shaisk, you can't imagine. Well, the hell with it. I tell you that you can say whatever you want about the low level of culture we have to deal with, but here ___. Well, the hell with it, it's my lot in life. To tell the truth, I'm so fed up with all the paper shuffling that it's time to go back to the factory. Lately I've missed factory life; it's time for a rest and to completely say good-bye to this whole situation.[39]

Nevertheless, Yezhov had assembled a group of comrades and friends around him in Mari. While in Moscow awaiting the outcome of the Petrov decision, he had written to a friend back in Mari about "our guys": "Now, if I by any chance can't come back, I'd like to have some memories from the guys from Krasnokokshaisk, Kosmodemiansk, of course from our guys. I think if it turns out that I'm leaving, you should take a photo of you all and send it to me. That's all for now. Anyways, my friend, there are very good guys there, though young."[40]

It seemed that Yezhov had won in Mari.[41] But at the precise moment of his apparent victory, he too was recalled from Mari. Again we lack details, but we do know that an Orgburo decision in early November extended Yezhov's annual "vacation" for another month at full salary, and we know that he never returned to his post in Mari. By January a new responsible secretary had taken over.[42] On the one hand, Yezhov's removal seemed a demotion, coming as it did at the moment of his victory over Petrov. On the other, he seems to have wanted and perhaps even lobbied to be taken out of Mari. He wrote his friend Ivanov about the Moscow party personnel administration, "Now about myself, here goes. I'm only telling you and mind you don't tell anybody yet. They agree to remove me from there. Everybody agreed except the Org-Instrukt Department, but there is already full agreement with Syrtsov and with Kuibyshev. Here's how it will be: I will go on vacation for a month, and in the meantime the Obkom of Marilanda will find me a replacement and I'll be transferred."[43]

Two elements of party policy were at work here. First, Moscow was sensitive about ethnic conflicts getting out of control. So when a con-

flict threatened peaceful relations between nationalities, it was often the Central Committee's decision to remove any suggestion of Russian chauvinism and to recall officials who might be identified with the tendency. The party's presence and control in non-Russian areas was thin and weak, and matters were difficult enough for the Bolsheviks without leaving any whiff of discrimination when it could be avoided. Since Yezhov's triumph might be seen as an insult to or oppression of the Mari, it was safest to remove him from the picture.

Second, the Yezhov-Petrov squabble was only one among many taking place in party committees in both Russian and non-Russian areas that were handled by transferring both combatants from the scene of the fight. The constant fighting, personal sniping, and appeals to Moscow were tiresome and inefficient; they tended to paralyze party work in the entire region. But they were common in this period. Yezhov had been sent to Mari by the Central Committee as responsible party secretary. One might think that he would immediately take charge and be obeyed, but this was not the case. Personal networks were so entrenched in local party organizations that newcomers, even if they came as chiefs with Moscow mandates, were not always able to take charge. When A. I. Mikoian was sent to Nizhnyi Novgorod, it took him nearly a year to establish his authority and overcome local "clan" resistance. In Mari, Yezhov established himself as unquestioned chief only with great difficulty, and the archives are full of similar cases in which leaders established from Moscow were either recalled or ejected by the locals.[44]

Since 1918 Moscow party leaders had complained about these personal squabbles. In 1919 G. Zinoviev told the CC that regular transfer of cadres from place to place was a good way to resolve local conflicts.[45] From 1919 to 1921 Central Committee Secretary for Personnel N. Krestinsky, regularly discussed such "squabbles" (*skloki*) at open party congresses. He noted that the CC was frequently obliged to transfer leading comrades from place to place ("to no less responsible positions") in order to break up cliques, although unlike Zinoviev he saw the transfers as a last resort after other means had failed. The pages of the CC's journal *Izvestiia TsK* are filled with discussions of these feuds, and Krestin-

sky specifically mentioned the most serious in Kazan, Saratov, Voronezh, and Briansk.[46]

For example, in Kostroma "certain comrades who love to push 'their opinions' everywhere cannot cooperate and by their activities divide comrades into 'your' and 'our' groups of partisans." In Astrakhan squabbles divided Communists into "old Astrakhaners" whose "localism" was based on alleged "special conditions in Astrakhan" vs. "newcomers from outside." The result paralyzed the party organization. In Arkhangelsk, Comrade Kulikov created around him "a tight group of offensive drunks" to run the party organization.[47] A celebrated battle between the party's Siberian Regional Buro and the Omsk party organization over prerogatives to appoint personnel involved local press battles, mutual party expulsions, and mass threats to resign from the party. Eventually, the Central Committee had to dissolve the Omsk organization, expel many of its leading party officials, and order a "reregistration" of party members in the area.[48]

At party congresses in 1921 and 1922, CC Secretary V. Molotov discussed some of the reasons for these conflicts, which included struggles between strong personalities and their clients, young and older party members, urban and rural cadres, local and recently arrived leading cadres (as with Yezhov in Mari), and returning Red Army Communists and the established leaderships, as well as disputes over nationality policy or simply between rival strong personalities with their followings. As Stalin told a party congress, "all these heterogeneous elements which go up to make the provincial committees bring with them different attitudes, traditions, and tastes, and on this basis brawls and feuds erupt." Real issues of principle were almost never involved.[49] Molotov agreed with his predecessor Krestinsky on the use of personnel reassignment as a last resort to stop the feuds, and he itemized the methods the Central Committee used before turning to reassignment: highlighting the conflict in the party press, sending secret CC letters to the party organization, and dispatching CC representatives (*instruktory*) to the scene to try to make peace. Only when these tactics failed was it appropriate to reassign leading cadres elsewhere, and even then there

were several approaches: removal of a few key players, recall of one of the feuding groups, or, in extreme cases, recall of both feuding groups, to be replaced by entirely new party staffs.[50] This drastic "plague on both your houses" solution seems to have been especially prevalent when ethnic or national conflicts were part of the dispute.

Despite its local bitterness, the Mari dispute did not receive coverage at party congresses. Other feuds were much worse. But the CC's handling of the matter followed the procedure outlined by Molotov. The CC had sent at least two "party letters" to the Mari party organization, and there had been at least two visits by CC Instructors Kubiak and Avdeev. Finally, when all else failed in a conflict that threatened to have ethnic overtones, the leaders of both the Petrov and Yezhov factions were removed. A Central Committee reporter on the Mari feud noted, "I am inclined to think that Petrov is mainly at fault. [But] maybe it will be necessary to take measures not only against him."[51] Shortly thereafter, Yezhov joined Petrov as a recalled official. (Matters did not improve in Mari. In the following years, Yezhov's replacement I. I. Ivanov also became involved in personal squabbles, charges and countercharges of criminal activity.)[52]

An anonymous performance report on Yezhov's work in Mari was critical, noting that even though he showed no signs of careerism or squabbling, he had a tendency to "one-man decision making and stubbornness bordering on bad temper and irascibility." The report added that his early "blunders" in Mari were "objectively understandable" because his lack of formal Marxist education and preparation left him without "the possibility to orient himself in especially complicated leadership situations." Yezhov was aware of his theoretical limitations. He used his vacation time to read Lenin, writing to a friend, "I'm also reading, finally got to do it, read already 2 volumes of Lenin, I'm studying the line of Vladimir Il'ich."[53] The same performance report, though it praised Yezhov's initiative, energy, connection with the masses, and ability to carry out practical work, suggested that he might best be used in a working-class province as a party leader of second or third rank.[54]

Nevertheless, Yezhov received generally positive work evaluations

on his work in Mari. A report about him dated September 1922 noted that his proletarian origins gave him great authority among nonparty workers. He was said to be a good organizer who worked independently, showed initiative, and brought matters to conclusion. He was self-reliant and energetic, without careerist ambitions or any tendency toward bureaucratism.[55]

Even though the secret police reported at the time of Yezhov's departure that the state of the Mari party organization was "satisfactory," Yezhov's debut as a responsible party leader was something less than a complete success, and his official biographies in subsequent years would not mention it.[56] He seems to have moved back and forth between Kazan and Moscow, first on paid vacation and then "at the disposal of the Central Committee," until 1 March 1923. But his experience in Mari apparently did not outweigh either the shortage of good administrators or his demonstrated skill as an up-and-coming party worker. In discussions in the Central Committee in November 1922, Yezhov was first offered party secretary posts in Orel, Briansk, Northern Dvinsk, and the Urals. He wrote to a friend, "The choice is mine, but I haven't thought about it yet."[57]

His friends from Kazan wanted him to return to work with them. But despite his rough time in Mari, he still felt a party duty not to abandon the Mari party organization and his "guys" there. As he wrote to his friend Petr Ivanov,

> Now about me. I hardly arrived Kazan when the guys from the Obkom came to me in a car and took me along to a conference that was taking place here at the time, and immediately, not letting me come to my senses, they wanted to get me into the Bureau of the OK. I hardly could persuade them not to do it, pointing at the absurdity of doing it to a person who still had another job. But it was not the end of it, they even didn't want to let me go from Kazan, didn't want to let me go to Moscow and come back, and I think (with confidence now) they wanted to make me stay by all means they had. You of course will ask my opinion. Here's

