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Fall

Dissatisfied with the May 1938 result of Shkiriátov's and Tsesarskii's examination, Sholokhov turned to Stalin again with respect to the terror in Rostov province and succeeded in being received by him on 23 October for almost an hour; during part of the conversation, Ezhov was present.¹ Apparently, it concerned I. S. Pogorelov, who had been ordered by the NKVD to collect compromising evidence on Sholokhov in order to have him arrested. Probably Stalin instructed Ezhov to examine the case immediately and report on it.²

One week later, on 31 October, a meeting took place in Stalin's office lasting more than two hours, attended by Stalin, Molotov, Malenkov, Ezhov, Sholokhov, P. K. Lugovoi (secretary of the Veshenskaia district Party committee, a terror victim liberated through Sholokhov's intervention), Pogorelov, and four local NKVD executives.³ According to Lugovoi's recollections, Sholokhov complained that he was being persecuted by the NKVD, which had concocted evidence in order to "prove" that he was an enemy of the people. Stalin then asked one of the NKVD executives whether he had been ordered to slander Sholokhov and had given such instructions to Pogorelov. The man answered that he

had indeed received such orders and that Ezhov had agreed with them. Ezhov, however, objected that he had given no such instructions.⁴ According to Pogorelov's recollections, Stalin added that he had twice been asked by Evdokimov to approve of Sholokhov's arrest, but he had dismissed the request because he thought it unwarranted.⁵

There were more signs that Ezhov's fall was drawing near. On 14 November Stalin ordered the regional Party committees to check the NKVD organs and purge them of all "hostile" people "not deserving political confidence"; they should be replaced by people who had been approved by the relevant Party authorities.⁶ The next day the Politburo confirmed a directive by the Central Committee and the Council of People's Commissars, with immediate effect ordering "a halt to examination by the troikas, military tribunals, and the Military Collegium of the USSR Supreme Court of all cases sent for examination on the basis of special orders or another simplified procedure."⁷ When on 15 September the Politburo had decided to transfer the "national contingents" to the special troikas, it had indeed fixed their term for two months, and that was exactly the result. Ezhov himself had participated in framing the directive.

Two days later, on 17 November, the Politburo approved the joint resolution of the Council of People's Commissars and the Central Committee, drafted by the commission of Ezhov, Beriia, Malenkov, et al. The one-month delay was explained by the fact that the mass operations first had to be concluded before they could be stopped.⁸ In general, the resolution approved of the results of the mass operations carried out by the NKVD in 1937–38. However, "a simplified procedure of conducting investigations and trials" had led to "gross inadequacies and distortions" in the work of the NKVD and the Procuracy. Enemies of the people and foreign spies that had infiltrated the security police and the judicial system had "tried in all conceivable ways to confound investigative activities, deliberately perverted Soviet laws, carried out unfounded mass arrests, while at the same time rescuing their accomplices from destruction." They had "committed forgeries, fal-

sified investigatory documents, instituted criminal proceedings and arrested on trivial grounds and even without any grounds whatsoever, instituted criminal cases against innocent people with provocatory aims.” They had relied exclusively on extracting confessions. The resolution called off the mass operations, abolished the troikas, and placed all detention procedures under the control of the procuracy.⁹

The resolution was a mortal blow to the sitting NKVD leadership. Stalin wanted to shift the blame for the mass operations’ excesses on the NKVD and Ezhov—that is to say, for the excesses and deviations, not for the purge itself. Neither in this resolution nor in any later decision by Stalin was the significance and necessity of the mass operations ever doubted. It does not alter the fact that, apart from the mistakes committed, in Stalin’s opinion their main goal had not been reached, since they had not succeeded in “fully unmasking the arrested spies and saboteurs from foreign intelligence services and fully exposing all their criminal connections.” Therefore, the resolution specifically stated that the “purging” of the USSR of “spies, terrorists, and saboteurs” had not been completed.¹⁰ In Stalin’s eyes, the NKVD executives were to blame, for they had not carried out the mass operations as they should.

Already before the commission had finished its work, it had become evident that Beria would be the new NKVD chief. On 7 November, during the military parade and demonstration in Red Square, Ezhov, who had first appeared on the tribune of the Lenin Mausoleum alongside Stalin and the other leaders, was later replaced by Beria, his head adorned by a blue service cap with a speckled band—that is to say, he wore the uniform of a state security commissar of the first class, a very high rank, only a fraction lower than Ezhov’s.¹¹ Western correspondents drew the conclusion that he was to succeed Ezhov as NKVD chief.¹² The names of other possible successors were also being mentioned. According to information of Malenkov’s, Chkalov’s, and Mikoian’s sons, Stalin offered the post of Interior People’s Commissar to their fathers as well. Another name mentioned among Chekists



Two photographs of the Party leaders on top of the Lenin Mausoleum during the 7 November 1938 parade, with, in the first photograph, Stalin (left) and Ezhov (right), and in the second photograph, Stalin (left) and Beriia (right). In the course of the demonstration Ezhov's place was taken by Beriia, who appeared at the tribune for the first time here wearing the uniform of a state security commissar of the first class, something Western correspondents did not fail to notice. (RGAKFD collection)

was that of Khrushchev.¹³ Because all these rumors were unfounded, Stalin may purposely have sent up trial balloons to heat up the situation.

