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# Directing the Purges and Supervising the NKVD

In April 1933 the Central Committee entrusted a commission, including Raspredotdel chief Ezhov, with a large-scale purge, similar to earlier purges organized in 1921 and 1929.<sup>1</sup> All Party members were subjected to a review to establish whether they could remain in the Party; for the time being, no new members were admitted. The purge resulted in many expulsions.<sup>2</sup> It lasted until May 1935 and was followed by two successive purge campaigns under Ezhov's direction, lasting until September 1936.<sup>3</sup>

When in January–February 1934 the Seventeenth Party Congress convened, Ezhov was elected to its Secretariat and (as chairman) to the Mandate (credentials) Commission.<sup>4</sup> During the Congress he was elected to the Central Committee and (as deputy head) to the newly instituted Party Control Commission.<sup>5</sup> Reportedly, the commission head, Kaganovich, personally chose him as his deputy.<sup>6</sup> At the Central Committee Plenum following the Congress he was made a member of the Organization Bureau (Orgburo).<sup>7</sup> In March he was charged with presiding over the Central Committee Industrial Department, and in December he succeeded Andrei Zhdanov as chairman of the Commission for Foreign

Travel.<sup>8</sup> He was rising extraordinarily fast, as if Stalin trusted him more than anyone else.

From this early moment on, Ezhov was involved in state security matters. On 20 February 1934 he attended his first Politburo meeting;<sup>9</sup> on Stalin's initiative, it was decided to institute an all-Union People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), with a reorganized state security organization OGPU incorporated within it.<sup>10</sup> A month later, in this connection, the Politburo charged a commission, presided over by Kuibyshev and including Ezhov, with reforming the judiciary.<sup>11</sup> A few days later, together with Stalin, Ezhov was included in another Politburo commission, presided over by Kaganovich and charged with working out draft regulations for the NKVD and a "Special Board."<sup>12</sup> As a result, on 10 July the OGPU was abolished, its police functions being incorporated in the newly instituted NKVD under Genrikh Ia-goda, with Ia. S. Agranov and G. E. Prokof'ev as deputies; the Chief Directorate of State Security (GUGB) and the camps system (GULag) were part of it. Unlike the OGPU, the NKVD was not authorized to pass death sentences or administrative sentences above five years; with respect to "people recognized as socially dangerous," an NKVD Special Board (Osoboe soveshchanie, OSO) was authorized to pass sentences up to five years (from April 1937 on, eight years) exile or camp. Treason cases were referred to the courts.<sup>13</sup> In May 1935, the NKVD ordered its regional bodies to organize triumvirates or troikas, enjoying the same powers as the OSO.<sup>14</sup> These were the so-called "militia troikas" (headed by the regional militia chief); the main targets were people who had transgressed the passport regime, and tramps.

As before, Ezhov suffered from bad health. By now he ranked high enough to earn the privilege of traveling abroad. In July 1934, the Politburo sent him to Italy for medical treatment, with a disbursement of 1,200 rubles in foreign currency (later supplemented with an additional 1,000 gold rubles); he had to be forbidden to return until the end of his rest.<sup>15</sup> Instead of Italy he went to Vienna, where he was treated in a sanatorium for several weeks. (After arrest he gratuitously stated that while there he had had

intimate intercourse with a nurse; when a doctor found out about it, he had himself recruited as an “agent of the German intelligence service.”)<sup>16</sup> In early October he returned to Moscow, informing Stalin (who was on leave in Sochi) that he was at work again. He wrote that he felt all right but was on a diet and in half a year’s time had to have his appendix removed in order to improve the working of the alimentary canal. Apparently, when abroad he had not lost sight of state security interests: he told Stalin that he had had a look at the work of Soviet institutions there and wanted to report on it.<sup>17</sup>

Stalin indeed took personal care of Ezhov, whom he had selected as his main assistant in realizing plans for a political purge. This became clear after the murder of the Leningrad Party chief, Sergei Kirov, on 1 December 1934. According to one version of events, on the morning of that day, after the news of the murder had reached Moscow, Ezhov was summoned to Stalin’s office and spent a good part of the day there.<sup>18</sup> The day’s register of visitors to Stalin’s office does not mention Ezhov at all.<sup>19</sup> Yet when on the same day late at night Stalin left for Leningrad on a special train, Ezhov was among those accompanying him, and after arriving in Leningrad the next morning, he attended Stalin’s interrogation of the murderer, Nikolaev.<sup>20</sup> Two days after the murder, the Politburo approved an emergency decree enabling the conviction and execution in an abbreviated procedure of persons accused of terrorism. During the purges of the following years, this Law of 1 December 1934 was used extensively.<sup>21</sup>

Stalin charged Ezhov with supervising the investigation, together with Komsomol leader A. V. Kosarev and Iagoda’s deputy in charge of state security Agranov.<sup>22</sup> Notwithstanding the lack of any facts, Stalin gave orders to fabricate the story that Zinov’ev, Kamenev, and the other former Party oppositionists were responsible for the murder. The NKVD leadership, however, treated this version of events with distrust and tried to disregard Stalin’s orders. Then Ezhov came to play his role. Stalin in fact appointed him his representative in the NKVD. This was not appreciated by Iagoda, and later, under arrest, he testified that after the Kirov

murder Ezhov “systematically and persistently began to creep into NKVD matters”; passing over Iagoda, he went straight to the operative departments and meddled in everything.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, at an NKVD conference in December 1936, Ezhov confirmed to having been very closely connected with NKVD work during the past two years.<sup>24</sup>

Delving into the details of the investigation, Ezhov gave it the direction Stalin wanted: in a detailed report, he unmasked the culpable enemies and spies. The NKVD, accustomed to acting on its own, resented the interferences; as Ezhov explained later, the NKVD looked in another direction and would not allow him access to the case until Stalin intervened. The Party leader threatened Iagoda, “Take care, or we’ll punch you in the mug.” He ordered the NKVD chief to arrest those against whom Ezhov had collected evidence, which Iagoda did, but only reluctantly.<sup>25</sup>

By February, Ezhov reported to Stalin that he had rounded up about one thousand former Leningrad oppositionists, three hundred of whom had been arrested, the rest exiled; in addition, several thousand so-called “former people” had been deported from the city.<sup>26</sup> In December 1934 Kirov’s murderer, Nikolaev, was tried; next month followed the trial of the “Moscow Center” of Zinov’ev, Kamenev et al., who received five-to-ten-year sentences for “ideological involvement” in the murder.<sup>27</sup> Henceforth, Iagoda sent Ezhov all examination records of the main oppositionists and plotters.

