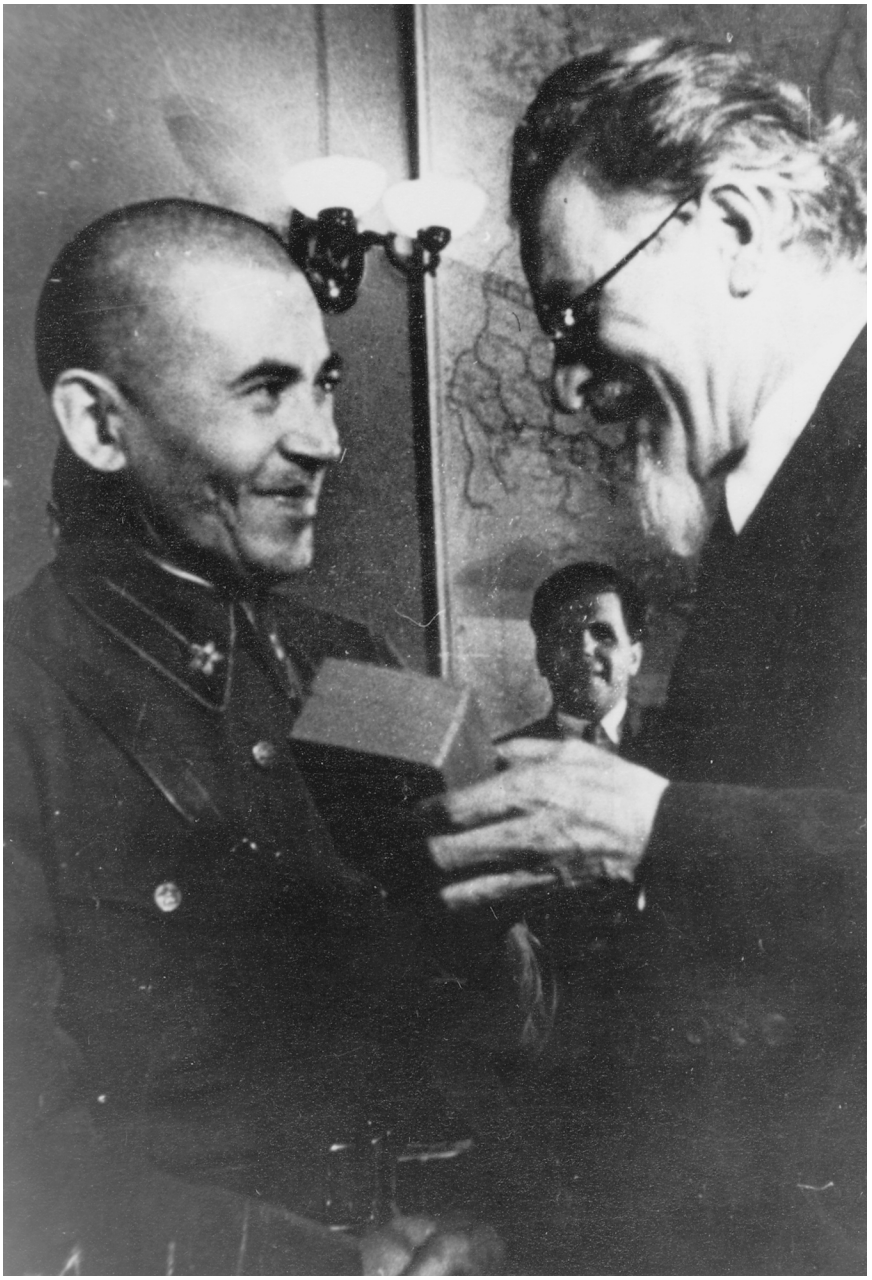
5
Apogee

On 17 July 1937 the Central Executive Committee (TsIK), in agreement with the Politburo, awarded Nikolai Ezhov the Lenin order "for his outstanding success in leading the NKVD organs in their fulfillment of government assignments."[1] Ten days later, with the preparations of the mass operations in full swing, TsIK President Mikhail Kalinin ceremonially handed over the order to him, as well as orders to some 120 other NKVD executives: Bel'skii, Berman, Dagin, Frinovskii, Gendin, Leplevskii, Litvin, Redens, Tsesarskii, Zakovskii, et al. Kalinin embraced him warmly, declaring that he had "introduced Party spirit, Bolshevism into the NKVD work" and calling him an example for the Chekists.[2]

A few days after that, *Izvestiia* published Boris Efimov's famous cartoon of Ezhov's "hedgehog's gauntlets" (*ezhovy rukavitsy*).* The cartoon showed an armored gauntlet crushing a reptile covered with the words "terror" and "espionage"; in the corner were Trotskii and his son, with frightened faces.[3] Later during the