> what I think, frankly: of course, it is possible to change "Marlandia" [the Mari region] for Tataria, and it's even profitable, but there is a "but" here that makes one think twice, and first of all—it's about the state of the Mari organization, I, being a party guy, can't watch calmly the agony of the organization in Marlandia. And the second reason is all these promises I had given about coming back, etc. Of course it's nonsense, a promise, especially such as I gave, of course it's possible to break such promises, it's nonsense, but it can badly influence the "guys" [in Mari] especially, the locals, and it will make them view any newcomer as a barnstormer. And the third reason is the quarrels here in the Kazan organization. There'll be a lot of work, but it's not important, of course, if unity in Marlandia could be preserved if I leave, then, I repeat, it would be possible to change "Red Kokshogu" for Kazan.
>
> I'll not write about the reasons that make the local guys press me to stay here [Kazan], and it's not worth writing, but they are in a very difficult position, and they put their hopes on me thinking I can uphold the class line.[58]

His friends from his former post in Kazan and Vitebsk lobbied for him to be sent there, but in late February, he was offered his choice of party secretary positions in Penza, Astrakhan, Semipalatinsk, or Pskov.[59] Yezhov and the Central Committee finally agreed on Semipalatinsk, and in early March 1923 the Orgburo assigned him to the post of party secretary of the Semipalatinsk provincial committee in central Asian Kirgizia. He was simultaneously awarded a three months' salary bonus at the level of responsible party worker.[60]

As with his appointment to Mari a year before, Yezhov must have viewed the Semipalatinsk assignment with mixed feelings. On the one hand, it was a major step upward for his career. Covering an area more than twenty times the size of Mari province, Semipalatinsk had a party organization ten times as large as the Mari organization: six thousand members organized into three hundred party cells, sixty-one of which

were urban.[61] This was no backwoods Mari; Semipalatinsk was a major province, and with nearly a thousand proletarians in its party organization, it was a Bolshevik stronghold in Muslim Central Asia. He wrote to Ivanov, "The work is interesting, the organization is large (six thousand people), [there are foreign economic] concessions, Altai mountains, etc."[62]

But the assignment was also fraught with peril. As in Mari, the situation in Central Asia involved national frictions between ethnic groups. Kirgiz and other non-Russians outnumbered the Russian population by about three to two, which was roughly the proportion of non-Russians to Russians in Mari.[63] Russian and Kirgiz party members eventually would fracture and factionalize against each other in complicated ways. As in Mari, the native population was generally uneducated and of dubious loyalty to the Bolshevik cause. The thousand proletarian members of the Semipalatinsk party were a drop in the bucket, considering that the province's population was more than a million. At exactly this time, the Central Committee reported to the 12th Party Congress that the "political level" in Kirgizia was low. So weak was the Bolshevik presence in such places that the party had difficulty finding party secretaries with the requisite experience or even the required term of years in the party.[64] Here, as in other non-Russian territories, there were relatively few proletarians, and the "native intelligentsia," often traditional and hostile to Bolshevism, had great influence.[65]

Kirgizia was in crisis. Secret police reports described terrible problems. Mounted bandit gangs of up to two hundred members stalked the territory, stealing livestock and robbing and beating the population. In one instance, a Turkmen gang made off with three hundred cattle and forty "prisoners" they intended to hold for ransom. Frequent harvest failures led to hunger, anger and panic among the population, which turned to "food substitutes." There were outbreaks of malaria, and the state was able to provide practically no medical assistance.[66]

The peasant population, mostly Kirgiz, was in a constant state of protest—sometimes nearing revolt—about high taxes and related disputes about land allocation and valuation. Both party and secret police

reports noted that drunken tax collectors beat the taxes out of Kirgiz peasants. Beatings and fistfights were common responses to tax collection, and tax evasion was chronic.[67] According to one report, tax collection had been completed on time but only at great "social cost." In one case, a peasant froze to death when tax collectors locked him in a barn for eight days for tax evasion. The party recommended arresting several of these renegade tax officials and sending them to drumhead military tribunals for misconduct. Moreover, the report went on, former soldiers of General Kolchak's anti-Bolshevik White Army had joined the party organization and as tax collectors used "beastly methods" against the population.[68]

And the party organization was in disarray. A letter from the Semipalatinsk provincial party secretary to the Central Committee written in February 1923 bemoaned the state of the party there and may well have occasioned Yezhov's dispatch to the province less than three weeks later.[69] At the same time, a summary of the situation in Semipalatinsk prepared at this time for the 12th Party Congress was no more optimistic about the party organization itself: "The condition of the party organization is grave, even aside from the squabbles and factions. There is a strong increase in drunkenness, property accumulation, weak discipline, and even guerilla aberrations and methods" among party members.[70] Very little political education, agitation, or other "party work" was taking place among the Kirgiz, with the exception of some organization of Kirgiz women in the city. The provincial party committee had virtually no connection with the localities, and had no instructors to visit them. The rural agricultural cooperatives—traditionally among the few well-organized rural organizations—were dominated by hostile Socialist Revolutionaries and well-to-do peasants (kulaks); they contained virtually no Kirgiz members.[71]

Police reports also described massive corruption in the party and state apparatus, but typically blamed the problem on "kulak elements" who had penetrated the apparatus. Bribery, drunkenness, and general "laziness" were common. In one place, a supply chief was siphoning grain off the harvest collections and selling it at half price for personal

profit. In another district, the local prosecutor punished peasants who complained about high taxes by extorting two thousand rubles and two hundred puds of opium from them.[72]

Yezhov had his work cut out for him, and sometime in March 1923 he and Antonina made their way to Kirgizia. Antonina, who had worked as chief of agitation and propaganda for the Mari obkom, now found a position as head of the Press Department of the Semipalatinsk party gubkom.[73] Typically, there was confusion surrounding her new appointment. In March 1923 the Central Committee assignment apparatus Uchraspred sent an urgent telegram to Mari demanding to know "immediately" why Antonina Titova had been "removed" from the Mari Agitprop department and where she was currently working. In fact, Uchraspred itself had formally transferred her to Semipalatinsk.[74]

Throwing himself into the work with his customary energy, Nikolai Yezhov quickly sized up the party situation in Semipalatinsk and produced a lengthy report to the Central Committee in June. In the party report style that he had mastered so well (perhaps with some help from Antonina), his text was full of apparently frank and objective detail. It also incorporated the by-now standard "although" style: Yezhov frankly admitted "shortcomings" and problems while foregrounding pending improvements. In so doing, he implied that he was responsible for a turnaround without saying so in as many words, which would have seemed self-promoting and incongruous with Bolshevik traditions of modesty and impersonal speech.

Former White Army soldiers, Yezhov wrote, had "penetrated" the provincial land office "although" SRs and Mensheviks had practically no influence in the province. Although there had been an increase in support for the Bolsheviks from some poor peasants, kulaks had a "hostile attitude" toward the Bolsheviks; they had penetrated the cooperatives and were trying to turn the poor peasants against "Soviet power" by, among other things, running candidates for local Soviet elections. There had been a disturbing growth in religion, including a rise in support for "sectarians" and Baptists (which Yezhov misspelled) even among returning Red Army soldiers, although party agitational work

was better and improving every month. There had also been a growth of Kirgiz clan-based hostility toward the regime, and traditional clan leaderships were still hostile to the party. However, this was always the case around the time of Soviet elections and in any case in some places clan loyalties were fortunately giving way to class hostility of the poor against the traditional leaders.[75]

Soon after his arrival, Yezhov faced an uprising in the countryside. His hagiographer Alexander Fadeev tells us that the unrest was caused by an "incorrect understanding" of the private property relations of the New Economic Policy. Given what we know about discontent among Kirgiz peasants, this probably refers to a land dispute. Fadeev also tells us that at great personal risk the brave Yezhov traveled alone to the rebellious self-proclaimed "Bukhtarma Republic" and put down the revolt single-handedly, although photos from the time suggest that he had considerable assistance.[76]

Despite the difficulties, Yezhov's work had so impressed his superiors, both locally and in Moscow, that after a year in Semipalatinsk, he was promoted in May 1924 to head the Organizational Department (ORPO) of the entire Kirgiz obkom. This made him responsible for all personnel assignments in Kirgizia. Several months later (by December 1924) he had become a full secretary of the Kirgiz Obkom, and in October 1925 he was made deputy responsible secretary of the Kazakhstan Territorial Party Committee and chief of its personnel (ORPO) department.[77]

He demonstrated a certain deftness in dealing with subordinate organizations and mediating between them and Moscow. In October 1924 the First Secretary of the Akmolinsk Provincial Party Committee was recalled to Moscow. As their superior party organization, the Kirgiz Obkom suggested to the Akmolinsk comrades that they ask the Central Committee in Moscow to recommend a replacement from outside. The Akmolinsk party committee instead proposed the candidacy of their own comrade, one Chirkov, to the Kirgiz Obkom. At first it seemed that the local party leaders were trying to protect their own prerogatives against Moscow's centralization and wanted to promote one

of their own number rather than accept an outside Moscow candidate. But the situation turned out to be more tactically complicated than that. In fact, the opposite was true.