Ezhov’s authority was not limited to overseeing the investigation of these cases; increasingly he gained control of the whole NKVD. In a memorandum, he directed Stalin’s attention to NKVD “deficiencies,” criticizing its policy of drift with respect to the work of informers and agents. The way agents were recruited was “bordering on counterrevolution”: “Under such conditions of recruiting, foreign intelligence services can easily implant their people under the guise of Cheka agents.” The NKVD, he complained, was much less competent in investigating than in searching. On the whole, its people were insufficiently qualified, and the purge that he had carried out personally of the Leningrad NKVD,

in his opinion, "should yet be extended." (In Leningrad Ezhov had checked 2,747 NKVD employees and 3,050 militia employees, resulting in the firing or transferring to other work of 298 and 590 of them, respectively). Ezhov asked Stalin for permission to address a conference of NKVD executives with sharp criticism of these deficiencies.<sup>28</sup> Stalin approved, and in February 1935 Ezhov addressed such a conference.<sup>29</sup> On 31 March, the Politburo decided to give him for examination the regulations pertaining to the NKVD and the GUGB.<sup>30</sup> USSR Procurator Ivan Akulov also sent him his complaints about NKVD methods.<sup>31</sup> In short, from December 1934 on he was the supreme supervisor of the NKVD.

On 1 February the Central Committee appointed Ezhov its secretary. He was given an office in the Central Committee building on Staraia ploshchad', on the fifth floor, where also were offices of the Orgburo and the Secretariat.<sup>32</sup> (As Raspredotdel head, he already must have had an office there.) Apart from Stalin and Ezhov, the Secretariat now consisted of Kaganovich, Zhdanov, and (from 28 February on) Andreev. As Secretary, Ezhov got three assistants: S. A. Ryzhova, V. E. Tsesarskii, and I. I. Shapiro, the last two already having served under him in the Industrial Department; they stayed with him during the following years.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, on 27 February the Politburo appointed him chairman of the Party Control Commission, succeeding Kaganovich, who became People's Commissar of Communications.<sup>34</sup> Now he was the supreme Party judge as well, investigating and punishing cases of ideological deviance, corruption, and violation of Party rules.

On 10 March he took over the key function of head of the Department of Leading Party Organizations (ORPO). This department had been established straight after the Seventeenth Party Congress in the place of Raspredotdel and was engaged in the selection and distribution of personnel in the Party, but not in industry, which was the Industrial Department's responsibility. The first ORPO head had been D. A. Bulatov, but since his transfer in December 1934 to another Party function, the post had been vacant. Already since then, Ezhov had signed the ORPO documents, and now he was officially appointed its head.<sup>35</sup> He

had to hand over the Industrial Department to Andrei Andreev, who also became head of the Orgburo, but with Ezhov as second man.<sup>36</sup> On 31 March the Politburo replaced Kaganovich in several of its commissions by Iakovlev, Andreev, and Ezhov. Ezhov was charged with purging the Komsomol and checking the NKVD staff.<sup>37</sup>

According to O. V. Khlevniuk, as a consequence of this redistribution of leading functions, Kaganovich lost his position as Stalin's second man. Formally he was succeeded by Andreev, but Andreev's influence was strongly limited by his having to share responsibility in the Orgburo with Ezhov, and furthermore Kaganovich remained Central Committee secretary and Orgburo member. The roles of Andreev and Ezhov were more or less balanced. Although not (like Andreev) a Politburo member, Ezhov controlled the Party personnel policy and the conduct of the main political campaigns. Moreover, he took an active part in Politburo work and was charged by Stalin with the task of controlling the NKVD and organizing the political purges.<sup>38</sup> A relative unknown, in Central Committee circles Ezhov's rapid promotion was explained by his great firmness and "good nose" (*ogromnyi niukh*), as well as by the strong support of Kaganovich and Stalin.<sup>39</sup>

According to a number of authors, on 13 May 1935 the Politburo secretly instituted a special State Security Commission, headed by Stalin, with Ezhov as his deputy. The members were Zhdanov, Malenkov, Matvei Shkiriakov (secretary of the Party Collegium of the Party Control Commission), and USSR Deputy Procurator Andrei Vyshinskii; an executive staff was added under Ivan Serov from the NKVD. Supposedly, the commission's task was to prepare the coming liquidation of the "enemies of the people," and with this aim it began collecting information on former oppositionists and others. The commission was, the story goes, in effect a state security staff within the Party apparatus, parallel to the NKVD. Moreover, in addition to a public verification of Party documents, there was to be a secret check of the political conduct of all Party members. In this vision, the commission played a key role in the organization of the Great Terror. According to

A. Avtorkhanov, a former Party functionary who emigrated during World War II, it planned the mass terror that surfaced in 1937.<sup>40</sup>

A. Kolpakidi even quotes the relevant Politburo decision, in quotation marks but without any reference.<sup>41</sup> This, however, must be a falsification. As the authors of the present work have verified in the archives, neither the Politburo minutes (*protokol*) of 13 May 1935, or any other date, nor the special files (*osobyie papki*) contain any reference to such a commission. Moreover, it is improbable that Serov was made head of an executive staff, since in 1935 he entered the Military Frunze Academy in Moscow and did not finish the study before February 1939.<sup>42</sup> This does not alter the fact that in January 1935, on the instruction of the Central Committee apparatus, the regional Party organizations started drawing up lists of Party members who had earlier been expelled for belonging to the “Trotskiist and Trotskiist-Zinov’evist bloc.” According to Khlevniuk, the later arrests were carried out on the basis of these lists.<sup>43</sup>

What did happen at the 13 May Politburo meeting was that after a report by Ezhov, the Politburo approved his draft Central Committee letter to all Party organizations “on disorders in the registration, issuing, and keeping of Party cards, and on measures for regulating these.”<sup>44</sup> The letter charged that Party organizations were guilty of “the most flagrant arbitrariness in the handling of Party cards” and of “a totally intolerable chaos in the registration of communists.” In numerous cases, enemies had succeeded in seizing Party documents. He had found “utmost neglect of and disorganization in the registration of communists” and an absence of investigation with respect to new members. All this attested to “organizational lack of discipline of the Party organizations” and to “intolerable complacency [*blagodushie*] and idleness [*rotozeistvo*] among Party members.”