On 19 November, two days after the issuing of the joint resolution calling a halt to examination by troikas, a crucial meeting took place in Stalin's Kremlin office. The subject was a statement on disorders in the NKVD that the Ivanovo NKVD chief, V. P. Zhuravlev, had sent to Stalin on 13 November. Two days before sending the document, Zhuravlev had visited Beria and told him all about it; probably Beria then urged him to write Stalin, in order to promote Ezhov's dismissal. In his statement, Zhuravlev criticized Ezhov's hand in selecting suspicious people for the central NKVD apparatus, like Radzivilovskii and especially his acquaintance M. I. Litvin, the NKVD chief in Leningrad, who had had "hostile contacts" with Postyshev. When Zhuravlev had reported on it to Ezhov, he had not paid proper attention.¹⁴ Beria apparently set to work at once, for on 12 November Litvin was summoned to Moscow. That morning, Ezhov had rung him up, and although he had said nothing directly about any danger, the tone of the conversation and veiled allusions were sufficient to tell Litvin that nothing good was awaiting him in Moscow, so he shot himself at home.

Litvin was, of course, another enemy who had gotten away, and Ezhov was involved. Stalin sent Zhuravlev's statement on to the main Politburo members, including Ezhov, noting that it should be discussed.¹⁵ Then, a day later, on 14 November, another of Ezhov's protégés disappeared, the Ukrainian NKVD chief A. I. Uspenskii, also after having been summoned to Moscow. He had been called by Ezhov, who had told him that his doings would be sorted out and that it looked bad. "See for yourself, how and where you will go," he had added.¹⁶ Expecting arrest, Uspenskii disappeared, leaving a message that they should look for his body in the Dnepr. On 22 November Stalin told Beria, not Ezhov, that Uspenskii's disappearance could in no way be tolerated and instructed him "*at any price*" to catch the "scoundrel."¹⁷ He had to suspect that Ezhov was involved in the disappearance. Khrush-

shchev (then the Ukrainian Party chief) later recalled that Stalin had told him, by telephone, of the planned arrest; he also recalled that Stalin had later told him that Ezhov had evidently overheard their conversation and had warned Uspenskii.¹⁸

The meeting in Stalin's Kremlin office on 19 November with respect to Zhuravlev's statement lasted from eleven o'clock in the evening until four o'clock the next morning and turned into a slating of Ezhov. Ezhov himself was present, along with Stalin and Politburo members Andreev, Kaganovich, Mikoian, Molotov, Voroshilov, and Zhdanov and also Beria, Frinovskii, Malenkov, and Shkiriakov.¹⁹ Ezhov was charged with littering the investigation agencies with foreign spies but, most important, with neglecting the department for the guarding of Central Committee and Politburo members, where conspirators had allegedly entrenched themselves (concerned, obviously, was Dagin's testimony of 15 November).²⁰

On the evening of 23 November Ezhov was summoned again, this time for a meeting with Stalin, Molotov, and Voroshilov. The meeting began at nine and went on until one. It was Ezhov's last visit to Stalin. The topic of discussion was evidently Ezhov's statement resigning his position as Interior People's Commissar and admitting guilt in having let too many "enemies of the people" get away.²¹ In the (unsent) letter to Stalin Ezhov wrote that after the meeting on 23 November, he had left "more upset yet. I had not at all managed to express . . . to you in a coherent form either my mood or my sins. . . . I had the feeling that the distrust you totally legitimately conceived toward me had not vanished, had possibly even increased."²²

Within hours, the Politburo accepted the resignation, also taking into consideration Ezhov's "state of ill health, making it impossible for him to simultaneously direct two major People's Commissariats." He retained his functions of Central Committee Secretary, chairman of the Party Control Commission, and People's Commissar of Water Transportation but lost his position among the five highest Party leaders. This is indirectly demonstrated by the Politburo resolution of 27 November on the distri-

bution of duties among the Central Committee Secretaries, which mentioned only Zhdanov and Andreev. One day after Ezhov's resignation was accepted by the Politburo, on 25 November, Beria was appointed the new Interior People's Commissar.²³ The same day, Stalin informed the regional Party secretaries about the change, pointing as an explanation to the facts in Zhuravlev's statement and to new facts concerning the appearance in the NKVD, after the rout of Iagoda's gang, of a new gang of traitors, including Liushkov and Uspenskii, who had deliberately tangled up investigation cases and had shielded notorious enemies of the people, with Ezhov doing little to oppose them.²⁴ The change was given no immediate publicity, however. Two weeks later, a six-line item appeared in *Pravda*, relegated to the bottom of the back page.²⁵

