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Concluding Remarks

We will destroy every enemy, even if he is an Old Bolshevik, we will destroy his kin, his family. Anyone who by his actions or thoughts encroaches on the unity of the socialist state, we shall destroy relentlessly.

—I. V. Stalin, November 1937

What kind of man was Nikolai Ezhov? At five feet tall, or 151 cm., he was extremely short.¹ In order to correct his small stature, he apparently used to wear high-heeled boots.² He is also reported to have had a slight limp. He was quite thin and frail. He had a small, rather expressionless face, with a sickly yellowish skin, and protruding ears.³ His hair was dark, an irregular, shining crew cut. On his right cheek he had a scar, the result of an injury from the civil war time. He had bad, yellow teeth, which makes plausible indeed the report that after the alleged mercury affair they began falling out. More than anything, his eyes stuck in people's memory: they were "grey-green, fastening themselves upon his interlocutor like gimlets, clever as the eyes of a cobra," wrote Dmiitrii Shepilov.⁴ Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov described them as "the greedy eyes of a hyena."⁵ In general, however, Shepilov found him "shabby," "insignificant," when in the autumn of 1937 he talked with him in his Central Committee office. He was dressed simply, in army-issue trousers and blouse; his rather coarse boots were reddish from lack of care.⁶ He seems to have had a "soft monotonous voice,"⁷ a baritone, and he occasionally sang romances and

Russian folk songs rather well.⁸ According to Fadeev, in his leisure time he loved to play the guitar and to sing and dance.

He was not notable for strong health. In the early 1930s he was diagnosed as suffering from tuberculosis of the lungs, myasthenia, neurasthenia, anemia, malnutrition, angina, and sciatica. In addition, he seems to have had psoriasis.⁹ He had a long history of illnesses. In 1916 he was wounded and sent on leave for six months. Something similar happened during the civil war. In 1922, after falling ill from exhaustion, he was treated in the Kremlin hospital for colitis, anemia, and lung catarrh. Later in the



Before the fall: Ezhov on top of the Lenin Mausoleum, 1 May 1938.
(Memorial collection)

same year he was granted a leave, for he was “worn out completely” and suffered from “almost seven illnesses”; he was treated in Kislovodsk. In the summer of 1927 he underwent a koumiss cure in the Urals. During the summer of 1934 the Politburo sent him abroad for medical treatment, and he was treated in a Vienna sanatorium for several weeks. In September 1935 he had become overworked again; on Stalin’s instigation, the Politburo gave him a leave of two months and sent him abroad for treatment (from 1937 on, however, such trips abroad were no longer made). Shortly after his appointment as NKVD chief in September 1936, the mercury affair allegedly made him sick, and when in November 1938 he was dismissed, his “state of ill health” was taken into consideration. Indeed, after his dismissal he wrote that during the past two years his nervous system had been overstrained and he had started to suffer from hypochondria. After his arrest, in early 1940, he fell ill; the doctors diagnosed pneumonia, and he was transferred to a prison hospital. His consumptive condition did not promote good manners. During the talk with Shepilov, he “coughed heavily and strainedly”: “He coughed and spit out straight on the luxurious carpet heavy clots of slime.”¹⁰

His health was probably affected by his addiction to alcohol. After August 1938 it reportedly exceeded previous bounds, even the drinking bouts in the late 1920s together with Konar and Piatkov. By 1933–35 he was drinking heavily in a systematic way.¹¹ According to Serafima Ryzhova, his personal secretary for ten years, drinking bouts with his NKVD adjutants took a central place in his working day.¹² In early 1939 Andreev, Beriia, and Malenkov reported on having ascertained Ezhov’s “constant drunkenness.” He “systematically arrived at work no earlier than at four or five in the afternoon, adapting the whole NKVD apparatus to this.”¹³ At his trial, Ezhov did not deny that he “drank heavily,” but he added that he “worked like a horse.” “Where is my decay?” he objected.¹⁴ Although he was able to work very hard indeed, at other periods as a result of his ill health and alcoholism he gave the impression of being a rather poor functionary.

One has only to think of the bad references after his service in the Mari province and the long periods of inactivity thereafter.