Ezhov recommended that in order to facilitate the exposure and liquidation of Party enemies, the “organizational lack of discipline” should be overcome as soon as possible, all expressions of “idleness” and “complacency” among communists should be

completely eradicated, and order should be instituted within the Party. Until this was accomplished, the admission of new members was out of the question. The letter formulated a number of organizational measures the Party organizations had to take in order to institute order within two to three months, all boiling down to more control and more discipline. The second secretary of each Party committee and the regional ORPO head were charged with carrying out the verification operation.<sup>45</sup>

Later, Ezhov explained that the letter had been inspired by Stalin. He reported that during 1934 the Central Committee had taken a number of decisions on disorders in the issuing and keeping of Party documents with respect to separate Party organizations. Under Ezhov's direction, the ORPO controlled the execution of these decisions. Then in the Orgburo, facts of "scandalous disorders" in the issuing of Party documents were revealed. Stalin attended the Orgburo meeting and put the question "on a completely different track." He announced that "as long as such arbitrariness in the issuing of Party documents and chaos in the admission of Party members and candidates were reigning," an exchange of Party cards, as intended by the Central Committee, and especially the admission of new Party members, were out of the question. The result of this formulation of the question, according to Ezhov, was the Central Committee letter of 13 May 1935.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, on 27 March Stalin in the Orgburo had declared himself opposed to admitting new members as long as the membership administration was in such a mess: "Good guys sometimes are expelled from the Party, while scoundrels remain, because they dodge very adroitly." Stalin had thought it necessary to send the Party organizations a special Central Committee letter on this issue: "We gained power and took it into our own hands, but we don't know how to handle it. Get this clear, we turn it over, like a monkey smelling at a pair of spectacles, we lick it, and that's all. . . . We are bad heirs: instead of accumulating new moral capital, we run through it."<sup>47</sup>

In this way Ezhov came to direct the verification of Party doc-



uments campaign, aiming at “exposing the alien people who have wormed their way into the Party.”<sup>48</sup> It continued the purge started in April 1933. During the next one and a half years he was engaged in organizing Party purges.<sup>49</sup>

In early 1935 Zinov’ev and the others had been punished relatively mildly, but the matter had not been settled. In consultation with Stalin, Ezhov was writing a book on the Zinov’evists entitled “From Factionism to Open Counterrevolution.” On 17 May 1935 he sent Stalin the first chapter, “The Stages of the Anti-Party Struggle of the Zinov’evist-Kamenevist and Trotskiist Groups.” The intended four following chapters were not yet ready. He asked Stalin’s instructions because the journal *Bol’shevik* wanted to publish the chapter before the rest of the book was completed.<sup>50</sup> Stalin indeed gave his comment, as did Shkiriakov and Iaroslavskii, but neither the chapter nor the book was ever published.<sup>51</sup>

The book’s title pointed to the fact that, according to the author, there was a straight line from the inner-Party factionism of Zinov’ev, Kamenev, and their supporters since the mid-1920s to their involvement in the Kirov murder: in a logical development, the Zinov’evists had passed from inner-Party opposition to counterrevolution. As early as 1925 a “bloc of Trotskiists and Zinov’evists” had been formed, “uniting all anti-Party groupings in the struggle against the Party.” In the absence of any support within the Party, the Zinov’evists had repeatedly retracted their positions in public, promising to abstain from factionism, but that had been no more than a false maneuver in order to escape annihilation, and by late 1927 an “explicitly terrorist” mood was reigning among them toward Stalin. They “tried to decapitate the revolution, by destroying comrade Stalin.”

Ezhov further charged that in the late 1920s the Zinov’evists had set up leading clandestine Moscow and Leningrad centers, hoping to make use of the appearance of the Rightists in order to return to power. Zinov’ev and Kamenev took steps “for a deal” with the object of a possible “joint action of the Rightists and the Zinov’evists.” Bukharin and Kamenev (who indeed had had a

conversation in April 1928) “on behalf of their groups negotiated about a concrete plan for an action against the Party.” In 1929 the plans were thwarted by the annihilation of the Rightist opposition, but in 1932 the activity of the Zinov’evist organization revived. There were negotiations with the “Leftists” (Lominadze et al.) and with the Rightist Riutin group, and contacts were searched with the Trotskiist underground. Zinov’ev, Kamenev, and their supporters set their hopes on a military attack by the imperialists on the Soviet Union so that a favorable situation could be created for the overthrow of the Party leadership. When this turned out to be hopeless, they seriously considered “terror against the most prominent Party and government leaders” as a method. A “clandestine terrorist group” was formed within the “Leningrad Center” “with the object of organizing the murder of comrades Kirov and Stalin.” The group succeeded only in the first object. At the same time there was a close relationship with the Trotskiists, who were also informed of the terrorist activity of the Zinov’evist organization. What is more, the Trotskiists “also took the course of organizing terrorist groups.”

Stalin slightly edited the text, making no substantial corrections. One may safely conclude that he agreed.<sup>52</sup>

Ezhov’s papers contain another, more extensive (probably later) version of the same work. In it Ezhov expanded on details with respect to the so-called “Kremlin affair.” During the early months of 1935 a large group of Kremlin staff had been arrested, among them Kamenev’s brother. They were accused of having prepared an attempt on Stalin’s life. (At the June 1935 Central Committee Plenum Ezhov used the evidence in attacking the Secretary of the Central Executive Committee, Avel’ Enukidze.) According to Ezhov, it had now been proved that the Zinov’evists and Trotskiists had passed to terror, in the first place, attempts on Kirov and Stalin. Zinov’ev had organized the terror in Leningrad, and Kamenev in Moscow; they kept in touch with the Trotskiists. The Kirov murder, organized by Zinov’ev and Kamenev, was “just a link in the terrorist chain of the plans of the Zinov’evist-Kamenevist and Trotskiist groups.”<sup>53</sup>

Ezhov's work initiated the prosecution of the former Party opposition. It was specific in making inner-Party opposition a criminal act, by means of linking it to concrete terrorist activity. This was done on Stalin's initiative. The several Party oppositions were closely linked together, as "blocs." But Ezhov did not yet explicitly point to a joint bloc of Zinov'evists, Trotskiists, and Rightists, nor did he link the Rightists to terror. That may explain why the text was not published: Stalin needed more evidence. In any case, the attribution of terrorist plans to the former opposition leaders inevitably implied a program for their physical liquidation.

It was not only a question of prosecuting former Party oppositionists, however. On 11 February 1935 a Politburo commission consisting of the control commissions functionaries Z. M. Belen'kii and M. F. Shkiriakov and directed by Ezhov was charged with checking the personnel of the USSR Central Executive Committee apparatus (together with that of its Russian Republic counterpart) for evidence of "elements of decay."<sup>54</sup> In June 1935 Kaganovich informed the Central Committee Plenum that as soon as Stalin received the news of the "Kremlin affair," he had convened his entourage, establishing that "there was something rotten here," and raised the question of removing Enukidze from the post of USSR Central Executive Committee (TsIK) Secretary.<sup>55</sup> On 3 March the Politburo indeed transferred him to the Transcaucasian TsIK.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the information on the "Kremlin affair" had probably been received shortly before that date, and Stalin personally had taken the first step leading to Enukidze's dismissal.

