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Enemy of the People

Ezhov's time was clearly running out, but he continued to work. According to R. Medvedev, during meetings of the People's Commissariat of Water Transportation he did not utter a word, only folded paper airplanes, tossed them in the air, and then crawled under tables and chairs searching for them.¹ This story seems hardly justified. Although undoubtedly depressed and upset, he had not become senile. The orders and instructions signed by him up to his last working day bear witness to this.² Nor have we found any traces of folded airplanes in the papers of the People's Commissariat of Water Transportation. Medvedev's story is no more than embroidered fiction about a half-mad People's Commissar.

On 9 April 1939 Ezhov signed his last three orders.³ It was his last working day. Obviously there was a Party meeting in the People's Commissariat of Water Transportation with "criticism without respect of persons." He was not dismissed; his People's Commissariat was simply abolished by splitting it into two, the People's Commissariats of the River Fleet and the Sea Fleet, with two new People's Commissars, Z. A. Shashkov and S. S. Dukel'skii.⁴ The next day, 10 April, Ezhov was arrested. It seems

he was summoned by Malenkov to his Central Committee office, to be arrested there, possibly by Beria personally. The same day, his apartment, dacha, and office were searched.⁵ In his apartment, his nephews Anatolii and Viktor Babulin were also arrested as unwanted witnesses.⁶ The search of his office and apartment revealed traces of his alcoholism and distress. In his desk and bookshelves (filled to a large extent with the works of his victims) guns with cartridges and vodka bottles were found hidden here and there. In a drawer was a package with the bullets by which Kamenev, Zinov'ev, and other former leaders had been executed, each wound in paper with the name of the person involved.⁷

His arrest was painstakingly concealed, not only from the general public but also from most NKVD officers. Nonetheless, perspicacious readers could notice that the press was now calling Ezhov Dinamo Stadium in Kiev simply the Dinamo Stadium. In April the Sverdlovsk Provincial Party Committee "requested" one of the districts to be renamed from Ezhovsk to Molotovsk.⁸ Very quietly without any stir, Ezhov's name disappeared from other institutions. The city of Ezhovo-Cherkessk was renamed Cherkessk only in mid-June, however, and the arrest appears to have been officially legalized with a warrant dated 10 June, indicating that for two months Ezhov was kept in prison secretly.⁹ After legalization of the arrest by the Procuracy, though it was no longer a secret, it was not reported in the newspapers. It would not do to make a fuss about the arrest of "the leader's favorite," and Stalin had no desire to arouse public interest in NKVD activity and the circumstances of the conduct of the Great Terror.¹⁰

Ezhov was confined in the Sukhanovka prison, the special NKVD prison for "particularly dangerous enemies of the people" in Vidnoe, just outside Moscow, not far from Ezhov's dacha in Meshcherino (which after his arrest was turned over to the disposal of the Comintern leader Georgii Dimitrov).¹¹ The prison was quite close to Moscow's main execution place, Butovo. The facility had been opened only at the end of 1938. An eyewitness description of Sukhanovka shows it to have been a fairly grim place:

It was a row of prison cells on both sides of a corridor, without natural light, with dim bulbs under covered bars at the high ceiling. Each cell contained an iron bunk, a chair, and a table, all riveted to the floor, and a lavatory pan. An iron door with a hole for the observation of the prisoners and a small opening to pass food, also with the bolt on the outside. The prisoners were only allowed to use the bunk during the permitted time; by day it was drawn up to the wall and locked.¹²

After two weeks Ezhov sent Beria a note declaring his unbounded devotion to the Party and Stalin. On 10 June 1939 he was officially incriminated for spying during many years on behalf of Poland, Germany, England, and Japan; directing a conspiracy within the NKVD; preparing a coup d'état; organizing a number of murders; having sexual intercourse with men ("sodomy"). He was interrogated by the infamous NKVD investigation department executives A. A. Esaulov and B. V. Rodos, as usual mainly at night. He could not bear torture and signed everything.¹³