He seems to have been bisexual. He was married twice; the first marriage went wrong, and the second one was not without frictions either. With no registered children of his own, he had an adopted daughter, who in her diary describes him as a loving father, although she did not see him very often. Apart from affairs with other women, from the age of fifteen Ezhov must have had sexual relationships with men. One should, of course, approach this information with caution, since it comes from a Stalinist investigation, but Ezhov never denied his own confessions in this regard, in contrast to some of the other accusations.

Some authors stress his low intellectual level, emphasizing that he did not even finish primary education. Without wanting to demonstrate the opposite, we should add that before the revolution among co-workers he was known as “Nicky the booklover” and had the reputation of being well read. According to Fadeev, he loved reading and poetry and now and then scribbled a few lines himself. In a questionnaire of the early 1920s he answered that he was “literate (self taught).”¹⁵ He also taught himself Marxism-Leninism. Fadeev describes how in the mid-1920s he used to sit over his books at night “in order to master the theory of Marx-Lenin-Stalin.” In 1926–27 he followed the one-year Marxist-Leninist Courses of the Central Committee. According to people who knew him, however, even in high positions he remained an ignoramus.¹⁶ Shepilov, for example, describes him as “a little cultured and in theoretical respect totally ignorant man.”¹⁷ His texts were crude, full of errors in syntax and grammar, and he was not much of an orator either and did not like to make speeches.

During the 1930s, Ezhov had offices in the Central Committee building on Staraia ploshchad' (fifth floor), in NKVD headquarters in the Lubianka, and, after April 1938, at the People's Commissariat of Water Transportation. He had an apartment in the Kremlin, plus a luxurious dacha in Meshcherino, just outside Moscow, with its own film theater, tennis court, nanny, and so

on. There is evidence that several thousand dollars were spent on packages from abroad for Ezhov's wife. All this implies that—after the poverty of his youth and early career—he was not averse to “bourgeois” delights. Moreover, he seems to have been a collector. According to Lev Kassil', Ezhov once showed him “numerous models of yachts and ships, either made by himself, or gathered in a unique collection.”¹⁸ Rather macabre, on the other hand, was his collecting mania with respect to the bullets with which his more prominent victims had been executed.

Ideologically, he was a radical and a quibbler, to such a degree that he had sometimes deviated from the correct official line. During the early 1920s he had been at least a sympathizer of the Workers' Opposition, and in later years he had had contacts with different oppositionists, like Piatakov, Mar'iasin, and Konar. During the Mari episode, he made himself disliked by fighting “national chauvinism.” In Kazakhstan, he vehemently opposed concessions to foreign capitalists. During the late 1920s he made a stand not just against the Rightists but against the “Party swamp” as well. He made a name for himself as a “Bolshevik Marat”: a fanatic and bloodthirsty hangman, who did not know how to stop “purging,” made countless victims, and spared nobody, not even his close acquaintances.¹⁹ However, in this respect testimonies from the 1920s rather unanimously show him from quite a different side. At that time he seems to have been, on the contrary, well meaning, attentive, responsive, humane, gentle, tactful, free of arrogance and bureaucratic manners, helpful, modest, rather agreeable, quiet, somewhat shy.

By consequence, somewhere around 1930 he had changed, or another side of his character had emerged. From that time on he had the reputation of being fanatic, radical, cruel, immoral, ruthless, uncompromising. He saw enemies and conspiracies everywhere. He did not even spare those whom he had worked with and whose loyalty toward the Soviet regime he knew. He did not lift a finger for their acquittal or the mollification of their fate. For example, when in October 1937 the former chief of the Second Base of Radio-Telegraph Units—that is, his superior in 1919, A.T.

