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Decline

In March 1938 the last of the three great Moscow show trials, that of the “Anti-Soviet Bloc of Rightists and Trotskiists,” took place; in the dock were Bukharin and his associates, and Iagoda. It was supervised by Stalin personally; Ezhov, who had headed the investigation, was in the supervising commission. He promised the defendants that if they behaved well, their life would be spared—a promise that was not kept.¹ According to testimony given after arrest by I. Ia. Dagin, then GUGB First Department chief, Ezhov even attended the execution. He instructed Dagin to beat up his predecessor Iagoda before the execution: “Come on, hit him for all of us.” On the other hand, the shooting of his drinking companion Bulanov upset him, and he ordered that he should be given brandy first.² The trial was the logical conclusion, as well as the ultimate proof, of the scheme Ezhov depicted at the June 1937 Plenum, confirming it all: the joining together of all hostile forces (the Right and Left Opposition in the first place), the “Center of Centers,” the ramified network of conspirators and spies in all spheres of Soviet life. In this sense, it completed his job. The mass operations, however, continued, and in this respect his mission in Stalin’s eyes was not at all complete.



Chubar' (effaced), Dimitrov, Ezhov, Andreev, Kalinin, Mikoian, Stalin, Molotov, and Kaganovich on their way to Red Square, 1 May 1938. (RGAKFD collection)

On 8 April 1938, after sharp criticism, the People's Commissar of Water Transportation, N. I. Pakhomov, was dismissed (later during the same month he was arrested, to be sentenced and shot afterward).³ Ezhov was appointed his successor, remaining at the same time Interior People's Commissar.⁴ By charging him with the extra job, Stalin killed two birds with one stone: Ezhov could correct the water transportation situation with tough Chekist methods, and his transfer to the terra incognita of economic tasks would leave him less time for the NKVD and weaken his position there, thus creating the possibility that in due course he could be removed from the leadership of the punitive apparatus and replaced by fresh people. After his fall, in a letter intended for Stalin but probably never sent, Ezhov indeed stated that after his appointment as People's Commissar of Water Transportation, he had dived completely into the new work; during two months he almost never went to the NKVD but left its management to his first deputy, Frinovskii.⁵



Shkiriatov, Ezhov, and Frinovskii on their way to Red Square, 1 May 1938.
(Memorial collection)

It is possible that the idea may already have been ripening with Stalin to force Ezhov gradually out of the supreme leadership. For the time being, however, Ezhov remained in favor. Neither he nor his associates sensed any kind of dirty trick in the appointment. On the contrary, his influence seemed to be growing: his appointment represented a further extension of his commissariat's power.⁶ Another sign that he enjoyed Stalin's confidence was that in May, during the election campaign for the Supreme Soviets of the republics, only Stalin and Molotov were nominated in more electoral districts.⁷ In June, the Ukrainian Party leader, N. S. Khrushchev, in an election speech praised Ezhov, together with Stalin,

for having unmasked the bourgeois nationalists: "We thank you and greet you, great Stalin, your best pupil Nikolai Ivanovich Ezhov, and all of you who by your Bolshevik actions have destroyed these vermin."⁸

The new People's Commissar started with a noisy campaign to eradicate "wrecking" in water transportation. Just over a week after his appointment, a lead article, "Root Out the Enemy Rabble to the End, Liquidate the Consequences of the Wrecking," appeared in the People's Commissariat's paper, *Vodnyi transport*, confirming that the "band of Trotskiist-Bukharinist thugs and spies, having forced their way to the top posts in the People's Commissariat, have tried to mess up water transportation."⁹ With the Politburo's consent, Ezhov reinforced the personnel of the People's Commissariat of Water Transportation with approved Chekists, bringing his own people from the NKVD and placing them in important functions—Ia. M. Veinshtok (who became his deputy), D. M. Sokolinskii, N. T. Prikhod'ko, R. A. Listengurt, V. M. Lazebnyi, and A. I. Mikhel'son.¹⁰ No fewer than an estimated twenty-five to thirty Chekists were transferred to the leadership of the People's Commissariat.¹¹ On 4 May Efim Evdokimov, dismissed as Party Secretary of Rostov province, was also appointed Deputy People's Commissar.

