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State Security Chief

While collecting incriminating evidence against Iagoda, Ezhov took advantage of the anti-Iagoda sentiments of some of his subordinates, like the Voronezh NKVD chief Semen Dukel'skii. On 13 July 1936 Dukel'skii informed him about the slowing down by the NKVD leadership of the investigation of Trotskiist cases.¹ On 11 September, Dukel'skii sent Ezhov another note and immediately, probably on the next day, was received by him. On 14 September Ezhov wrote Stalin that, according to Dukel'skii, the NKVD had been informed about the existence of a Trotskiist center in early 1933, but instead of sorting it out, they had consciously slurred over it. Explicitly, Dukel'skii had put the "organizational question" with respect to the GUGB "arrangement of forces," which in his eyes was not good.² By sending the information on, Ezhov was aiming at Iagoda, whom Stalin wanted to dispense with by then anyway. Iagoda reacted by dismissing Dukel'skii.³

However, Iagoda was the one to be dismissed. On 25 September Stalin, also on behalf of Zhdanov, sent Kaganovich, Molotov, and the other Politburo members a telegram from his holiday resort in Sochi: "We deem it absolutely necessary and urgent to

have comrade Ezhov appointed People's Commissar of Internal Affairs. Iagoda has definitely proved himself incapable of unmasking the Trotskiist-Zinov'evist bloc. The OGPU [*sic*] is four years behind in this matter." Iagoda was to be appointed People's Commissar of Communications. Ezhov was to retain his functions of Central Committee Secretary and of chairman of the Control Commission, on the condition that "he will devote nine-tenths of his time to the NKVD." As Stalin informed his colleagues, "Ezhov agrees with our proposals."⁴ The "four years" referred to the formation in 1932 of a Trotskiist-Zinov'evist bloc, which had been discovered no earlier than in June–July 1936, as well as to Dukel'skii's information cited above.⁵ The following day, carrying out Stalin's order, the Politburo appointed Ezhov People's Commissar of Internal Affairs.⁶ (As a result, Shkiriatoev became the acting head of the Control Commission.)⁷

Of course, Iagoda's dismissal was not the result of Dukel'skii's statement; that served only as an extra argument. Iagoda had not expected such a rapid outcome, and for him the decision was a complete surprise. He left for Sochi immediately, assuming it was a misunderstanding that could still be corrected. But his, now former, subordinate K. V. Pauker, heading the guard department, did not even let him enter Stalin's dacha.⁸

Stalin did, however, receive Ezhov.⁹ As we have seen, in his telegram Stalin wrote that Ezhov had agreed with his being appointed, which means that they had already discussed it. Possibly as early as the day before his appointment Ezhov had left for Sochi with the information of Tomskii's widow about Iagoda. On 29 September, back in Moscow, he started his new job of state security chief in the Lubianka.¹⁰ The leadership received his appointment favorably. On 30 September Politburo member Kaganovich wrote to his colleague Sergo Ordzhonikidze:

This remarkably wise decision of our father [*roditel'*], which had been pending for some time, has met with a splendid reception in the Party and the country. Iagoda had absolutely turned out to be too weak for such a role; to be organizer of construction

is one thing, but to be politically mature and expose enemies *in good time* is something else. And the OGPU is several years behind in this matter, and failed to forestall the vile murder of Kirov. Surely, under Ezhov things will go smoothly. According to my information among the Chekists, with few exceptions, the change in leadership was favorably received also.

Two weeks later Kaganovich confirmed that “under Ezhov things are going well! He set to work firmly, in a Stalinist way.”¹¹

Ezhov’s appointment was no sudden decision; it had ripened for a long time. According to E. G. Evdokimov (when being interrogated in 1939), already during the June 1936 Plenum Ezhov had shown interest in going to work in the NKVD, “even as deputy to Iagoda.” Somewhat later, when Evdokimov had urged him to take the NKVD leadership, Ezhov had given the impression that “the question of his appointment as People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs is being decided [*reshaetsia*].”¹² Stalin may have wanted to make Ezhov Iagoda’s deputy first, in order to force the other out—a maneuver he would use later when replacing Ezhov with Beria. As things worked out, he decided to appoint Ezhov immediately.

The first person that Ezhov received on returning from Sochi was his protégé G. S. Liushkov, the former deputy head of the NKVD Secret Political Department whom Iagoda had recently appointed NKVD chief of the Azov–Black Sea province. M. I. Litvin, an old acquaintance of Ezhov’s from his Kazakhstan times and later his subordinate in Raspredotdel, was made NKVD personnel chief. The Moscow NKVD chief, S. F. Redens, was also promised a promotion. Ezhov put his special trust in Chekists from North Caucasia, like Efim Evdokimov (since early 1937 the Party chief of the Azov–Black Sea province), V. M. Kurskii, I. Ia. Dagin, N. G. Nikolaev-Zhurid, and P. F. Bulakh. On 16 October the head of the NKVD Chief Directorate of Frontier and Internal Troops, Mikhail Frinovskii, was appointed Deputy People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs, though for the time being Agranov—whom Ezhov thought too closely connected with Iagoda—was re-

tained as First Deputy; in December 1936 Agranov was even appointed head of the Chief Directorate of State Security (GUGB). From the Control Commission and the Central Committee Secretariat, apart from Litvin, Ezhov took along V. E. Tsesarskii (NKVD Special Plenipotentiary, charged with investigating work offenses by NKVD employees and from November 1936 on head of the GUGB registration department), S. B. Zhukovskii (head of the Administrative-Economic Department), and I. I. Shapiro (deputy head, then head of the NKVD Secretariat). Other acquaintances appointed to high positions were S. G. Gendin, P. A. Korkin, A. R. Stromin, G. N. Lulov, L. V. Kogan, M. S. Alekhin, and Z. I. Passov.¹³ Ezhov had been acquainted with Liushkov, Gendin, and Korkin since the Kirov murder investigation and with Frinovskii since supervising the NKVD. He knew Frinovskii, Evdokimov, and Redens to be at odds with Iagoda.