Yezhov discovered that the Akmolinsk recommendation of Chirkov came on a vote of five in favor, four opposed, one abstaining, with all the Russians voting against Chirkov and all the Kirgiz members in favor. Yezhov wrote to Akmolinsk, "The obkom does not think it possible that it can confirm the candidacy of a secretary who did not receive a unanimous vote, or even a majority, and that reflected disagreement between the Kirgiz and Russian parts of the leadership." The Kirgiz Obkom then reported the strife in Akmolinsk to Moscow and again proposed to Akmolinsk that it seek a nomination from the Central Committee.

This time, the truth came out. As it happened, Yezhov learned, the Akmolinsk comrades had deliberately and artificially staged a split vote to suggest serious dissension in its ranks, "not as any principled disapproval of Chirkov, but rather in the hope that they could get an extra worker from the Central Committee." Knowing that Moscow was short of skilled cadres for Central Asia, the Akmolinsk comrades were afraid that if they asked the Central Committee, Moscow would simply pick among the leaders already in Akmolinsk. Knowing also that Moscow was quick to send new party workers to places troubled by ethnic conflict, the Akmolinsk comrades faked a local conflict, hoping that the maneuver of a split vote would stampede the CC into sending them another pair of hands. Far from resisting Moscow's centralizing power of appointment, the Akmolinsk party committee was counting on it to send them help. As was often the case in these years, the shortage of administrative talent in the party was far more important than protection of turf.[78]

The Akmolinsk maneuver did not work. Caught in the act, Akmolinsk quickly voted again, this time unanimously for Chirkov. Yezhov and the Kirgiz obkom approved and the matter ended. In his final letter to Akmolinsk, Yezhov chided the provincial communists for their trickery and for making both Akmolinsk and the Kirgiz obkom look bad. But he also made clear that the storm was over:

> One has to wonder what to make of [your] plenum meetings, which in the discussion of a new gubkom secretary managed to produce a 5–4–1 vote and somehow expected the obkom to approve. Do you really think it is proper to vote for or against a party secretary in order to get an extra worker from the Central Committee? Do you really think it is all right that after two telegrams from us recommending that you ask the CC, and after we had notified the CC of all this, that we and the CC suddenly and unexpectedly find out that you had then suddenly voted unanimously for Chirkov and that your [real] motive, to receive a new worker from the CC, was unknown to us until it fell on our heads at the last minute? The obkom hopes that now . . . it has become clear [to you] the position you put the obkom in with your peculiar vote. . . . The obkom regrets that, despite the obvious mistakes of the Akmolinsk gubkom, it was necessary for us to return to this problem which now we can regard as ancient history. We suggest that by means of this comradely letter we will consider the matter closed.[79]

As an administrator, Yezhov had made the best of a bad situation. To his superiors in Moscow, he was a leader who had bothered to get the facts, to get to the bottom of a strange situation and sort it out (in the process saving Moscow the expense of another cadre). To his subordinates, he had shown that he could not be fooled so easily. But Yezhov also knew that he had to work smoothly with such committees in the future, and although he scolded the Akmolinsk party committee, he could have been far more severe. His rebuke of them was firm and on the record, but it was also moderate and measured.

Although Yezhov handled these bureaucratic tiffs well, there were some problems that seemed intractable, and they had to do with his old nemesis: the nationality question. In Kirgizia and in the Kirgiz part of Kazakhstan, ethnic tensions ran high. Secret police reports of 1923–25 on the mood of the population constantly mentioned Russian-Kirgiz conflict. Some of these conflicts were no doubt exacerbated by brutal

and high-handed Russian tax collectors, but other issues—including land disputes—also raised the temperature. Fistfights broke out between Russians and Kirgiz over land rights, and occasionally the fights turned into armed conflicts. Some Kirgiz settlements wanted to deport all Russians from Kazakhstan, and one settlement drove out the Communists altogether. At a meeting in one settlement, a speaker said, "If things continue this way we will have to revolt." In other places, there was talk of forming an "autonomous Cossack republic," as well as bizarre rumors that Trotsky would soon arrive with a Russian military detachment to arrest non-Russian Kirgiz officials.[80]

Clan politics played an important role in Kirgizia. Some Kirgiz settlements insisted, for example, on administration of justice by local beys from their own clans.[81] But it was not only a matter of Russians vs. Kirgiz. As usual, members of the Russian party contingent had differing views about how to handle the Kirgiz. And among the Kirgiz, splits ran in several directions: between intelligentsia and worker, Bolshevik and anti-Bolshevik, eastern and western. Kirgiz clans fought each other, and sometimes one clan allied itself with Soviet officials against their Kirgiz rivals. In other places, clans struggled among themselves to control local soviet institutions.[82]

Socially, among the Kirgiz there was a split between the intelligentsia, many of whom had been members of the Alash-Orda movement, and the poor Kirgiz, who were more likely to be Bolshevik supporters.[83] A Kirgiz party secretary wrote to the Central Committee in 1924 about the split in his own party committee. He noted that there were also "eastern" and "western" groups of Kirgiz, with the westerners maintaining too close a tie with the Alash-Orda intelligentsia. The western group had the opposite fault; they were too hostile to the nonparty intelligentsia.[84]

Among the Kirgiz Bolsheviks, at least two factions contended with each other and with different groups of Russian Bolsheviks. Thus a Kirgiz party member named Dzhangildin wrote to Stalin in April 1925 about the alliance between some Russian party leaders and the Alash-Orda intelligentsia. Identifying himself as a poor Kirgiz, Dzhangildin identified party secretaries Naneishvili and Yezhov as leaders of a fac-

tion that "had nothing in common" with the proletariat and associated not only with Alash-Orda but with "bey elements" that represented the traditional elites in Kirgizia. They were helped, Dzhangildin wrote, by Communists like the "petty bourgeois" Kirgiz Khodzhanov, who was a "Turkestan Kirgiz" rather than a proper proletarian eastern Kirgiz. He accused Yezhov and Naneishvili of operating behind the back of Central Committee instructor Tolokontsev, telling the party committee in Tolokontsev's absence that they did not need him to decide things.

Dzhangildin went on to complain that Naneishvili and Yezhov had no understanding of Kirgiz society, with its loyalties of clan, lineage, and orda (a territorial designation that originally referred to a Mongol camp). He pointed out that Yezhov's Kirgiz allies, the Khodzhanov group and their "petty bourgeois" Alash-Orda friends, understood the Russians' ignorance of the real groupings in Kirgiz society and used that ignorance to their own advantage against other Kirgiz. Dzhangildin suggested that Stalin send a new party secretary to Kirgizia from Moscow, and helpfully offered to provide a list of reliable Kirgiz proletarians to staff a new territorial party committee. He included in his letter a traditional component of such petitions and complaints: a lengthy statement on his own revolutionary services.[85]

Ethnic conflict in Kirgizia seems to have been as severe as it had been in Mari, and once again Nikolai Yezhov had been accused of Russian chauvinism. Indeed he seems to have been censured formally by the party for it a year earlier, in mid-1924.[86] We have already noted that given the high emotions and complicated politics in such regions, it is difficult to evaluate such accusations, and Yezhov's Kirgiz experience shows that they can mask a more complicated reality that may well have been mixed up as much with personal rivalries as with ethnic conflict.

Central Committee secretaries were also receiving statements and complaints from other Kirgiz, and more than once Moscow fired off letters to the Kirgiz party organization demanding that they stop disagreements and skloki and work together, especially in the top provincial leadership.[87] The same Khodzhanov who had been the target of Dzhangildin's anger sent his own letter to Stalin in March 1925. His

complaint was a more general one against Russians' chauvinistic relations with the Kirgiz people. After outlining some of the personal conflicts in the Kirgiz party committee, he launched into a bitter denunciation of Russians' haughty attitude toward their Kirgiz comrades in party organizations. Russians ordered Kirgiz around, saying "I want . . . " or "I forbid . . . " or "I am commissioned by the Central Committee . . . " Accordingly, there was a good deal of suspicion between the two groups, and the Kirgiz had formed their own mutual protection group within the territorial party committee. First Secretary Naneishvili apparently tried to referee and mediate between the two nationalities, but Khodzhanov wrote that when Naneishvili was absent, the Russians on the kraikom ignored Khodzhanov, who was second secretary of the kraikom.[88]

Two weeks earlier, Khodzhanov had asked the Kirgiz kraikom to relieve him of his duties as second secretary. He pointed out that he had no clearly assigned duties in the position; his subtext was that he had become mere ethnic window dressing for a Russian-dominated committee. The kraikom had refused but had resolved to draw up a specific division of responsibilities among the secretaries.[89]

Yezhov was third secretary of the Kirgiz organization, subordinate to First Secretary Naneishvili and responsible for personnel assignments throughout the province. We have seen his efficiency and bureaucratic skill in action, and by 1925 he seems to have taken upon himself most of the work of running the entire province. Khodzhanov ended his letter to Stalin with a recommendation in a "P.S.": "Comrade Naneishvili, even though he is a longtime member of the party, has a mental limitation that is intolerable in someone in his position: he is incapable of directing anyone or anything. Yezhov can. Consequently, it would be good to appoint Comrade Yezhov as First Secretary of the kraikom, so that he not only does everything but would be immediately responsible for it."[90]

Khodzhanov's postscript again confirms Yezhov's tremendous energy and ability in party administration: he was running the province from the position of third secretary. The note also shows how complicated the charges of "chauvinism" can be. Dzhangildin had accused Yezhov of ig-

norance of Kirgiz society and of running roughshod over Kirgiz sensibilities. But Khodzhanov, who also complained about Russian chauvinism in general, had recommended the Russian Yezhov for the top position.