Uglov—was accused of espionage for Germany and arrested, his son asked Ezhov to stand up for his father. In response, Uglov's wife, whom Ezhov also knew well, was arrested as well, and in February 1938 Uglov was shot.²⁰ During the same year a number of former associates from the Mari province were executed, among them his former opponent as president of the Executive Committee, I. P. Petrov; one of the accusations was that they had hindered Ezhov when he was Party secretary in the Mari province and had plotted an attempt upon his life.²¹

In June 1937, according to Razgon, he confirmed the order to arrest his “godfather” Moskvín, together with his wife (who was accused of having planned an attempt on Ezhov); in November of the same year Moskvín was sentenced to death and shot; his wife was shot as well.²² In March 1937 his former mistress Evgeniia Podol'skaia was shot. In early 1938 the Kremlin physician Dr. Lev Levin was arrested on a charge of deliberately having given Soviet leaders as well as Maksim Gor'kii incorrect medical treatment. After arrest, he was permitted to ring up Ezhov, who had been one of his patients. Ezhov answered that he did not know about it; Levin should formally submit, but he promised he would examine the case in the first instance. Instead, Levin's son was also arrested, and in March 1938 Levin was tried and shot.²³

Ezhov's murderous suspicions were aimed at more people from his own circle, such as his drinking mate of old, Piatakov. According to Dagin, when in the autumn of 1937 Ezhov's former friend Iakovlev was shot, he witnessed the execution. Iakovlev turned to him, saying: “Nikolai Ivanovich! I see in your eyes that you feel sorry for me.” Ezhov answered nothing but was noticeably flustered and gave the order to fire.²⁴ (It is not quite clear who is meant here by Dagin. It could have been Iakov Iakovlev, the USSR People's Commissar of Agriculture from 1929 to 1934, whose deputy Ezhov had been in 1929–30: he was arrested in October 1937 but shot only in July 1938, which is rather later than the autumn of 1937.²⁵ N. A. Iakovlev, deputy director of the Central Labor Institute, was shot in October 1937, but we are not aware of any connection between him and Ezhov.)

In December 1936, Ezhov's former colleague from the Central Committee apparatus, Lev Mar'iasin, was arrested; he had been a very close friend. Earlier that year, when Mar'iasin had given up his State Bank function, Ezhov had offered him a job in the People's Commissariat of Internal Trade or Heavy Industry, denying him a Party function.²⁶ In September 1937 he was sentenced to death by the Military Collegium, to be shot only almost a year later, on 22 August 1938.²⁷ For the period, this was an incredibly long delay. Ezhov took an exceptional interest in the case and personally directed the investigation. On his orders, Mar'iasin was terribly and continuously beaten. "I ordered to cut off his ear and nose, to put out his eyes, to cut him to pieces," Dagin was told by a drunken Ezhov.²⁸ According to Frinovskii's evidence, "other prisoners were only beaten until they confessed. But Mar'iasin was beaten even after the investigation had been completed and no evidence was requested from him anymore."²⁹ On the other hand, at night and in a drunken state Ezhov used to visit Lefortovo prison, where he had long private talks with Mar'iasin.³⁰ Might these have been cordial conversations with an old friend, whom Ezhov was unable to help? Fearing the possible consequences of his former friendship, Ezhov had him beaten heavily but spared his life for an exceptionally long time. On the day of Beriia's appointment, however, he promptly ordered to have him shot. Ezhov understood that in Beriia's hands such prisoners were dangerous, since they might testify against him. That is how Ezhov parted with old friends. His hatred of Poles, Germans—everything foreign—is the more striking if one considers that his own mother was Lithuanian (a fact naturally to be suppressed).

His victims ran to thousands—deliberately destroyed by means of "quotas," "contingents," and other bureaucratic expedients. "Better that ten innocent people should suffer than one spy get away," was his philosophy: "If during this operation an extra thousand people will be shot, that is not such a big deal," he stated in July 1937. Or, in January 1938: "In such a large-scale operation mistakes are inevitable." In accordance with Stalin's instructions, he ordered his subordinates to torture the prisoners

so that they would “confess,” sometimes attending the tortures himself.