The next day, 26 November, the new NKVD chief gave instructions on how the resolution of 17 November was to be carried out. The NKVD organs were to end the mass operations immediately, and all prior orders and instructions were rendered inoperative. Regional and local conferences of NKVD executives should be organized so that the resolution could be read out and explained.²⁶ Some regional NKVD chiefs did not immediately understand the significance of the change. The Crimean chief, L. T. Iakushev-Babkin, for example, was arrested in December 1938 on a charge of having continued the mass operations after the dissolution of the troikas; on 28–29 November 770 people were shot with the Crimean NKVD chief personally participating in the shooting of 553.²⁷

Beria had many of Ezhov's people arrested, including S. G. Gendin and Z. I. Passov (22 October), S. B. Zhukovskii (23 October), N. G. Nikolaev-Zhurid and M. A. Listengurt (25 October), S. M. Shpigel'glaz (2 November), Dagin (5 November), Evdokimov (9 November), Ia. I. Serebrianskii (10 November), I. I. Shapiro (13 November), N. N. Fedorov (20 November), S. F. Redens (22 November), M. A. Trilisser (23 November), and G. F. Gorbach (28 November). Some of the regional NKVD chiefs tried to avert the danger. On 12 November Litvin shot himself, to be re-

placed by Beria's protégé S. A. Goglidze. Two days later Uspenskii disappeared. Beria gave instructions to strengthen the border guard and to trace the fugitive; he was arrested only on 14 April 1939.²⁸

The ending of the mass operations, as much as their beginning in June 1937, went quite according to plan. Both were initiated by the center, by Stalin.

Reportedly, Stalin and Beria had first wanted to arrest Ezhov's wife as an "English spy" and have her testify against her husband.²⁹ Evgeniia was particularly vulnerable because of her many lovers. One of them must have been the writer Mikhail Sholokhov. According to the testimony of Zinaida Glikina, USA expert of the Writers' Union Foreign Commission and an intimate friend of Evgeniia who used to live with the Ezhovs from time to time, they had first met in the spring of 1938, when during a stay in Moscow Ezhov invited Sholokhov to his dacha. That summer, when Sholokhov was in Moscow again, he went to see Evgeniia at the editorial office of *USSR in Construction*, under the guise of a contribution to the journal, and accompanied her home. In August, again in Moscow, he and Fadeev visited Evgeniia at the editorial office, after which the three had dinner together in the National Hotel. The next day Sholokhov returned to Evgeniia's office, this time inviting her to his room in the same hotel, where she stayed for several hours.

The day following, after returning to the dacha late at night and drinking a lot, Ezhov in a state of noticeable intoxication and irritability drew a document from his briefcase and in a rage asked his wife, "Did you sleep with Sholokhov?" It was a stenographic report of what had happened in Sholokhov's hotel room during Evgeniia's stay: on Ezhov's orders, everything had been monitored. Glikina reported that Evgeniia became very agitated as she read it; then Ezhov showed the document to Glikina. She read fragments like "our love is difficult, Zhenia," "they kiss each other," "they lie down." Getting beside himself, Ezhov jumped up toward Evgeniia and, according to Glikina, "started to beat her

with his fists on her face, breast, and other parts of her body.” Apparently, the marital spat soon ended, for a few days later Evgeniia told Glikina that her husband had destroyed the report.³⁰ (In October, Ezhov told Glikina that Sholokhov had complained to Beria about being shadowed by him, Ezhov, and that as a result Stalin himself examined the case.³¹ As we have seen, the examination was actually concerned with Sholokhov’s complaints to Stalin about the terror reigning in his home region.)

It did not take long, however, before Ezhov deemed it necessary to divorce. On 18 September 1938 he informed Evgeniia about his decision. She felt completely lost, and the next day turned to Stalin for “help and protection.” In her letter she wrote: “From the fact that he [Ezhov] long questioned me about my encounters with various acquaintances I understood that his decision has not been caused by personal reasons, i.e. by a cooling off toward me or by love for another woman. I felt it has been caused by political considerations, by suspicion of me.” She said she did not know what had caused this suspicion, for she was a “fighting comrade and friend” to her husband. She proclaimed her innocence, regretting that because of her, suspicion fell upon Ezhov.³² Stalin did not answer the letter. Soon, Evgeniia left for a holiday in the Crimea, together with Glikina (whose husband, Zaidner, had that spring been arrested on a charge of espionage).