In the eyes of the public, Ezhov's appointment did not point to an intensification of the terror. Bukharin, for example, was even pleased, according to his widow. His relations with Ezhov were reasonable, and until late 1936 he believed that the new NKVD chief would not engage in forgeries.¹⁴ Unlike Iagoda, Ezhov did not come out of the "organs," which was considered an advantage. "The majority of Old Chekists," one of them writes in his memoirs,

were convinced that with the coming to the NKVD of Ezhov we would at last return to the traditions of Dzerzhinskii, overcome the unhealthy atmosphere and the careerist, degenerating, and forging tendencies introduced in the organs during the last years by Iagoda. For, as a Central Committee Secretary, Ezhov was close to Stalin, in whom we then believed, and we thought that now the firm and reliable hand of the Central Committee would reign in the organs.¹⁵

Dagin thought that with the coming of Ezhov a "Party atmosphere" would be brought into the NKVD work, an idea in which he was later disappointed.¹⁶

The campaign against the Party opposition continued. Ezhov drafted the Politburo resolution "On the Attitude to Counterrevolutionary Trotskiist-Zinov'evist Elements," which Stalin signed on 29 September; the "Trotskiist-Zinov'evist scoundrels" should from now on be considered "foreign agents, spies, subversives, and wreckers on behalf of the fascist bourgeoisie in Europe," and one needed to make short work of them all.¹⁷ Stalin did delete one point from the draft: a demand for the summary execution of several thousand Trotskiists and the exile of thousands of others to Iakutiia.¹⁸ Within a few days, Ezhov, together with Vyshinskii, requested the Politburo to sanction the conviction of 585 listed participants in the Trotskiist-Zinov'evist counterrevolutionary terrorist organization; on 4 October the Politburo agreed with the request.¹⁹

On 7 October Ezhov sent Stalin the testimony of a minor Rightist who had admitted to the existence of a "terrorist organization of the Rightists" with plans to murder Stalin and also to having been informed by Tomskii of a Rightist center with Bukharin, Rykov, Tomskii, et al.²⁰ For the time being, Bukharin and Rykov were only approached via their surroundings; little by little, evidence accumulated. Though only recently, in August, Ezhov had expressed himself rather moderately concerning the Rightists; after the August 1936 trial, interest in them continued. It has been assumed that Stalin removed Iagoda for being inattentive to the Rightists, whereas in September 1936, not long before his dismissal, Iagoda had in fact sent Stalin the testimonies of some minor Rightists who had recently been arrested, incriminating Bukharin, Rykov, and Tomskii. And he had added, "The testimony of Kulikov concerning terrorist activity of a counterrevolutionary organization of Rightists is especially interesting."²¹

It was to become clear that Stalin's lifting of the accusations against Bukharin and Rykov was only temporary; until more evidence had been accumulated, there was no sense in diverting the attention of the public. For the time being, the next in line were the arrested Trotskiists—Piatakov, Sokol'nikov, and Radek. At this point Ezhov was himself opposed to the preparation of a new

public trial and, apparently, contributed to Vyshinskii's decision to drop the proceedings against Bukharin and Rykov, published on 10 September.²²

Although Ezhov was not the first to draw Stalin's attention to the Rightists—Iagoda had also done so—Ezhov had the advantage of grasping what Stalin wanted at a given moment, and how to act on it. Iagoda's attack against Bukharin and Rykov was not backed by compelling evidence, and he had to retreat. Possibly, Stalin had explained to him how to act properly. Later in September Iagoda began to accumulate evidence from the Rightist small fry, mentioning terrorist Rightist groups, as well as Bukharin and Rykov, and send it to Stalin. The more such evidence of small people accumulated, the harder it would be for the Rightist leaders to refute it, and the more well founded their prosecution would be later. Ezhov did not discover this line, as has generally been assumed; in his new function of People's Commissar, he only continued it.

Soon the offensive against the Rightists went public. On 4 December 1936 at the Central Committee Plenum Ezhov accused them of having been informed of the plans of the Trotskiist-Zinov'evist bloc regarding attempts on Stalin and others and of having approved of them; they had even "immediately directed terrorist groups." But Stalin in his concluding words acknowledged that there were no straightforward indications that Bukharin and Rykov were related to a terrorist group. The Central Committee decided to carry on the examination and postpone the decision until the next Plenum.²³

While the case against the Rightists was still pending, the second great Moscow show trial, that of the "Parallel Anti-Soviet Trotskiist Center" against Piatakov, Radek, Sokol'nikov, and others, took place. At the December 1936 Plenum Ezhov had reported that another "conspiracy" by these people had been revealed and that the Central Committee had expelled Piatakov and Sokol'nikov from the Party because of their close ties with terrorist Trotskiist and Zinov'evist groups.²⁴ The trial was conducted between 23 and 30 January 1937, and from the indictment to the

death sentence was directly predetermined by Stalin and Ezhov.²⁵ On 13 January, when Radek was confronted with Bukharin, Ezhov directed the interrogation with Stalin and other Politburo members in attendance.²⁶ Three days before the trial ended, Ezhov was rewarded with the title of Commissar-General of State Security, a rank equivalent to that of marshal.²⁷

At the notorious February–March 1937 Central Committee Plenum, Stalin sketched the background of the unfolding terror. According to him, the “Zinov’evist-Trotskiist bloc” had turned into an “espionage and saboteur-terrorist agency of the German secret police” and was in a kind of alliance with the surrounding bourgeois states—Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, Romania, Turkey, and Japan—supported by France and Great Britain, as always intending to crush the USSR. Following their plan, the Trotskiists had undermined the Soviet state by committing espionage, terrorism, and sabotage so as to make it ripe for military intervention. This was all clear enough, but some of the leading Party comrades, too “careless, complacent, and naïve” to see it, had helped foreign agents to advance to important positions.²⁸ But now the time had come to round up the saboteurs without mercy.