Ezhov had the NKVD examination records at his disposal and on their basis wrote a draft Central Committee report concerning "the USSR Central Executive Committee apparatus and comrade Enukidze." On 21 March, after being edited by, probably, Stalin and Molotov, the text was approved by the Politburo. It said that in the beginning of the year counterrevolutionary activity directed against Stalin and the Party leadership had been established among the Kremlin personnel; recently, the NKVD had even discovered several mutually allied counterrevolutionary groups that had set themselves to organizing terrorist attempts on Stalin and

other leaders. Many members of these groups had enjoyed the support and protection of Enukidze, who had appointed them and had even cohabited with some of the females. The report admitted that, indeed, Enukidze had not known about the preparations for an attempt on Stalin; but the class enemy had used him as “a man who has lost political vigilance and has shown an attraction toward former people [*byvshie liudi*] that is uncharacteristic for a communist.”<sup>57</sup>

A few days later, the leadership agreed to Enukidze's request for the time being not to send him to Tiflis but rather to Kislovodsk for medical treatment. On 8 May Enukidze even requested to be dismissed as Transcaucasian TsIK president for health reasons and to be given work in Moscow or, if this was impossible, in the Northern Caucasus, for example, as local TsIK representative.<sup>58</sup> Although Ezhov asked Stalin's permission to summon Enukidze for interrogation, Stalin agreed to Enukidze's request, and on 13 May, on his proposal, the Politburo dismissed Enukidze and gave him the job of representative of the USSR TsIK for the North Caucasian mineral resorts.<sup>59</sup>

Two weeks later Enukidze returned to Moscow for a Central Committee Plenum. Here, on 6 June, Ezhov made his first Plenum speech. It had been approved by Stalin.<sup>60</sup> He reported that although the investigation into the Kirov murder had not yet fully revealed the role of Zinov'ev, Kamenev, and Trotskii in the preparation of terrorist acts against Soviet leaders, it appeared from the new facts of the “Kremlin affair” that they had been not just the instigators but the “direct organizers” of the Kirov murder as well as of an attempt on Stalin's life that had been prepared within the Kremlin. Ezhov further said that the NKVD had rounded up five terrorist groups within and outside the Kremlin that had been after Stalin's life; they were all linked to Zinov'ev, Kamenev, and Trotskii. Thus, Kamenev's and Zinov'ev's “direct participation in the organizing of terrorist groups” had been proved, as well as Trotskii's responsibility for organizing the terror.

Continuing, Ezhov turned his attack on Enukidze. The terrorist groups had made use of the lack of vigilance of many commu-

nists with respect to the enemies, their “loss of class vigilance, criminal idleness, complacency, and decay.” The clearest example of such “political myopia” was TsIK Secretary Enukidze, head of the Kremlin apparatus. As a result of his lack of vigilance, the Zinov’evists and Trotskiists had succeeded in penetrating the Kremlin and organizing terrorist groups there. Owing to Enukidze’s personnel policy, the TsIK apparatus had become “extremely contaminated with elements alien and hostile to the Soviet regime,” who could thus freely weave their “counterrevolutionary nest” inside it. These and other counterrevolutionary elements had been patronized by Enukidze. In this way, a situation had been created within the Kremlin “in which terrorists were able with impunity to prepare an attempt on comrade Stalin’s life.” Enukidze, Ezhov charged, was “the most typical representative of the corrupt and self-complacent communists, playing the ‘liberal’ gentlemen at the expense of the Party and the state.” They “not only fail to see the class enemy, but in fact affiliate themselves with them, become their involuntary accomplices, opening the gates to the enemy for their counterrevolutionary acts.” On this account, Ezhov recommended Enukidze’s expulsion from the Central Committee.<sup>61</sup>

At the Plenum, Enukidze was attacked from all sides. When in his defense he argued that the Kremlin personnel were hired only after a thorough check by the NKVD, this was labeled a lie by its chief Iagoda. It did not alter the fact that Iagoda was also pushed into the defense. He felt forced into taking part of the responsibility: “I admit my guilt in that I have not seized Enukidze by the throat and forced him to kick out all this scum.” He demanded that Enukidze be arrested and tried.<sup>62</sup>

Enukidze’s main fault had been, Ezhov explained in his concluding remarks, that “from day to day you supported all this White Guard rubbish that had settled down in the Kremlin, defended them in every way, rendered them material help, created conditions, in which these inveterate counterrevolutionaries and terrorists felt themselves at home in the Kremlin, felt themselves master of the situation.” The speaker advocated a decision, that

“will harden even more the Party ranks and allow us to finally root out political myopia, moral and political corruption, rotten liberalism, from which unfortunately—as we have seen in Enukidze’s example—some communists still suffer.”<sup>63</sup> The Central Committee decided to expel Enukidze from the Party because of “political and social corruption.”<sup>64</sup>

Thus, through Ezhov’s doing, approved by Stalin, the June 1935 Plenum introduced a new element. From now on, not only former Party oppositionists were outlawed. Communists who—in contrast to Stalin and his supporters—practiced a conciliatory attitude toward the oppositionists were also called to account for their lack of vigilance regarding the enemy. Enukidze’s case was exemplary. As appears from Kaganovich’s words, the initiative here had again been taken by Stalin, just as in the preparation of the Central Committee letter of 13 May 1935. On 27 July the “Kremlin affair” ended in a trial, in which Kamenev and the other defendants were accused of having instigated the plan for a terrorist act. Two of them were condemned to death; Kamenev got ten years.<sup>65</sup>

The June 1935 Plenum had put the NKVD chief Iagoda on the defensive for having missed the “Kremlin affair,” and conflict with his supervisor Ezhov was unavoidable: “When the NKVD is to be blamed, nobody has ever obscured it,” Ezhov had said in his concluding Plenum remarks.<sup>66</sup> But the two still had to cooperate in the verification operation. In July they sent a joint instruction to the regional NKVD and Party chiefs on involving the NKVD in the conduct of the operation. The regional NKVD chiefs were ordered to help the Party chiefs by examining questionable Party members, “for the sake of arresting and thoroughly investigating the activities and contacts of the exposed spies, White Guards, speculators, etc.”<sup>67</sup>

The Party leadership was not impressed by the conduct of the verification operation at the local level. On two occasions, in June and August, it criticized the “overtly unsatisfactory” course of the operation in quite a number of Party organizations. According to the criticism, the rules formulated in the letter of 13 May were

handled “formally-bureaucratically,” and almost no defects were exposed. The vigilance was not heightened but weakened. Accordingly, some province and district Party leaders were reprimanded or even expelled.<sup>68</sup>

