babulin, who studied in Moscow (Evdokiia herself with her four other children lived as a peasant in a village near Vyshnii Volochek in Tver' province). After finishing the agricultural academy in 1928, Antonina was also employed by the People's Commissariat of Agriculture, as subdepartment head. With her husband's help, she published a book, *The Collectivization of Agriculture and the Peasant Woman*. But around 1930 they divorced because Ezhov, who had never been much of a true husband, had seriously fallen in love with another woman.⁷⁹

Her name was Evgeniia Solomonovna (or Zalmanovna), born Feigenberg in 1904 to a large Jewish family in Gomel', where her father was a small tradesman. There, while young, she had married Lazar' Khaiutin. After divorcing him, she had married the journalist and diplomat Aleksandr Gladun. They had lived in London since September 1926 but were expelled from Great Britain in connection with the raid in May 1927 by British authorities on the Soviet trade delegation and the resulting break in diplomatic relations between Moscow and London. Gladun returned to Moscow, Evgeniia became a typist for a time at the Soviet Trade Mission in Berlin, where in the summer of 1927 she met the writer Isaak Babel' and apparently had an affair with him. (According to Babel's widow, Babel' had known Evgeniia since the time when she worked in an Odessa publishing house.)

Before too long Evgeniia was back at her husband's side in

Moscow, and in November 1927 Ezhov must have appeared in their apartment for the first time; they seem to have met in a Black Sea sanatorium. In 1939, during interrogation, Gladun testified: “She said that Ezhov was a rising star and that it was profitable for her to be with him and not with me.” Around 1930 Ezhov married Evgeniia, who took his name. They lived in central Moscow. Evgeniia worked as a typist for the newspaper *Krest’ianskaia gazeta*, edited by Semen Uritskii, with whom she seems to have had an affair as well. Uritskii took her away from the typewriter to make her a journalist. She had a sort of salon where she received writers, artists, and diplomats. Apart from Babel’, regular guests were other writers like Lev Kassil’ and Samuil Marshak and the musician Leonid Utesov.⁸⁰

Ezhov not only had heterosexual relations. On 24 April 1939, after his arrest, he wrote a statement for the NKVD investigation department about his “vice of long standing—pederasty.” Of course, the word “pederasty” meant homosexuality, but except for that the confession seems to have been well founded, and the statement needs to be quoted at length:

It started already when at a very young age I was a tailor’s apprentice. Approximately from fifteen to sixteen I had some cases of perverted sexual acts with apprentices of the same tailor’s workshop who were of the same age. This vice was resumed in the old tsarist army under front conditions. Apart from an accidental liaison with a soldier of our company, I had a liaison with a certain Filatov, a friend of mine from Leningrad who served in the same regiment. The liaison was mutually active [*vzaimnoaktivnaia*], i.e. now the one, now the other side was the “woman.” Later Filatov was killed at the front.

In 1919 I was appointed commissar of the Second Base of Radio Telegraph Units. My secretary was a certain Antoshin. . . . In 1919 I had a mutually active pederastic liaison with him. In 1924 I worked in Semipalatinsk. My friend of long standing Dement’ev went there together with me. In 1924 I had also some cases of pederasty with him in which I alone was active. In 1925 in Orenburg I established a pederastic liaison with a certain Bo-

iarskii, then chairman of the Kazakh provincial trade union council. At present, as far as I know, he is director of the Moscow Arts Theater.* The liaison was mutually active. He and I had then just arrived in Orenburg, we lived in the same hotel. The liaison was brief, until shortly after his wife arrived.

In 1925 the capital of Kazakhstan was transferred from Orenburg to Kzyl-Orda, and I went to work there also. Soon F. I. Goloshchekin (now Chief Arbitrator) arrived there as secretary of the provincial committee [*kraikom*]. He arrived as bachelor, without wife, and I also lived as bachelor. Until my departure to Moscow (approximately within two months) I practically moved to his apartment and frequently passed the night there. Soon I also established a pederastic liaison with him, which continued periodically until my departure. Just like the previous ones, the liaison with him was mutually active.⁸¹

In the late 1920s–early 1930s, Ezhov had already developed drinking habits. Later, during interrogation, Zinaida Glikina, Evgeniia's old friend from Gomel' times on and an habituée of their apartment, testified that Ezhov “drank systematically and often got awfully drunk.” He also “incredibly indulged in debauchery, and lost the appearance not only of a communist, but of a man as well.”⁸² One of the close friends with whom he used to spend nights hitting the bottle was his colleague from the People's Commissariat of Agriculture, Fedor Mikhailovich Konar (Polashchuk); they probably became acquainted in 1927. After arrest, Ezhov stated that “Konar and I always drank in the company of prostitutes he had brought to his apartment.”⁸³ Having become Deputy People's Commissar of Agriculture, in January 1933 Konar was arrested on a charge of espionage for Poland; two