Ezhov’s report to the Plenum on the “Lessons from the Wrecking, Sabotage, and Espionage by the Japanese-German-Trotskiist Agents” accused Bukharin, Rykov, and the other Rightists of having, since the early 1930s, aimed at seizing power by means of force and having formed a *de facto* bloc with the Trotskiists, Zinov’evists, and anti-Soviet parties. In his words, they had resorted to terror and collaboration with foreign fascists. When Bukharin refused to confess, Ezhov demanded that he and Rykov be expelled from the Party, tried, and condemned to death. Some of the participants thought the death penalty was too severe, and at Stalin’s suggestion the Central Committee decided first to refer the matter to the NKVD. Bukharin and Rykov were arrested on the spot.²⁹ Ezhov also shook his finger at several Soviet departments for reportedly protecting pseudo-loyal saboteurs within their ranks. According to him, even within the “armed

vanguard of our Party” (Stalin’s designation of the state security organs) vigilance had been lacking, and traitors had penetrated there so that he had had to arrest lots of people.³⁰

Ezhov had requested the Central Committee Secretariat, in addition to those invited *ex officio*, to permit nineteen NKVD executives to be present at the Plenum. One of those making a speech was his first deputy, Agranov, who seized the opportunity to praise his chief. The appointment of Ezhov, he declared, had “cleared the air with its strong, bracing Party spirit,” and since then “the state security organs have begun to consolidate swiftly, made compact by a powerful Party-Bolshevik cement.”³¹

The Central Committee approved Ezhov’s stern measures in removing from the GUGB those “decayed bureaucrats, who have lost all Bolshevik sharpness and vigilance in the struggle against the class enemy,” as was apparent in the much too lenient prison procedures regarding the political enemies of the Soviet regime: “The political isolation facilities have been quite comfortable, resembling involuntary rest homes rather than prisons.” Moreover, the NKVD was four years behind in unmasking the Trotskiist-Zinov’evist bloc. The former chief of the GUGB Secret Political Department, Molchanov, was declared “one of the main culprits in the shameful failure of the state security organs in the struggle against the Zinov’evists and Trotskiists.” His arrest, one month before, and his trial were duly approved of. The GUGB apparatus was to be augmented with new Party cadres, and its reorganization (started on 28 November 1936) should be continued, in order to make it a “real fighting organ,” able to guarantee the security of the Soviet state and society.³²

Ezhov carried out a large-scale purge operation within the NKVD. The Saratov NKVD deputy chief, Ignatii Sosnovskii, of Polish origin, had already been arrested the previous November, and his arrest was followed by that of others from Poland, Germany, and elsewhere whom Ezhov suspected of being “foreign agents.” In February 1937 his deputy, Agranov, from the regional departments requested lists of former Trotskiists, Zinov’evists, and Rightists employed in the NKVD.³³

On 19–21 March 1937 Ezhov convened a Party meeting of state security officers at NKVD headquarters for a report on the results of the February–March Plenum. He announced that the conspirators had penetrated even the heart of the NKVD and that Iagoda himself was the main traitor.³⁴ Stalin, he said, no longer trusted the NKVD leadership: people in key functions, Iagoda's protégés like Molchanov, Gorb, Gai, Volovich, and Pauker, had turned out to be German spies and had been removed. In the mid-1920s even Dzerzhinskii's policy had sometimes been "hesitating": "What is needed is purging, purging, and again purging."³⁵ As a result, former Dzerzhinskii people were arrested, especially the Poles.

After the meeting, more arrests followed among the NKVD leadership, forming the base of a "Iagoda conspiracy," which on 29 March culminated in the arrest of Iagoda himself, along with the head of his secretariat, P. P. Bulanov. Two days later, Stalin informed the Central Committee members that "anti-state and criminal acts" had been brought to light, committed by Iagoda when he was NKVD chief and after. In view of the "danger of leaving Iagoda at liberty for so much as one day," the Politburo had been "compelled to order Iagoda's immediate arrest"; now, afterward, it asked the Central Committee to sanction his expulsion and arrest.³⁶

On 12 April it was the turn of Iagoda's former deputy (since 29 September 1936 Deputy People's Commissar of Communications), G. E. Prokof'ev. Also arrested were the state security department heads K. V. Pauker (guard department, 17 April), A. M. Shanin (transport department, 22 April), G. I. Bokii (special [*spetsial'nyi*] department, 16 May), and M. I. Gai (former head of the counterintelligence [*osobyi*] department and since November 1936 Eastern Siberian NKVD chief, 1 April). In April the head of the counterespionage department, L. G. Mironov, was sent on a mission in order to "destroy the spies and wreckers" in the Siberian and Far Eastern railways. He even took part in interrogating Iagoda, but on 14 June was arrested himself.

On 4 April, right after press reports of Iagoda's arrest, his

close ally, the Gor'kii NKVD chief, M. S. Pogrebinskii, shot himself. During the spring of 1937, fear caused more NKVD suicides. So on 17 April the assistant head of the counterespionage department, I. I. Chertok, threw himself out of the window. In May Ezhov continued to purge the NKVD of Iagoda's adherents. On 17 May Agranov was dismissed as Deputy People's Commissar, having already lost his function of First Deputy and GUGB chief to Frinovskii on 15 April; he became NKVD chief of Saratov, after his predecessor, R. A. Piliar, was arrested as an agent of the "Polish Military Organization." Agranov was arrested on 20 July and tried and executed on 1 August 1938.