In the rough and tumble world of ethnic politics on the periphery, there were no safe approaches. One could be solicitous and indulgent, catering to the sensibilities of non-Russians, but such conduct could earn one accusations of going overboard with anti-Russian chauvinism, as it had for Yezhov's rival Petrov back in Mari. Or Russians could ignore local traditions and draw upon themselves the opposite accusation of chauvinism. One could even try to steer a middle road, working hard to be fair and impartial, and still run afoul of the charge because of divisions between Russians and divisions between non-Russians.

We know virtually nothing about Nikolai Yezhov's attitudes toward or relations with either the Mari or the Kirgiz Communists with whom he worked. We do not know whether he was biased or impartial. We do know that he and Nancishvili had made common cause with one group of Kirgiz. Such an alliance, with some native group or another, was a practical necessity for Bolshevik administrators who needed the help of influential groups of local people. But this infuriated other local factions, with the result that some Kirgiz wanted to promote Yezhov and others accused him of chauvinism. It was probably impossible to carry out party work in these territories of mixed ethnicity without being accused of some kind of chauvinism at one time or another.

Kirgizia was far from Moscow, far from the capital with its culture, influence and power. Those like Yezhov who found themselves on the periphery did everything they could to move closer to the center. The constant ethnic one-upmanship and backbiting made assignments on the nationality periphery seem like an even crueler exile. Yet the more Yezhov demonstrated his loyalty, faith in Bolshevik principles, capacity for hard work, and administrative skill, the more valuable he became as a provincial leader able to work well in difficult situations. Given the shortage of available talent for such assignments, Yezhov's work history and self-promotion actually made it less likely that he would be brought to Moscow. He was too valuable where he was.

FOUR

The Party Personnel System

And so, comrades, if we want successfully to get over the shortage of people and to provide our country with sufficient cadres capable of advancing technique and setting it going, we must first of all learn to value people, to value cadres, to value every worker capable of benefiting our common cause.

JOSEPH STALIN

The history of the party in the 1920s is usually understood in connection with Stalin's rise to power, which was facilitated by his control of the levers of personnel assignment. Usually, when we think about the Stalinist personnel system, we think about it as a tool Stalin used to gain power through patronage, by promoting those loyal to him and removing those who challenged him. According to the theory of "circular flow of power," party secretaries at all levels were appointed by Stalin and returned the favor by supporting him against his rivals.[1] Yezhov, like nearly all territorial party leaders, was a Stalin supporter. Moreover, he was later to have a key role in the persecution and physical annihilation of anti-Stalin dissidents, or "oppositionists," as they were called. At

this point, then, it is important to survey the history of anti-Stalin oppositions in the 1920s and how that story relates to the party's early personnel system. In so doing, we shall see how Stalin commanded the loyalty of party apparatus workers like Yezhov.

The New Economic Policy (NEP), adopted in 1921, allowed free markets in agriculture and in small and medium industry. (The Bolsheviks retained nationalized heavy industry in their own hands.) Lenin saw this concession to a limited capitalism in the form of market mechanisms as a necessary measure to appease the peasants and to allow market forces to help rebuild the shattered economy. NEP always enjoyed mixed popularity among the Bolsheviks. Rightist Bolsheviks, who clustered around the economic theoretician and *Pravda* editor Nikolai Bukharin (and eventually the trade union leader Mikhail Tomsky and the Council of Commissars chairman Aleksei Rykov), saw NEP as a long-term strategy by which the party could maintain its alliance (*smychka*) with an increasingly prosperous peasantry. Funds for industrialization would be generated by rational taxation and the general growth of the economy. Leftist Bolsheviks, on the other hand, favored "squeezing" resources from the peasantry at a faster rate. Led by the Communist International and Leningrad party head Grigory Zinoviev, the Moscow party chief Lev Kamenev, and the brilliant Lev Trotsky, the leftists were impatient with what they considered coddling of the peasantry and pressed for a more militant and aggressive industrial policy.

Aware that disagreements could lead to splinter groups and split the party, Lenin was worried about maintaining iron discipline. At the very moment of victory in 1921 the Bolsheviks passed a resolution banning the formation of factions within their own party. Lenin's ideas of party organization, known as "democratic centralism," held that party policies should be adopted democratically, but that once a decision was taken it was the duty of all party members publicly to defend and support that decision whether or not they personally agreed with it. Rather loosely observed in the party before and during 1917, these norms received strong reinforcement in the desperate emergency of the Civil War, and party leaders of all kinds had little trouble institutionalizing

them as a "ban on fractions" at the Tenth Party Congress in early 1921. The Bolsheviks' insecurity and apprehension told them that maintaining party discipline and unity was the key to survival and was more important than the right to bicker and disagree.

Overlaying and sharpening economic disagreements was a classic personal struggle for succession that followed Lenin's death in 1924. The struggle for power among the Olympian Bolshevik leaders was complicated but can be summarized quickly. Beginning in 1923, Trotsky launched a trenchant criticism of Stalin's "regime of professional secretaries," claiming that they had become ossified bureaucrats cut off from their proletarian followers. Trotsky also argued that the survival of the Bolshevik regime depended on support from successful workers' revolutions in Europe, and he accused Stalin and other leaders of losing interest in spreading the revolution. To the other Politburo leaders, Trotsky seemed the most powerful and the most dangerous. By common recognition he was, after Lenin, the most brilliant theoretician in the party. More important, he was the leader of the victorious Red Army and regarded as personally ambitious and a potential Napoleon of the Russian Revolution.

Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin closed ranks to isolate Trotsky, accusing him of trying to split the party because of his personal ambition to lead it. They argued that Trotsky was only using "party democracy" as a phony political issue: during the Civil War he had never been for anything less than iron discipline. Now, they charged, his criticism weakened party unity. Faced with the unity of the other Politburo members, the party's near-religious devotion to party unity and discipline, and Stalin's influence among the party apparatus, Trotsky could not win. He was stripped of his military post in 1924 and gradually marginalized in the top leadership.[2]

The following year, Zinoviev and Kamenev split off from the party majority by launching their own critique of NEP from the leftist point of view. This New Opposition said that the NEP policy of conceding constantly increasing grain prices to the peasantry was depriving the state of capital for industrialization, bankrupting industry, confronting

the proletariat with high bread prices, and indefinitely postponing the march to socialism. In 1926 Trotsky joined Zinoviev and Kamenev in the United Opposition. To the Leningrad and Moscow votes controlled by Zinoviev and Kamenev, Trotsky brought the remnants of his supporters.

Stalin and Bukharin denounced the United Opposition as another attempt to split the party by challenging the existing policy and violating the centralism part of democratic centralism. Bukharin's impressive pragmatic and theoretical defense of "Lenin's" NEP, combined with Stalin's low-key pragmatic approach, made a formidable combination. The votes from the party secretarial apparatus, loyal to Stalin and disinclined to provoke a dangerous turn in party policy, won the day, and the United Opposition went down to defeat in 1927.[3] Zinoviev and Kamenev were stripped of their most powerful positions. Trotsky was expelled from the party and exiled to Central Asia. Two years later, in 1929, he was deported from the country.

Stalin, as General Secretary of the Party, had influence among the growing full-time corps of professional party secretaries and administrators. Toward the end of the Civil War the Central Committee had formed three subcommittees to carry out the party's work between sittings of the full body: the Political Bureau (Politburo), the Organizational Bureau (Orgburo), and the Secretariat. Stalin alone sat on all three subcommittees.[4] Although he did not always attend meetings of the Orgburo or Secretariat, Molotov did. As we shall see, up to 90 percent of all personnel assignments were based on recommendations by Orgburo staff, rather than by Stalin, Molotov, or one of the top leaders. The top leaders, sitting on either the Secretariat or the Orgburo, were there to vet the recommendations they received, and they nearly always rubber-stamped staff appointment proposals, often in batches and by polling the members rather than by actually meeting. Certainly the CC staff responded to Stalin's and Molotov's instructions and political tastes, but the image of Stalin personally and politically deciding each appointment is not accurate.[5]

In the usual understanding of party politics in the 1920s, Stalin's am-

bition is the driving force, and the history of the party becomes synonymous with his rise to power. There is much truth in this view, and Stalin's rise to unchallenged personal power in the party is impossible to understand outside of his control of the personnel process. Yet this understanding is incomplete in important ways. It cannot explain key aspects of that evolution, including the broad consensus in the party—even among oppositionists—in favor of strong discipline, centralization of personnel assignment, and a firm "organizational line." Indeed, much of the impetus for centralizing personnel assignment and the creation of a full-time party apparatus came originally from anti-Stalin oppositionists. Nor can Stalin's ambition alone explain why as his power grew in the 1920s, the number of centrally controlled personnel appointments actually *declined* year to year. The Stalin-centered story overemphasizes his personal direction of the apparatus, its efficiency, and even the centrality of the struggle with the opposition. We are thus often inclined to see workers in the party apparatus as mere puppets, without any independent views, interests, or control over their fates and careers.