Ezhov’s files contained evidence on his wife’s contacts.³³ Certainly he realized how dangerous they were, and perhaps he was hoping to protect her from arrest—that would explain her note in the file: “Kolia darling! I earnestly beg you to check up on my whole life, everything about me. . . . I cannot reconcile myself to the thought of being suspected of double-dealing, of certain non-committed crimes.”³⁴

In July 1938, almost two years after being arrested, Evgeniia’s former husband, A. F. Gladun, was shot.³⁵ That same month, one of Evgeniia’s alleged lovers, Semen Uritskii, was arrested. He was the former editor of *Krest’ianskaia gazeta*, where Evgeniia had once worked, and later the director of the All-Union Book Chamber. Without a doubt, Ezhov himself had organized his arrest. It

is striking that, unlike Gladun, Ezhov was not able to have him shot before Beria's arrival at the NKVD, and Uritskii thus could offer interesting testimony about the Ezhovs. He revealed the information that Evgeniia had had intimate relations with Isaak Babel', which Ezhov had learned about when he found love letters from Babel' in his wife's belongings. He thereupon gave orders to collect evidence with respect to Babel', and within a few days, a large file lay on the People's Commissar's table.³⁶

From the autumn of 1938 on, one after another, people around Evgeniia were arrested. Afterward, Ezhov's nephew and housemate, Anatolii Babulin, testified that in late October 1938 Frinovskii brought Ezhov a document at the dacha that made him very worried. The next day, Ezhov called his wife in the Crimea and asked her to return to Moscow at once. From that moment on, his mood swiftly deteriorated; he started to drink more than ever and became extremely irritable. He feared that he had fallen from favor, especially because of the arrests of Dagin and Shapiro (on 5 and 13 November).³⁷ According to Ezhov's sister, Evdokiia, in the autumn of 1938 Evgeniia received an anonymous letter accusing her of espionage and betraying secrets to foreign countries.³⁸

After Evgeniia, and Glikina, returned from the Crimea Ezhov installed them in the dacha; he came to see them twice, saying almost nothing to Evgeniia and only talking in private with Glikina about something.³⁹ Very soon, on 29 October, Evgeniia was hospitalized for asthenic depression (cyclothymia) in the Vorovskii sanatorium, a small clinic on the outskirts of Moscow for people suffering from nervous disorders, where the best Moscow doctors treated her.⁴⁰ On 15 November Glikina was arrested, together with another bosom friend of Evgeniia's, Zinaida Koriman, technical editor of *USSR in Construction*. This had to be Beria's work. Logically, Evgeniia herself was next in line.

After the arrest of the "two Zinas," Evgeniia in desperation wrote again to Stalin. We don't know exactly when she sent the letter, but it was received on 17 November. It read as follows:

I beg you, comrade Stalin, to read this letter. For a long time I could not decide whether to write to you, but I have no strength anymore. I am treated by professors, but what sense does it make, if I am burned by the thought that you distrust me. I swear to you on my old mother, whom I love, on Natasha [the adopted daughter], on all who are dear and close to me, that until the last two years I never uttered any word about politics to any enemy of the people whom I met with and that during the last two years like all honest Soviet people I cursed this whole vile gang, and they agreed. As regards the time I lived with the Arkus couple* (it was in 1927), I remember several people who can confirm that I lived with them for one and a half weeks and then went to a boardinghouse. If I had liked them, I would not have left. In fact, when I learned that the (former) wife of Arkus was sent abroad for work, I remembered the impression she had made on me and told Nikolai Ivanovich about it; he checked the facts and gave orders to take away her foreign passport.

I cannot presume on your attention, so instruct somebody of the comrades to talk with me. With facts from my life I will demonstrate my attitude to enemies of the people who had not yet been unmasked then.

Dear, beloved comrade Stalin, oh yes, I may be defamed, slandered, but you are dear and beloved to me, as you are for all people in whom you have faith. Let them take away my freedom, my life, I will accept it all, but I will not give up the right to love you, as everybody does who loves the country and the Party. Once again I swear to you on the life and happiness of those close and dear to me that I have never done anything that could discredit me politically. In my personal life there have been mistakes about which I could tell you, and all of it because of jealousy. But that is personal. How unbearably hard it is to me, comrade Stalin! What doctors can cure these nerves, strained after many years of insomnia, this sore brain, this deep mental pain you don't know how to escape from? But I don't have the

*Probably Grigorii Moiseevich Arkus and his wife. Arkus, who had been the State Bank deputy chairman, was arrested in July 1936; in September of the same year he was sentenced to the death penalty and shot. *Rasstrel'nye spiski*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1993), p. 8.

right to die. So I live only on the idea that I am honest toward the country and you.

I feel like a living corpse. What am I to do?

Forgive me for my letter, written in bed.

Forgive me, I could not keep silence anymore.⁴¹

Again, Stalin left the letter unanswered. On 19 November Evgeniia became unconscious as a result of an overdose of Luminal; two days later she died, at thirty-four years of age.

