Preface

I don't know of any more ideal functionary than Ezhov. After charging him with a task, you don't have to check up on him: he will accomplish the mission. He has only one, indeed essential, shortcoming—he does not know where to stop.

—I. M. Moskvin, 1936–37

If during this operation an extra thousand people will be shot, that is not such a big deal.

—N. I. Ezhov, July 1937

Better too far than not far enough.

—N. I. Ezhov, October 1937

Recent literature on the Stalinist period of Soviet history has dwelt heavily on the significance and scope of the terror, and historians are still much divided on both facts and interpretation, but there is little difference of opinion on the central role of what is now generally called the Great Terror of 1937–38. In the course of some fifteen months, approximately 1.5 million people were arrested; almost half of them were executed. The main executor of this gigantic operation was Stalin's state security chief of those years, Nikolai Ezhov.

Until quite recently, very little was known about this man, and what was known was to a large extent the product of invention. It was hard to realize that Ezhov had been one of the secret police chiefs praised most by Soviet propaganda. The extremely short lived Ezhov cultus of the years 1937–38 was indeed unprecedented. During this period Stalin was very favorably disposed toward Ezhov; according to Khrushchev, he had a pet name for

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him: *ezhevichka,* "little bramble."[1] Stalin put his boundless trust in Ezhov. He was personally allowed to impose death sentences in the so-called "national operations," whereas the responsibility to impose death sentences in the operation with respect to order No. 00447 was passed on to an even lower level, that is, the regional NKVD chiefs. Since the Red Terror years 1918–21, neither before nor later in Soviet history have there been similar examples. During the 1920s and 1930s all death sentences were confirmed at the highest level, that is, by the Politburo. Even Ezhov's predecessors Menzhinskii and Iagoda, who had an OGPU Board issuing death sentences, officially needed prior permission by the Politburo. So from early 1937 until November 1938 Ezhov was not only the troubadour but the symbol of the new Soviet terror. His name is strongly linked to the Great Terror.

His short period of greatness, amounting to only one and a half years, was followed by a sudden complete, and well enforced, oblivion. Stalin forbade mention even of his name—not, perhaps, simply because it may have called up unpleasant memories, but because it annoyed him. For example, in 1949 in a conversation with Vulko Chervenkov and other Bulgarian leaders, when explaining how to organize the work of their national Department of the Interior, Stalin referred to the Soviet experience and in that connection also mentioned the name of Iagoda; but he kept silent about Ezhov.[2] According to the aircraft designer A. Iakovlev, some months after his fall Stalin recalled his former favorite with the words: "Ezhov was a scoundrel. He ruined our best cadres. He had morally degenerated."[3] Stalin seemed to put the burden of guilt for the terror of 1937–38 on the executors.

The historian analyzing the life and activity of Ezhov is confronted by a great deal of vagueness and inconsistencies. This is partly a result of the shortcomings of his official biography, published in the 1930s, which, as usual with a "model" biography of a Kremlin leader, omitted much and falsified when convenient, all in order to present an exemplary revolutionary career. Biographical facts were adjusted to the accepted cliché; all that was considered dubious or superfluous was cut out, or altered. After Ezhov's

fall in the late 1930s, the situation was turned upside down: he was accused of having been a spy, a drunkard, a "pederast," the murderer of his wife. Nothing good remained. Stalin's famous *Short Course in the History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)*, which began appearing in installments in *Pravda* in September 1938, mentions Ezhov just twice—once in connection with his role during the civil war and again in the verification of Party documents campaign of the mid-1930s.[4] The second edition omits him altogether.[5] From the late 1930s on, Party censorship banned his works.[6] Since then, he has mainly been described in very negative terms. During the de-Stalinization campaign of the 1950s, the term *ezhovshchina* was even invented as a synonym for the bloody purges of 1936–38, as if it had all been Ezhov's work.

In the 1990s, the doors of the former Soviet archives were set ajar. New information on Ezhov's life and work began to appear. The authors of the present biography have used the following hitherto unpublished information to fill the gaps: materials from Ezhov's personal file (*lichnoe delo*) as nomenklatura functionary of the Party Central Committee apparatus at the Tsentr khraneniia sovremennoi dokumentatsii (TsKhSD,* the former archive of the General Department of the CPSU Central Committee); Ezhov's papers (*fond* 57) in the Arkhiv Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii (APRF, the former Politburo archive), later transferred (as *fond* 671) to the Rossiiskii tsentr khraneniia i izucheniia dokumentov noveishei istorii, or RTsKhIDNI† (the former Central Party Archive, where as yet they have not been completely declassified and are only sparsely accessible to researchers; most of these materials have been studied by the authors when they were still in the Presidential Archive, as a consequence of which in the notes they refer to this archive); other documents from the APRF and the RTsKhIDNI; Ezhov's interrogation and other documents from the Tsentral'nyi arkhiv Federal'noi sluzhby bezopasnosti (TsA FSB, the former

*Since 1999 renamed Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii, or RGANI.

†Since 1999 renamed Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii, or RGASPI.

KGB archive), as well as from the archive of the Moscow Province FSB Directorate; papers of the People's Commissariat of Water Transportation of 1938–39 at the Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki (RGAE); and documents from the Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), all of them in Moscow. In addition, a number of photographs have been obtained from the Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv kinofotodokumentov (RGAKFD) in Krasnogorsk.

A word on the archival investigation cases (*arkhivno-sledstvennye dela*) in the FSB Archive studied by us: they are a unique source of immense importance. It is true that they contain the most fantastic confessions of people tortured during interrogation; NKVD officers, for instance, confessed to having taken part in nonexistent conspiracies, having prepared attempts on the life of Stalin and other leaders, and so on. However, if handled in a critical way, such evidence can reveal totally truthful information about the way of life and mutual relations of the various NKVD clans, the character of the NKVD conferences at which campaigns of repression were discussed, private conversations of NKVD leaders, their reactions to remarks by Stalin and Molotov—the list goes on. Moreover, the truthfulness of such information can be examined for compatibility with other sources, such as Stalin's and Ezhov's visitors' registers. Another important source is that of the stenographic reports of the operational NKVD conferences of December 1936 and January 1938. Having been the first to study them, we are able to publish Ezhov's original words with respect to the repressions.

It should be pointed out that there may be serious discrepancies with Ezhov's accepted official biography, which created for Ezhov a totally fictitious revolutionary past. That work states, for example, that "comrade Ezhov prepared the soldiers in Belorussia for the [October 1917] uprising," whereas Ezhov's role until the mid-1930s was in fact of rather secondary importance. But we shall also critically examine Ezhov's image in the anti-Stalinist historiography as "bloodthirsty dwarf," "moral and physical pygmy," or "bloody degenerate."[7]

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