For example, by equating the rise of centralized personnel practices with Stalin's person, we have assumed that Yezhov's rise through that bureaucracy must have been due to Stalin's personal patronage, and Yezhov is often characterized as someone Stalin spotted early and whose career he nurtured, even though there is no evidence to support this view.

Looking at the party's personnel process from the beginning forward, rather than backward from Stalin's victory, produces a rather different picture. By examining the environment in which the system took shape, we are able to highlight historical and structural factors other than Stalin's personality that pushed the process forward. Stalin was, of course, an ambitious politician who used this process for his own ends. But the process of centralized and undemocratic personnel assignment predated his rise to power and evolved from objective dynamics that often had little to do with him. Even without an ambitious politician aiming for dictatorship, even without an internecine struggle for

Lenin's mantle, the process would have proceeded much the same because it was a logical response to the interaction of party traditions and goals in a difficult environment. In fact, Stalin did not invent or impose the patron-client system; it was inherent in the situation.[6]

Ironically, it was oppositionist criticism (of the chaos in personnel) and proposals that first led to the systematization and professionalization of these functions and to the creation of a secretarial apparatus that Stalin would later use against them. In 1919 the oppositionists V. V. Ossinsky and Timofei Sapronov led the call for a "strong" Secretariat with the ability to distribute personnel and for the creation of a group of full-time professional party workers; Ossinsky complained that a real "Secretariat does not exist." The future oppositionist G. Zinoviev seconded their call and argued for the CC's right to shift personnel around as needed to break up cliques and ensure obedience.[7] Lev Trotsky told the 9th Party Congress that the party needed a strong "organizational center" with the ability to appoint provincial party secretaries, regardless of the electoral principle.[8]

Although some oppositionists quickly changed their minds about the benefits of a "strong" bureaucratic personnel system (especially when it was used against them), others remained ambivalent. In April 1923 the Trotskyist Ye. Preobrazhensky warned against the tendency to appoint rather than elect provincial party secretaries, but conceded that the Central Committee needed such authority.[9] As late as 1925, when he came into open opposition to the Stalin machine as head of a dissident Leningrad delegation at the 14th Party Congress, Zinoviev took pains to criticize only Stalin's "political line," not his personnel policies (the "organizational line").[10] Early oppositionist calls for a tighter party machine and their continued ambiguity on the question made it easy for supporters of the Stalin majority to heckle them for hypocrisy when they complained about Stalin taking "organizational measures" against them. Thus V. M. Molotov, I. P. Rumiantsev, and others chided Lev Kamenev in 1925 for being in favor of iron discipline and a hard "organizational line" only when he was in the majority.[11] Martymian Riutin, who was to be shot in 1937 for writing a sharp condemnation of Stalin's

rule in 1932, must have rued his 1923 statement that it was natural to have a stable leading group: "A party that discredits its leaders is unavoidably weakened. Parties are always led by chiefs [*vozhdy*]."[12]

Nikolai Yezhov probably agreed. He watched much of this struggle from far off Kirgizia, where, as we have seen, he was stationed until 1926. Like his fellow regional party secretaries, Yezhov probably had a narrow understanding of the inner dynamics of the party fights, first between Stalin and Trotsky and then between Stalin and Zinoviev. Much of their information came through official party channels that Stalin loyalists controlled, and Yezhov and his fellows almost certainly had a one-sided picture of the issues and dynamics behind the political struggles in Moscow. They also interpreted the struggle both personally and in their own terms as provincial secretaries.

The struggles and debates among the top contenders for Lenin's succession were always presented in terms of principled positions. The speeches in which hopefuls presented their candidacies to the party masses were invariably about agricultural and industrial options, foreign policy, and other grand strategies, and were always couched in and buttressed by theoretical references to the writings of Marx and Lenin.

But the truth is that all of them changed their principled positions constantly. Stalin's flip-flops are well known. An opponent of using bourgeois specialists in the Civil War, he defended them in the early 1920s, then attacked them again in 1928, then defended them again in the early 1930s. A staunch defender of the mixed-economy gradualism of NEP for most of the 1920s, he suddenly lurched to the left at the end of the decade and occupied a position not far from Trotsky's, which he had bitterly attacked just months before. Zinoviev and Kamenev, who had strongly supported a conciliatory policy toward peasants in 1924, attacked Stalin and Bukharin for that very thing in 1925–27. Trotsky, the ultimate disciplinarian of the Civil War, who had argued that party members should unquestioningly go where they were sent, had suddenly become a champion of inner-party democracy by 1923. Zinoviev, who had loudly and brashly attacked Trotsky's ideas on party life and the economy, was by 1925 saying that Trotsky was right.

To a great extent, therefore, the struggle of the party titans in the 1920s was a struggle of personalities, each of whom deployed personal political machines and defended or criticized policies as needed.[13] Most mid- and lower-level party members tended to attach themselves permanently to one or another of the top leaders, following him through his ideological and policy twists and turns. There were more or less consistent personal loyalties: regardless of the current ideological position of one of the top leaders, party members identified themselves as "Trotskyists," "Stalinists," or "Zinovievists." Loyalty and patronage were major parts of this struggle. Everything was personal. Motivations for attaching oneself to a major leader varied. It is easy to imagine personal ambition leading one to become one of the "-ists" in the expectation that one's career would rise with that of the patron. But it would also not be surprising to find midlevel party officials making calculations according to their specific work interests.

Yezhov, like his fellow regional party secretaries, owed his appointment to the Central Committee secretarial apparatus that Stalin dominated. Even though they probably had never met him, party secretaries in the provinces surely thought of him as the "boss" of the party chain of command of which they were part. His leadership of the apparatus that gave them their jobs was a crucial element in their loyalty to him. But bosses do not always automatically command the support and loyalty of their subordinates. Explaining their support of him purely as loyalty to a patron does not give us the whole picture. If Stalin had lost and Trotsky or Zinoviev had won, secretaries like Yezhov could easily have cut a deal with a new boss. Given the crying shortage of administrative talent and the reluctance of many Bolsheviks to take provincial posts, regional secretaries need not have feared wholesale purging or replacement in case of a Stalin defeat. They were valuable people with cards to play. To fully explain their support for Stalin, we need to look further into the precise situation in which these secretaries found themselves and the ways in which they understood their individual and corporate interests. To put the question another way, why was Stalin more appealing to them than Trotsky, Zinoviev, or any of the oppositionists?

First, many of the criticisms raised by the oppositionist challengers had little relevance to the day-to-day work and concerns of party workers in the provinces. Trotsky's and Zinoviev's critiques of Stalin's policy on the Chinese and German revolutions, their hairsplitting about theories of permanent revolution or "primitive socialist accumulation"—such issues seemed wholly irrelevant to them. Indeed, to those like Yezhov trying to govern with few loyal party supporters in a sea of hostile social and religious forces, it must have seemed bizarre, even annoying, to make so much of events in far-off places when matters were so dire right here at home, where violent bandits could still ride down on Soviet settlements and ambush party members. The oppositionists' concerns must have made Stalin's critics seem hopelessly out of touch.

Second, for those party workers who followed the twists and turns of the struggle for power in Moscow, it was easy to see the oppositionist leaders as opportunists and hypocrites on the question of party discipline. In their times, each of the oppositionist movements, from the Democratic Centralists to the Workers' Opposition to the Trotskyists to the Zinoviev-Kamenev group, had called for centralization and strict punitive personnel measures against the others for violating party discipline. Many remembered that it had been the oppositionist Democratic Centralists who had called for the creation of a powerful CC apparatus with a strong secretary at the helm. Now, though, when they had gone over to opposition, they had become champions of leniency, a soft interpretation of party discipline, the right to criticize, and the right to be immune from punitive "organizational measures" in the area of personnel. Because he always found himself in the majority, Stalin at least had a consistent record on party discipline.

Third, party workers trying to hold their committees together in the face of chronic and perennial local personal spats and conflicts placed a premium on unity and pulling together to do the job. The oppositionist groups had been the ones to challenge the status quo by launching their various critiques of the Stalinist majority. Right or wrong, they were dissidents and were rocking the boat. The principled critiques by local oppositionists not only were implicit challenges to the unity and

patronage control shaped by the local secretary but were also disruptive sallies that weakened the local party effort by threatening to split it. Whatever the merits of the oppositionist critiques, anything that endangered the unity of local party cells was unwelcome to those in charge.