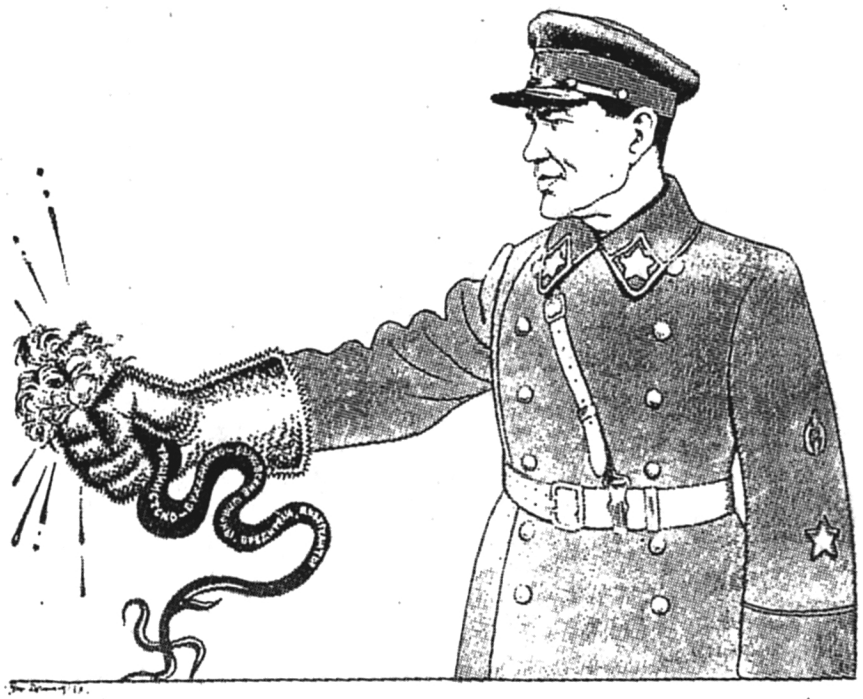
*In Russia, the expression *derzhat' v ezhovykh rukavitsakh* means "to rule with an iron rod."



Kalinin handing over the Lenin order to Ezhov, 27 July 1937. (Memorial collection)

same year, a poster by Efimov was published with Ezhov himself depicted, with the same gauntlet squeezing a poisonous snake, personifying the "enemies of the people."[4] His influence had reached its apogee. On 12 October 1937, following Stalin's proposal, the Central Committee at its Plenum promoted him to candidate member of the Politburo (replacing Ian Rudzutak, already arrested, shot the following year).[5]

During the Supreme Soviet elections of December 1937 Ezhov was preceded only by Stalin, Molotov, and Voroshilov in the number of nominations.[6] The poster of his "hedgehog's gauntlets" was affixed everywhere.[7] He was ultimately nominated in Gor'kii, where, on 9 December, three days before the elections, he



"Ezhov's hedgehog's gauntlets of steel" (*ezhovy rukavitsky*): poster by Boris Efimov, 1937. (Collection N. Petrov)

addressed a meeting attended by 75,000.[8] He praised the successes achieved during the socialist construction in the field of industrialization, the collectivization of agriculture, the conquering of unemployment, the increasing living standard, free education, equal rights of nations and of men and women. However, he stressed, these successes had not been achieved without struggle, and the struggle was not over. For the capitalists offered fierce resistance:

> . . . the stronger and richer we get, the more anger we provoke from the frenzied pack of the bourgeoisie, flirting with Fascism, preparing for war with us, and in the meantime sending us packs of spies, saboteurs, and wreckers. They inspire to struggle with the working people of the Soviet country those leftovers of the capitalist classes that have not yet been finished off, mobilizing under their Fascist banners the wretched remains of kulaks, criminals, and Trotskiist-Bukharinist degenerates. During their struggle, this whole disgusting bunch of Trotskiist-Bukharinist degenerates play the most dirty, fishy, monstrous tricks on us, in order somehow to call a halt to the triumphant advance of our people toward communism.
>
> Our further successes to a high degree will depend on our ability to identify these clever methods of the class enemy against us, on our will at last to cleanse the Soviet country of this vermin. . . . Much of our success must depend on the increasing of our revolutionary Bolshevist vigilance. . . . Our Soviet people will exterminate to a man all these despicable servants of the capitalist lords, vile enemies of all workers.[9]

He was of course elected to the Supreme Soviet, together with Frinovskii, Bel'skii, and sixty-two other NKVD executives; moreover, thirty-two of their colleagues were elected to the Nationalities Soviet.[10]

On 20 December 1937 the twentieth anniversary of the NKVD was celebrated all over the country, with articles in the press and meetings in factories and kolkhozes.[11] A ceremonial meeting was held in the Bol'shoi Theater, with in the Presidium

Andreev, Kaganovich, Khrushchev, Mikoian, Molotov, Voroshilov, Zhdanov, Frinovskii, Redens, et al. and in the middle, of course, Ezhov himself. In his speech Politburo member Anastas Mikoian praised him as a "gifted, faithful Stalin pupil": "He has smashed the vicious spy nests of Trotskiist-Bukharinist agents of the foreign intelligence services, cleansed our native land of many enemies of the people, who had sought to turn back the wheel of history." "Learn from comrade Ezhov the Stalinist style of working he has learned and is learning from comrade Stalin!" Mikoian added. Ezhov had "created within the NKVD a splendid backbone of Chekists, Soviet intelligence officers." He had taught the Chekists "an ardent love for Socialism and for our people, as well as hatred for all enemies": "Therefore today the whole NKVD and comrade Ezhov in the first place are the favorites of the Soviet people. . . . In our country every worker is an NKVDist!"[12] Ezhov and the NKVD were praised by the rest of the Party press as well—for example, by *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo*, edited by Malenkov, writing in December 1937: "The Soviet people love their intelligence service, because it defends the vital interests of the people and it is their flesh and blood."[13]

Ezhov's name was bestowed on everything from a Dal'stroi steamer, a factory in the Ukraine, the Dinamo stadium in Kiev, to a district in Sverdlovsk, the NKVD troops officers' school, the Krasnodar Higher Agricultural School, and hundreds of other educational institutions, kolkhozes, Pioneers' troops, and so on; on 15 July 1937 the Politburo voted to rename the city of Sulimov, capital of the Cherkess Autonomous Province in the Northern Caucasus, Ezhovo-Cherkessk.[14] (Early in 1938 Ezhov proposed that Moscow be renamed Stalinodar, but Stalin dismissed the idea.)[15]

Ezhov was even immortalized in poetry. On 10 December 1937, during the election campaign for the Supreme Soviet, *Ogonek* weekly published a long paean of praise by Kazakhstan's "national poet," Dzhambul Dzhabaev. The title was "Song of *Batyr* Ezhov," *batyr* being a local word for hero:

Stalin's faithful and devoted friend,
Before whom enemies tremble in fright.
He does not betray his love for the native land.
The country knows him as its best friend.
Spies and sworn enemies dream about him,
Always with a bare slicing sword.
. . . . . .
I praise the hero, who sees and hears
How the enemy, who creeps upon us in the dark, breathes.
I praise the courage and strength of the hero
Who strikes the enemies with an iron hand.
I praise *batyr* Ezhov, who
Dug up and wiped out the snakes' lairs,
Who stood up, threatening the winged enemies,
To guard the country and its harvest.
Be forever decorated with the Lenin order,
Our sharp-sighted guardian of factories and fields,
And let my song carry throughout the world
Universal glory to our native *batyr*.[16]

A week earlier, on 3 December, *Pravda* had published parts of another poem by the same Dzhambul, "People's Commissar Ezhov." During the next month, the literary journal *Novyi mir* published the complete text of this "Poem on People's Commissar Ezhov," again in a Russian translation from the Kazakh:

Make, dombra,* for the country's favorite
Eagle's screams with your strings.
Play, dombra, so that the nations will learn
About the knight of Stalin's strong rock.
. . . . . .
In flashing lightning we came to know
Sharp-sighted and intelligent People's Commissar Ezhov.
Great Lenin's wise words
Trained the hero Ezhov for battle.
Great Stalin's ardent call

*Dombra: a Kazakh stringed instrument.

Was heard by Ezhov with all his heart, all his blood.
When October's dawn began to shine,
He stormed the palace with courage in his eyes.
. . . . . .
With glittering sword he boldly leads
The people, dressed in greatcoat, into the attack.
He fights, while learning from the great *batyrs*,
Like Sergo [Ordzhonikidze], Voroshilov, and Kirov.
He is tender to fighters, severe to enemies,
Battle-hardened, brave Ezhov.
. . . . . .
Ezhov was sent to us [Kazakhs] by Lenin and Stalin.
Ezhov arrived, dispersed the mist,
And roused Kazakhstan to the battle for happiness,
United the *auls* under the banner of the Soviets,
Gave the strength and wisdom of the Kremlin decrees.
Leading the Kazakh people,
He led the advance against *bais* and *beks*.
The people followed Ezhov into the offensive.
The golden visions came true.
Ezhov drove the bloodsuckers over the mountains,
Liberating their herds.
. . . . . .
All love you here, comrade Ezhov!
Canals, ponds, the blue lakes
Look to you happily.
. . . . . .
The feather-grass sings its song about you,
Your breathing is in the movement of the wind.
More sonorous than waterfalls, more wonderful than canals,
The steppe bards [*akyny*] sing songs for you.
. . . . . .
They exulted, bringing us fetters,
But the beasts fell into Ezhov's trap.
Great Stalin's faithful friend,
Ezhov broke their traitorous circle.
The wicked enemy breed has been disclosed
By the eyes of Ezhov, the eyes of the people.
Ezhov has been on the watch for all poisonous snakes

And has smoked out the reptiles from their lairs and dens.
The whole scorpion breed has been routed
By the hands of Ezhov, the hands of the people.
And the Lenin order, all ablaze,
Has been given to you, faithful Stalinist People's Commissar.
You are a sword, quietly drawn and threatening,
A fire, scorching the snakes' nests.
. . . . . .
The clear word of millions of voices
Flies from the people to *batyr* Ezhov:
Thank you, Ezhov, that, raising the alarm,
You guard the country and the leader.[17]

In an article titled "My Happiness," Dzhambul recalled his visit to Ezhov in Moscow on 8 January 1938, on which occasion he sang his song. Ezhov called Dzhambul "our country's best poet" and declared: "I have been brought up by Stalin and the party of Lenin and Stalin. I have served it, do serve it, and will serve it until the end of my days."[18]

A grateful Dzhambul then produced a new work, "Wipe Them Out," which *Pravda* published on 7 March 1938 during the Bukharin trial. The poem pleads for "a dog's death for the dogs" and ends with another tribute to the hero:

Keep the country from the damned vipers,
Just as it is piously guarded by Stalin's friend
Who has been brought up for us by Lenin and Stalin,
Who is hard and severe, like cast steel,
Who is more courageous than the snow leopard
and more sharp-sighted than the eagle:
The country's favorite, vigilant Ezhov!

Probably in 1935, after being elected secretary of the Central Committee in February of that year, Ezhov and his wife, Evgeniia, moved from an apartment near Pushkin Square to the Kremlin.[19] They also had a luxurious dacha in Meshcherino, a picturesque place on the Pakhra River to the southeast of Moscow, just

beyond Gorki Leninskie, where more Soviet leaders had their dachas.[20] During the 1930s Evgeniia directed the editing of the popular journal *USSR Under Construction* (*SSSR na stroike*); successive editors in chief were Uritskii, Piatakov, Mezhlauk, and Kosarev.[21] Ezhov seems to have had little interest in his wife's literary, musical, and other passions.[22] According to Babel', he never attended her salons, and as soon as the guests saw Ezhov arriving at the house (it was said that Stalin himself sometimes gave him a lift), they quickly departed.[23] Under arrest one of Ezhov's adjutants, I. Ia. Dagin, testified that the Ezhovs very regularly ordered packages abroad through the People's Commissariat's Secretariat, which had at its disposal foreign valuta especially for this purpose, and "in the course of two years, several thousand dollars were spent for Ezhov's wife."[24]

They had no children of their own, and—probably in the summer of 1936—adopted a little orphan named Natasha from a children's home near Moscow. At the dacha, Ezhov taught her to play tennis, skate, and ride a bicycle. He is remembered as a gentle, loving father, showering her with presents and playing with her in the evenings after returning from the Lubianka.[25] Ezhov's mother, Anna Antonovna, lived in their apartment, or at least was there very often.