In his new job Ezhov used his customary NKVD methods. On 23 April the head of the Central Water Building Directorate, Lapisov, was arrested for "wrecking" management.¹² He introduced special forms to draw up orders, named "Joint Order of the USSR People's Commissariats of Internal Affairs and Water Transportation."¹³ Notwithstanding his claim that after his new appointment for two months he only made it over to the NKVD on rare occasions, he continued to devote himself seriously to NKVD business. When in April–May the NKVD was being restructured, he could not stand aloof. On 28 May, two weeks after the suicide of Zakovskii's successor as Moscow NKVD chief, V. A. Karutskii, he attended a conference of Moscow NKVD executives, where his protégé V. E. Tsesarskii was appointed the new chief. There were many similar matters demanding his attention, the more so be-

cause he was not satisfied with the management of Frinovskii, who—as he wrote to Stalin—“never was a deputy of full value.” Especially, Frinovskii tarried over further purging the NKVD apparatus:

At one time, with Frinovskii and many others present, I was so irritated that I requested the personal files of the officers of what was then the Fourth Department, in order to deal with them myself. Of course, nothing came of it. Once again I was worn out by all kinds of routine business, and the personal files were just lying there. To be fair, I must say that even in those times I purged quite a bit. But I did not look after the investigation, and it turned out to be in the hands of traitors. . . . I started to become irritable, snatched at everything, bringing nothing to an end. I felt that you were dissatisfied with the NKVD work, which deteriorated my mood still further.¹⁴

Ezhov made serious efforts to promote NKVD officers to crucial functions in the state and Party apparatus.¹⁵ In mid-1938, for example, a number of regional NKVD chiefs were promoted to regional Party leadership, including Omsk NKVD chief K. N. Valukhin (Sverdlovsk, 27 April) and Kirov NKVD chief L. P. Gazov (Krasnodar, May).¹⁶ Other protégés were placed in state apparatus positions. All these appointments were, of course, made with Stalin's consent and approved by the Politburo. Under certain conditions, Stalin might have been worried, but for the time being he closed his eyes to what might be happening and did not question Ezhov's loyalty and devotion. However, only a trace of doubt had to creep into his mind to arouse his suspicions to the point of accusing Ezhov of deliberately promoting his own people in order to seize power.

In mid-June Ezhov was astounded to learn that the Far Eastern NKVD chief, G. S. Liushkov, fearing arrest, had defected to Japan on 13 June, crossing the Manchurian border on foot.¹⁷ This former GUGB Secret Political Department deputy head had been appointed NKVD chief of the Azov–Black Sea province in August

1936 and in July of the following year had been transferred to the post of Far Eastern NKVD chief (of course, not without Stalin's knowledge—he had received him a few days before).¹⁸ Ezhov, who had known Liushkov well since 1933–34, had reason to feel apprehensive, since he might be suspected of having protected him. Later, Frinovskii testified that during the summer of 1937 the Georgian NKVD had sent them T. I. Lordkipanidze's testimony that Liushkov belonged to the “conspirators around Iagoda,” but Ezhov had not only withheld the evidence from the Central Committee but had also appointed Liushkov Far Eastern NKVD chief. He had instructed Frinovskii to reinterrogate Iagoda, thereby leaving Liushkov out of it. Understanding what was expected of him, Iagoda had testified that Liushkov was not involved in the conspiracy.¹⁹

Testimony by L. G. Mironov and others about Liushkov's conspiratorial activities was also withheld. Liushkov himself, however, was informed, and in January 1938, when he was in Moscow for the Supreme Soviet session, he agitatedly complained to Frinovskii that he was distrusted and was being shadowed. Frinovskii assured him that he and Ezhov “tried to keep him safe,” though in fact, Frinovskii wanted Liushkov arrested. Ezhov did not agree, fearing that the deceit with respect to the evidence would come to light and instead ordered Frinovskii to tell Liushkov that if the situation became critical he should commit suicide. The signal was to be a telegram from Moscow about his dismissal or promotion to Moscow, or the sending of a commission.²⁰ In March or April, when reinterrogating Mironov, Ezhov induced him to retract his testimony against Liushkov. Around the same time, on 16 April, Liushkov's deputy, M. A. Kagan, was summoned to Moscow and arrested upon arrival. According to Frinovskii, this was meant to signal Liushkov to commit suicide, but he did not react. The Central Committee wanted him dismissed soon. A second signal was Ezhov's telegram to Liushkov of late May 1938 about his promotion to the central NKVD apparatus in Moscow. But Liushkov, instead of committing suicide, escaped

to Japan.²¹ (Later, at his trial, Ezhov stated that he had wanted to arrest Liushkov but that he had escaped in time.)²²