He confessed to having been recruited as a spy for German intelligence in 1930, when by order of the People's Commissariat of Agriculture he had visited Königsberg for the purchase of agricultural machines and to having spied on behalf of Poland, Japan, and England, to having directed a conspiracy within the NKVD, and to having plotted against Stalin and other leaders.¹⁴ On 24 April he wrote a statement for the NKVD investigation department concerning "my vice of long standing, pederasty," characterizing his "moral and social decay"; it has been amply quoted in earlier chapters.¹⁵ For the investigation authorities these facts turned out to be of secondary importance only. When two days later his partner I. N. Dement'ev wanted to give evidence on their homosexual relations, the investigator reacted: "That is of little interest to us. You are concealing your main enemy activity that you have undertaken on Ezhov's instigation."¹⁶ In the case file ridiculous confessions alternate with interesting evidence on the mass operations and their mechanism, although here also Ezhov talked about his conscious distortion of the Party directives

and sabotage in the conduct of the mass terror. He understood that such were the rules. Now he was the enemy and had to take all upon himself and confess to everything.

He dragged many people along in his fall. Besides his nephews Anatolii and Viktor Babulin, who were also arrested on 10 April, a few weeks later, on 28 April, his brother Ivan, by then already having lost his job, was arrested in Moscow, accused of plans to murder Stalin and of counterrevolutionary and anti-Semitic utterances.¹⁷ In addition, Ezhov confessed to having recruited him for the Polish intelligence service.¹⁸ A few days before Ezhov's arrest, on 6 April, his former first deputy, Mikhail Frinovskii, had been arrested, soon to be followed by his wife, Nina, and his seventeen-year-old son, Oleg.¹⁹ He too was confined in Sukhanovka prison. Five days after his arrest he issued a forty-three-page statement for Beria, in which he confessed his crimes: "Only after arrest, after having been shown the charge, and after a conversation with you personally, I took the path of repentance, and I promise to tell the investigation the whole truth to the end."²⁰ Two days later, on 13 April, Beria sent the statement on to Stalin, who made some notes in it.²¹ Ezhov's interrogation seems to have been combined with the interrogation of Frinovskii, as well as that of his other close colleague, Efim Evdokimov, who had been arrested in November 1938 (together with his wife, Mariia, and son, Iurii) but had denied guilt for five months.²² On 14 April he changed his attitude, promising to give truthful evidence about his counterrevolutionary activity, but he stubbornly kept refusing to confess, until on 6 June during a confrontation Ezhov and Frinovskii exposed him as their co-conspirator; after this he promised to give detailed evidence.²³

Other people arrested from Ezhov's surroundings were, on 20 November 1938 his Central Committee assistant, Sergei Shvarts; on 17 December his personal secretary, Serafima Ryzhova; on 13 January 1939 his bodyguard, Vasili Efimov. His sexual partners Ivan Dement'ev and Vladimir Konstantinov were arrested no later than April 1939, an earlier partner, Iakov Boiarskii, on 5 July 1939, and Evgeniia's brother Il'ia Feigenberg, on 18 June 1939.²⁴

Evgeniia's first husband, Gladun, had already been executed; her second husband, Khaiutin, was also repressed.²⁵ Association with Evgeniia indeed could have unpleasant consequences as well. During interrogation Ezhov mentioned Isaak Babel', Mikhail Kol'tsov, People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs (until May 1939) Maksim Litvinov, the writer Ivan Kataev (who was shot on 2 May 1939), the actor Topchanov, and the polar explorer Otto Shmidt as suspicious persons his wife had associated with; he described Babel' and Shmidt as her lovers.²⁶ Viktor Babulin added Aleksandr Kosarev and a student of the Industrial Academy, Nikolai Baryshnikov, as persons she had had intimate relations with.²⁷ Former Komsomol leader Kosarev (who had been editor in chief of Evgeniia's *USSR in Construction*) had already been arrested on 28 November 1938 and was shot on 23 February of the following year. He was arrested as a participant in an alleged Komsomol conspiracy, however, and there is no evidence that his case was in any way intertwined with Ezhov's.²⁸