Ezhov paid close attention to Iagoda's interrogation, seeing to it that his own protégés were not put in an unfavorable light. This was no easy task, since Stalin himself was following the investigation and Ezhov had to send all examination records of important prisoners to the Kremlin without delay. Although Frinovskii was charged with directing the investigation of Iagoda, the Leningrad NKVD chief, L. M. Zakovskii, also took part in it, together with V. M. Kurskii, L. V. Kogan, and N. M. Lerner. In accordance with Ezhov's and Frinovskii's instructions, the names of certain high NKVD officers were kept out of the examination records—for example, Liushkov's.³⁷ Based on this evidence, "anti-Soviet conversations" were ascertained among Chekists.³⁸ But this was still not enough; because Stalin wanted Iagoda exposed as a real conspirator, coup plans were attributed to him and his close collaborators, like Pauker, Sosnovskii, Piliar, Prokof'ev, and Shanin.³⁹

Iagoda was also accused of attempted murder. During interrogation, he testified that right after his dismissal he had tried to poison his successor. On 28 or 29 September he had ordered his secretary, Bulanov, to spray Ezhov's office with mercury dissolved in an acid; Bulanov had done this, aided by Iagoda's messenger, Savolainen, with Iagoda watching the procedure. Allegedly, the spraying had been continued after Iagoda's departure (on 1 October).⁴⁰ At their trial in March 1938 Iagoda and Bulanov confirmed the testimony.⁴¹ Later, during the proceedings instituted against Ezhov, it was concluded that Ezhov had himself launched the af-

fair; he was said to have had the cloth in his apartment sprinkled with mercury and then when the attempt was “discovered” to have had an NKVD employee arrested and forced to confess that it was done by order of Iagoda and the “Rightist-Trotskiist bloc.” Frinovskii testified in April 1939 that Ezhov complained to his colleagues that as soon as he entered his office, “he felt a metallic taste in his mouth”; blood appeared from his gums and his teeth got loose. He started repeating that he had been poisoned in his office and in this way, according to Frinovskii, “instilled the investigation to obtain the appropriate evidence.”⁴²

At his trial in February 1940, Ezhov denied the charge that he had ordered the fraudulent mercury poisoning affair; shortly after starting to work in the NKVD, he said, he began feeling bad and losing his teeth. The doctors diagnosed the flu, but he looked so ill that finally, during the spring of 1937, Zakovskii concluded he had probably been poisoned. The head of the GUGB Operative Department, N. G. Nikolaev-Zhurid, who was ordered to test the air of Ezhov’s office, discovered mercury vapors in the air and came to the same conclusion.⁴³

In June 1939, after arrest, Ezhov’s former Kremlin doctor and personal physician, V. M. Pollachek, testified that in the spring of 1937 he had been summoned to Ezhov’s office, together with his colleague Vinogradov. Ezhov complained about feeling bad and having a metallic taste in his mouth. An analysis of Ezhov’s urine gave no results, but after ten or twelve days the doctors were summoned again and shown an analysis of Ezhov’s urine from the clinic of the biochemist Professor B. I. Zbarskii, in which there were indications of mercury traces. Pollachek and Vinogradov then treated Ezhov until November 1937.⁴⁴ Years afterward, the same Zbarskii told the writer A. P. Shtein about how in 1937 Ezhov had confronted him with Iagoda’s testimony that he (Iagoda) had instructed Zbarskii to poison Ezhov. The personnel had been ordered to spray Ezhov’s office at night with a solution of a disinfecting preparation containing mercury (called “Zbarskii’s bactericide”); the door curtains had to be sprayed with a special

pulverizer and the windows and doors kept closed until the morning (mercury has no odor).⁴⁵

During the rehabilitation campaign of the 1980s it was confirmed that Ezhov had himself staged the mercury poisoning affair. Nikolaev had rubbed mercury into the cloth and furniture of Ezhov's office and had then had them examined. An NKVD employee with access to the room was beaten up until he confessed to being responsible for the poisoning; a pot of mercury, which had been planted in his house, was duly discovered as "evidence."⁴⁶

On 20 June 1937, with Stalin's approval, the first NKVD "conspirators" group was shot, among them Gai and S. V. Puzitskii, the head of the operational department of Dmitrov camp, or Dmitlag, charged with the construction of the Moscow-Volga canal, which had been opened in early May (Puzitskii had been arrested shortly after Stalin, Ezhov, and a number of colleagues visited the canal on 22 April, together with Dmitlag chief S. G. Firin and more than 200 other alleged participants in Iagoda's conspiracy).⁴⁷ In early June a commission of the NKVD and the Procuracy, or *dvoika*, was created for quick examination of such cases. During the following months a great number of former OGPU-NKVD leaders were shot: on 14 August Pauker, Prokof'ev, Shanin, and Firin; on 21 August former Foreign Department head A. Kh. Artuzov; on 2 September Piliar and S. A. Messing; on 9 October Molchanov; on 15 November Bokii and Sosnovskii; and on 27 November F. D. Medved' and V. A. Balitskii.

Half a year earlier, in May 1937, Balitskii had been appointed Far Eastern NKVD chief, replaced by T. D. Deribas as Ukrainian Interior People's Commissar. But Deribas never went to Kiev, for on 7 June 1937 Ezhov sent a brigade under Frinovskii, Deribas, and the chief of the fifth GUGB department, I. M. Leplevskii, to the Ukraine in order to "expose and destroy the espionage, sabotage, diversion, and conspiratory Trotskiists and other counter-revolutionary groups" there, including some in the Red Army and the NKVD.⁴⁸ Now Leplevskii was officially appointed Ukrainian



Voroshilov, Molotov, Stalin, and Ezhov visiting the Moscow-Volga canal under construction near Iakhroma, 22 April 1937. The obvious brushed-in water and wall anticipate completion of the project. (RGAKFD collection)

Interior People's Commissar; Deribas returned to the Far East as NKVD chief, and Balitskii was dismissed. Balitskii was arrested on 7 July. Just over a month later, on 12 August, it was Deribas's turn to be arrested by his successor in the Far East, Liushkov.