Too many of them remembered how the unpleasant personal squabbles (*skloki*) of the early 1920s had paralyzed the party in the provinces, and the oppositionists' challenge looked like just another divisive squabble. It was easy to think of them as squabblers (*sklokisty*). As we have seen, Yezhov had become involved in these personal battles and groupings, which in the 1920s were chronic in the party system. Sometimes these personal factional fights could paralyze the entire party organization. We can easily imagine that young party officials like Yezhov saw the challenge of the opposition in these terms, as a personalized *sklok*. Absent regular institutions and rules, personal links were not just adjuncts of ideology or bureaucracy, they were the very essence, the "sinews" of the system.[14]

The most general and decisive reason for the party secretaries' support for Stalin had to do with their basic aversion to risk. Many of them, Nikolai Yezhov included, found themselves in precarious positions. Party saturation in many provinces—the numerical strength of party membership—was dangerously low, and while the party's representatives could count on the backing of the police and army if necessary, they still felt themselves isolated from much of the population, which was not proletarian, and often not Russian. They never felt ultimately secure. In this besieged situation, they were responsible for carrying out an ever-increasing list of tasks from education to political indoctrination to party recruitment to agricultural policy to tax collection. They were overwhelmed and understaffed and often thought of themselves operating in hostile territory. The last thing they needed or wanted was a new personalized factional spat that could weaken not only their personal leadership but party work in general.

From their insecure position, any challenge to the precarious status quo must have seemed risky and dangerous. The party had swollen

since the Civil War with the addition of millions of raw, untested members without revolutionary background and experience. Opening the party to full party democracy and control from below, as Trotsky argued in 1924, threatened not only their positions as local leaders but also the stability of the party and its traditions. What did the callow, ignorant youths and self-seeking newcomers who had recently joined the winning side know about the party or its goals? Cracking down on the economic liberties and position of peasants, who were the majority of the population—as Zinoviev and Kamenev suggested in 1925—seemed risky and even suicidal to the party's representatives in the countryside.

The party chain of command leading from them up to Stalin's CC secretarial apparatus was their lifeline. Without it, they would drown in a sea of local frictions, hostile social groups, and anti-Bolshevik sentiments based on everything from religion to nationality. The lifeline seemed thin and shaky, often held together by a single telegraph or telephone line over great distances. In the 1920s these local leaders were not interested in autonomy from Moscow or fearful of encroaching centralization. Quite the contrary: the line to Moscow was the source of support, reinforcements, resources, and, if necessary, defense. As we saw in Yezhov's handling of matters in Akmolinsk, local party committees wanted people sent to them from Moscow, and a variety of sources shows that before, during, and after the struggles with the opposition, they were desperate for Moscow's help and guidance on matters ranging from propaganda to personnel. Anything that shook things up jeopardized that lifeline. Busy as they were trying to implement Soviet policies (and sometimes just to keep their party committees together), they had no interest in shakeups, challenges, or disruptions. They were just too risky, and Stalin seemed the stable choice. His ability to portray himself as the injured party and to wail about the precarious nature of the Bolsheviks in general in the face of hostile encirclement and internal opposition just served to reinforce the risk aversion that provincial party leaders felt anyway. These party leaders were not simply Stalin's stooges. They had their own problems and interests, and even if Stalin had not been the one to give them their jobs, they probably would have

supported him or anyone else who promised a stable party structure. And as good (or at least willing) provincial administrators at a time when such people were hard to find, their support was crucial. They were not merely clients or stooges of this or that Moscow grandee.

Stalin was an attractive leader for many other reasons. Unlike the other top leaders, he was not an intellectual or theoretician. He spoke a simple and unpretentious language suited to a party increasingly made up of workers and peasants. His style contrasted sharply with that of his Politburo comrades, whose complicated theories and pretentious demeanor won them few friends among the plebeian rank and file. He also had an uncanny way of projecting what appeared to be moderate solutions to complicated problems. Unlike his colleagues who seemed shrill in their warnings of fatal crises, Stalin frequently put himself forward as the calm man of the golden mean, with moderate, compromise solutions.

Nikolai Yezhov had first attended a party congress, the 14th, in December 1925 as a nonvoting provincial delegate from Kirgizia. Although he did not speak there and we have no record of his impressions, we can imagine that as a hardworking provincial party worker beset with problems including local hostility, he was horrified at what he saw and heard. At the 14th Congress, Zinoviev and Kamenev led a unified oppositionist Leningrad delegation in an attack on Stalin and his leadership. Zinoviev broke with the traditional united Politburo report and gave what he called a coreport that was sharply critical of Stalin's Politburo majority.

His attack was seconded by several well-known members of a Leningrad delegation that, while calling for party democracy, had rigged elections there to ensure that only oppositionists represented the city. A series of rather self-righteous (and, given identical practices against the opposition in the rest of the country, hypocritical) reports produced by the CC documented Zinoviev's Leningrad machine's crude use of patronage and electoral "repression" of pro-Moscow candidates. Antiopposition petitions were ignored, meetings were broken up, voting was faked.[15]

Other speakers at the Congress pointed out that the oppositionists had been all for discipline when they were in the majority and now suddenly were for open criticism.[16] Not even pleading from Lenin's widow, Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, for sympathy toward the Leningraders could overcome the indignation felt by most delegates at what they regarded as Zinoviev's attempt to divide and split the party for reasons of personal ambition. The delegates laughed at her and at Kamenev's plea not to apply personnel sanctions against those who used their right to voice their opinions at party congresses.

We can safely assume that Yezhov was among the party workers who hooted and jeered Kamenev's call to replace the CC leadership and Zinoviev's suggestion to abandon the 1921 ban on factions. Party secretaries like Yezhov wanted a stable central leadership prepared to support local party committees and protect them from disruption and, if need be, their own populations. Oppositionist critiques and now their open sally against the party, which party organizers like Yezhov must have regarded as unseemly and out of line, were simply too risky.

There is no doubt that Stalin used his control over personnel to maintain his position and to weaken his critics. But so did Zinoviev, Trotsky, and all the other top competitors. Patronage was not just a feature of the system, it was the system itself. Stalin's actions against his rivals in the 1920s were nothing like the lethal force he would apply in the 1930s and tended to be measured and incremental. Throughout most of the decade, such "organizational measures" were aimed not so much at firing or demoting oppositionists but at breaking up concentrations of them. As we have seen, when a struggle between two factions (whether based on personal cliques or on political argument) paralyzed a party committee, the CC stepped in and either sent an emissary or removed one or both factions. The same techniques were used to break up oppositional concentrations in party committees, whose dissident members were dispersed to new positions. Celebrated cases in the Urals and Ukraine at the beginning of the 1920s followed this pattern, as party committees that had gone wholly over to the opposition had their members dispersed to new positions. This was the case following the

14th Congress, when Zinoviev's dissident Leningraders were "exiled" from the city to new (but not necessarily lower-ranking) positions elsewhere.

When this happened, Stalin and his supporters always had plausible justifications that sounded more practical than political. How could the party tolerate oppositionists rigging elections in Ukraine in 1920 to return a favorable majority?[17] How, Molotov had asked in 1922, could the CC tolerate oppositionist control in Samara, where party members who disagreed with the local oppositionist leadership were put in jail?[18] Local party activists desperately needed reliable personnel and did not particularly want to carry on ideological debates with local dissidents. They wanted to maintain local order and protect their own power bases, and Moscow's interventions served their interests. It was indeed sometimes the case that local party factions "chased out" ideological dissidents, demanding their recall to Moscow.[19] The fact that oppositionists also used patronage power and had themselves earlier demanded stern central measures against local party troublemakers did not enhance their case or lend sympathy to their complaints. And because of the shortage of talented and hardworking party administrators (remember Yezhov's multiple job offers in 1923), transferred oppositionists were usually offered equivalent positions elsewhere; the disruption of their circles did not seem excessively punitive.[20] In fact, the use of central personnel measures against troublemakers and dissidents enjoyed broad support in the party and was a matter of group consensus as much as it was Stalin's personal tactic. Everyone understood how the system of personalized politics worked.

Recalcitrant or determined oppositionists received harsher treatment. Some were expelled from the party for a time, but upon their statements of adherence to party policy they were readmitted: by the dawn of the 1930s virtually all leading and even minor oppositionists of the 1920s were in the party working in responsible positions. Particularly "dangerous" oppositionists, most of them Trotskyists, who were regarded as having broken state laws (over and above party rules) were imprisoned. This category of intransigent oppositionists included those

who tried to organize secret political cells or illegal underground newspapers, or those who tried to lobby in the military.

It is perhaps surprising at first glance that in the files of Orgraspred there are almost no documents pertaining to punitive personnel appointments of opposition members. In the voluminous records relating to personnel, there is no paper trail indicating that oppositional membership was used as a criterion for appointment, nonappointment, or removal. On the other hand, responsible workers in Orgraspred did their best to keep track of oppositional backgrounds as part of their growing card files, and it is highly probable that when Orgraspred representatives presented personnel recommendations to the Orgburo or Secretariat, they orally mentioned such facts in a candidate's background.[21] At the very least, then, Orgraspred was keeping track of oppositional membership, and it is hard to imagine that this information did not influence appointments.