As we have seen, Isaak Babel' may indeed have had an affair with Ezhov's wife. In any case, he had been a regular visitor to their apartment. He seems to have been fascinated by Ezhov, the opposite of his own intellectual milieu and somebody who could dispose of the life and death of others. Moreover, he was working on a novel about the state security organs. According to Il'ia Erenburg, Babel' "knew he should not go to Ezhov's house, but wanted to understand the solution of the riddle of our life and death."²⁹ In May 1939 Ezhov confessed that Babel' had committed espionage together with Evgeniia. Within a week the writer was arrested; during interrogation he in his turn testified against the Ezhovs.³⁰ Another writer, Mikhail Kol'tsov, had already been arrested on 14 December 1938. Ezhov testified that after his return in 1937 from Spain, Kol'tsov's friendship with Evgeniia had become much stronger. Asked by her husband what bound them so closely, she had answered that it was connected with her work, both literary and of other nature. "I understood that Ezhova was connected with Kol'tsov with respect to espionage work on behalf of England."³¹

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Ezhov's physical condition had been bad for years. In late November 1938, in his (unsent) letter to Stalin, he had written: "The last two years of tense, highly strung work have to a high degree strained my whole nervous system. All perceptions became exacerbated, and hypochondria [*mnitel'nost'*] appeared."³² In prison, his health deteriorated further. On 10 January 1940, Beria informed Stalin that the day before his prisoner had fallen ill. He had complained about pain in his left shoulder blade and the doctors had diagnosed lobar pneumonia, with a pulse rate of 140 and a temperature of 39°C. He was placed under close medical observation.³³ Three days later, Beria reported to Stalin that Ezhov's condition was worsening. The doctors had diagnosed "a creeping form of pneumonia, assuming an acute character owing to the fact that Ezhov N. I. has previously suffered consumption. The inflammation has spread also to the kidneys; a deterioration of the functioning of the heart is being expected. In order to ensure better care, prisoner Ezhov N. I. will today be transferred to Butyrki prison hospital."³⁴ Apparently, Beria feared Ezhov would succumb before his forthcoming trial.

For a trial was imminent. Another three days later, on 16 January, continuing Ezhov's methods, Beria for approval submitted to Stalin a list with the names of 457 "enemies of the Party and the Soviet regime, active participants in the counterrevolutionary, Rightist-Trotskyist conspiratorial and espionage organization," who were to be tried by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court. Those 346 who according to Beria's proposal were to be condemned to death included: Ezhov, together with his brother Ivan and his nephews Anatolii and Viktor Babulin; Evdokimov, together with his wife and son; Frinovskii, also together with his wife and son; Zinaida Glikina, Zinaida Koriman, Vladimir Konstantinov, Serafima Ryzhova, Sergei Shvarts, Semen Uritskii, Isaak Babel', and Mikhail Kol'tsov. The list also included the names of at least sixty leading NKVD officers.³⁵

The next day the Politburo approved Beria's proposal without emendations.³⁶ Hereafter, Ezhov was interrogated by the Dep-

uty Main Military Procurator, N. P. Afanas'ev, right in the Sukhanovka prison. In his memoirs Afanas'ev writes that Ezhov had bags under his eyes and looked exhausted and shabby. He asked whether Stalin had really decided to try him, since he had sent him a statement. With respect to the charge he said, "It is indeed true that I have been drinking, but the work was also devilish." He asked why he had to take responsibility for Vyshinskii, "that Menshevik bitch and whore": "If they now accuse me of violating legality, let them first of all ask that bitch Vyshinskii. . . . For he was the Union Procurator, not me. He had to take care of legality. By the way, comrade Stalin knew all about it."³⁷