All in all, almost all NKVD department heads, their deputies, and the regional chiefs were arrested and repressed, all on the basis of ridiculous charges. According to official NKVD statistics, from 1 October 1936 to 15 August 1938—that is, during the Ezhov purge—throughout the country 2,273 state security officers were arrested.⁴⁹

Those arrested were, of course, replaced with Ezhov's own people—the investigation staff was nearly quadrupled—tempted with considerable salary increases and all kinds of other privileges.⁵⁰ “We must train Chekists now,” Ezhov announced at a banquet on the occasion of the decorating of a group of Chekists, “so that this becomes a closely welded, closed sect that will unconditionally fulfill my orders.”⁵¹ The Party put quite a few of its

people at the disposal of the NKVD.⁵² So on 3 December 1936 Ezhov reported to an NKVD conference that he had made arrangements with the Central Committee about selecting 150 to 200 Party secretaries for work in the NKVD.⁵³ On 11 March 1937 he welcomed them with a pep talk:

The title of Chekist is considered by our people the most honorary title. When the Party delegates people to work there, it considers this work to be the sharpest and most important battlefield. Therefore, a Chekist should wholeheartedly be devoted to our Party, to our Soviet people and system, and be prepared at any minute to sacrifice his life, no matter under what conditions he has to work.⁵⁴

Military intelligence was purged as well. Since April 1935 the Red Army Intelligence Directorate (Razvedupr) had been headed by S. P. Uritskii. In January 1937, at Uritskii's insistence, his deputy, A. Kh. Artuzov, was dismissed by the Politburo and replaced by M. K. Aleksandrovskii (Artuzov was arrested on 13 May and shot on 21 August). But Uritskii himself felt uncomfortable and tried to put on a good face by practicing self-criticism. "We are rather bad intelligence officers," he said on 19 May 1937 at a Razvedupr Party meeting, but to no avail.⁵⁵

Two days later, on 21 May, Stalin at the Kremlin, accompanied by Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Ezhov, and Frinovskii, received NKVD Foreign Department chief A. A. Slutskii, the head of the Group for Special Tasks (which reported directly to the center and was charged with sabotage, abduction, and assassination operations on foreign soil), Ia. I. Serebrianskii, and Razvedupr leaders Uritskii, Aleksandrovskii, and A. M. Nikonov (another deputy of Uritskii's). They met for over two and a half hours.⁵⁶ Stalin announced that Razvedupr with its apparatus had "fallen into German hands" and demanded the disbandment of the agents network.⁵⁷ A fortnight later, on 8 June, the Politburo dismissed Uritskii as Razvedupr head and replaced him with Ian Berzin, who had headed military intelligence from 1924 to

1935.⁵⁸ (Uritskii was arrested in November and shot in August of the following year.)⁵⁹

In July 1937 the real purging of Razvedupr started. Twenty people from the leading staff were arrested by the NKVD, among them Aleksandrovskii (he was later shot). On 19 July Berzin reported on the arrests at a Party bureau meeting.⁶⁰ A chain reaction followed. Having served less than two months, on 1 August Berzin himself was dismissed by the Politburo and replaced by Nikonov as temporary acting head of Razvedupr. Ezhov was empowered with its general supervision. He was charged with “studying the state of its work, taking urgent operational measures in agreement with the People’s Commissar of Defense, revealing the shortcomings of Razvedupr, and reporting to the Central Committee within two weeks his proposals for the improvement of the Razvedupr work and its strengthening with fresh people.”⁶¹ In this way Ezhov also came to head military intelligence, strengthening it with “fresh people” from the NKVD.

Nikonov broke the record, being arrested only a few days after his appointment of 1 August (he was shot in October).⁶² More and more arrests were carried out, and on 3 December Berzin’s arrest was announced.⁶³ (He was shot in July 1938.) On 5 September 1937 the Politburo appointed Ezhov’s protégé, the state security officer S. G. Gendin, as deputy head of Razvedupr; in fact, he headed it under Ezhov’s direction. The Red Army officer A. G. Orlov became deputy head for foreign intelligence.⁶⁴ Gendin was arrested on 22 October 1938, and Orlov in the spring of the following year; they both dragged along their immediate subordinates. Not until September 1939 was a new Razvedupr head appointed, I. I. Proskurov. According to E. Gorbunov, the purge of Razvedupr from July 1937 to the beginning of 1938 brought about “a total paralysis of the central apparatus of military intelligence” that completely swept away the leadership and all department chiefs.⁶⁵ According to V. Kochik, between 1937 and 1940 hundreds of military intelligence officers were repressed, “approximately half the total intelligence staff.”⁶⁶

Ezhov eliminated some of Iagoda’s people in a cunning way

in order not to provoke unnecessary commotion. Later, during interrogation, Frinovskii stated that in early 1938 Ezhov had thought it insufficient merely to arrest Foreign Department head Abram Slutskii, after Agranov and L. G. Mironov during their interrogation had called him a “participant in Iagoda’s conspiracy”; if Slutskii was arrested, his testimony might harm Ezhov in Stalin’s eyes, and furthermore, Slutskii’s intelligence officers abroad could be induced not to return home, after the example of Reiss-Poretskii in 1937.⁶⁷ According to Frinovskii, Ezhov himself gave the order to “remove Slutskii without noise” and approved concrete plans in this respect; in February 1938, before leaving for the Ukraine, he ordered his deputy Frinovskii to liquidate Slutskii before his return.⁶⁸

Some days later, on 17 February, Slutskii was summoned by Frinovskii (so the latter stated during interrogation); at the same time, M. S. Alekhin, head of the operational techniques department, hid in the adjoining room. While Slutskii reported, Zakovskii, another of Ezhov’s deputies, entered Frinovskii’s office, pretending to wait for the others to finish. Then suddenly Zakovskii “threw a mask with chloroform over Slutskii’s face.” After the victim had passed out, Alekhin entered the office and “injected poison into the muscle of his right arm, as a result of which Slutskii immediately died.” Subsequently, Frinovskii summoned the doctor in duty, who certified Slutskii’s death.⁶⁹