In any case, high politics and struggles between Stalin and his opponents were not the major determinant of the party's increasingly centralized personnel system in the 1920s. Much of the situation was dictated by geography, supply and demand of party workers, and the political situation. After 1917 the Bolshevik Party had to adapt itself from making revolution to governing a huge territory in which the previous administration either had fled, had been destroyed by civil war, or was hostile to its new Communist masters. Although the party had grown tremendously during the Revolution and Civil War (from about twenty-four thousand members at the beginning of 1917 to more than seven hundred thousand in 1921, when the Civil War ended), many of the recruits were undependable and uncommitted types who had simply joined the winning side. Even counting everybody in the party, moreover, the total was a drop in the bucket of the vast Soviet population. The peasant bulk of that population had won its centuries-long battle for the land and could be counted on to take a dim view of any nationalization schemes the socialist Bolsheviks might propose. Similarly, the mass of urban and rural traders were not likely allies.

The Bolsheviks, despite their enforced monopoly on the press, political organizing, and violence, found themselves a small minority floating in a hostile sea of peasants. As late at 1927, when Yezhov joined the CC apparatus, only one-half of one percent of the rural population were Communists. The party itself, in terms of its composition, was a blunt instrument, an unwieldy mass. The hundreds of thousands who had joined since 1917 did not share the prerevolutionary underground tradition of commitment, discipline, and singleness of purpose. They frequently ignored the Central Committee's orders. By mid-1924 only 25 percent of secretaries of district party committees (*ukom*) had been in the party before 1917; the figure for those running provinces (*gubkom* presidiums) was only 49 percent.[22] One in forty party members was illiterate, and one in four had fewer than four years of schooling. Some new party members had to ask what the Politburo was.[23]

Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks brought some assets to their attempts to build a working administration. As was the case with other European political parties of the day, policy had always been made in the center and promulgated through a network of committees. This shared party culture of political centralization would help to build a working administration, as would the Leninist tradition of "democratic centralism," in which central party decisions were obligatory and binding on all members. Although often observed only in the breach during 1917 and the Civil War, party discipline (if enforced) could be a powerful lever in creating a network of obedient administrators.

Lenin had laid the groundwork for such a network and had surrounded himself with talented and loyal lieutenants. Yet the personalized Leninist nature of the party—it was scarcely possible to imagine the party without him or to separate "Bolshevism" from "Leninism"—also had a negative side. When the founder and unchallenged leader died in early 1924, it was not clear what would follow his long-standing one-man leadership. Moreover, these same talented lieutenants were themselves ambitious men, guaranteeing a messy and disruptive succession struggle.

Throughout the 1920s it is fair to say that the party had only a prim-

itive organizational structure. A Central Committee, dominated by Lenin and his closest associates, made policy and did its best to direct the Revolution and Civil War. In principle, CC orders were carried out by the network of territorial party committees, but as we have seen with Yezhov in Mari and Kirgizia, the system hardly worked as a well-oiled machine, and the Central Committee had a difficult time ensuring fulfillment of its decisions, especially in faraway locales. Until his death in 1919, Yakov Sverdlov acted as informal party secretary, making personnel assignments and allocations based on his personal connections and knowledge of a vast number of the party faithful. He worked largely according to personal contacts, sometimes receiving and assigning twenty-five party workers per day. As V. V. Ossinsky told the 8th Party Congress, "Sverdlov kept in his head information on all party workers in Russia and where to find them. At any moment he could tell you where each one was, and he could move them around. Now he is dead and nobody knows where any of the party workers are."[24]

After the death of the irreplaceable Sverdlov, everyone in the central party leadership agreed on the need for systemization of the party's personnel system. First, it was necessary to build and maintain communication links with the far-flung party organizations, such efforts being called the "organizational" (*organizatsionnaia*) or "informational" (*informatsionnaia*) task. This was to be done by insisting that local party committees regularly send reports of their decisions to the Central Committee and by dispatching emissaries (*instruktory*) to the committees to relay central decisions and verify fulfillment of them. Second, it was necessary to rationally and intelligently assign party cadres to places where they were needed according to their talents, experience, and reliability. Local party leaders, desperately short of help, were vitally interested in augmenting this "assignment" (*raspredelitel'naia*) task. Third, in order to distribute personnel rationally, the Central Committee had to gather information about who was in the party and create personnel files; this was the "registration" (*uchetnaia*) function.

In order to achieve "the systematic reallocation of party workers for . . . most productive use," the 1919 party congress created three sub-

committees of the Central Committee.[25] The newly created 1919 Politburo (five members and three candidate members) was to decide the larger strategic and political issues; an Orgburo (eleven members) was to oversee personnel tasks and related functions; and a Secretariat (two members) was to supervise the Central Committee's growing administrative and clerical apparatus (eighty workers in 1919).

That apparatus consisted of numerous departments charged with propaganda, the press, accounting, statistics, work among women, and, most important, personnel. Originally, personnel was handled by newly created Organizational (*Orgotdel*) and Registration-Assignment (*Uchraspred*) departments, with subdepartments for other functions with descriptive abbreviations and acronyms, such as *Orginstrukt*. These departments worked closely together on the registration, communication, and assignment tasks, and in 1926 they would be merged into a single *Orgraspred* department of the CC Secretariat.[26] Despite the structural changes initiated in 1919 and the general agreement in all political quarters of the party that systemization, professionalization, and obedience were needed, the personnel assignment capabilities of the Central Committee remained weak and disorganized for years. Understaffed and overwhelmed by its tasks, the assignment system was in chaos, relying on personal connections, accidentally spotting talent, and mass mobilizations rather than on any system.

In the first years, during the Civil War, it was necessary to draft ("mobilize") masses of party workers for large tasks. Every year until 1923, Uchraspred mobilized between twenty thousand and forty thousand Communists for various assignments. (As we have seen, Yezhov was mobilized in 1919 under such conditions.) Obviously there was no opportunity to know the characteristics of these party workers; the CC simply ordered local committees to provide party members by quota, and there was little time to attend to qualifications or experience. From 1919 through 1922, CC Secretaries N. Krestinsky and V. Molotov regularly lamented the wild "atmosphere" in the Secretariat and complained that the personnel allocation system worked on "impulse" and "shock work" more than on any system.[27]

Even after the end of the Civil War, the Secretariat and its personnel apparatus were overwhelmed by the quantity of work. A flood of paperwork and correspondence—120,000 letters and reports and 22,500 assignments in 1922 alone—simply choked the CC bureaucracy. Up to sixty party comrades per day showed up at Uchraspred offices looking for assignments; they were quickly dispatched without much ado, to whichever party committee needed someone the most.[28] Boris Bazhanov, who worked in the Orgburo apparatus in these years, remembers that for purposes of secrecy the staff of the Secretariat and the Orgburo were kept small, making it virtually impossible to deal with the "ocean of paperwork" that flooded in. Workers in the apparatus routinely worked twelve to fourteen hours per day, seven days a week. A request from the Politburo or Orgburo for some paper would produce many hours of frantic chaos through the offices as workers threw piles of papers from one place to another.[29] It was not until the mid-1920s that a filing system (***kartotek***) was introduced, a move celebrated at the end of 1925 when D. Kursky proudly announced that the Politburo and the Orgburo could now locate and review the decisions they had already made.[30]

A smoothly functioning personnel allocation system was impossible without some kind of record-keeping system for party members. Yet despite constant attempts to compile such a system, the task was never completed satisfactorily in the 1920s. A succession of CC secretaries and Uchraspred chiefs (Zinoviev, Krestinsky, Molotov, Kaganovich, and others) complained constantly about the failure of local organizations to provide information on their members, and about the inability of their own departments to build a file system. V. P. Nogin, a CC member who headed the Accounting Department, told the 11th Congress in March 1922 that despite the "endless questionnaires" the CC had solicited, he had looked into his own personnel file in Uchraspred and found only a letter from someone looking for him![31] Throughout the decade there was a constant stream of questionnaires, surveys, party censuses, and other campaigns to build a base of information on party members. The need to restart these campaigns every couple of years speaks for itself.

At various points in the early 1920s, the Central Committee apparatus produced for internal use reference lists of the party leadership groups in the provinces. Characteristically, at the end of 1923 the official list showed that the identities of comrades heading the government (chairman of the executive committee of the soviet) were unknown in Astrakhan, Yekaterinburg, Irkutsk, Kharbin, and Grozny. Identities of trade union chiefs, upon whom the Bolsheviks relied for mass support, were unknown in Briansk, Dagestan, Odessa, and Kharbin. The Communists running agitation and propaganda in Ivanovo, Tula, Tver, the Urals, Siberia, and Yekaterinoslav were a mystery to Moscow. The Moscow personnel department's own personnel assignment contacts (chiefs of organizational departments in party committees) were unknown in Vladimir and Novgorod.

Only by the end of the 1920s did Orgraspred even manage the beginnings of a personnel filing system, and even as late as 1935 Yezhov (by then the head of the CC personnel apparatus) complained that "in the apparat of the Central Committee we are presently beginning only now to find out the composition of the leading party workers in the regions and districts."[32] One can imagine the primitive nature of central records a decade earlier.