According to Frinovskii, when Ezhov informed Stalin about Liushkov's defection, he made no mention of this telegram, or of the evidence he had against Liushkov.²³ As a consequence, after Liushkov's flight Ezhov's greatest concern was that his deceit would come to light. To Stalin, Liushkov's move was an extraordinary event, for there had never been any defectors at this level. Moreover, Liushkov knew a lot and might disclose state secrets. Ezhov also feared that discovery of the telegram would be taken as a signal for Liushkov to escape, which would incriminate Ezhov as being his accomplice. After resignation, in his letter to Stalin (probably never sent), Ezhov stated that as a result of Liushkov's desertion he "literally went mad":

I asked Frinovskii to go with me so that we could report to you together. On my own I did not have the strength. I told him: Now they will surely punish us severely. For such an obvious and major intelligence failure, they naturally don't pat you on the back. At the same time it proved that in the NKVD apparatus there were still traitors. I understood that you would develop a suspicious attitude toward the NKVD work. And that was indeed the case.²⁴

On the evening of 15 June, three days after Liushkov's defection, Frinovskii met with the Far Eastern army commander, Marshal V. K. Bliukher, in Ezhov's office. Bliukher wanted information about the mass operations and about Liushkov. He also wanted to find out what the attitude was toward himself, since he was under suspicion of being connected to the "military-fascist conspiracy." Before Ezhov was able to talk with them, he was summoned to the Central Committee. Frinovskii and Bliukher waited for him for a while and then were told that Ezhov would not return soon; Frinovskii, meanwhile, had told Bliukher that in two days he was going to the Far East.²⁵ By consequence, Frinovskii's trip had been decided before, so apparently either Ezhov

had already visited Stalin at some point between Liushkov's flight and the evening of 15 June, or else the decision had been taken during a telephone conversation of the two. Indeed, on 17 June the Politburo sent Frinovskii on a commission to the Far East, along with the chief of the Red Army Political Directorate, Lev Mekhlis. They were granted wide powers for sorting out the details of Liushkov's flight and making large-scale arrests. Before leaving, they sent an instruction to the regional NKVD and army and navy Special Departments chiefs to prepare within a week "a mass operation for the removal of Rightist and Trotskiist military-fascist elements, agents of the Japanese and other intelligence services, former White Guards, anti-Soviet elements among the former partisans, clergy, and sectarians, all Germans, Poles, Koreans, Latvians, Finns, and Estonians suspect of espionage." On arrival, Frinovskii carried out mass arrests. In addition, he watched Bliukher closely and reported on him to Moscow; on 22 October 1938 Bliukher was arrested on Ezhov's order (in accordance with Beriia). Frinovskii returned to Moscow only after 22 August, when Beriia had already been appointed Ezhov's first deputy.²⁶

Ezhov's authority was no longer unquestionable. On 12 June Gosplan head Nikolai Voznesenskii in a private conversation expressed doubts about Ezhov's excessive administrative gusto in the mass disclosing of conspiracies.²⁷ Shortly after 30 June, the People's Commissar of Defense, Voroshilov, was asked by his deputy, Ivan Fed'ko, to arrange a meeting for him with Ezhov in order to prove his innocence. Voroshilov advised against it, saying (according to his former adjutant Khmel'nitskii in 1961): "You should not go to Ezhov. . . . They will force you to write down all kinds of fables about yourself . . . there, everybody confesses." Within a week, Fed'ko was indeed arrested.²⁸ After his own arrest, Ezhov testified that around July 1938 Stalin and Molotov all of a sudden had started asking him about his suspicious contacts with F. M. Konar, who had been closely related to Ezhov through their work in the People's Commissariat of Agriculture until he was executed in 1933 as a "Polish spy." In 1937–38, Poland may indeed have been Stalin's greatest enemy, and contacts with a Polish

spy were considered something unforgiveable. As a result, Ezhov “felt that Stalin distrusted him.”²⁹

Realizing that Stalin was beginning to display his discontent, Ezhov felt that the ground was sinking beneath him. And when, on 14 July, the NKVD resident in Spain, Aleksandr Orlov, having been summoned to Antwerp, failed to arrive there, Ezhov did not report the fact to Stalin immediately, fearing that it would be another count of his future indictment. He understood that the Party leader already somewhat suspected him of having warned Liushkov of danger; withholding information on Orlov’s defection confirmed the picture. More and more Stalin had reason to distrust Ezhov.