The official NKVD report was that during his talk with Frinovskii Slutskii suffered a heart attack and died. The injected poison probably caused death that resembled a heart attack (no potassium cyanide was used, as has been stated by A. Orlov et al.). Allegedly, during his preliminary investigation Ezhov testified that he “had instructions from the leading organs not to arrest, but to eliminate” Slutskii.⁷⁰ So Stalin may have also approved of the murder. There is no reason to suspect Frinovskii of not telling the truth. Nevertheless, the post-Soviet Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) maintains the official point of view that Slutskii “suddenly died in office of a heart attack.”⁷¹

After Slutskii’s death, a successor was not immediately ap-

pointed; it seems his deputy, S. M. Shpigel'glaz, was requested to take over temporarily as acting Foreign Department chief. On 28 March 1938 the Politburo appointed Z. I. Passov as Foreign Department chief. He held the office until his arrest on 22 October of the same year, with Shpigel'glaz as deputy. Shpigel'glaz was arrested on 2 November 1938, one day after P. M. Fitin was appointed the new deputy, and a month later, on 2 December, Beria appointed V. G. Dekanozov chief of the Foreign Department.

Meanwhile, a similar cleansing of the army command was under way. During the second half of 1936 the NKVD had started collecting evidence against high officers, and in early December at an NKVD conference Ezhov had stressed the need of strengthening the NKVD work within the army: if there was sabotage in industry, why not also in the army? "The army offers rather more than less possibilities for it than industry."⁷² On 6 May 1937 the former Red Army air defense chief, M. E. Medvedev, was arrested on Ezhov's orders. Later, during interrogation, the former Moscow NKVD deputy chief Radzivilovskii testified that Ezhov and Frinovskii had instructed him to interrogate Medvedev and "let him testify about the existence of a military conspiracy in the Red Army with as many participants as possible. . . . I should obtain the names of as large a number of leading military functionaries as possible." Radzivilovskii then elicited details of the existence of a military conspiracy, including the names of "a considerable number of major leading military functionaries."⁷³

Later, during the same month, the Deputy People's Commissar of Defense, Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevskii, was arrested, together with a number of other "conspirators," and accused of conspiracy in collaboration with the Trotskiists, the Rightists, and the German intelligence service. They were tortured until they confessed. Later, during his own interrogation, Ezhov revealed that at the time there had been deliberations at the highest level about how to make Tukhachevskii confess, after Procurator Vyshinskii had insisted on using torture. Stalin's final words had been: "See for yourself, but Tukhachevskii should be forced to tell everything and to reveal his contacts. It is impossible that he acted

on his own.”⁷⁴ Indeed, analysis during the Khrushchev years showed that there were bloodstains on Tukhachevskii's testimony.⁷⁵ Ezhov directed the investigation and personally interrogated Tukhachevskii and others. Stalin supervised, read the examination records, and received Ezhov almost every day. On 11 June the Soviet press reported that the military tribunal in closed session had condemned Tukhachevskii to death for treason and espionage, together with seven army generals. During the following nine days, 980 high officers and political commissars were arrested as participants in a “military conspiracy.” In connection with the case, Ezhov and a large number of NKVD officials were decorated.⁷⁶

That was only the first act of the military purge. In November 1938 the People's Commissar of Defense, Voroshilov, declared that during 1937–38 more than 40,000 people had been purged from the Red Army.⁷⁷ A memorandum of September 1938 by Voroshilov's deputy, E. A. Shchadenko, gives precise figures. According to this source, during 1937–38, a total of 36,761 officers and political commissars were dismissed from the Red Army (some 10,000 of them being subsequently reinstated); 10,868 of them were also arrested, and 7,211 were condemned for counterrevolutionary crimes.⁷⁸ According to other more recently published official information, during the 1937–38 purge 33,947 (or 33,460) officers were dismissed, 7,280 (or 7,263) of whom were also arrested.⁷⁹

Among Old Bolsheviks, the mood was extremely depressed. Shortly after Tukhachevskii's trial People's Commissar of Justice Nikolai Krylenko in a private conversation showed himself unbearably trapped by Ezhov's “hedgehog's gauntlets” (*ezhovy rukavitsy*): “Nowadays Leninists like me are not wanted; the fashionable ones are the Ezhovs and Vyshinskiis, parvenus with a lost conscience.” Indignantly, he talked about the “chicken brain” and “sparrow short-sightedness” of Ezhov and his surroundings, so different from the old Leninists:

Intoxicated by power, they easily give in to misinformation and provocations of hostile intelligence services, seeking to destroy our functionaries and to weaken our successes. They believe the denunciations, inflate cases, pave the way for new accusations, misinform and delude the leadership of the Party and the government. In time the Party will figure it out and condemn the culprits. But now we are living through a terrible time.⁸⁰

In half a year Krylenko was arrested, and in a year he was shot.

Ezhov was now one of the top Party leaders. On 23 January 1937 he replaced Iagoda as member of the Politburo Political-Judicial Commission (*Komissiia po politicheskim (sudebnym) delam*), overseeing judicial cases of political significance.⁸¹ In the course of 1937 full power was transferred from the Politburo to a narrow circle of five, one of whom was Ezhov, even though he was not a Politburo member. On 14 April 1937, on Stalin's initiative, the Politburo set up a permanent commission to prepare and,



Ezhov, Kalinin, and Stalin leaving the Lenin Mausoleum, 1 May 1937.
(RGAKFD collection)

if necessary, solve questions of secret nature, including foreign policy questions. Its members were Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, and Ezhov.⁸² In practice, the five became the working organ, in major questions supplanting the Politburo. The most secret and serious information of the political, punitive, and military departments was addressed to these five only. Moreover, on 27 April the Politburo set up a Defense Committee with Molotov (chairman), Stalin, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Chubar', Rukhimovich, and Mezhlauk as members, and Gamarnik, Mikoian, Zhdanov, and Ezhov as candidates.⁸³