At some point during the summer Ezhov reported to Stalin on the course of the verification operation, observing that the term originally fixed for its end—early August—was unrealizable and should be extended for another three months, until 1 November. He attributed the delay to the Party organizations, which only after one, sometimes even two months, had understood the seriousness of the matter, after which almost all of them had had to start the operation all over again. In addition, “the contamination of the Party ranks turned out to be greater than we supposed.” Foreign intelligence services had instructed their agents to penetrate the Party, it contained complete Trotskiist organizations, and so on. In particular, Ezhov noted, Stalin’s anxiety with respect to the verification operation in the Ukraine had been justified, for a new verification round in several Ukrainian provinces had revealed how much the Party organizations had been contaminated with Polish, Romanian, and German agents. Because the Party could not on its own “expose all this scum to the end,” this was a job for the NKVD. However, until very recently it had stood aside; only during the past months had Ezhov succeeded in involving it in this work. He asked Stalin’s permission to organize an operative conference of NKVD executives in order to instruct them how even better to track down Trotskiists and spies within the Party. In the meantime, he and his team would begin work on a new operation, the exchange of Party cards. In this connection he directed Stalin’s attention to the utter disorder in the registration of Party members; it should be organized more professionally.<sup>69</sup>

On 25 September 1935, at a conference of regional ORPO representatives, their chief Ezhov criticized the “criminal idleness and complacency” initially shown by many Party organizations with respect to the verification.<sup>70</sup> He urged the Party organizations to cooperate closely with the NKVD. When during the course of the verification they ran across swindlers, adventurers, scoun-

drels, spies, and that sort, they should hand them over to the NKVD.<sup>71</sup>

In September 1935 Ezhov had again become overworked. Stalin pressed him to “go on leave straight away, to a Soviet health resort or abroad, as you like it, or as the doctors say.”<sup>72</sup> The Politburo granted him a leave of two months and sent him abroad for treatment, in accordance with the conclusions of the doctors; he was to be accompanied by his wife.<sup>73</sup> In early October he apologized to Stalin that he should already have gone on leave, but that he had lingered because he had gotten the flu.<sup>74</sup> Later, in 1939, during interrogation, Ezhov confirmed that in 1935 he had indeed gone again to Vienna to be treated for pneumonia by Dr. Noorden and that he had been accompanied by his wife, who had gone shopping. (As was expected of him by then, he confessed to having used the visit for contacting the German intelligence service.)<sup>75</sup>

Ezhov was back in Moscow by 15 December, for on that day he visited Stalin in his Kremlin office.<sup>76</sup> Ten days later he reported to the Central Committee Plenum on the results of the verification campaign: on the basis of the verification of documents of every member and candidate, the Party should be “cleaned of swindlers, rascals, and elements who had attached themselves to it,” and there should be an end to the disorder in the issuing and keeping of Party documents: the registration of communists should be put in a model way. The organizational licentiousness in the Party organizations should be overcome, and the “complacency and idleness among communists” be finally extirpated. Ezhov stressed how much Stalin was concerned about the organization of the verification campaign: “He interrogated me at least five times. Who will verify, and how. Who will be responsible for the verification in the provincial committee, who in the city and district committee. How will the organizations report to the Central Committee and how will the course of the verification work be controlled.”

In Ezhov's opinion the campaign enabled the Party committees to “unmask the enemies who had crept into the Party.” The



secretaries of the district committees personally verified the Party documents of all members and candidates, talked extensively with many of them, and in this way “often to their surprise discovered overt Party enemies.” Ezhov disapprovingly reported how at the beginning of the campaign many Party organizations had requested some deviations from the established order; they had asked permission to verify without necessarily summoning every Party member to the district committee, since this was “unpleasant” to them. But all these proposals had been rejected. There had also been many Party organizations that considered the campaign a mere technicality and wished it to be over as soon as possible.

According to Ezhov, as a result of the campaign the most malicious and active Party enemies had been expelled. Many of them had deliberately penetrated the Party in order to undermine it and had not been unmasked during earlier purges. Data of 1 December showed that 177,000 members and candidates had been expelled (9.1 percent of the Party membership); 8.7 percent of these, or 15,218 people, had been arrested. But, Ezhov added, this figure was incomplete—“in fact it is considerably higher.” He blamed the penetration of so many malicious enemies into the Party on subjective guilt and bad work and stressed that Bolshevik vigilance should not be forgotten.<sup>77</sup>

During the Plenum, the Belorussian Party chief, Nikolai Gikalo, indicated how closely Ezhov had supervised the course of the verification campaign: on Ezhov’s instructions, the Central Committee apparatus had called almost every day.<sup>78</sup>

The resolution of the Central Committee Plenum, drafted by Ezhov, declared that as a result of the verification campaign the Party organizations had unmasked “alien persons who had made their way into the Party.” But there was still insufficient awareness of the need for a “comprehensive increase of Bolshevik alertness and discipline”; the class enemy could still take advantage of the “opportunistic complacency and idleness” of communists. Therefore, although the verification operation had not yet been completed, its results should be consolidated by means of one more

purge operation, an “exchange of Party documents of all Party members and candidates,” from 1 February to 1 May 1936.<sup>79</sup>

On 25 January, at an ORPO conference devoted to the results of the verification operation, Ezhov warned that the purge had not yet been completed and that among those expelled there were still enemies against whom criminal proceedings had not yet been instituted. He urged the regional Party leaders to “get in touch with the NKVD organs and give us a personal list of people who immediately should be deported from the region by administrative means.”<sup>80</sup> (It was one of Ezhov’s last actions as ORPO head; on 4 February he was succeeded in this function by his deputy, Georgii Malenkov.) Later, Ezhov claimed that during the verification campaign “many enemies and spies” had been pointed out but that the NKVD had only arrested them after Stalin’s intervention.<sup>81</sup>

Since early 1935, Ezhov had also been directing a campaign against foreign influences. In March of that year he summoned Evgenii Varga,\* director of the Institute of World Economy and World Politics, which employed many foreign communists who had found refuge in the Soviet Union. Ezhov inquired why so many “enemies of the people” had “nested” themselves at the institute, making clear he did not trust political émigrés or people who had lived abroad. He urgently reminded Varga of Stalin’s teaching that “vigilance requires the obligatory discovery of anti-Party and hostile elements and the subsequent purging of them.”<sup>82</sup> In September he again requested Varga’s help in “disclosing the counterrevolutionary underground” in his institute, which he believed to be “filled with dark personalities who were tied to foreign countries.” He therefore demanded “secret references regarding each employee, with detailed indication of his activities and foreign links.”<sup>83</sup> Varga proved extremely uncooperative and half

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\*The Hungarian communist Jenő (Russian: Evgenii) Varga (1879–1964) had been People’s Commissar of the Hungarian Soviet republic of 1919; after its suppression, he lived in exile in the Soviet Union.

a year later, in March 1936, was reprimanded by an angry Ezhov for ignoring Stalin's "appeals for high-level vigilance." In Ezhov's opinion, Varga underestimated the counterrevolutionary danger lurking in his institute, since among the employees—the foreign émigrés as well as Russians who had lived abroad—there were probably foreign intelligence agents. Varga was instructed to produce at once the mandatory references as well as a special list of those who had been in close contact with Zinov'ev, Kamenev, Radek, Bukharin, and others. When Varga failed to comply, Stalin personally interfered, explaining that Varga insufficiently understood the complexity of the political situation and was "excessively trusting": "And because of that the enemy wins."<sup>84</sup>