In early August, the Ukrainian NKVD chief, A. I. Uspenskii, was in Moscow for the session of the Supreme Soviet commencing 10 August. As Uspenskii testified after arrest, in the Lubianka he



Party leaders on top of the Lenin Mausoleum viewing a gymnastic parade, 24 July 1938, with Stalin (third from left), Ezhov (fifth from right), Shkiriakov (fourth from right), and others. (RGAKFD collection)

was told by the head of the NKVD Secretariat, I. I. Shapiro, that "Ezhov is in great trouble, for he is distrusted in the Central Committee." According to Shapiro, it was rumored that "next to Ezhov there will come somebody . . . who should be feared"; Shapiro did not mention a name. He deemed it necessary to cover the tracks: within the next five days, one thousand people should be executed.³⁰ When Uspenskii met with Ezhov, Ezhov confirmed: "The tracks should be covered. All investigation cases should be finished in an accelerated procedure so that it will be impossible to make sense of it." Leningrad NKVD chief Litvin added that if they failed to cover it up and things looked bad, he would commit suicide. In such an event, Uspenskii himself planned to escape.³¹

The decision to appoint a new first deputy to Ezhov was already ripe in late July 1938. Stalin was probably dissatisfied with the state of NKVD affairs: investigations were taking too long and as a result the prisons were overcrowded and the mass operations were dragging. Perhaps reflecting his dissatisfaction with the delay, Stalin immediately confirmed the list of a large group of leading Soviet, military, and Party functionaries to be shot on 29 July. The arrest of people from Ezhov's close circle, like Bulakh, Leplevskii, and Zakovskii in April and Dmitriev in June, may also have resulted from Stalin's loss of confidence. Significantly, by 10 August there were rumors that a new deputy was to be appointed to Ezhov and that this boded ill for him. It was no accident that the largest group of prisoners was shot in a rush on 29 July; a month later, on 26 and 29 August, another group was shot, including Zakovskii, Salyn', and L. G. Mironov.³² Ezhov was in a hurry to get rid of people who might testify against him.

In connection with the discussion by the Supreme Soviet of the new law "On the Judicial System of the USSR," in August, it was rumored that the mass operations might cease and "Soviet legality" return. The leading Chekists believed in these rumors, though on the whole it made no difference: the mass operations proceeded at high speed and reached their apogee after 15 September, when Special Troikas were created to examine what remained of

the national contingents.³³ (The measurement of the dose of the terror, practiced by Stalin since the January 1938 Plenum, only related to the purge of the higher echelons of the state and the Party apparatus.)

In early August, even before Frinovskii had returned from the Far East, Stalin proposed him as People's Commissar of the Navy—apparently a promotion—and simultaneously blocked Ezhov's attempt to appoint his protégé M. I. Litvin, then the Leningrad NKVD chief, as Frinovskii's replacement.³⁴ That is why Shapiro was alarmed by the appointment of a new first deputy, although for the time being he did not know who it was going to be. In any case, Stalin appointed someone quite different from anybody Ezhov would have hoped for.

On 22 August 1938, the Georgian Party leader, Lavrentii Beria, was made First Deputy People's Commissar of the Interior. Ezhov, it appears, had started collecting incriminating evidence against him, in connection with his growing influence.³⁵ According to one version of events, Ezhov had even signed an order for his arrest, but Beria learned about it from Georgian NKVD chief Goglidze and immediately left for Moscow to be received by Stalin, the result of which was a long conversation ending in Beria's appointment as Ezhov's first deputy.³⁶ The story overlooks the fact that, without Stalin's consent, Ezhov could not have any plans, and certainly no written order, to arrest Beria, who was a member of the Central Committee and of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. If Stalin had consented, he would not have received Beria, who would have been arrested right away. It seems more likely that Stalin talked with Beria about his transfer to the NKVD as first deputy during the session of the Supreme Soviet starting on 10 August; as members of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, they met regularly. (Between 11 March and 13 September 1938 no visits by Beria to Stalin's Kremlin office were registered, but the visitors' journal does not reflect all of Stalin's contacts.)³⁷