After arrest, Ezhov testified to having provided all his relatives with apartments. Moreover, he got his brother Ivan work in a GUGB Department of Operational Techniques workshop.[26] In November 1938, in a letter to Stalin that was probably never sent, Ezhov had depicted his relationship with his brother in a more negative way. He wrote that until recently his brother had been employed "as a warden [*komendant*] in one of our works [*ob'ekt*]." He had repeatedly instructed Frinovskii to fire him, but his deputy was in no hurry; on the contrary, Ivan had even received an apartment.[27] In 1934 Ivan had married Zinaida Ivanova, but in 1937 they divorced; she said that he humiliated her by bringing home prostitutes.[28] Later, during interrogation, an acquaintance affirmed that Ivan "constantly drank heavily and indulged in debauchery and hooliganism. Repeatedly he was

Ezhov *en famille*. From left to right, Natasha, Ezhov, Evgeniia Solomonovna, Ordzhonikidze, Zinaida Ordzhonikidze, possibly Ordzhonikidze's assistant Semushkin, 1936. (Memorial collection)

detained by the police; once, being drunk, he even broke the head of a policeman. But he was always released as soon as his close relationship with comrade Ezhov came to light."[29] One highly improbable story describes a meeting of the two brothers in the apartment of an acquaintance, during which, after some drinks, the two began arguing; Ivan called Ezhov a "bloodsucker" who had drenched the country in blood, and after a few days he was arrested and disappeared without a trace.[30] Certainly it is possible that behind his back Ivan called Ezhov a bloodsucker—the two had after all never gotten along—but Ivan did not disappear but was arrested only after his brother's arrest.

Ezhov's sister, Evdokiia, had six children with, it seems, a man called Nikolai Babulin. From the early 1930s on she lived in Moscow, in one of Ezhov's former apartments, with her second husband, Egor Pimenov, apparently a tailor, and some of her children; her son Sergei Babulin, also a former tailor, got an NKVD

job and the apartment of Iagoda's sister but was later fired.[31] During the second half of the 1920s, as related earlier, Liudmila and Anatolii Babulin had lived with their uncle; during the 1930s Anatolii, a mechanical engineer at the Central Scientific Research Institute for Aircraft Motor Building, again lived with Ezhov's family, as did also his brother Viktor.[32]

Ezhov and his wife both had their lovers. Evgeniia, it seems, continued her relationship with Babel'; she also had intimate relations with her chief, Uritskii.[33] In the spring of 1934 Ezhov made advances to an employee of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade, Tat'iana Petrova.[34] In 1935, Evgeniia's close friend Zinaida Glikina separated from her husband, and Evgeniia invited her to settle in their apartment. Later, after arrest, Ezhov testified that he had established intimate relations with his wife's friend (probably Glikina), as well as with her husband.[35] He also testified about his relationship with Evgeniia Podol'skaia, the wife of the Soviet plenipotentiary in Warsaw (born in 1903), whom he got to know well in 1931–33. Soon they began to "cohabit," which continued until her arrest on 1 November 1936, shortly after Ezhov was appointed NKVD chief. He ordered the Secret Political Department chief, V. M. Kurskii, to handle her interrogation personally so that she would not give compromising evidence against him.[36] A fifteen-year-old daughter was left behind alone because her father, Podol'skii, was unable to come from Warsaw, and she began to lead a dissolute life. Ezhov offered her protection on the condition that she also would "cohabit" with him. In his own words, he "inclined her to cohabitation in an active form"; it probably meant he could not keep his hands off her. But the girl refused.[37] On 10 March 1937 the Military Collegium condemned Evgeniia Podol'skaia to the death penalty for counterrevolutionary and terrorist activity; she was shot the same day.[38]

Ezhov continued to drink heavily. His relatives testified about his "drinking bouts" at home or the dacha together with friends and colleagues, many of whom were later "unmasked" as "enemies of the people." According to Anatolii Babulin, friendly relations were based on systematic drunken orgies.[39] Nor did he drink

only at home. According to the testimony of Vasilii Efimov, Ezhov's bodyguard in 1937–38, Frinovskii and Shapiro, the chief of his Secretariat, also introduced "drinking bouts" in his office, ordering wine, brandy, and other drinks via the guard department. Efimov recalled how Ezhov and Litvin, having gotten "terribly drunk," at six or seven in the morning started to play at skittles (*gorodki*), making Efimov and other adjutants run to collect sticks and skittles (*riukhi*). Ezhov often got drunk at his residence on Gogol' Boulevard and would then go to Lefortovo prison to interrogate prisoners.[40] I. Ia. Dagin, in 1937–38 chief of the guard department, during interrogation confirmed that "there was not a single day that Ezhov did not drink hard" and that he drank in his office as well, where Shapiro took care of the brandy. Sometimes, after heavy drinking, Ezhov indeed left for Lefortovo prison. Frinovskii and Bel'skii were not up to the drinking bouts, but Ezhov forced them to continue.[41]

All the same, Ezhov worked very hard. During this period of his career, he had to be forced to take a holiday. On 1 December 1937 the Politburo decided that Ezhov should be forbidden to appear at work and should leave town for a week's rest; Stalin personally was instructed to see to it that his state security chief carried out the decision.[42]