He could not bear his own methods, though, and when he was handled in the same way as his victims, he confessed everything. This should not surprise us. What is striking is his naïveté in this respect. In common with many other Great Terror victims, he saw his own fall as a “coincidence.” When Beriia promised to spare his life if at his trial he would sincerely confess, he indignantly rejected the proposal, perhaps forgetting that he had made the same hypocritical proposal to his own victims. In his (unsent) letter to Stalin of late November 1938, Ezhov complained that after his dismissal the comrades with whom he had made friends “suddenly turned their back upon me as if I were plague-stricken,” but how many of his victims had not met with the same misfortune? He had come to the conclusion that he hardly knew people: “I never realized the depth of the meanness all these people could get to.”³¹ At the same time there was a sense of resignation. When interrogating Khristian Rakovskii, who was tried together with Bukharin in March 1938, he persuaded him to sign fantastic nonsense. “Sign, Khristian Georgievich, don’t be shy!” he urged him (so Rakovskii told his fellow prisoner). “Today you, and tomorrow me.”³²

What had caused Ezhov’s change? Some authors explain his abuse of power by pointing to an inferiority complex on account of his small size, simple origin, and scant education. Through Ezhov’s career an anti-intellectualist thread is woven indeed. According to V. Topolianskii, his inferiority complex generated sadism, the particular cruelty of a spoiled, underdeveloped child who, as long as he is not punished, does not know when to stop tormenting weaker beings.³³ His “infantilism”—to use Topolianskii’s word—may certainly have played a role, but it does not explain the change.³⁴ The same thing applies to the class hatred he allegedly developed during labor disputes before the revolution, when as a worker he faced the industrialists. Another explanation is Stalin’s influence. While strengthening his power, the Soviet dictator could well use the ideal executor (as he was characterized by

Moskvin): a very energetic man of great organizational talents, a strong hand with an iron grasp. When Stalin provided him with power, Ezhov answered with an obedient, ultrazealous devotion in executing any of the leader's orders. In the eyes of anti-Stalinist historians he was above all a product of Stalin's totalitarian, terrorist, and bureaucratic system. In the present state of our knowledge this is indeed the most plausible explanation.

It is clear that Ezhov's advance on the hierarchical ladder was particularly pushed by Stalin. Originating from the Party apparatus, he was actually a stranger to the state security organs. It is possible that he had met with Stalin as early as 1922–23; in 1927 they were certainly acquainted, and by 1930 he belonged to Stalin's "inner circle." His rapid advance in key positions—head of the Distribution Department, Raspredotdel (1930), member of the Central Committee purging commission (1933), head of the Mandate Commission of the Seventeenth Party Congress, member of the Central Committee and the Orgburo and deputy head of the Party Control Commission (1934), Secretary of the Central Committee, head of the Control Commission, head of the Department of Leading Party Organizations and member of the Comintern Executive Committee (1935)—without a doubt was supported by Stalin. From 1930 on he was allowed to attend Politburo sessions and had access to the same information as Politburo members. From late 1934–early 1935 on, without being a Politburo member, he was in the supreme Party leadership, controlling personnel policy and state security.

After the Kirov murder in December 1934 Stalin charged him with the investigation of the case, instructing a reluctant state security chief Iagoda to carry out his orders. In fact, he was made Stalin's representative, supervising the NKVD. In May 1935 he provided Stalin with the "proof" that the former opposition in its struggle against the Party had resorted to terror; this was done in his text "From Factionism to Open Counterrevolution," that is, its first chapter, which Stalin himself edited. From the spring of 1935 until the autumn of 1936, he was engaged in a Party purge, inspired by Stalin, the verification and exchange of Party docu-

ments operations. The NKVD was involved in the conduct of the purge; enemies who had crept into the Party were unmasked and sometimes arrested. Ezhov's attack in June 1935 on the former TsIK Secretary Enukidze, also instigated by Stalin, shows that it was not a question only of former oppositionists but also of Stalinists who were thought insufficiently "vigilant." The ranks of the foreign communists and political émigrés to the USSR were purged as well, to root out the supposed "spies" among them. When in March 1936 Varga sought support against Ezhov's demands, Stalin sided with Ezhov.