In the summer of 1935, on Stalin's proposal, Ezhov was



Dimitrov, Ezhov, and Manuil'skii at the Seventh Comintern Congress, summer 1935. (RGAKFD collection)

elected to the Comintern Executive Committee.<sup>85</sup> This assignment was connected with preparations of a campaign with respect to the political émigrés, especially from Poland. More than a million Poles were living in the USSR, mainly peasants in the Ukrainian and Belorussian border regions but also many political émigrés. Already in 1933 a group of Poles had been arrested for alleged membership in the “espionage and sabotage organization of the Polish Military Organization (POV),” which had been set up in 1915 under General Józef Pilsudski for the independence struggle against Austria-Hungary and Germany, as well as against Russia. It had suspended its activity in 1921 and therefore in 1933 did not in fact exist. Nonetheless, several of those arrested were condemned to death. In September 1935 a new wave of arrests started, with a view to end an alleged “POV network.”<sup>86</sup> During the same month, the representative of the Polish Communist Party in the Comintern Executive Committee, B. Bronkowski (Bortnowski), sent Ezhov a memorandum on deficiencies in the NKVD work concerning the exposure of the agent provocateur and espionage role of Polish agents.<sup>87</sup>

Agents of foreign intelligence services, disguised as political émigrés and members of sister parties, allegedly had penetrated the Russian Communist Party. This is what Ezhov had reported to Stalin in the summer of 1935, and at an ORPO conference of late September he reached the same conclusion.<sup>88</sup> In particular, he mentioned the Poles, Romanians, Germans, Finns, and Czechs. Following this report, the December 1935 Central Committee Plenum decided on checking the political émigrés, charging Ezhov with preparing a Politburo resolution in this respect.<sup>89</sup> On 19 January 1936 the Secretary of the Comintern Executive Committee, Dmitrii Manuil'skii, asked to be received by Ezhov within the next few days in order to discuss measures to “stop the infiltrating in the USSR of spies and saboteurs under cover of political émigrés and members of sister parties.” Manuil'skii proposed to curtail the inflow of political émigrés and to require registration and verification of all such persons in the USSR. He especially insisted on a verification of the Polish Communist Party as “one of the

main suppliers of spies and agent provocateur elements in the USSR.”<sup>90</sup> He recommended that the check should be completed before 8 March. Although from nine to ten thousand people had already been checked, many still remained, about whom neither the Comintern personnel department nor the International Red Help had information.<sup>91</sup> Reporting to Stalin on the course of the resolution work, Ezhov pointed to “political émigrés, suspected of espionage, whose cases are being worked out in the NKVD.”<sup>92</sup>

On 28 February, after many revisions, Ezhov’s draft of “On Measures to Protect the USSR Against the Penetration of Spy, Terrorist, and Sabotage Elements” was accepted as a Central Committee resolution stating that among the numerous political émigrés in the USSR there were “direct agents of spy organizations of capitalist states.” In order to track them down, the Comintern and the NKVD were charged with carrying out within three months a complete new registration of all political émigrés who had arrived in the USSR by way of the International Red Help, the Comintern, or the Red Trade Union International.<sup>93</sup> To this end a special Central Committee commission on political émigrés was created, including Ezhov, Manuil’skii, and the head of the GUGB counterintelligence department (*osobyi otдел*), M. I. Gai. After taking stock of the émigrés, the commission was to submit to the Central Committee for confirmation lists with three categories: those who should be exiled from the Soviet Union on suspicion of espionage or hostile anti-Soviet activity, those who could be sent abroad for clandestine work by way of the Comintern or the International Red Help, and those who should remain in the Soviet Union because in their own country they would be in danger.<sup>94</sup>

At its first meeting, on 15 March, the commission decided not to wait until the registration of political émigrés had been completed but from 1 April on to examine the lists of the Comintern sections, starting with the Polish one. The NKVD began collecting compromising materials against Polish political émigrés.<sup>95</sup> There had already been some arrests. In November 1935 the Ukrainian NKVD chief, V. Balitskii, had reported the arrest of 184 Poles, 61

Galicians, and 57 Germans, some of them on suspicion of espionage under the cover of a Party card.<sup>96</sup> Although the Central Committee resolution had only provided for exile abroad, the commission also sanctioned the arrest of political émigrés. Of the 368 cases of Polish political émigrés examined, 53 ended in arrest and 238 in exile. In early July 1936 a total of 811 political émigrés from Germany had been registered, and compromising evidence had been collected against 414 of those.<sup>97</sup> During 1935–36, authorities arrested 126 members of the German Communist Party in the USSR—38 as “Trotskiists” and 50 for “connections with the Gestapo and the German consulate” (in Moscow).<sup>98</sup>

Ezhov was most active in the campaign against the Poles, especially those who worked in the NKVD (during the terms of the Poles Dzerzhinskii and Menzhinskii, from 1917 until 1934, the VChK-OGPU had employed many Poles). On 7 February 1936 he sent Stalin a note on the GUGB counterintelligence department head of Omsk province, Iu. I. Makovskii, who had recently been arrested on charges of being an agent of the Polish intelligence service. In addition to Makovskii's former department, Ezhov also implicated Iagoda: the NKVD chief had failed to report, and in the counterintelligence department there were “friends” of Makovskii.<sup>99</sup>

In January 1936, a commission headed by the member of the Presidium of the Executive Committee, M.A. Trilisser-Moskvina (a former Chekist), was charged with verifying the Comintern Executive Committee staff and purging the Comintern apparatus.<sup>100</sup> The Executive Committee leadership instructed the representatives of all affiliated parties to make a further check of all political émigrés and decide on each individually, in writing; information on all suspected persons had to be passed on.<sup>101</sup> On 23 August Comintern Secretary General Georgii Dimitrov reported that the personnel department of the Executive Committee had made available to the NKVD material on 3,000 persons who were “under suspicion of being saboteurs, spies, agents provocateur, etc.”<sup>102</sup>

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Party leaders on top of the Lenin Mausoleum viewing the 1 May parade, 1936. From left to right: Andreev, unknown (effaced), Ezhov, Ordzhonikidze, Kaganovich, Molotov, Dimitrov, Stalin, Khrushchev, Kalinin. (RGAKFD collection)