The register of visits to the NKVD chief (preserved in the FSB archives) indicates that Beria was immediately received by Ezhov

on the evening of 22 August.³⁸ Shortly after, Beriia returned to Georgia for a few days to direct a Plenum of the Georgian Central Committee at which a new First Secretary was to be elected. The Plenum took place on 31 August in Tbilisi. During the stay Beriia may well have selected loyal people, personally talking with V. N. Merkulov, B. Z. Kobulov, V. G. Dekanozov, and other executives: in the course of the following weeks these men appeared in Moscow to occupy main positions in the central NKVD apparatus. In early September Beriia was back in Moscow and began his NKVD work. On 4 September he conferred with Ezhov in his NKVD office for the entire afternoon.³⁹

Later, in the (probably unsent) letter to Stalin, Ezhov wrote that he was upset by Beriia's appointment, sensing "an element of distrust toward me," and thought it "the preparation for my dismissal," supposing Beriia "might occupy the post of People's Commissar."⁴⁰ Shortly after Beriia's appointment, probably in late August, Ezhov indeed assembled some of his protégés at his dacha and warned that they would be disposed of soon.⁴¹ His close collaborators were, as he predicted, dismissed and arrested and replaced by Beriia's people from Georgia. The ease with which this happened showed the People's Commissar's impotence. But, encouraged by Frinovskii, he did not intend to surrender without a fight.

According to a number of testimonies, after Beriia's appointment Ezhov took to even heavier drinking, appearing for work at three or four in the afternoon.⁴² Nevertheless, he made several attempts to isolate his new first deputy within the NKVD leadership. He intended to appoint the Kazakhstan NKVD chief, S. F. Redens, second deputy as a counterbalance, but when Redens thought it no longer served any useful purpose, he tried to reduce Beriia's influence by reanimating the NKVD Collegium.⁴³ This led nowhere either. The collecting of evidence compromising Beriia was intensified, and on Frinovskii's advice Ezhov handed it over to Stalin, but to no avail.⁴⁴ Beriia had obtained wide powers from Stalin and did not intend to share them with anybody, and to that end he secured the acceptance of a procedure by which a number

of key documents emanating from the NKVD were valid only with his signature added to Ezhov's.⁴⁵ On 29 September Beria was appointed GUGB chief, with Merkulov as deputy.⁴⁶

Frinovskii had returned to Moscow on 25 August, just after Beria's appointment, and he was invited straight to the NKVD and stayed with Ezhov for more than an hour. After arrest he testified: "I had never seen Ezhov in such a depressed state. 'Things are rotten,' he said, passing right away to the question that Beria had been appointed contrary to his wish." On 27–28 August Frinovskii met with Evdokimov, who insisted that before Beria arrived he must take care of any unfinished cases (*nedodelki*) that might compromise them. He told Frinovskii: "Check to see whether Zakovskii and all Iagoda people have been executed, because after Beria's arrival the investigation of these cases may be renewed and they may turn against us." Frinovskii then ascertained that a group of Chekists, including Zakovskii and Mironov, had been shot on 26–27 August (actually they were shot on 29 August).⁴⁷ Ezhov, Frinovskii, and Evdokimov were with good reason concerned about Chekists who had been arrested on charges of conspiracy and might under Beria's regime testify against Ezhov's circle, or even against Ezhov himself. It was no accident that the executions took place in a hurry in late August, while Beria was away in Georgia.

Frinovskii did not need explanations: Beria had obviously been appointed so that he could be moved to the post of Interior People's Commissar. Frinovskii sensed a new purge was approaching.⁴⁸ He stayed on as Ezhov's deputy until 8 September, when he was appointed People's Commissar of the Navy. Beria immediately took over as chief of the NKVD First Directorate (state security); henceforth, NKVD documents were signed by Ezhov and Beria together. Beria also immediately initiated a change in the NKVD central apparatus structure; the Politburo considered the first plans on 13 September, and within ten days approved the new structure. Officially, Beria took over the GUGB on 29 September, but one may safely conclude that from early September on, after Frinovskii's departure, Beria had assumed

absolute power in the NKVD. On 13 September A. P. Radzivilovskii and M. S. Alekhin were arrested, on 15 September the Moscow NKVD chief, V. E. Tsesarskii, was demoted to chief of the Ukhta-Izhma camp, and on 24 September the former Belorussian NKVD chief (since May 1938 head of the NKVD Third Directorate) B. D. Berman was arrested.