At the October 1937 Central Committee Plenum, Stalin announced that since the June 1937 Plenum eight Central Committee members and sixteen candidates had been expelled and arrested as "enemies of the people."[43] Among them were Deribas, Gikalo, Khataevich, Nosov, Piatnitskii, and Vareikis. In December of the same year the Central Committee by referendum voted for the expulsion and arrest of ten other members and candidates, also "enemies of the people."[44] From 11 to 20 January 1938 another Central Committee Plenum was held, coinciding with the first session of the Supreme Soviet (12–19 January). There has been much speculation about this Plenum. Some authors have considered it the beginning of the end of the mass repressions; others have seen it as simply marking a break in the activity of the troikas.[45]

USSR Supreme Soviet, first session, January 1938. From left to right (first row): Ezhov, Zhdanov, Mikoian, Kaganovich, Molotov, and Stalin, together with deputies from the Belorussian SSR. (RGAKFD collection)

What happened at the Plenum was that on 14 January Malenkov, who since February 1936 had been Ezhov's successor as head of the Department of Leading Party Organizations, reported "on errors of Party organizations in expelling communists from the Party, on formal bureaucratic attitudes toward the appeals of those expelled from the VKP(b), and on measures to eliminate these shortcomings." According to the speaker, during 1937 some 100,000 Party members had been expelled, whereas during the same period no less than 65,000 appeals had been submitted that had not yet been examined by the Party organizations. An end should be put to this "formalistic and callously bureaucratic attitude" toward Party members; the Central Committee and Stalin had already repeatedly insisted on this. Some communists sought to "reinsure themselves through repressions against Party members." They should be unmasked and branded as careerists, for they were "cleverly disguised enemies who try to disguise their hostility with shouts about vigilance, in that way to maintain

themselves in the Party ranks, who strive through repressive measures to beat up our Bolshevik cadres and to sow uncertainty and excess suspicion in our ranks."[46]

Suggestions that Malenkov's words were an expression of moderation, the veiled criticism by a "dove" on "hawks" like Ezhov, are unfounded. Stalin and Ezhov himself had made similar remarks. During the January 1938 Plenum, more leaders criticized excesses in the examination of personal cases of communists. Politburo candidate member Zhdanov demanded that people should not be accused without grounds and that accusations against every suspect should be investigated. Kalinin wanted people to be judged on the basis of their actions instead of their relations. Even Molotov thought that people who had erred should be distinguished from wreckers.[47]

First of all, the criticism was directed at some of the regional Party leaders, who in the opinion of the central leadership expelled too many Party members. The main target was the Kuibyshev Party chief, Pavel Postyshev. Already at the February–March Plenum of 1937, he had been criticized for publicly questioning the accusations against certain Party members he knew personally. Although he acknowledged his guilt, he was dismissed as Second Party Secretary of the Ukraine and as First Party Secretary of Kiev and Khar'kov and was then appointed First Party Secretary of Kuibyshev, for the time being retaining his Politburo candidate membership. Shortly before the Plenum, Malenkov had reported to Stalin that during the past three months Postyshev had disbanded thirty district committees and had proclaimed their leadership enemies of the people. Malenkov considered these actions "politically damaging" and in their consequences "manifestly provocatory."[48]

At the Plenum, none other than Ezhov himself, as well as Kaganovich and Molotov, blamed Postyshev for having disbanded so many district committees. Stalin proposed to expel him from the Central Committee.[49] He was replaced as Politburo candidate by Khrushchev, dismissed as Kuibyshev Party Secretary, and shortly after the Plenum expelled from the Party, also because of

his contacts with Rightist-Trotskiist counterrevolutionaries. On 21 February 1938 he was arrested. About the same time, the First Deputy People's Commissar of Defense, Marshal Aleksandr Egorov, was expelled from the Central Committee (in March of the same year he was arrested).[50]

The original idea had been to send the Party organizations a secret letter on the errors in expelling Party members, but after the Plenum discussion it was resolved to approve the draft of the secret letter and publish it as a Plenum decision. Stalin probably turned to publication because he wanted to put an end to the uncontrolled expulsions from the Party and to improve the situation in the lower Party organizations; simultaneously, he wanted to extend the mass operations, not mainly directed against communists. So on 18 January the Central Committee Plenum adopted a resolution, "On Errors of Party Organizations in Expelling Communists from the Party, on Formal Bureaucratic Attitudes Toward the Appeals of Those Expelled from the VKP(b), and on Measures to Eliminate These Shortcomings." It was pointed out that during the purges Party organizations had committed "serious errors and perversions." On many occasions they had adopted a "completely incorrect approach" and expelled communists from the Party "in a criminally frivolous way." They had pursued their "formalistic and callously bureaucratic attitude toward the fate of individual Party members"; many Party members had been expelled without foundation. This was made possible by the fact that among communists

> there exist, still unrevealed and unmasked, certain careerist communists who are striving to become prominent and to be promoted by recommending expulsions from the Party, through the repression of Party members, who are striving to insure themselves against possible charges of inadequate vigilance through the indiscriminate repression of Party members.

These communists should be unmasked and branded as "careerists striving to curry favor by expelling others from the Party and

to reinsure themselves through repressions against Party members." Both the expelling and the restoring to the rights of Party membership of those who had been incorrectly expelled should be done "on a careful individual basis." The Party organizations were directed "resolutely to end mass indiscriminate expulsions from the Party and to institute a genuinely individualized differentiated approach to questions of expulsion from the Party or of restoring expelled persons to the rights of Party membership."[51]

Indeed, the purge of the Party and state apparatus had negative consequences for the country's economic, cultural, and defense potential. All branches of the economy were affected, and the arrests of specialists and leaders at various levels disorganized economic life to a certain degree. The January Plenum ended this purge, but the "mass operations," on the contrary, were continued.