Ezhov played a leading role in the organization of the great show trials. In July 1936 he supplied Stalin the text of a Central Committee instruction, "On the Terrorist Activity of the Trotskiist-Zinov'evist Counterrevolutionary Bloc," which, slightly edited, Stalin sent to the Party organizations. Evidently, however, Ezhov had not yet prepared an exact program of the Great Terror. As is clear from a draft of his letter to Stalin of September 1936, he was not yet convinced that the Rightists had really formed an organizational bloc with the Trotskiists and Zinov'evists. He wanted to punish them by only expelling them from the Central Committee and exiling them to remote places. After the trial of Zinov'ev et al. (August 1936), he was against further political trials; Piatakov, Radek, and Sokol'nikov also should be punished without trial. But he pleaded for the extrajudicial execution of "quite an impressive" number of prisoners, "in order to finish with this scum once and for all." In spite of this, in January 1937 Piatakov et al. and in March 1938 Bukharin et al. were tried in trials that had been organized by Ezhov on Stalin's orders. When Stalin appointed him state security chief in September 1936, the Party leader had clearly made him change his mind. Within the NKVD the newcomer was considered a representative of the Central Committee and Stalin. This enabled him to start a purge there of people connected to Iagoda; military intelligence was also thoroughly purged.

With Stalin's support, Ezhov now seriously went on the offensive against the Rightists, Bukharin and his colleagues. After the

February–March Plenum of 1937, mass repressions started within the Party. Under Stalin’s supervision, Ezhov also carried out a purge of the Red Army command. At the June 1937 Central Committee Plenum he sketched an all-embracing conspiracy against the Party leadership, involving the Trotskiists, the Zinov’evists, the Rightists, people from the Comintern apparatus, Tukhachevskii and his accomplices from the Red Army, and Iagoda and his accomplices from the NKVD. According to Ezhov, the conspiracy extended to local levels. Because only the leaders had been liquidated, this implied the beginning of the great purge.

With this aim, from July 1937 on, “mass operations” were organized along “quotas” and “national contingents.” It is beyond doubt that the Great Terror was thoroughly planned by Stalin and his staff. By order of Stalin and the Politburo, Ezhov drew up a plan aiming at the arrest of almost 270,000 people, some 76,000 of whom were immediately to be shot, their cases having been considered by troikas. For this purpose, the regional authorities were given quotas of arrests and executions. In return, they requested even higher quotas, with the central leadership encouraging them. The original term of four months was amply exceeded. During the following months, the Politburo approved the arrest of more than 180,000 additional people, including 150,000 who were to be shot. The arrest of some 300,000 more people was approved by Ezhov without formal Politburo decisions but apparently with Stalin’s agreement. All in all, in the operation with respect to order No. 00447, from August 1937 to November 1938, 767,397 people were condemned by the troikas, including 386,798 to the death penalty.

Many thousands of other people were hit by the “national operations” against Poles, Germans, Harbin returnees, Latvians, Estonians, Finns, Romanians, Greeks, Afghans, Iranians, Chinese, Bulgarians, Macedonians, and related people of other nationalities. All in all, almost 350,000 people were involved in the national operations, including almost 250,000 who were condemned to death and 90,000 to imprisonment. Stalin signed 383 lists, sent by Ezhov, with the names of over 44,000 state and Party

functionaries who were to be condemned, almost 39,000 of them to death. Another target was the Comintern apparatus and foreign communist parties. Over 7,000 army officers were condemned for counterrevolutionary crimes, and over 2,000 state security executives were arrested. From August through October 1937 more than 170,000 Koreans were deported from border regions in the Far East. Over 18,000 wives of “enemies of the people” were arrested and some 25,000 children taken away. Outside the Soviet borders, in Outer Mongolia, by orders of the Politburo in Moscow a troika up to March 1938 had almost 11,000 people arrested, including over 6,000 who were shot; yet another 7,000 people had been targeted. As a result, during 1937–38 more than 1.5 million people were arrested for counterrevolutionary and other crimes against the state, and nearly 700,000 of them were shot. By order of Ezhov, and with Ezhov personally participating, the prisoners were tortured in order to make them “confess”; the use of torture was approved of by Stalin and the Politburo.

In 1937 Ezhov's influence reached its apogee. In April, though not a Politburo member, he was included in the leading five who in practice had taken over from the Politburo. During the summer he was also empowered with supervising military intelligence. In October he was included in the Politburo as a candidate. In the spring of 1938 his decline started. In April of that year the People's Commissariat of Water Transportation was added to his functions. In June–July two major NKVD officers defected, Liushkov and Orlov; when Ezhov tarried over reporting it to Stalin, the latter's suspicion was aroused. In August Stalin appointed Lavrentii Beria as Ezhov's deputy and intended successor. Apparently, by then the Party leader had decided to get rid of him. During the months September through November a number of his adjutants and other people surrounding him were arrested, and the net also closed around his wife, who in November committed suicide with Ezhov's cooperation.