One can only conjecture why Beriia was promoted and not somebody else. Stalin's choice was probably connected with the fact that Beriia was under threat of being persecuted by Ezhov. In 1938 their former friendship had fallen apart, when Ezhov investigated a number of signals received in Moscow with respect to Beriia. Stalin understood that under these circumstances Beriia and Ezhov had become rivals, and he could appoint Beriia as Ezhov's successor without having to fear a possible intrigue between the two. The new Interior People's Commissar had to be a Party functionary who was a Central Committee member and had a serious Cheka record. The only other candidate with such a background was M. D. Bagirov.

Already years before, Beriia had made a good impression on Stalin, as appears in a 1932 letter that Stalin wrote to Kaganovich. Beriia was "a good organizer, businesslike and capable," whereas Ia. I. Mamuliia, proposed as Georgian Party secretary by Ordzhonikidze, was "not worth the left foot of Beriia."⁴⁹ Stalin appreciated Beriia not merely as a Party secretary, who moreover had actively contributed to the work of the February–March Plenum of 1937; he also knew him to be a man of tough Chekist methods. In 1937–38, as the Georgian Party leader, he had personally taken part in the interrogating and beating of prisoners.⁵⁰ But it was Stalin's tactic not to appoint Beriia as Interior People's Commissar immediately but rather to put him in as first deputy only, thus, by degrees, paving the way for Ezhov's removal. This was Stalin's characteristic cunning, moving step by step, frightening Ezhov to make him toss about, and pushing him to disclose his weak spots.

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There were no more mass arrests and persecutions of Party members in the summer of 1938 like those during the second half of 1937. After the January 1938 Central Committee Plenum, the NKVD terror against the Party was carefully monitored by Stalin and rigorously supervised by the Party organs.⁵¹ During the summer and autumn of 1938, the arrests of leading Party functionaries of course continued, but they were always approved by Stalin. The regional Party leadership appreciated the “healthier” atmosphere. In June the third secretary of the Party committee of Rostov province, M. A. Suslov, reported to a Party conference that the situation in the province had improved compared with half a year ago: “The practice of indiscriminate expelling from the Party has ceased. An end has been put to impunity for a various number of slanderers. Gradually the situation of general suspiciousness is breaking down. The provincial committee leadership has thoroughly and attentively investigated the appeals of those expelled.”⁵²

Throughout 1937 E. G. Evdokimov had been First Party Secretary of Rostov province (before September 1937 part of Azov–Black Sea province), until in May 1938 he was dismissed and appointed Deputy People’s Commissar of Water Transportation under Ezhov. In April 1939, after arrest, he testified that upon being transferred to Moscow he had asked Ezhov to have him “politically verified,” for he supposed that his dismissal was connected with the recent arrests, such as that of his assistant Magnichkin, and with distrust toward him. Ezhov promised a verification. When later Evdokimov asked him about it, however, Ezhov repeatedly hedged on it: “During all talks he had with me, I felt he was sizing me up and studying me.”⁵³

It is interesting to realize that the writer Mikhail Sholokhov, living in Veshenskaia in Rostov province, had complained to Stalin personally about the terror reigning in his home region with respect to communists. He had also criticized the provincial Party committee, especially Evdokimov, and the provincial NKVD (which until July 1937 had been led by Liushkov). A commission with M. F. Shkiriakov of the Party Control Commission and V. E. Tsesarskii, then the GUGB Fourth Department chief, examined

the case on the spot and on 23 May 1938 reported to Stalin and Ezhov that Sholokhov's accusations were founded only in part and that no drastic measures were necessary.⁵⁴ By then, however, Evdokimov had already been dismissed. During his trial, Ezhov claimed that the Rostov Party secretary was dismissed on account of his reports to the Central Committee.⁵⁵