During interrogation, V. K. Konstantinov testified that Ezhov, after receiving a letter from Evgeniia from the hospital, sent her a sleeping draught (so Konstantinov had been told by Dement'ev). Then he took a knickknack and ordered the maid to take it to her; soon after, she poisoned herself. Dement'ev thought the sending of the knickknack to be "an agreed signal that she should poison herself." When later Konstantinov asked Ezhov why Evgeniia had committed suicide, he answered that she had been a good wife but that "he had been compelled to sacrifice her in order to save himself."⁴² Dement'ev in turn testified that on 8 November—little more than a week after Evgeniia was hospitalized—Ezhov had sent him to see her and to take her a statuette. After receiving the figurine, "she wept for a long time, and we did not succeed in calming her." Then she gave Dement'ev a letter for Ezhov, which he handed over the same day. After reading the first page, Ezhov there and then tore it into small pieces. Three days later, Glikina went to the dacha, where she got a strong sleeping draught for Evgeniia.⁴³

One has to assume that Ezhov and his wife had agreed that she was to poison herself after receiving a signal. Ezhov gave such a signal on 8 November, but Evgeniia was in no hurry, and only Glikina's arrest incited her to action, since it clearly meant that Evgeniia would be next. (Glikina was indeed accused of having been recruited by Evgeniia and of having committed espionage together with her on behalf of foreign intelligence services.)⁴⁴ And with their arrest, the shadow of suspicion would fall upon Ezhov himself; in the course of Beria's investigation they would be

forced to talk. Since the autumn, Beriia had been arresting people acquainted with the Ezhovs, and in this situation Ezhov had to cut off his contacts. Ezhov did not poison his wife (as accused after his arrest); he only contributed to her voluntary decision.

After arrest Ezhov testified that Zinaida Ordzhonikidze, after a visit to the hospital, had brought him a letter by Evgeniia in which she informed him of her decision to commit suicide and asked him to send her a sleeping draught. He then sent her a statuette of a gnome—the agreed sign—and a great quantity of Luminal, which Dement'ev personally delivered to her. He brought back a note in which she said goodbye to him.⁴⁵

On the evening of 23 November—the same evening that Ezhov was in conference with Stalin, Molotov, and Voroshilov—Anatolii Babulin heard from Ezhov's mother that Evgeniia had committed suicide and that the funeral had taken place that same day, in the Moscow Donskoi cemetery. Ezhov seems not to have been present. Late that night, Ezhov returned to the dacha, together with Dement'ev, and they got very drunk. When the next day Anatolii's brother asked him why Evgeniia had committed suicide, Ezhov answered, "Zhenia has done well to poison herself, otherwise worse would have happened to her."⁴⁶

After his wife's death and on the eve of his inevitable arrest, Ezhov returned to the affections and habits of his youth. In his statement of 24 April 1939 about his homosexual relations, partly quoted in an earlier chapter, he wrote with respect to the period of November–December 1938:

In 1938 there were two cases of a pederastic liaison with Dement'ev, with whom I already had had such a liaison . . . in 1924. It was in the autumn of 1938 in Moscow in my apartment, soon after my dismissal as Interior People's Commissar. Then during approximately two months Dement'ev lived with me.

Somewhat later, also in 1938, there were two cases of pederasty between me and Konstantinov, whom I had known through the army since 1918. We worked together until 1921. After

1921 we almost never met. In 1938, on my invitation, he often stayed in my apartment and was at my dacha two or three times. Twice he brought his wife, the other visits were without women. He often stayed the night. As I have said earlier, we had two cases of pederasty then. The liaison was mutually active. I should add that one time, when he visited my apartment together with his wife, I had sexual intercourse with her as well.

All this as a rule was accompanied by drinking bouts. I present this information to the investigation organs as an additional trait, characteristic of my moral and social decay.⁴⁷

Perhaps his psychological state dictated the need to oust the fear of what lay ahead by trying to get back to the feelings and impressions of his younger and more successful days. Excessive drinking, uninterruptedly, is also a way of solving problems that suddenly overwhelm one.

During these months, his old friend Ivan Dement'ev, assistant chief of the guard of the Svetoch factory in Leningrad, indeed stayed with Ezhov regularly. The first visit covered the second half of October, when Evgeniia was in the Crimea; he returned in the second week of November and stayed until approximately 11 December. According to Dagin, during his visits, "one long drinking bout took place." This was confirmed by the Babulin brothers.⁴⁸ According to Konstantinov, during one of the drinking bouts, Ezhov, fearing arrest and with his nerves in tatters, tried to shoot himself, but Dement'ev took the gun away.⁴⁹ Dement'ev himself testified that during his stay in Moscow he and Ezhov were "engaged in pederasty," or, as he also called it, "the most perverted forms of debauchery." Ezhov was glad that Dement'ev had not brought his dental plate and repeatedly forced him to take his member in his mouth. Apart from this, Ezhov asked him to join his bodyguard, preferring to be guarded by a confidant instead of by Beria's people.⁵⁰