The campaign against the former oppositionists had run basically from December 1934 to March 1937. Mass repressions within the Party started after the February–March Plenum of 1937. Now Central Committee members who had never belonged to any opposition were being arrested. In March and April, during the reelection campaign to local Party organs, Party conferences started at district and city level, during which, under the guise of “Party democracy,” the rank and file were authorized to criticize and expel local Party leaders. In May and June, the same was repeated at the province level.⁸⁴ Expulsion often meant arrest. From 1 January to 1 July 1937, 20,500 members, mainly old Party cadres, were expelled.⁸⁵

The purge of the Comintern Executive Committee apparatus also continued, Stalin in February 1937, during a conversation with Dimitrov, having expressed the suspicion that the Comintern worked into the hands of the enemy.⁸⁶ In addition to the Moskvin commission mentioned above, from now on another commission of the Comintern Executive Committee Secretariat checked foreign communists who had become VKP(b) members; it consisted of Manuil'skii, Moskvin-Trilisser, and Jan Anvelt.⁸⁷ On 1 April Manuil'skii sent Ezhov, Andreev, and Shkiriakov a letter proposing stricter regulations for foreign communists who wanted to be VKP(b) members.⁸⁸ In May a special control commission was instituted, including Dimitrov, Manuil'skii, and Moskvin-Trilisser.⁸⁹ On the twenty-sixth of that month Dimitrov noted in his diary that during the night he had visited Ezhov, who had claimed that

“the greatest spies worked in the Comintern.”⁹⁰ The following day, the commission started to verify the Comintern apparatus. By mid-June, 65 employees had been purged, among them representatives of the national parties in the Executive Committee. In July the commission suspended its work.⁹¹

Ezhov was particularly concerned about the need for vigilance against foreign intelligence services and their agents. On 3 December 1936 he told an NKVD conference: “Each year we draw nearer and nearer to a war. Foreign intelligence services get more active, develop a feverish activity on our territory.”⁹² Sensing a strengthening of the activity of the Gestapo and other German intelligence organizations on Soviet territory, the NKVD set about registering all likely intelligence sources, such as political émigrés, German citizens, and former German citizens who had received Soviet citizenship; the directive of 2 April 1937 also ordered surveillance of German diplomatic representatives, as well as people connected with them.⁹³ On 15 February Ezhov informed the Central Committee that “foreign intelligence services, especially the German one, for espionage and sabotage aims make use of representatives of German firms and specialists of foreign nationality, working in Western Siberian enterprises and institutions.” This was followed on 13 March by a Politburo order not to renew residence permits of German, Japanese, Polish, and other foreign citizens staying in Western Siberia, and within a month, the NKVD instructed its regional organs in the course of six months to remove from the USSR all German citizens registered by the militia, as well as all foreign citizens who to some extent were suspected of espionage or counterrevolutionary activity; if necessary, German citizens were even to be arrested or deported. This did not involve German political émigrés, however; they were to be handled separately.⁹⁴ A commission of three was charged with deciding the question of renewing residence permits for foreign communists and political émigrés; the members were E. D. Stasova for the Central Committee, Agranov for the NKVD, and Moskvín-Trilisser for the Comintern.⁹⁵

Another target was what remained of the non-Bolshevik polit-

ical parties in the Soviet Union, who had long since suspended activity; those former activists who had not emigrated lived in inner-Soviet exile. In November 1936 Ezhov informed the regional NKVD chiefs of an “activization” of the former Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), with a view to recovering their party and organizing a large-scale insurrectionary movement. All SR groups were to be tracked down and liquidated.⁹⁶ Arrests of former SRs started immediately. During the same month in Western Siberia, for example, a sabotage-espionage-terrorist organization, directed by a “Siberian Bureau of the PSR,” was discovered and liquidated after being accused of working according to the instructions of an “All-Union United Center of the PSR.”⁹⁷ Referring to alleged sabotage, agitation, and terrorism, in February 1937 Ezhov proposed to rearrest the SR former leadership; after approval by the Central Committee, the NKVD arrested some 600 people. During the same year a large-scale trial behind closed doors of exiled SRs was held in Ufa. Close relatives were also arrested.⁹⁸

Nevertheless, on 17 January 1938 Stalin wrote to Ezhov that the policy with respect to the SRs had not yet been completed: “One should bear in mind that quite a few SRs have held out, both within and outside our army”; within two to three weeks he wanted to know how many of these (former) SRs had been registered by the NKVD.⁹⁹ The following day, Ezhov gave instructions for operational steps against former SRs, resulting in many arrests.¹⁰⁰ On 9 February he reported to Stalin about the execution of his orders to “rout the SR organization.” At the time of Stalin’s orders, the NKVD had registered 5,388 (former) SRs, including 1,014 VKP(b) members and 244 military men; as a result of Ezhov’s instructions, 2,000 people had already been arrested, and the latest arrests had led to the discovery and liquidation of a number of SR organizations, including a “branched military anti-Soviet organization” that carried out subversive activity in the army.¹⁰¹

In April 1937 Ezhov signed an instruction with respect to the Mensheviks, accusing them of clandestine activity under the leadership of an “All-Union Menshevik Center”; contacts with the

Menshevik Foreign Delegation, the SRs, and the Communist Party opposition; and involvement in sabotage and terrorism. What was left of the Menshevik underground was to be immediately and fully rounded up.¹⁰² On 14 February 1938 he gave new instructions for operational steps against former Mensheviks and Anarchists.¹⁰³

Ezhov's greatest triumph came at the Central Committee Plenum of 23–29 June 1937. In the official information the main Plenum item was missing: Ezhov's report on the conspiracies revealed by the NKVD during the past three months. From the start it was presupposed that Ezhov's report would cause a sensation among the Central Committee members and that some of them might be arrested. Therefore, it appears, either from 23 to 26 June no shorthand report was made of the sessions, or it was not preserved.