On 24–25 January 1938, right after the Plenum and the Supreme Soviet session, a conference of regional NKVD chiefs was held in Moscow. Most regional NKVD chiefs were Supreme Soviet deputies, and because they, along with a number of executives of the central NKVD apparatus, had attended the Plenum, one can infer that almost all conference participants were aware of the Party decision on errors by Party organizations in expelling communists.[52] The conference aimed in the same direction as the Plenum. Although the Plenum resolution had pointed out that expulsion of Party members should be taken under control, it had remained silent about the NKVD work and the repressions conducted; during the discussions nobody had condemned the repressive NKVD policy, nor had there been any criticism whatsoever of Ezhov. The terror against the Party was partially suspended and completely taken under control by the center, whereas the purge of society at large continued.

Stalin made a clear distinction between the Party purge and the mass operations—that is, the liquidation of the "national base of the intelligence services" and the "fifth column." He aptly combined both campaigns in time but, strategically, began the Party

purge approximately half a year before the mass operations, from the February–March Plenum of 1937 on; the Party purge was a necessary preparation for the mass operations starting in July 1937. But by early 1938 Stalin had realized that in order to preserve overall control, the Party purge had to be brought under control—hence the decisions at the January Plenum. Those decisions, however, had no relation whatsoever to the mass operations. One has only to think of the following Politburo decisions of 31 January 1938 and after about the allotting of new quotas and the continuation and even broadening of the national operations.[53] These were all Stalin's decisions. But during the summer of 1938 the situation in the Party was already quite different from what it had been in late 1937.

During the first seven months of 1938, some 37,000 people were expelled from the Party—only half as many as were expelled during the last six months of 1937. During the rest of 1938, the number diminished further. In carrying through the examination of complaints, proclaimed by the Plenum, during 1938 some 77,000 people were restored to Party membership, compared with 46,000 during 1937. Moreover, the Party began admitting new members on a large scale, a process that had been interrupted during 1937. Whereas during 1937 only some 32,000 members and 34,000 candidates had been admitted, in 1938 these numbers were approximately 148,000 and 437,000, respectively. All this testifies to a gradual restoration of the traditional practice of the Party function and of a relative stabilization of its personnel.[54]

The Party had changed considerably, however, with much more discipline and strict subordination to the center; it was much more manageable. Nor was it particularly a matter of restoring the balance between the Party and the NKVD, as Khlevniuk writes, for the balance had never actually been disturbed and the NKVD had always been strictly subordinated to the center. For the arrest of any Party member, preliminary approval by the relevant Party committee was obligatory (for nomenklatura functionaries this meant approval by the Central Committee).[55] In other words, the NKVD executives could not arrest Party members on

a whim but only after their expulsion from the Party or after approval by the relevant Party committee. In 1938, the number of arrests of communists grew, whereas the number of expulsions decreased. It is a normalization indeed when those who should be arrested (or have already been arrested) are expelled on purpose. As a matter of fact, many of those expelled in 1937 were not arrested.

When opening the NKVD conference, on 24 January 1938, Ezhov called upon those present to speak out "bluntly" and "pass criticism on themselves in a Bolshevik way." "It is better if we ourselves disclose our shortcomings, of which we have many," he explained:

> We have not become a genuine Soviet intelligence service yet. In any case, if we compare the tasks lying before Soviet intelligence and its present state, we are incredibly behind. There is an enormous gap between the tasks before us, the hope placed in us by the people and the instructions given by the Party on the one hand, and our practical work on the other.[56]

In this way Ezhov touched upon the question of continuing the purge of the NKVD apparatus. Having noted that in 1937 "we worked quite a lot and not badly," he added:

> Many comrades think that we have strongly purged around ourselves, that we have smashed all scum within our ranks. That is correct. We have solidly smashed them. If I were to give numbers of how many we have arrested, it should be said that in any case we did not lag behind other institutions, but that is not the point. It does not mean that among us there are no swine left. I assure you, that we have yet to purge.[57]

This was clearly a suggestion that between different Soviet institutions there was a feeling of competition with respect to the number of purged and arrested employees.

During their speeches following Ezhov's introductory speech, the regional NKVD chiefs stressed the necessity of continuing the mass operations and allotting additional quotas. Later, during investigation, Aleksei Nasedkin, the former Smolensk NKVD chief and from May 1938 on Interior People's Commissar of Belorussia, described the situation at the conference this way:

> Ezhov approved of the activity of those NKVD chiefs, who cited "astronomic" numbers of persons repressed, such as, for instance, the NKVD chief of Western Siberia, citing a number of 55,000 people arrested, Dmitriev of Sverdlovsk province—40,000, Berman of Belorussia—60,000, Uspenskii of Orenburg—40,000, Liushkov of the Far East—70,000, Redens of Moscow province—50,000. The Ukrainian NKVD chiefs each cited numbers of people arrested from 30,000 to 40,000. Having listened to the numbers, Ezhov in his concluding remarks praised those who had "excelled" and announced that, undoubtedly, excesses had taken place here and there, such as, for instance, in Kuibyshev, where on Postyshev's instruction Zhuravlev* had transplanted all active Party members of the province. But he immediately added that "in such a large-scale operation mistakes are inevitable."[58]

On 25 January, in his concluding remarks to the conference, Ezhov declared himself in favor of continuing the mass operations and keeping the troikas. But he also stressed the temporary character of the campaign and hinted that at some moment it would be ended. The troikas and the mass operation "should not exist outside of time and space": "someone has to be repressed, someone has to be shot; so the question is about quotas."[59] In his opinion, the "kulak operation" (order No. 00447) not only "went off brilliantly"—first of all it was supported by "the kolkhoznik, the muzhik"—but both mass operations should continue, the one concerning the "kulaks" as well as the "national" one: "Although

*V. P. Zhuravlev, Kuibyshev NKVD chief from September 1937 to February 1938.