Vladimir Konstantinov, a Red Army political worker with the rank of division commissar, also testified about this period. According to him, between October and December 1938 Ezhov reg-

ularly invited him to his Kremlin apartment to drink. One time, he asked him to bring along his wife, Katerina. He started to ply them with liquor. In the end, Konstantinov fell asleep on a couch, drunk. When around one or two at night he awoke, the housekeeper told him that his wife was in the bedroom with Ezhov; the door was closed. Soon after, she came out of the bedroom, in a disheveled state, and the two went home. There she cried and told him that Ezhov had behaved like a beast. After Konstantinov lay down, Ezhov started dancing the foxtrot with her; during the dancing, she said, “he forced her to hold his member in her hand.” After the dancing they sat down at the table and Ezhov “pulled out his member” to show her. Then he “got her to drink and raped her, tearing her underclothes.”⁵¹

The following evening, Ezhov again invited Konstantinov to drink with him, and on that occasion he told him that he had slept with his wife and that she “might be rather old, but was not a bad wife.” This time, Ezhov got even drunker than usual. They listened to the gramophone, and after supper they went to sleep. Konstantinov had just undressed and got into bed when Ezhov “lies down at my side and proposes to commit pederasty.” Konstantinov pushed him away, and Ezhov rolled on his bed. But when Konstantinov had just fallen asleep, he “felt something in my mouth. When I opened my eyes, I saw that Ezhov had shoved his member in my mouth.” Konstantinov jumped up, cursed at him, and threw him off, but Ezhov again crept toward him “with foul proposals.”⁵² Ezhov’s bodyguard, V. N. Efimov, confirmed that Konstantinov and his wife spent the night in Ezhov’s apartment and that they drank heavily. The next morning, Ezhov ordered his adjutants to show Konstantinov the Kremlin, and after that the drinking bout continued throughout the whole day.⁵³

Ezhov’s affairs with women also continued. From late 1938 on, his nephew Anatolii brought him “girls” to spend the night with: Tat’iana Petrova, an employee of the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Trade to whom he had made advances back in 1934; Valentina Sharikova, an employee of the Ordzhonikidze machine-

tool construction works; and Ekaterina Sycheva, an employee of the People's Commissariat of Water Transportation.⁵⁴

On 5 December 1938 the Politburo ordered Ezhov to transfer authority for the NKVD to Beriia in the presence of Andreev and Malenkov; the process was to begin on 7 December and to be completed within a week.⁵⁵ An agonizing phase started for Ezhov. Every day the commission gathered at the Lubianka, heard the reports of the department heads of the central NKVD apparatus, and recorded all offenses. Ezhov had to attend but, according to Anatolii Babulin, systematically avoided the commission work, calling the Central Committee and Beriia with the message that he was too ill to come. Apart from his drinking, he was completely sound, but every time he had to go to the commission meetings, he "became irritable, used obscene language, delayed his departure, and in the end stayed at home, devoting all his time to drinking and debauchery with various women of easy virtue."⁵⁶

The commission worked until 10 January, bringing to light many offenses and abuses. Gradually the evidence against Ezhov himself piled up. It became clear that, contrary to the standing order, he had gathered piles of compromising evidence but had not informed Stalin about them. While understanding that the blame for the mass operations' excesses would be fully shifted onto him, he had sought to put the NKVD files in order. As Evdokimov testified later, during interrogation, in conversations in his own circle Ezhov washed his hands and blamed the Party leadership for the mass arrests, referring to the instructions issued from there; in this connection he used to quote the saying "God's will—the Tsar's trial."⁵⁷ "God," of course, meant Stalin, and "the Tsar" Ezhov himself; but Ezhov did not wash his hands. He fully understood that, in spite of the fact that he had only been the diligent executor of the Party leadership's instructions, it was he, not Stalin, who would be blamed. Bringing the NKVD files in order, he paid particular attention to the so-called "Special Archive," which contained compromising evidence that for the present he did not want to use. Though these were mainly materials

on Chekists, there was material on Party executives as well. In this way Ezhov had them under his thumb. Stalin was not always informed about these materials.

Dagin, sometime in late August 1938, had seen a card-index and a large number of files on Ezhov's table. After reading the documents, Ezhov tore them up and threw them in the wastebasket. Dagin understood that he destroyed "compromising facts on officials." It was a "cleaning and destruction of materials put by at one time in the Secretariat," and it continued for days on end. I. I. Shapiro, the head of the Secretariat, also gradually got rid of documents; some he forwarded to the operative departments, others he destroyed. But Beria got hold of the inventory of the Special Archive and reported to Stalin that Ezhov had destroyed evidence relating to leading politicians. It was easy for Beria to demonstrate that people in the NKVD on whom there was compromising evidence, such as, for instance, Liushkov, had not been arrested or dismissed but, on the contrary, had been shielded by Ezhov. In other words, he had saved "enemies" from exposure.⁵⁸