From mid-1938 on, Ezhov's activity as NKVD chief clearly diminished. Later, during investigation, the (by then, former) head of the NKVD Secretariat, I. I. Shapiro, demonstrated the remarkable change in this respect. Originally, Ezhov had been much interested in investigation work: he frequently visited Lefortovo prison and sent for prisoners, "made the round of the departments, where prisoners were interrogated, summoned executives conducting the investigation." But since August he "completely kept aloof from this business": "It was all transferred to the department heads, without any control, leadership, and supervision from above."⁵⁶ Dagin testified that Ezhov's somber mood started in May; he rushed about in his office and was irritable. His adjutants, like Shapiro, Litvin, and Tsesarskii, were also depressed: "they had lost their former arrogance and were upset by something." Dagin supposed it was connected with the fact that "in a number of provinces serious excesses and perversions in the NKVD work had come to light, particularly in the Ukraine under Leplevskii, Sverdlovsk under Dmitriev, Leningrad and Moscow under Zakovskii, the Northern Caucasus under Bulakh, Ivanovo under Radzivilovskii, and so on." Then, after Liushkov's desertion, Ezhov "completely lost heart"; starting to cry, he told Dagin, "Now I am done for."⁵⁷

After Beriia was appointed first deputy, A. I. Uspenskii (according to his testimony of April 1939) witnessed an "unbelievable panic" among the executives of the central NKVD apparatus in connection with the arrests of colleagues taking place. Uspenskii himself also feared arrest and decided to escape; according to Frinovskii, Ezhov was in a state of panic and started to drink heavily.⁵⁸ Dagin described Ezhov as being totally upset by Beriia's appointment; the very next day, he fell ill—that is, he "took to

drink at his dacha”—and he stayed “ill” for more than a week. Then he reappeared in the NKVD, in a somber mood just as before; “he refrained from all business and received almost nobody.”⁵⁹ A subordinate who was summoned to his Lubianka office late one evening found him “sitting in his shirt sleeves on a sofa behind a table laden with bottles of vodka. His hair was ruffled and his eyes were swollen and inflamed: he was obviously drunk but he also seemed excited and alarmed.” A few days later the subordinate was arrested.⁶⁰

After arrest, Ezhov was accused of having schemed against the Party leadership. He testified himself that after arrests began within the NKVD he, together with Frinovskii, Dagin, and Evdokimov, made plans to commit a “putsch” on 7 November, the October Revolution anniversary, during the demonstration in Red Square. The plan was to cause a commotion and then in the panic and confusion to “drop bombs and kill someone of the government members.” Dagin, who was chief of the NKVD guard department, was to execute the plan, but on 5 November he was arrested, followed a few days later by Evdokimov. Ezhov alone could not prevent Beria’s initiative. “This way all our plans collapsed.”⁶¹

All this really only amounted to drunken talk. It was true that Ezhov’s acquaintance V. K. Konstantinov (according to his evidence) witnessed a conversation between Ezhov and Dagin on 3 or 4 November, which he understood to mean that Dagin was to organize something “with conspiratorial aims” on Ezhov’s orders. Dagin was somewhat embarrassed by Konstantinov’s presence, but Ezhov, who was very drunk, paid no attention; when he asked Dagin whether he had taken all necessary steps, Dagin—looking at Konstantinov uncomprehendingly—answered that he did not quite understand. Then Ezhov raised his voice and said: “Immediately remove all people posted in the Kremlin by Beria, and replace them with reliable people. Don’t forget, time does not wait: the sooner the better.” Looking with bewilderment at Konstantinov, Dagin answered that it would be done.⁶²

The striking scene may indeed have taken place. During inter-

rogation, Dagin confirmed that one night in late October or early November, when he was still at work in the Kremlin around six o'clock in the morning, he was called in by Ezhov, who had not yet gone to sleep either. His chief turned out to be "heavily drunk" and was accompanied by Konstantinov, who was also "rather drunk."⁶³ Imagine the scene: Ezhov is completely drunk and gives his fantasies free rein. Dagin realizes the state he is in and that an outsider is present but has to say yes. And of course he is no longer in the position to replace members of the Kremlin guard because these things are now being dealt with by Beria.

Evdokimov gave similar evidence. According to him, in September he discussed the threatening situation after Beria's appointment with Ezhov, Frinovskii, and Bel'skii. Allegedly, they agreed to prepare an attempt on Stalin and Molotov. Ezhov was also said to have had plans to murder Beria.⁶⁴ Obviously, Ezhov's utterances with respect to terrorism were no more than drunken talk, the fantasizing of somebody who had become embittered toward Stalin and his adjutants. After his arrest, Beria's investigation, not taking it too seriously, did not delve into it deeply.⁶⁵ According to Iu. K. Ivanov, an NKVD executive from Evdokimov's circle, as early as late July, after a visit to Ezhov, Evdokimov had alluded to terrorism against the Party leadership. Involved in the conspiracy first of all were people originating from North Caucasica (Evdokimov's home base), Dagin, Nikolaev-Zhurid, and others. But the action, planned for 7 November, did not take place because Dagin was arrested beforehand.⁶⁶