these operations were limited by the terms of my orders, nonetheless I think that they can be conducted further."[60]

In most regions, it should be noted, the kulak operation was already ending. On 1 February 1938, as a result of order No. 00447, some 600,000 people had been condemned; after that date large additional quotas were given only to the Ukraine (30,000 on 17 February) and the Far East (20,000 on 31 July).[61] On the other hand, the realization of the "national" orders concerning the repression against Poles, Germans, Latvians, and so on increased. The shifting of attention to the "liquidation of the human basis of foreign intelligence services" followed from some of the theses in Ezhov's speech at the January NKVD conference; he especially insisted on the continuation of the repressions against Poles and deserters from Poland.[62]

Of course, Ezhov had to take some note of local "excesses," mainly concerning numerous complaints received by the Central Committee from the provinces. He mildly pointed to shortcomings of the Ordzhonikidze NKVD chief, P. F. Bulakh, who had been carried away in exposing nonexisting conspiracies. "This tendency to go too far" was "exhibited by many," Ezhov said, and it could lead to "unpleasant consequences"; but it was "the enemies" who were to blame, for they directed the terror for their provocative purposes, complicating the investigation and giving erroneous signals to the NKVD, while diligent and honest Chekists were under their thumbs here and there.[63] Only ten minutes earlier, however, he had praised Bulakh as an "excellent executive," and he criticized him in a friendly way, shifting all his mistakes on the "enemies" surrounding him. On the whole, the January 1938 NKVD conference did not imply that Ezhov and the NKVD leadership took aim at struggling against local excesses, as had happened in the Party. The mass operations developed according to their own logic, different from the Party purge.

At the conclusion of the conference, on 27 January in the Kremlin, a large group of regional NKVD chiefs were handed government decorations by the president of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Mikhail Kalinin: among others, B. D. Berman,

D. M. Dmitriev, N. N. Fedorov, A. I. Uspenskii, K. N. Valukhin, and V. P. Zhuravlev.[64] After arrest, the former deputy NKVD chief of Tula, V. Ia. Zazulin, testified that his chief, S. I. Lebedev, after returning to Tula convened a conference of the provincial NKVD operational staff at which he urged the speeding up of arrests, saying that the NKVD orders with respect to the mass operations were still in force: "As for the number of arrests, Tula province lags behind, and the NKVD will not forgive us that we did not cleanse Tula, the USSR smithy, as we ought to, from all kinds of suspicious elements subject to the NKVD orders, especially the defense industry." Lebedev gave instructions for competition between the provincial NKVD departments with respect to the number of arrests.[65]

At the time of his arrival in Moscow for the conference Uspenskii was still the Orenburg NKVD chief. Later, after arrest, he testified to have been summoned by a drunk Ezhov, with a bottle of brandy at hand, who urged his unwilling subordinate to succeed I. M. Leplevskii as Ukrainian Interior People's Commissar.[66] He was appointed and left for Kiev, to return to Moscow in early February in order to pick personnel. After the Politburo had decided on new quotas and "national contingents" subject to repressions, between 11 and 19 February (on those days he visited Stalin), Ezhov went on a mission to the Ukraine, accompanied by Uspenskii and a group of executives from the central NKVD apparatus. In Kiev, the group carried out large-scale arrests, with Ezhov, never sober, approving without looking into the matter.[67] Uspenskii was astonished and alarmed by his drunken table talk. During the trip, Ezhov drank uninterruptedly, boasting to Uspenskii that he had the Politburo "in his hands" and could do literally anything, arrest anyone, including Politburo members.[68] His bodyguard later testified that during the trip Ezhov stayed in Uspenskii's home, where the two men "systematically, day after day drank heavily"; the drinking bouts continued until the morning. Even at a meeting of NKVD executives, conducted by Ezhov, they appeared drunk. At a banquet with Ukrainian NKVD executives, the day before Ezhov's return to Moscow, the two "got outrage-

ously drunk. Ezhov was so drunk that we, his adjutants, in the presence of all officials, had to carry him away under his arms to sleep."[69] Whether or not rumors of such behavior reached Stalin is not known, but even hints of Ezhov's excesses could become a reason for Stalin's growing distrust.

To the Ukrainian Chekists, Ezhov stressed the need of intensifying the "national operations." At a conference of Ukrainian NKVD bosses in the presence of the new Ukrainian Party leader, N. S. Khrushchev, he noted the extremely unsatisfactory results of the mass operations in the Ukraine in 1937: "It turned out that we executed a good deal, but have not always seized those we should have," and "we are now entering a new operation, or rather, continuing this operation on a new basis." His point was that although a great many enemies had been shot, their leaders had not been exposed and the major counterrevolutionary organizations had not been disclosed. On the new direction of the terror he declared: "In one word, the cream, the big shots should be removed. It should be such a blow, that it will be really felt." Noting the specific character of the Ukraine, he stressed the priority of the "national operations": "For you such operations, like the Polish, the German, the Romanian, should be the center of your attention."[70] In this way, he helped Uspenskii lead a large-scale purge in the Ukraine, with the Politburo on 17 February permitting the latter to arrest an extra 30,000 people.[71] Khrushchev was also involved. In June 1938, he reported to the Ukrainian Party congress that almost the whole Party leadership had turned out to be hostile, until Ezhov arrived, "and the real crushing started."[72] The wave of repressions touched other places besides the Ukraine, as is made clear by the quotas sanctioned by the Politburo on 31 January 1938 and after. Excesses were straightened out only in Party cases.