On 3 June 1936, Ezhov was able to report to the Central Committee Plenum that during the verification campaign over 200,000 people had been expelled and that the number of people arrested had also increased beyond the figure given at the December 1935 Plenum. Ezhov seemed to show a more “liberal” face here, questioning that the matter was now closed. First, the appeals of those who wanted to be reinstated into the Party had to be examined because most Party organizations adopted a formally bureaucratic attitude—not out of vigilance but simply through carelessness. After all, most of those expelled were not enemies; they had consciously concealed their past or committed some other minor offenses, and Ezhov thought it inadmissible that many of them were automatically dismissed from their jobs, expelled from universities, deprived of their apartment, and so on, and that similar actions were sometimes taken in regard to their families. He also reported that 3.5 percent of Party members had not received new Party cards, half of them on account of their “passivity.” He con-

sidered this percentage to be too high, the result of an arbitrary determination. He also insisted on the need of an active policy of bringing in new members.<sup>103</sup>

These objections hardly made Ezhov an overnight liberal, but they do suggest that the distinction that has sometimes been made in the historical literature between “hawks” and “doves” within the Stalinist leadership is artificial. The purges were directed against people who were considered *real* enemies. The intention was not at any price to expel as many members as possible for their mere “passivity.” In the opinion of the Party leadership, the regional Party officials often wrongly directed their attention to such “passives,” at the same time leaving untouched the real enemies, who were often among themselves. Ezhov thought this was an incorrect attitude “dictated not by reasons of vigilance but by a striving by certain party officials to protect themselves against any eventuality.”<sup>104</sup> His denunciation was endorsed by Stalin and the Plenum.<sup>105</sup> In accordance with Ezhov’s report, on 24 June the Central Committee issued a letter, “On Errors in the Examination of Appeals from Persons Expelled from the Party During the Verification and Exchange of Party Documents,” denouncing the frivolous, and in many instances callously bureaucratic, attitude of the Party organizations in processing the appeals of persons expelled from the Party.<sup>106</sup>

According to Stalin, the verification and exchange of Party documents were completed no earlier than September 1936. The ban on admitting new members into the Party was lifted only on 1 November of the same year.<sup>107</sup> Before the purges ended, the terror in the Party began, culminating first in the show trial of August 1936 against Zinov’ev, Kamenev, et al.

The current operations took so much of his time that Ezhov seems to have been unable to take his usual annual leave. Indeed, in April 1936 the Politburo had discussed the matter.<sup>108</sup> According to one source, he underwent medical treatment in Vienna in 1936, but this was stated after his arrest, when he was gratuitously accused of having stopped in Warsaw for a day on his return trip to



Moscow and had there established espionage ties with the Poles.<sup>109</sup> If we check Stalin's visitors' book for 1936 and add the other information we have of Ezhov's whereabouts, the longest hiatus is of a month, from late March to late April; he may have taken a leave within that period. In any case, as Iagoda confirmed later, when being interrogated, "during the summer of 1936 Ezhov worked all the time, did not take a leave, and, it seems, was not even ill."<sup>110</sup>

He took a leading part in preparing and organizing the Zinov'ev trial. According to Khlevniuk, the situation of early 1935 was repeated: Stalin used Ezhov to push through his version against a certain amount of opposition from the NKVD leadership. Having carried out mass arrests among Trotskii's former adherents, the NKVD leadership wanted to try and execute them. But Stalin demanded the fabrication of a case of a united "Trotskiist-Zinov'evist Center" that on behalf of Trotskii abroad gave instructions to use terror against the Party leaders. When the NKVD leadership seemed skeptical of these plans, Ezhov undertook the preparation of the case.<sup>111</sup>

Ezhov had already, in mid-1935, ordered Iagoda's deputy, Agranov (as the latter reported afterward), to carry out an operation against the Trotskiists in Moscow—according to his information and "in the opinion of the Central Committee" (that is, Stalin), there existed "an undiscovered center of Trotskiists that should be tracked down and liquidated." (Indeed, in his letter to Stalin of the summer of 1935 as well as in his address to the ORPO conference of late September of the same year, Ezhov concluded that the Trotskiists must have been directed by a center within the USSR.) Agranov then instructed the head of the GUGB Secret Political Department, G. A. Molchanov, to carry out the operation, but Molchanov did not believe in the reality of an active Trotskiist underground, and with Iagoda's support the operation was obstructed.<sup>112</sup>

Essential in the preparation of the Zinov'ev trial was a united Trotskiist-Zinov'evist bloc, allegedly having been formed in 1932.<sup>113</sup> As Ezhov reported afterward, the NKVD almost immedi-

ately had information about the bloc but did not use it and picked up the thread only in late 1935. Stalin “correctly sensed in all this something was not quite right, and ordered the case to be continued,” with Ezhov overseeing the investigation.<sup>114</sup> In February 1936 Stalin gave instructions to hand over to Ezhov all documents regarding Trotskii and to have him participate in the interrogation of arrested Trotskiists.<sup>115</sup> In June, after Iagoda’s plan of a trial of the Trotskiists alone had been dismissed, Stalin ordered Ezhov to organize a trial against both the Trotskiists and Zinov’evists.<sup>116</sup> Ezhov then summoned Agranov and passed on Stalin’s order to “expose the real Trotskiists center.”<sup>117</sup>

Around the same time, more definite information concerning the 1932 “bloc” reached Stalin. In July 1936 Ezhov sent Stalin a draft Central Committee resolution “on the terrorist activities of the Trotskiist-Zinov’evist-Kamenevist Counterrevolutionary Group,” a summary of the preliminary investigation results. Stalin carefully edited the text, changing the title to “On the Terrorist Activities of the Trotskiist-Zinov’evist Counterrevolutionary Bloc,” and on 29 July sent the letter to the regional and local Party committees.<sup>118</sup> It was the basis of the August 1936 trial. The 1932 “bloc” was blown up to a terrorist conspiracy. “New materials gathered by the NKVD in 1936” had led to the assertion that Kamenev and Zinov’ev had plotted an attempt on Stalin and that already since 1932 a united Trotskiist-Zinov’evist bloc had been directing the terrorist activities. In view of the dangerous situation, the Party should “come to understand that the vigilance of Communists is necessary in every area and in every situation.” According to the letter, every Bolshevik now should be able to “recognize and identify the enemies of the Party, no matter how well they may have camouflaged their identity.”<sup>119</sup>

Ezhov’s important role in organizing the trial is evident from the fact that his papers contain no less than ten related files on matters like providing information about the trial, photos and films, the admittance of the press, and so on.<sup>120</sup> Among them is also a manuscript by Zinov’ev of eleven chapters, entitled “A Deserved Sentence,” sent to Ezhov and Molchanov two weeks before



Ezhov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, and Stalin on their way to a gymnastic parade in Red Square, July 1936. (RGAKFD collection)

the trial, on 4 August.<sup>121</sup> He had the disposal of all materials both of the NKVD and the Central Committee, uniting their work in view of conducting a political and legal investigation regarding the former oppositionists and their sympathizers. He supervised the investigation with respect to the trial and occasionally attended the interrogations in person. As a rule, these took place at night, and at Ezhov's insistence the prisoners were not handled with "kid gloves."<sup>122</sup> The trial of the "United Trotskiist-Zinov'evist Center" against Zinov'ev, Kameney, and fourteen others took place from 19 to 24 August 1936 and resulted in their death sentences, which were carried out immediately.