After the Party purge was brought under control in January 1938, in mid-November of the same year Stalin signed a resolu-

tion criticizing the NKVD methods. An end was put to the mass operations. Within a week Ezhov sent Stalin a letter of resignation. It was accepted, and Beriia succeeded him as state security chief. After 23 November he was no longer admitted to Stalin. But Stalin let him dangle for a while. For the time being he stayed on as People's Commissar of Water Transportation, and on 21 January 1939 he still appeared on Stalin's side in a commemoration ceremony in honor of Lenin. In the draft act on the transfer of authority for the NKVD of 29 January, a passage questioning whether Ezhov could remain Party member was crossed out, probably in accordance with Stalin. The same day, he still attended a Politburo meeting, but it proved to be his last one. He was not elected a delegate to the Eighteenth Party Congress of March 1939 and was refused the floor there. After sharp criticism by Stalin, he was not reelected to the Central Committee. Following the Congress he was deprived of all Party posts. In April he was arrested. He could not bear torture and during interrogation confessed everything: spying, wrecking, conspiring, terrorism, sodomy. On 2 February 1940 he was tried behind closed doors and sentenced to death. During the investigation as well as at his trial he expressed his unbounded devotion to Stalin; he announced that he would die with Stalin's name on his lips. He was shot the following night.

Was Ezhov's role more or less independent, or was he merely Stalin's instrument? There is a great deal of documentary evidence that during the Great Terror Ezhov's work was thoroughly controlled and directed by Stalin. Stalin edited the principal documents, prepared by Ezhov, and supervised the investigation and the course of the political trials. For example, during the investigation of the Tukhachevskii case, Stalin received Ezhov almost daily. It is evident from the register of visitors that during 1937–38 Ezhov was received by Stalin in the Kremlin 278 times and altogether spent 834 hours with him. Only Molotov appeared in Stalin's office more often than Ezhov.³⁵ According to O. V. Khlevniuk,

Ezhov could hardly aspire to the role of organizer of the “Great Terror,” an independent political figure who to any serious extent determined the scope and direction of the purge. He was the diligent executor of Stalin’s wishes, and functioned within the framework of precise instructions “from above.” We do not know of any single fact showing that he exceeded Stalin’s control in any way. He was dismissed when Stalin himself thought it expedient.³⁶

Indeed, there are no indications that Ezhov ever exceeded the role of Stalin’s instrument. After his fall, contrary to the accepted order, he turned out to have gathered compromising evidence on many NKVD and Party executives, without informing Stalin about their existence. Among the papers confiscated during his arrest there was even evidence with respect to Stalin himself: pre-1917 correspondence of the Tiflis gendarme and notices of the Turukhansk post office. However, it is not necessarily the case that Ezhov was gathering evidence to prove that Stalin had been an Okhrana agent. It may simply have been intended for a Stalin museum.

For his part, Ezhov was boundlessly devoted to Stalin. When I. B. Zbarskii was summoned to his office in 1937, he saw a small, frail man with inquisitive eyes sitting behind a large desk in an enormous room. “On the wall behind his back hung a portrait of Stalin of impressive dimensions, on the desk were a bust of Stalin and yet another framed portrait of Stalin.”³⁷ There is evidence that beginning in the summer of 1938, when Beriia was appointed his deputy and started arresting people from his circle, he became disillusioned with Stalin. A number of witnesses have testified that on several occasions after that he abused and insulted Stalin and other Party leaders. After arrest he himself confessed to having conspired against Stalin and having planned an attempt on him; this was confirmed by a number of accomplices and witnesses.³⁸ At his trial he revoked the confession, saying that it was made under torture. In all probability, it was simply drunken talk by one who had become embittered toward Stalin. It cannot be ex-

cluded that after falling into disgrace and with their relations interrupted, he was no longer completely loyal to Stalin and may have organized opposition and collected evidence against him, but it does not seem very probable, if only because he would not have wanted to risk the inevitable arrest.