After January 1938, the center of gravity of the repressions was transferred to the national operations. In accordance with the Plenum decisions of the same month, action was taken against some people who had distorted the policy and had tolerated excesses, mass expulsions from the Party, or mass arrests. Later,

after arrest, Frinovskii gave testimony on the matter: according to him, it was established that in Ordzhonikidze and a number of other provinces, prisoners had been murdered during interrogation, after which things were settled as if they had been condemned to death by the troikas; outrages were also reported from the Urals, Belorussia, Orenburg, Leningrad, and the Ukraine. They had increased most noticeably after the order "to repress other nationalities, suspects of espionage or ties with foreign consulates, deserters." In Leningrad and Sverdlovsk provinces and the Belorussian and Ukrainian republics, they had started arresting "indigenous inhabitants" of the USSR, on charges of ties with foreigners, although evidence was often lacking. "In this operation the cases were examined in Moscow by an especially created troika, presided over by Tsesarskii and then Shapiro."* In early 1938, the Central Committee sent Shkiriatov to Ordzhonikidze to "investigate evidence that had come through about criminal perversions during the mass operations" committed by regional NKVD organs. So as to create the impression that he had reacted on the signals in good time, after Shkiriatov's return to Moscow Ezhov handed over to him an "order," allegedly issued by him about the NKVD excesses in Ordzhonikidze province. But in fact no such order was ever issued.[73]

On 20 January Redens was transferred as NKVD chief from Moscow to Kazakhstan. Five days later I. M. Leplevskii was dismissed as Ukrainian Interior People's Commissar, to become head of the NKVD Transport Department; on 26 April he was arrested on a charge of belonging to the "Iagoda conspiracy" (that is, not because of any excesses). On 31 January the Rostov NKVD chief, Ia. A. Deich, was dismissed; on 29 March he was arrested. On 17 March the Ordzhonikidze NKVD chief, Bulakh, was dismissed because of "excesses" that went beyond the fixed quota (on 25 April he was arrested). On 16 April L. M. Zakov-

*In the national operations, the albums sent from the provinces, before being approved by the central dvoika, i.e. Ezhov and Vyshinskii, were surveyed by the main department chiefs, or at least by the chief of the Registration Department, V. E. Tsesarskii, in late March 1938 succeeded by I. I. Shapiro.

skii, Deputy Interior People's Commissar since January, was fired by the Politburo; two weeks later he was arrested, also on a charge of belonging to the "Iagoda conspiracy." On 22 May another NKVD chief who, like Leplevskii, was said to have committed excesses, the Sverdlovsk chief D. M. Dmitriev, was transferred to the NKVD Highways Directorate; on 28 June he was arrested as a conspirator.[74]

In Ezhov's view, it appeared that after the January 1938 Plenum the enemies had used the NKVD repressions for their own purposes, in order to parry the blow and direct it toward "honest" citizens. This thesis, apparently rectifying the situation, permitted new arrests (including some NKVD executives), this time to search for "real enemies." In the Bolshevik world view the enemies were insidious to such a degree that they could even turn the struggle against themselves in their favor, escape repressions, and incite the discontent of the innocently suffering masses.

Thus, from early 1938 on, the national operations became the main direction of the NKVD activity, replacing the kulak operation, which had been central during the autumn and winter of 1937. But shortcomings resulting from the inadequacies of the operational registration and from the simplified methods clearly manifested themselves in the work of the regional NKVD organs. So in February 1938 the Sverdlovsk NKVD chief, Dmitriev, complained about the slow examination of albums in Moscow. On 21 March Frinovskii riposted that the more than 10,000 prisoners in the albums presented by Dmitriev in overwhelming majority did not belong to the nationalities of the relevant national operations. He drew the conclusion that "you have in essence not executed the operational orders of the People's Commissar."[75]

In this way, numerous albums from the provinces piled up for examination in Moscow. In addition to this, in the spirit of the decisions of the January 1938 Plenum, the fight was started against those who had "distorted the Party line" by committing excesses, mass expulsions from the Party, or arrests. Of course, it did not bring the NKVD terror to an end, but a punctual execu-

tion of the directions from the center was clearly demanded, without any local initiative. So in February 1938 Frinovskii complained to Dagin that some regional NKVD chiefs "broke free from the leadership, ran off, went too far."[76] After arrest, Dagin testified that there had been "intolerable irresponsibility" in the examination of cases in the mass operations. The albums were supposed to have been examined by the NKVD leadership, which should also pass sentences; in fact, "the whole business was entrusted to Tsesarskii and Shapiro, who decided on their own whether a death sentence was passed or another punishment." But this procedure did not last long either: "soon they started to shove the album information over to the departments, leaving the decision to the department chiefs or sometimes even their deputies."[77]

During the summer of 1938 it had become evident that the central NKVD apparatus was unable to digest the enormous quantity of albums from the provinces with lists of those arrested in the national operations, which contained the names of more than 100,000 people. As a result, the prisons were overcrowded, and another way out had to be found. At Ezhov's request, on 15 September the Politburo decided to abolish the album procedure and to create regional Special Troikas, consisting of the regional Party chief, the NKVD chief, and the procurator, in order to settle the cases with respect to the national contingents. The troikas were allowed to impose the death penalty and immediately execute it. The decision further stated that the examination of the cases should be completed within two months—that is, before 15 November. The decision was signed by Stalin.[78]

All albums relating to national operations that had not yet been processed were returned to the regional NKVD organs to be examined by the Special Troikas. This time, the term set by the Politburo was not extended. On 15 November a halt was called to the examination of cases by the Special Troikas, and two days later, on 17 November, the Central Committee and the Council of People's Commissars in a joint resolution suspended the mass operations. During the two months of their activity, the Special

Troikas examined the cases of almost 108,000 people who had been arrested in the national operations. Over 105,000 of them were condemned, including more than 72,000 to the death penalty; among them were over 21,000 Poles and over 15,000 Germans.[79]