In his report Ezhov sketched an all-embracing conspiracy against Stalin. Allegedly, already in 1933 on the initiative of various opposition groups a united "Center of Centers" had been created with Rykov, Tomskii, and Bukharin on behalf of the Rightists, SRs, and Mensheviks; Enukidze on behalf of the Red Army and NKVD conspirators; Kamenev and Sokol'nikov on behalf of the Zinov'evists; and Piatakov on behalf of the Trotskiists. The main task of the "Center of Centers" or "United Center" had been the overthrow of Soviet power and the restoration of capitalism in the USSR. Reportedly, the military conspirators led by Tukhachevskii, as well as Iagoda and his NKVD people, had also been subordinated to the Center. New in Ezhov's scheme was that in the leadership of every republic or province there were conspirators too. He mentioned the regional Party leaders Sheboldaev from Kursk, Razumov from Irkutsk, Kabakov from Sverdlovsk, and Rumiantsev from Smolensk—all of them Central Committee members who had already been arrested before the Plenum.¹⁰⁴

All in all, Ezhov reported, after the February–March Plenum fourteen Central Committee members and twelve candidates had been arrested. He gave a detailed account of the wrecking in all

economy branches, especially the People's Commissariats of Agriculture and State Farms, where the Second Five-Year Plan had been sabotaged with respect to high-quality crops, and the stock raising messed up. Indeed, the enemies "purposely spread epizootics among the cattle by means of the infection with foot-and-mouth disease, plague, malignant anthrax, etc.; castrated pedigree sheep; and wrecked the work of the artificial sowing points."¹⁰⁵ On the grounds of these accusations, on 3 August 1937 Stalin ordered the organization in each province of a number of show trials against agricultural saboteurs in order to mobilize the peasants in the struggle against wrecking.¹⁰⁶

Ezhov also issued an ominous warning:

At present, only the leadership and active members of the organization have been liquidated. It has been determined that the following sectors have been seized by its anti-Soviet work: the NKVD, the Red Army, its Intelligence Directorate, the Comintern apparatus (especially the Polish section of its Executive Committee), the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, the defense industry, transport (particularly the strategic roads of the western war theater), agriculture.¹⁰⁷

This implied that an even greater purge was still to come. According to Ezhov, the Polish intelligence service, by means of the "Polish Military Organization" (POV), had deeply infiltrated the Soviet intelligence and counterespionage services, massively exploiting people of Polish nationality. The Polish government had created a large-scale network of political agents in the USSR; under the guise of political émigrés, it had transferred a great number of spies and saboteurs there. The POV organization was headed by a center in Moscow with Unshlikht, Muklevich, Ol'skii, et al. The NKVD, the Red Army, Razvedupr, the Comintern apparatus, especially the Polish section of the Comintern, the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, the defense industry, and transport had been seized by its anti-Soviet work. The POV top was also linked to the military conspirators (Tukhachevskii et al.)

and the Rightists. Unshlikht, Piliar, Sosnovskii, and other Polish spies had infiltrated the NKVD and seized all intelligence and counterespionage work with respect to Poland.¹⁰⁸

After Ezhov's report, debates with further exposures unfolded at the Plenum. On the first Plenum day, fifteen Central Committee members (or candidates) were expelled "for treason to the Party and motherland and for active counterrevolutionary activities." Their cases had already been referred to the NKVD, practically all of them having been arrested in May–June—that is, before the Plenum. Seven other members (or candidates) were only expelled by the Central Committee, declaring its "lack of political confidence" in them. Moreover, during the Plenum, on 26 June, Central Committee candidate member and People's Commissar of Public Health Grigorii Kaminskii was expelled from the Central Committee and the Party for "not deserving confidence" and arrested. The same day, four Central Committee members were expelled "in view of incontrovertible facts concerning their belonging to a counterrevolutionary group." The last Plenum day, at Stalin's suggestion, four more members were expelled "in view of incontrovertible facts concerning their involvement in the criminal actions of the conspirators"; all four had already been arrested. All in all, during the June 1937 Plenum fifteen Central Committee members plus sixteen candidates were expelled. Before the Plenum, from 31 March to 1 June 1937, nine Central Committee members had already been expelled by referendum, among them Iagoda and Tukhachevskii.¹⁰⁹ Following the Plenum, on 7 July 1937, the former Secretary of the Comintern Executive Committee, Osip Piatnitskii, was also arrested (in July 1938 he was tried and shot).¹¹⁰

The June 1937 Plenum was an important turning point in the process of the increasing terror and the weakening position of the Party apparatus. The massive expelling of Central Committee members and candidates was unprecedented. No longer was expulsion limited to former oppositionists. Since the autumn of 1936, there had been an active policy to arrest Stalinists as well. In February 1934 some 139 people had been elected to the Central

Committee. In 1935 Enukidze had been expelled, in 1936 Sokol'-nikov and Piatakov (Tomskii committed suicide). In 1937, during the months before the June Plenum, another 11 people had been expelled (excluding Gamarnik, who committed suicide). At the June Plenum 31 members and candidates were expelled simultaneously. The Plenum may well have sanctioned the implementation of the mass operations that began in the following weeks. Indeed, immediately after the Plenum, on 2 July, the Politburo decided to start the operation against "anti-Soviet elements," implying the beginning of the "Great Terror."¹¹¹

With the June 1937 Plenum, the scheme of a universal conspiracy was set by Ezhov and approved by Stalin. Arrests unfolded at all levels of the Party and state system. Ezhov directed the NKVD officers to act in accordance with the scheme. When on 19 July 1937 he sent Radzivilovskii as NKVD chief to Ivanovo, he told him to prove that the provincial Party chief, I. P. Nosov, who was trusted in the Central Committee, was connected with the Rightist underground. He was to be arrested, and an operation in the textile industry was to be determined.¹¹² (Nosov was dismissed in August and thereupon arrested; in November he was shot.) So Ezhov showed initiative in organizing the arrest of a Central Committee member, but it is unlikely that he did so without Stalin's consent.