*Ia. I. Boiarskii (Shimshelevich), born 1890, Party member, Central Committee chairman of the Trade Union of Artistic Functionaries *Rabis*, first deputy of the Soviet government Committee for Art Questions. In July 1937 the Politburo appointed him director of the Moscow Arts Theater, a function he held for more than a year; in July 1939 he was arrested, then sentenced to death: *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia: Dokumenty TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b), VChK-OGPU-NKVD o kul'turnoi politike. 1917–1953 gg.* (Moscow, 1999), pp. 201, 250, 269, 699, 774; Memorial archive, execution lists, No. 25D–928.

months later he was condemned to death for “sabotage activity in agriculture,” and shot.⁸⁴

Another drinking pal was Lev Efimovich Mar’iasin, Ezhov’s co-deputy head of *Orgraspredotdel* from November 1927 on. In 1930 he was appointed to the governing board of the USSR State Bank; the next year he became its deputy president and in 1934 its president; at the same time, he was Deputy People’s Commissar of Finances. There is evidence about how Mar’iasin and Ezhov loved to kill time. Having gotten drunk, the two organized a competition to see who, with their pants off and squatted, was faster and better at blowing away a handful of cigarette ash from a penny by farting.⁸⁵

Via Mar’iasin, Ezhov came to know his chief, Georgii Leonidovich Piatakov, since 1928 deputy president and since the following year president of the board of the USSR State Bank, until in 1932 he became Deputy People’s Commissar of Heavy Industry. During his trial in 1940, Ezhov gave details of their relationship: “Usually Piatakov, when he became slightly tight, loved to mock partners. In one case, being drunk, he pricked me with a pin twice. I flared up, slapped his face, and cut his lip. After this we swore and did not talk anymore.” Mar’iasin tried to reconcile the two, but Ezhov refused and eventually broke with Mar’iasin.⁸⁶ All these and other acquaintances were subsequently condemned as “Trotskiists,” etc., and when in 1939 Ezhov was arrested himself, he was accused of having had the wrong contacts.

In these early years Ezhov did not yet have the reputation of being a cruel and merciless henchman. He was not considered to be all that bad. In the province he gave the impression of “a nervous but well-meaning and attentive person, free of arrogance and bureaucratic manners.” When Iurii Dombrovskii met Ezhov’s Kazakhstan Party colleagues, not one of them had anything negative to say about him: “He was a responsive, humane, gentle, tactful man. . . . Any unpleasant personal matter he without fail tried to solve quietly and to slow down.” “He responded to any request, even of little importance, and always helped as best he could,” a colleague of Ezhov from Kazakhstan told Anna Larina (Bukha-

rina). When Nadezhda Mandel'shtam met him at a holiday resort for Party bosses in 1930, she found him "a modest and rather agreeable person." A Russian who knew him in the same period wrote that he "made the impression of a good lad, a good comrade."⁸⁷

During the late 1920s Lev Razgon, who was married to Ivan Moskvin's stepdaughter, met Ezhov a couple of times in the family circle: "Ezhov did not at all resemble a vampire. He was a small slender man, always dressed in a crumpled cheap suit and a blue satin shirt. He sat at the table quietly, not talking much, somewhat shy, drank little, did not interrupt, only listened attentively, slightly bending his head." Moskvin's wife was anxious about his not eating enough; she was very concerned about his health (he had suffered from tuberculosis). He had a good voice and in company used to sing folk songs sometimes. Moskvin esteemed him as an irreproachable executor. When his former protégé was already NKVD chief, he told Razgon:

I don't know of any more ideal functionary than Ezhov. Rather, he is not a functionary, but an executor. After charging him with a task, you don't have to check up on him: he will accomplish the mission. Ezhov has only one, indeed essential, shortcoming—he does not know where to stop. . . . Sometimes you have to take care to stop him in time.⁸⁸

Ezhov's later colleagues in the Party leadership testified that he had "great organizational talents and an iron grasp," was "very energetic, a strong hand."⁸⁹ And he was "boundlessly devoted to Stalin."⁹⁰ According to Roy Medvedev, Stalin's influence on Ezhov became "total, unlimited, almost hypnotic."⁹¹ The Party leader made him a key figure in the struggle against the "enemies of the people"—against, that is, those who opposed his personal rule.