On 27 November Ezhov had a parcel delivered to Stalin via his secretary Poskrebyshev, containing a description of the evidence kept in the NKVD Secretariat, as demanded by Stalin. According to a draft by Ezhov, kept in his papers, the evidence had been collected during the preceding August and September, but when he first saw it in September–October he realized that much of it had never been reported to him. He then gave orders to deposit most cases in the archive, but he kept aside materials relating to Andreev, Beria, Frinovskii, Khrushchev, Malenkov, Poskrebyshev, and Vyshinskii. Added was a list with the names of more than a hundred political leaders, Chekists, and so on, with indications of the nature of the evidence against them (testimonies on suspicious contacts, for example, with arrested persons). Some of the evidence involved people such as Andreev, Bagirov, Beria, Bulganin, Chubar', Frinovskii, Iaroslavskii, Kaganovich's brother Mikhail, Khrushchev, Kosarev, Litvinov, Malenkov, Mekhlis, Mikoian, Poskrebyshev, Postyshev, and Vyshinskii. According to

Ezhov, a large part of the evidence had been sent to the Central Committee.⁵⁹

Stalin suspected Ezhov of collecting evidence even against himself.⁶⁰ Among the papers confiscated during Ezhov's arrest in April 1939, there was indeed a pre-1917 correspondence of thirty-five pages of the Tiflis gendarme with respect to the search for "Koba" (i.e., Stalin) and other members of the Transcaucasian RSDRP organization. Later, the correspondence could not be found in Ezhov's file; Beria was rumored to have kept it.⁶¹ In Ezhov's papers, however, the authors came across a dozen notices of the Turukhansk post office relating to remittances and parcels received by I. V. Dzhugashvili (Stalin), when he was exiled there in 1913–15.⁶² About Ezhov's intentions, one can only speculate. Could he have collected evidence in order to prove, if necessary, that Stalin had been an Okhrana agent? Or there could be a quite simple explanation, that is, that he collected evidence on Stalin's prerevolutionary activity for a museum of the leader, for he was a specialist in this field and in 1935–36 had directed the organization of the Central Lenin Museum in Moscow.⁶³ It is not to be ruled out, however, that during the period of Stalin's cooling off toward him, since the summer of 1938, Ezhov was no longer completely loyal and was quietly collecting strength and evidence against Stalin.

On 1 February 1939 Andreev, Beria, and Malenkov handed over to Stalin the act on the transfer of authority for the NKVD. In their conclusions they established "flagrant errors, perversions, and excesses" in the NKVD work: "Enemies of the people who have forced their way into the NKVD organs have deliberately perverted the punitive policy of the Soviet regime and carried out unfounded mass arrests of completely innocent people, while at the same time concealing real enemies of the people." Illegal investigation methods had been used and torture applied in order to obtain "confessions." The work of the troikas had been full of defects. Under Ezhov the guarding of Party and government leaders had been directed by Kurskii, Dagin, and other enemies: "The whole foreign agents and informants network of the NKVD was

in the service of foreign intelligence services.” Ezhov used to appear at his office very late and had abandoned himself to drink. He had concealed from the Central Committee “compromising evidence with respect to leading NKVD executives who have now been unmasked and arrested as conspirators.” All these things “cause serious doubts with respect to comrade Ezhov’s political honesty and reliability.” The draft of the covering letter, dated 29 January, asked whether Ezhov could remain a Party member, but this passage had been crossed out and was not included in the final text.⁶⁴ The authors are inclined to think it was crossed out in accordance with Stalin.

On 10 January Ezhov was reprimanded by the chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars, Molotov, for neglecting his work in the People’s Commissariat of Water Transportation, systematically arriving no earlier than three to five o’clock in the afternoon.⁶⁵ According to Anatolii Babulin, Ezhov, in private, answered Molotov’s address with “choice swear words.”⁶⁶ One week later he lost his membership in the Politburo Political-Judicial Commission.⁶⁷ On 21 January the general public saw him for the last time, when he appeared among the other leaders in the Presidium at the mourning ceremonies in the Bol’shoi Theater in observance of the fifteenth anniversary of Lenin’s death. Standing behind the table of the Presidium he found himself next to his NKVD successor, Beriia. In the photograph that appeared in *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, in his modest Party jacket without the habitual marshal stars on the tabs, the small and frail Ezhov cuts a poor figure next to the complacent, large-faced Beriia robed in the uniform of a state security commissar of the first class.⁶⁸ On 29 January he attended his last Politburo meeting.⁶⁹

Ezhov surely knew what future was in store for him. His close comrades-in-arms promoted by him to the People’s Commissariat of Water Transportation vanished one by one. His deputy, Ia. M. Veinshtok, had already been arrested (21 September). In October Rafail Listengurt tried unsuccessfully to shoot himself when the same thing happened to him; on 9 November Efim Evdokimov was arrested, in December A. I. Mikhel’son, and in early 1939

D. M. Sokolinskii. Ezhov saw it all, understanding how it threatened him, but was unable to do anything.

Nonetheless, on 19 February 1939, during the run-up to the Eighteenth Party Congress, he was elected to the honorary Presidium of a Party conference of the Sverdlov district in Moscow. This was a fixed Party ritual; after all, he still held his Party functions. It seems it happened without his knowledge, however, for when his nephew Viktor Babulin, who had read about it in the paper (probably the provincial committee organ *Moskovskii Bol'shevik*), told him about it, "he was surprised, cursed embitteredly, and declared that he would not go to the conference, since there was nothing for him to do there." According to Babulin, when he was not elected as a delegate to the Party Congress, he reacted extraordinarily bitterly.⁷⁰