Following the Politburo decision of 17 January, trials began within a few days and continued into February. With respect to Ezhov's case, on 1 February the investigation resulted in an indictment unmasking him as the leader of a conspiracy within the NKVD; a spy on behalf of Poland, Germany, England, and Japan; the plotter of a coup d'état, guilty of attempts on Stalin, Molotov, and Beria; and a saboteur. He was accused of having forged the mercury poison affair and of having organized the murder of a number of people, including his wife, who allegedly had been an English spy since the mid-1920s.³⁸ He was not charged with pederasty or with large-scale violations of legality.³⁹ That same day Ezhov was taken to Beria's office in the Sukhanovka prison, to be promised that his life would be spared if he would sincerely confess.⁴⁰

The next day, Friday, 2 February, he was tried within closed doors by the Military Collegium chaired by Vasilii Ul'rikh, without prosecutor, defender, or witnesses.⁴¹ By virtue of his office, the Deputy Main Military Procurator, N. P. Afanas'ev, attended the trial. It took place in the prison, in the office of its chief. Ul'rikh forbade Ezhov to bring up Vyshinskii.⁴² Ezhov was permitted a closing address to the court, and he then denied being a spy, a terrorist, or a conspirator, saying that his confessions had been obtained under extreme torture. Referring to Beria's promise the previous day, he pointed out that he preferred death to telling lies. He did confess other crimes, however: "I purged 14,000 Chekists,

but my enormous guilt lies in the fact that I purged so few of them. . . . All around me were enemies of the people, my enemies.” He did not expect his life to be spared, but he asked that they shoot him “quietly, without torture” and that they not subject his nephews to punitive measures; he also asked them to take care of his mother (if she was still alive) and his daughter. His very last words were for Stalin: “Let Stalin know that I am a victim of circumstances and that it is not impossible that enemies of the people I have overlooked have had a hand in this. Let Stalin know that I shall die with his name on my lips.”⁴³

After the session, Ezhov was returned to his cell. Half an hour later, he was called back, to hear the death sentence pronounced. On hearing it, he became slack and started to fall sideways, but the escort caught him and under his arms took him out the door. A few minutes later, Procurator Afanas’ev came to his cell to point out to him that he had the right to apply to the Supreme Soviet for pardon and commutation of the death sentence. According to Afanas’ev, Ezhov “lay on his bunk, somehow dimly lowed, then leaped up and spoke rapidly, ‘Yes, yes, comrade procurator, I want to appeal for pardon. Maybe comrade Stalin will do that.’ ” Because the cell was too dark, they went to the inquiry office, where Ezhov wrote a short statement with big scrawls (his hands trembled). Afanas’ev then handed the statement to Ul’rikh, who from the prison chief’s office by telephone consulted the Kremlin; within half an hour he was back to announce that the appeal had been declined.⁴⁴

Ezhov was shot some time that very night, in a special execution place that had been built according to his own instructions—probably the special accommodation the NKVD had on Varsanof’evskii Lane, not far from the Lubianka headquarters. According to Procurator Afanas’ev, who attended the execution, it was a low, squarish building, in the heart of a yard, with thick walls. It was Afanas’ev’s task to make sure that it was indeed Ezhov who was shot. The execution took place in a large room with a sloping cement floor. The far wall was made of logs, and

there were hoses for water. The execution was carried out precisely against this wall of logs. According to Afanas'ev, before the execution Ezhov behaved in a very cowardly fashion. When the Procurator told him that his appeal had been declined, "he became hysterical. He started to hiccup, weep, and when he was conveyed to 'the place,' they had to drag him by the hands along the floor. He struggled and screamed terribly.⁴⁵ The sentence must have been executed by the NKVD Commandant, V. M. Blokhin. Besides Afanas'ev and Blokhin, the head of the NKVD First Special Department, L. F. Bashtakov, must also have been a witness.

After the execution, Ezhov's body was put in an iron case and taken to the crematorium where it was burned, with Afanas'ev attending.⁴⁶ His incinerated remains were then thrown into a mass grave at Moscow Donskoi cemetery, where Babel's remains had ended up as well. Evgeniia is buried in the same cemetery, alongside her three brothers.⁴⁷ Neither the press nor the radio gave any information about Ezhov's trial and execution.