According to Konstantinov, some time in mid-November Ezhov told him that his song was ended, thanks to Stalin and loyal Stalinists like his deputy Beria: "If they could be removed, all would be different." He suggested that Konstantinov should kill Stalin, but without giving any concrete form to his plans.⁶⁷

On 8 October the Politburo instructed a commission to prepare within ten days a draft decree by the Central Committee, the Council of People's Commissars, and the NKVD pertaining to a "new policy on the making of arrests, on the supervision by the

procuracy, and on the conducting of investigations.” Ezhov presided over the commission, which included Beria, Malenkov, Vyshinskii, and People’s Commissar of Justice N. M. Rychkov.⁶⁸

According to his son, Malenkov played a main role in bringing down Ezhov. Malenkov had (since 1935) been Ezhov’s deputy as head of the Central Committee Department of Leading Party Organizations. Malenkov’s biographer says that their relations were “those of a chief and a subordinate, of a teacher and a pupil,” and continued to be so after 1936, when Malenkov replaced Ezhov as head of the department. Its journal, *Partiinoe stroitel’sтво*, edited by Malenkov, thus extolled Ezhov’s teaching abilities: “Comrade Ezhov taught us how to reorganize the Party’s work, how to raise organizational work to a higher level, and how to make this work more effective. . . . We strive to carry out these instructions.”⁶⁹

In 1937–38 Malenkov made an important contribution to the forming of the NKVD staff. As head of the Department of Leading Party Organizations he supervised the selection and assignment of nomenklatura personnel over the whole country and in all branches, including the NKVD. In his recollections, Vasilii Riasnoi describes how in February 1937 as a regional Party secretary he was summoned to Moscow and received by Malenkov; he found himself in a group of Party people who had been transferred to the central NKVD apparatus. Malenkov accompanied them to the Lubianka, to Ezhov, and at parting addressed them: “We are surrounded by enemies. They are everywhere, and you should guard the achievements of the revolution!” According to Riasnoi, Malenkov “more than anybody else” was engaged in the organization of things in the Lubianka.⁷⁰ In his memoirs Khrushchev claims that at an unspecified moment (probably late 1937 or early 1938) Ezhov asked Stalin to give him Malenkov as a deputy.⁷¹ In the statement for Stalin he probably never sent, Ezhov wrote that he had been in urgent need of somebody dealing with personnel and had asked for such a person all the time.⁷² Because Malenkov was specialized in this field and Ezhov knew him well

and trusted him, it is likely that he did ask for his pupil as a deputy for personnel.

It is of particular interest in this connection that, according to Minister of the Interior N. P. Dudorov's words at the June 1957 Central Committee Plenum, after his arrest on Beria's orders Ezhov was interrogated especially about Malenkov and that he wrote down almost twenty pages of evidence on him. Until his own arrest, in June 1953, Beria kept this document with him; it was then passed on to Dudorov, who in February 1955 showed it to Malenkov. "Malenkov stated that everybody knew about this document, and took it 'to his apartment in order to destroy it.' That is how the document disappeared."⁷³

In light of the role Malenkov played in the repressions of 1937–38 against Party people, both in Moscow and in the provinces, it is clear that he could have acted against Ezhov only at the instigation of Stalin.

The commission had to regulate the policy of repressions. It had been Stalin's decision to end the mass terror. With Beria's support, Malenkov could now act openly against Ezhov. The commission went to work, initially at the Lubianka. According to the register of visitors, on the evening of 13 October Malenkov, Vyshinskii, and Rychkov were with Ezhov for some two hours; between 9 and 14 November Ezhov several times received Vyshinskii alone; and on 15 November Malenkov and Vyshinskii visited Ezhov for several hours. The commission members also had separate meetings with Beria, without Ezhov. The result of all these conversations and agreements was the resolution of the Central Committee and the Council of People's Commissars, "On Arrests, the Supervision by the Procuracy, and the Conducting of Investigations," which put an end to the mass operations; on 17 November 1938 the resolution was approved by the Politburo. Thus, the commission did not by order of the Central Committee make an investigation into Ezhov's activities. On the contrary, Ezhov himself presided over the commission; it was he who had to work out measures to curb the terror and new principles for the punitive policy.