Ezhov could not consult Stalin on every detail, and his role as Stalin's instrument had to involve a certain amount of autonomy, but with regard to the operations we know of, it is striking how closely Ezhov cooperated with his boss. We may recall that, being the ideal executor, according to Moskvín, he had one essential shortcoming: he did not know where to stop. Summed up in his own words, his logic was: "Better too far than not far enough." This method of working could not infinitely be prolonged without great danger even for the Stalinist system itself. So, during the spring of 1938, the first Party secretary of Karelia, N. I. Ivanov, who was also a troika member, declared that he was unable to imprison over a thousand enemies of the people because the prisons were overcrowded.³⁹ During the following months, the Novosibirsk NKVD chief, I. A. Mal'tsev, had to cancel a planned operation of his deputy to arrest some hundred priests because there was no place left for them in the overcrowded prisons. The Russian historian S. A. Papkov comments: "If there was nowhere to imprison a hundred priests, how could one handle thousands of other prisoners? It is clear that the Stalinists had reached such a scale of the terror that they lacked the means of maintaining it."⁴⁰

Although Ezhov was chosen precisely because of his zeal, that zeal, which he carried to an excess, made it all the more easy for Stalin to dump him when he was no longer needed. It needs to be stressed, however, that the point of overzealousness was never touched upon during the investigation of his case and his trial. Some authors, incorrectly, tend to suppose that Stalin wanted Ezhov to bear responsibility for the excesses of the purges of 1937–38 and wanted him to be a scapegoat. If that had been the case, wouldn't he have publicly proclaimed him an enemy of the people and had him executed with a lot of noise? But there was no noise: Ezhov's disappearance went almost unnoticed. The term

ezhovshchina was invented only later, during the de-Stalinization campaign of the 1950s.⁴¹ Only months after his fall, Stalin explained to the aircraft designer A. Iakovlev:

Ezhov was a scoundrel! He ruined our best cadres. He had morally degenerated. You call him at the People's Commissariat, and you are told that he went out to the Central Committee. You call him at the Central Committee, and you are told that he went out for work. You send for him at home, and it turns out that he is lying in bed, dead drunk. He ruined many innocent people. That is why we have shot him.⁴²

Because he especially referred to 1938, Stalin suggested that in his opinion in that year, unlike 1937, the terror had gotten out of control and endangered the country's stability.⁴³ At the end of his life, Stalin told his bodyguard that "the drunkard Ezhov" had been recommended for the NKVD by Malenkov: "While in a state of intoxication, he signed lists for the arrest of often innocent people that had been palmed off on him."⁴⁴

In interviews in the 1970s, Molotov reasoned along similar lines. According to him, Ezhov had enjoyed a good reputation, until he "morally degenerated." Stalin had ordered him to "reinforce the pressure," and Ezhov "was given strong instructions." He "began to chop according to plan," but he "overdid it": "Stopping him was impossible." Extremely selective in his memory, Molotov gave the impression that Ezhov had fixed the quotas on his own and that therefore he had been shot. He did not agree that Ezhov had only carried out Stalin's instructions: "It is absurd to say that Stalin did not know about it, but of course it is also incorrect to say that he is responsible for it all."⁴⁵ Another former Stalin adjutant who justified the purges was Kaganovich. There *was* sabotage and all that, he admitted, and "to go against the public opinion was impossible then." Only Ezhov "overdid it"; he even "organized competitions to see who could unmask the most enemies of the people." As a result, "many innocent people perished, and nobody will justify this."⁴⁶

In actual fact, Stalin himself bore full responsibility for the purge as well as its excesses. Just like its beginning, the end of the wave of terror went completely as planned. According to Avtor-khanov, in 1938, in Butyrki prison, Pavel Postyshev gave as his view:

Ezhov is a hunting dog on Stalin's rein, but a faithful and distinguished one, that following the will of his master destroys the Party and terrorizes the people. As soon as the dog finishes the hunt (and we won't be alive anymore by then), Stalin declares it mad and destroys it.⁴⁷