After Ezhov's arrest his adopted daughter, Natal'ia, some seven years old, was taken away from her nanny, Marfa Grigor'evna, who had taken care of her at the dacha since the death of Evgeniia Solomonovna, and put in a children's home in Penza. She was instructed to forget her family name and took an earlier name of her mother, Khaiutina. In 1958, after finishing school, she voluntarily settled in faraway Kolyma region, one of the most notorious Gulag regions, and became an accordion teacher in a school. Around the turn of the millennium, she was reported living on a miserable pension in a one-room flat in Ola, just below the port city of Magadan, having a daughter, Evgeniia (called after her foster mother), and seven grandchildren. Her life has been extremely difficult. "All my life I have lived in fear," she told an interviewer. Nonetheless, she remembers Ezhov as a gentle and loving father; even now, when more and more details of her father's bloody activity have become known, she is not prepared to renounce him.⁴⁸

In 1995, she appealed to the Procuracy to apply the law "On the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repressions" of October

1991 to her father, for, according to the legislation applying at the time, Ezhov had not been a counterrevolutionary or saboteur. She argued:

Ezhov was a product of the system of bloody dictatorship of the time. He is to blame for not having found in himself the power to refuse to slavishly serve Stalin, but his guilt toward the Soviet people is absolutely no greater than that of Stalin, Molotov, Kaganovich, Vyshinskii, Ul'rikh, Voroshilov, and the other Party and government leaders.⁴⁹

After reexamining the case, the Main Military Procuracy concluded that the charges with respect to espionage on behalf of foreign intelligence services and the organization of his wife's murder should be excluded from Ezhov's sentence, since they had not been proved. But it saw no reason to exclude the other charges from the sentence—that is, “sabotage, the attempt of carrying out terrorist acts, and the participation in the organization of the carrying out of these crimes.” The Procuracy alluded to the serious consequences of Ezhov's activity as NKVD chief and the casualties he inflicted upon the country—his responsibility for the organization of the mass repressions. Therefore, in the Procuracy's opinion, Ezhov was not subject to rehabilitation.⁵⁰

On 4 June 1998 the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court decided that Ezhov indeed was not subject to rehabilitation. Its president, Nikolai Petukhov, argued that, in this way, justice had prevailed. In his opinion, the law of October 1991 had not been written for people like Ezhov. Former CPSU Politburo member and by now chairman of the Presidential Rehabilitation Commission, Aleksandr Iakovlev, even considered the reopening of Ezhov's case “undemocratic,” “a dangerous signal of a return to the old times, and a rehabilitation of the crimes of the Stalin regime.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, Natal'ia Khaiutina is determined to go on fighting for a revision of the case.⁵²

On 3 February 1940 Frinovskii was tried and condemned to death for participation in a conspiracy directed by Ezhov; five days later

he was executed.⁵³ (His relatives, too, have made unsuccessful attempts to have him rehabilitated.)⁵⁴ On 2 February the Military Collegium sentenced Evdokimov to death, to be shot the next day; unlike Ezhov and Frinovskii, he has been rehabilitated (on 17 March 1956).⁵⁵

As for the other people around Ezhov, on 19 January his bodyguard Vasilii Efimov was condemned to the death penalty by the Military Collegium and executed two days later.⁵⁶ On 20 January his brother, Ivan, and his nephew Anatolii Babulin were sentenced to death by the same court; both were shot the next day.⁵⁷ That is to say, when on 2 February before the Military Collegium Ezhov requested that his relatives be left in peace, the same Collegium had already sent them to their death. On 21 January Semen Uritskii was condemned to the death penalty and executed next day.⁵⁸ On 24 January Zinaida Koriman and Zinaida Glikina were condemned to the death penalty; the next day they were both executed.⁵⁹ On 26 January Isaak Babel' and Ezhov's secretary, Serafima Ryzhova, were sentenced to death; the next day they were shot.⁶⁰ On 1 February Kol'tsov was sentenced to death; he was shot the following day.⁶¹ Boiarskii was also sentenced to death by the Military Collegium on 1 February and shot the next day.⁶² On 2 February Il'ia Feigenberg was sentenced to death by the same court; he was shot the following day.⁶³ The charges were terrorism, espionage, conspiracy, counterrevolutionary activity. Filipp Goloshchekin was arrested on 15 October 1939 and shot in Kuibyshev on 28 October 1941.⁶⁴ Information about what happened to Ezhov's other homosexual partners, Ivan Dement'ev and Vladimir Konstantinov, as well as to Viktor Babulin, is missing. Their files could not be found in the execution lists of Moscow Memorial Society, which means that either they were not shot (in that case they may have been sentenced to imprisonment), or if they were shot they have not yet been rehabilitated. Ezhov's first wife, Antonina Titova, was never persecuted and died in 1988 in Moscow.⁶⁵ His sister, Evdokiia, also survived the Stalinist terror and died in 1958 in Moscow.⁶⁶ Neither was Ezhov's mother men-