The Eighteenth Party Congress opened on 10 March. Although not a delegate, Ezhov as a Central Committee member was entitled to attend, but since he had begun all-day drinking, he only attended the evening sessions. He was not elected to any Congress organ. Still, as he told Viktor Babulin, he prepared himself for a speech. But after returning from the third evening session, he told Babulin that he had not been allowed to speak, and he used "unprintable language about the Congress Presidium." From then on, he stopped visiting the Congress and "drank uninterrupted."⁷¹ The FSB archives contain a delegate questionnaire filled in by him, evidently confiscated when he was arrested; apparently, he had taken it home, which explains why he is not in the delegates lists of the published official stenographic Congress report.

But even then he had not quite given up. During the Congress, on 19 March, he wrote a penciled note to Stalin on a small piece of paper: "I strongly ask you to talk with me for only one minute. Give me the opportunity."⁷² He may still have wanted to have it out with Stalin and to justify himself, or perhaps he merely wanted permission to speak, since it was the last Congress day on which speeches could be made. As far as we know, Stalin ignored

the request. After their very close cooperation of 1937–38, Stalin now was inaccessible to Ezhov.

There was yet one more humiliation to come at the Congress. In his memoirs N. G. Kuznetsov, the future People's Commissar of the Navy, writes that during the Congress there was a meeting of the old Central Committee in order to discuss the composition of the new Central Committee, to be elected the following day, 21 March. At the meeting Stalin fell upon Ezhov, "pointing to his poor work; more than his exceeding his authority and the unfounded arrests, he stressed his hard drinking." After this Ezhov admitted his faults, asking him to "appoint him to less independent work, work that he could cope with."⁷³

According to another testimony, Stalin summoned Ezhov to the fore, asking him what he himself thought of his candidature. Turning pale, the People's Commissar of Water Transportation answered in a broken voice that he had devoted his whole life to the Party and Stalin, loved Stalin more than his own life, and was unaware of any guilt. How about Frinovskii and his other arrested assistants then, Stalin asked. Ezhov declared that he had unmasked them himself. But according to Stalin he had done so only in order to save his own skin; after all, had Ezhov not prepared an attempt to murder him, Stalin? Stalin left it to the others to decide whether Ezhov could be reelected to the Central Committee, but he said he had his doubts. This was enough to make Ezhov disappear from the list.⁷⁴ This secondhand testimony also sounds rather plausible, although Frinovskii was arrested only in April. As we have seen, Ezhov was indeed accused of having prepared an attempt on Stalin's life on 7 November 1938.

Frinovskii was himself a delegate to the Party Congress. When at the opening not he, the People's Commissar of the Navy, was elected to the Presidium but the commander of the Pacific fleet, N. G. Kuznetsov, he was alarmed.⁷⁵ It was rumored that he would soon be dismissed.⁷⁶ He was not reelected to the Central Committee either. On 16 March he sent Stalin a request to dismiss him as People's Commissar of the Navy, in view of his "ignorance of naval affairs."⁷⁷ His request was not granted immediately. On 24

March, at a meeting of the Main Navy Council, Kuznetsov was appointed First Deputy People's Commissar; Frinovskii stayed on as People's Commissar in name only.⁷⁸ In fact, his fate had already been sealed. After former NKVD executives had testified against him, wishing to justify himself, he wrote a number of statements to Stalin and Voroshilov. He assured Stalin that he was not an enemy and asked him to look into the matter and give him the opportunity to confront those who had accused him.⁷⁹

During the Central Committee Plenum following the Congress, Ezhov was stripped of all Party posts. He remained in only one function, that of People's Commissar of Water Transportation. On 29 March the Politburo set up a commission for the transfer of authority for the Central Committee Secretariat to Malenkov, his successor as secretary. He did not appear in public, and though he continued to work at the People's Commissariat of Water Transportation, he did not attend any serious meetings. Most likely, they simply were not held. His colleagues understood that he would soon be arrested and did not particularly seek to be received by him; neither did he try to draw attention to himself.

A strange situation arose. On 6 March the paper *Vodnyi transport* mentioned his name for the last time, in a report on the People's Commissar's order "on the payment of an initiative of the Stakhanov school leaders." The only exception to the subsequent suppression of his name was a note by the captain of the steamer *N. Ezhov* published on 2 April. Nevertheless, he was active and the paper reported about him, but only as "the People's Commissar of Water Transportation." During the second half of March 1939 *Vodnyi transport* published some sharp criticism of the water transport situation. On 27 March the Council of People's Commissars established that since 1936 the People's Commissariat of Water Transportation had not fulfilled the plan, and in early April the same People's Commissariat was also criticized in *Pravda*.⁸⁰