The trial was only the beginning. In July and August, some of the accused in the case against Zinov'ev et al. testified that there was yet another Trotskiist "parallel" center with Piatakov et al. Piatakov had been under suspicion after a search of his ex-wife's apartment in July had turned up compromising materials on his Trotskiist past. On 11 August Ezhov reported to Stalin on his conversation with Piatakov. Ezhov had explained to his former drinking companion why he could not be a prosecutor at the Zinov'ev trial, as had been intended. Piatakov had pleaded guilty only to not having seen the counterrevolutionary activities of his ex-wife. When he had volunteered to "personally execute all those sentenced to death at the trial, including his own former wife," Ezhov had declined the offer as "absurd." A month later Piatakov was expelled from the Party and arrested.<sup>123</sup>

Late in 1935 evidence had also been collected against the Rightists, Bukharin et al., but Iagoda had not acted on it.<sup>124</sup> However, during the August 1936 trial, USSR Procurator Vyshinskii officially announced that, in view of the testimonies, an investigation would be started against Radek and Piatakov, as well as the Rightist leaders.<sup>125</sup> The next day one of the latter, Mikhail Tomskii, committed suicide. Immediately, Ezhov, together with Politburo members Kaganovich and Ordzhonikidze, informed Stalin (who was at his holiday resort in Sochi) that Tomskii, knowing he could "no longer hide his connections with the Zinov'evist-Trotskiist gang," had decided to "remove his traces" by commit-

ting suicide.<sup>126</sup> A letter that Tomskii had left behind was forwarded to Stalin. Kaganovich and Ordzhonikidze sent Ezhov to Tomskii's widow.

On 9 September Ezhov wrote to Stalin about the visit. Tomskii's widow had told him that, according to her late husband, during the late 1920s Iagoda had played a leading role among the Rightists; Ezhov was not sure whether this was "a counterrevolutionary kick from the grave by Tomskii, or a real fact." He rather thought that Tomskii had "chosen a peculiar means of revenge." "In the light of the latest testimonies of those arrested, the role of the Rightists appears quite different," Ezhov informed Stalin. Previously "we did not dig down far enough," and that was why on his orders some of the Rightists were interrogated anew, with interesting results: "There is every reason to suppose that we will be able to discover a lot of new things and that the Rightists will look different to us, including Rykov, Bukharin, Uglanov, Shmidt, et al."

Ezhov further reported that he had carried out Stalin's order in organizing a revision of the lists of all those arrested in connection with the latest cases, including those having to do with the Kirov murder. For the final examination a commission had been formed, including Ezhov, Vyshinskii, and Iagoda. The main organizers and direct participants in terrorist groups, double agents, and the like should be executed; the others were to get prison terms of five to ten years. Further, Ezhov expressed the opinion that at the August trial the accused had not told the whole truth and that the Trotskiists must still have "some unexposed officers" in the army. With respect to the NKVD, he thought its contacts with the Trotskiists had not been sufficiently investigated, since it had been revealed that, although the NKVD had had at its disposal signals about the terrorist activities of the Trotskiist-Zinov'evist bloc as early as 1933–34, it had paid little attention to them. Ezhov expressed the wish to inform Stalin privately about some deficiencies in the NKVD work that could no longer be tolerated: "Without your intervention things will come to no good."<sup>127</sup>

In a draft of the same letter that has been found among his papers, Ezhov wrote with respect to the NKVD deficiencies:

I restrained myself from it as long as the main emphasis was on unmasking the Trotskiists and Zinov'evists. But now, it seems to me, one should also get down to some conclusions from this whole affair for the restructuring of the work of the NKVD itself. This is especially necessary since within its leadership moods of complacency, calmness, and bragging are increasingly developing. Instead of drawing conclusions from the Trotskiist affair, criticizing their own deficiencies and correcting them, they now only dream about decorations for the discovery. It is even hard to believe that they don't understand that in the end it is not to their credit that the Cheka discovered the truth, already known by hundreds, five years *after* the organization of a serious plot.<sup>128</sup>

Ezhov was obviously after a change of the NKVD leadership, probably wanting to confirm Stalin's opinion. Within a month Stalin announced that the NKVD was lagging in the exposure of the plot and that Iagoda would be replaced. It is interesting that only after the change, on 29 September, Stalin sent Ezhov's letter on to his closest colleagues, Kaganovich and Molotov.<sup>129</sup> There may have been no earlier opportunity, but it is also possible that Stalin feared Iagoda's finding out about it, including Ezhov's sharp criticism directed at him and the invitation that Stalin should intervene.

In the draft letter Ezhov was more explicit with respect to the Rightists. He wrote that he doubted "whether the Rightists entered into a direct organizational bloc with the Trotskiists and Zinov'evists. The Trotskiists and Zinov'evists were politically so discredited that the Rightists must have feared such a bloc with them." The Rightists had their organization, supported the use of terror, knew about the activities of the Trotskiist-Zinov'evist bloc, but bided their time, wishing to make use of the results of the Trotskiist terror in their own interest. The time had come for tak-

ing measures, Ezhov wrote. He considered the “most minimal punishment” for the Rightists to be their expulsion from the Central Committee and exile to remote places. He urged Stalin’s “firm instructions” in this respect. As for Piatakov, Radek, and Sokol’nikov, though he had no doubt that they were the leaders of a “counterrevolutionary gang,” he considered the organization of a new trial “hardly expedient”:

The arrest and punishment of Radek and Piatakov without a trial undoubtedly will leak out to the foreign press. Nevertheless, it needs to be done. . . . It is understandable that no trials should be organized. It can be done by way of a simplified procedure, on the basis of the law of 1 December [1934] and even without a formal court session.<sup>130</sup>

The draft letter was never sent to Stalin. It seems that Ezhov was not informed about Stalin’s plans for new trials and a large-scale purge—if Stalin himself had already made up his mind. “But in any case, it was not Ezhov who suggested to Stalin new scenarios and ‘inspiring’ ideas,” writes Khlevniuk.<sup>131</sup>

It is also interesting to note that on 9 September Ezhov urged Stalin to investigate the Rightists more actively. For only a day later a report from the USSR Procurator, Vyshinskii, was published in the press to the effect that there was insufficient evidence to proceed against Bukharin and Rykov and that therefore the case was now regarded as closed.<sup>132</sup> The conclusion must be that the report was only intended to set Bukharin and Rykov at rest and that the cases with respect to the Rightists in actual fact were not closed at all. The trial of Piatakov et al. had priority now.