tioned in Beria's list of people to be shot. The nanny, Marfa Grigor'evna, also survived.⁶⁷

After Ezhov's fall, hundreds of his direct accomplices and other NKVD officers were arrested. This goes for all of Ezhov's deputies and department heads. Almost all former NKVD chiefs of the Union and Autonomous Republics as well as the majority of the provincial NKVD chiefs and other leading executives were dismissed and convicted.⁶⁸ In the autumn of 1938, between September and December, 332 leading NKVD executives had already been arrested, 140 of them from the central apparatus and 192 from the provinces.⁶⁹ Arrests continued in 1939; during that year 1,364 NKVD executives were arrested, 937 of them state security officers.⁷⁰

After Ezhov's dismissal as NKVD chief, many cases were reviewed.⁷¹ Several tens of thousands of people who were under investigation were liberated and the charges dropped. The Gulag was emptied somewhat: during 1939, unprecedentedly, 327,400 prisoners were liberated from the camps and colonies. Although quite a few of them were political prisoners, there were almost no prominent Party or state functionaries among them.⁷² On the other hand, on 28 October 1939 procurators of the USSR Procuracy complained to Zhdanov (the Politburo member in charge of the investigation of the cases of Ezhov and his NKVD accomplices) that the resolution of 17 November 1938, putting a ban on the flagrant violations of Soviet laws by the NKVD organs, was not being executed. According to them, Beria and his associates successfully undermined the Procuracy's desire to drop the charges.⁷³ So, during 1939, the procuracy of the Western Siberian province (Novosibirsk) received 31,473 complaints of people who had been sentenced by the troika and the NKVD Special Board, but the provincial Chekists obstructed the handling of the complaints by sending very little material to the procuracy, and with enormous delay.⁷⁴

How far had the organizers of the Great Terror attained their objective? In any case, Stalin's idea to put a final end to the criminal world by means of order No. 00447 had utterly failed. Within

a year, Moscow was again overcrowded with criminals. On 21 February 1940 Beria wrote government chief Molotov that during 1939 and the first two months of 1940 the Moscow police had arrested 28,921 people for various crimes (robbery, theft, murder, hooliganism, violation of the passport regime). Moreover, the criminal investigation department in Moscow had registered 7,032 people who had previously been condemned for stealing, hooliganism, robbery, and other criminal offenses. Every day, the Moscow police detained on average 300 to 400 people, approximately half of them “people without a definite occupation and a permanent address.” Beria deemed it necessary to “cleanse Moscow” of bandits, professional thieves, and other criminal elements, asking permission to arrest 5,000 to 7,000 criminal elements illegally living in Moscow (town and province) and have them sentenced to eight years at most by the Special Board; moreover, 300 professional bandits who had already been sentenced several times should be condemned to the death penalty by the Military Collegium. Molotov agreed, as did Voroshilov and Kaganovich; Stalin urged the execution of even twice as many people as Beria had proposed.⁷⁵ So, in 1940, just as in 1937, the Soviet authorities condemned people to death on totally formal grounds, be it by a legal court instead of a troika; as a matter of fact, according to the rules, criminals were to be judged by ordinary courts, and only state criminals by the Military Collegium.