In an effort to surmount these disorders and difficulties, the party worked hard in the 1920s to regularize and systematize personnel selection. Repeated drives for biographical information laid the foundation for a cadres file, first in Uchraspred, then in Orgraspred. Mass mobilizations of party cadres gradually gave way to individual assignments, although as late as 1922 the party was mobilizing more than ten thousand cadres per year without individual vetting.[33] To cope with the work, as we have seen, filing and reference systems were introduced in the mid-twenties. Moreover, even though the staff of the Secretariat expanded from 80 in 1919 to 767 at the end of 1925, the job turnover rate in the Secretariat staff itself was nearly 100 percent per year![34]

Further rationalization came in June 1923 with the establishment of the "nomenklatura" system. The nomenklatura of a given institution was a list of the positions that institution had the right to confirm. In

the 1923 system, of about five thousand positions to be confirmed by the Politburo, thirty-five hundred (Nomenklatura no. 1) in the party and state could be proposed and confirmed only by the Politburo, the Orgburo, or the Secretariat. An additional list of fifteen hundred jobs (Nomenklatura no. 2) could be filled by other bodies but were subject to confirmation and approval by these top three committees. The formation of the nomenklatura system was a major step in the creation of a privileged elite, identified by their presence on these CC lists, as well as an arrogation of political power by the Stalin-controlled Politburo, Orgburo, and Secretariat in order to build up a cadre of clients to defeat the opposition.

At the same time, though, the sources show that the nomenklatura system was really intended as a way to systematize existing ad hoc practice and even to decrease the appointment burden on the Central Committee apparatus. Months before its establishment, in March 1922, V. P. Nogin told a party congress that the Orgburo and the Secretariat were facing around one hundred issues per day. CC Secretary Molotov, who was becoming Stalin's right-hand man, complained that the apparatus—Stalin's apparatus—was burdened by far too many personnel appointments. The 22,500 personnel proposals passing through the apparatus in the previous year and the average sixty walk-in applicants per day were far too many to be handled properly. Molotov said that high-level confirmation of most of them was "unnecessary" and proposed sharply reducing the CC's appointment responsibilities to the leading responsible workers.[35] As we have seen, the original nomenklatura lists reserved for CC appointment or approval amounted to about 5,000 positions. This corresponded with existing practice: in the year before establishing the system, the CC had vetted 5,167 posts, and in the previous year 4,738.[36] The new nomenklatura system thus codified existing practice and scale for appointment of responsible workers.

Yet the goal was to reduce it. This may seem strange in light of our belief that Stalin sought to expand his power, but in 1926, a revision of the CC nomenklatura reduced the number of posts requiring direct CC appointment from 3,500 to 1,870 (with an additional 1,590 to be ap-

proved by commissions). Even so, the burden remained large, and it was to take several years to achieve the reductions Molotov wanted. At the end of 1926, 87.5 percent of Orgraspred's appointments were still outside the prescribed nomenklatura, although 1927 would bring the desired significant reductions.[37] Certainly, the creation of the appointive nomenklatura was the death knell to the short-lived revolutionary practice of electing local party leaders.[38] But since it merely codified existing practice with a view toward reducing the number of central personnel assignments, it was more an efficiency measure than an earthshaking political change.

The central nomenklatura system was designed to retain authority over the very top positions in the country ("the basic commanding heights," as Kursky put it) while reducing the workload of the secretarial apparatus.[39] Thus in 1929 in an average province, the posts requiring CC appointment or approval included the top party officials, chairman of the cooperative board, the top newspaper editors and trade union officials, and the provincial chiefs of the secret police, the procuracy, the courts, and higher educational institutions: eighty-eight in all.[40] All remaining mid- and lower-level positions were appointed by local officials without confirmation by the Central Committee.

Even with increased efficiencies of the 1920s, the jurisdictional lines between and among the Politburo, the Orgburo, and the Secretariat remained deliberately vague. Even a quick survey of the protocols of meetings of these three bodies shows the overlap in questions decided by the various bodies. Many positions were listed on several different central and/or local nomenklatura lists. Such items as the dates of upcoming party congresses, publication of new journals, communications and articles from oppositionists, and appointments at all levels could find their way to the agendas of any of the three top bodies.[41] Although this made for a certain confusion, the fuzzy jurisdictions were intentional. Twice Lenin himself had responded to criticism on this score by claiming that flexibility at the top was important.[42]

Lenin's idea of institutional flexibility at the top helps capture the way the system really worked. The interlocking three top bodies con-

sisted of the top party notables, and their personal authority was more important than the multiple seats they held. By 1925 all five CC secretaries were also Orgburo members, and three of them were also on the Politburo. Three Orgburo members were also on the Secretariat and three on the Politburo. Protocols of meetings of the Orgburo and the Secretariat are kept in the same archives, and standard practice was that once or twice a week one or the other body met to do the same work. If several members were available, it was called an Orgburo meeting. If only two—or even a single—member could attend, it was written up as a meeting of the Secretariat; the agenda was the same. Although in theory the Secretariat was the most junior of the three bodies, CC spokesmen noted that the personal authority of a CC secretary chairing a Secretariat meeting meant that the body could tackle important questions.[43] Despite attempts to systematize and rationalize personnel appointment, this was a system of powerful persons acting as referees and confirming judges, not one of fixed and rule-bound institutions.

Personnel appointments, usually generated by staff, were therefore most often only casually vetted by one or more of the top notables, depending first on who was available to do it, and second on the importance of the post. As we have seen, a meeting of one of the top three bodies could carry hundreds of agenda items, and time permitted discussion of no more than ten to twenty of them. This meant that dozens, even hundreds of agenda items were approved by polling the members (*oprosom*) before or after the meeting. Already by 1923, 90–95 percent of the personnel questions coming before the Orgburo/Secretariat were quickly settled based on staff (*Uchraspred* or *Orgotdel*) proposals. The structure at the top of the party therefore, was really a kind of personal oligarchy. The quantity of work involved in assigning personnel far outweighed the ability of top leaders to cope with it. Nearly all of it was delegated to the CC staff.

The oligarchs at the top of the party, Stalinist and oppositionist alike, were veterans of the prerevolutionary underground and were Lenin's comrades in arms. They felt themselves awash in the sea of new party recruits and as a generational cohort must have felt matters slipping

from their control. They had to delegate much decision making to staff but were unwilling to completely relinquish their elite supervision, so they had to settle for a system of vetting and approving prepared decisions. The sense of oligarchy and elite supervision is demonstrated by these "flexible" arrangements at the top: any of the three top bodies could ratify personnel appointments, and even if only a single member of their number was available to do it, it was done as a meeting of the Secretariat.[44] According to party rules, decisions of the Secretariat could be appealed to the Orgburo, and the latter's decisions could be appealed to the Politburo. But the flexible personalized oligarchy created by Lenin and his generation of party leaders meant in practice that this hardly ever happened. Powerful persons worked it out informally.[45]

Most of the Central Committee's work related to personnel, and most personnel decisions originated in Orgraspred proposals. A group of seven "assignment commissions" in Orgraspred worked out proposed appointments in consultation with the party organizations concerned.[46] By 1925 Orgraspred was working out the agendas and work plans for the Orgburo. Conferences of Orgraspred assistants (*pomoshniki*) worked out the important appointments for the Nomenklatura no. 1 ahead of time for the Politburo, the Orgburo, and the Secretariat. When provincial party secretaries arrived in Moscow to deliver reports to the Orgburo, they gave them first to Orgraspred, where they were critiqued and edited.[47]

Orgraspred was "enormously powerful."[48] It was responsible for making rational personnel assignments not only to party committees but to major economic and industrial institutions. It therefore became a kind of research think tank, holding conferences on such issues as agricultural techniques, various kinds of metal production, rural cooperatives, and the like. Responsible officials in Orgraspred developed specialties. For example, in Orgraspred's 1928 roster of assignments, Deputy Chief Zh. I. Meerzon was responsible for following the work of local party organizations, monitoring "self-criticism" in party committees, investigating questions of party growth and nationality, and organizing mass work among new party members. Deputy Chief

N. Zimin had authority over cadre assignments for the Commissariats of Foreign Affairs and Education and for the press, as well as working out the Orgburo's appointments of workers in science. Young assistant G. M. Malenkov oversaw the Stalingrad party organization, questions of labor discipline, and studies of a proposed seven-hour working day. Additionally, each of about twenty-five instruktory was responsible for a group of provinces, as well as other specialties.[49]

As the diversity and number of these duties suggest, Orgraspred was always busy studying a wide variety of questions and was seriously understaffed and overworked. Responsible workers of Orgraspred like Meerzom, Zimin, Malenkov, and others were responsible for two to six broad areas of personnel assignment each. Moreover, the more than five thousand possible posts that Orgraspred was responsible for—dozens or even hundreds per meeting of the Orgburo/Secretariat—were handled by a fairly small staff of workers. In the late 1920s Orgraspred's total staff roster was in the seventies, with twenty to thirty of these classified as "technical": typists, receptionists, archivists, and so forth. That left only forty or fifty responsible officials (fifty-three in 1928). Of these, several were involved in other organizational areas (*orgrabota*, or contact and communications with party committees, for example), leaving in 1928 only forty-one assignment (*raspredelrabota*) officials to make the actual personnel recommendations. Five of these positions were unfilled in 1928.[50] Assuming something like a normal distribution of personnel slots across the group, each official would therefore have been responsible for expertise on a bit more than 140 different cadre positions.

Within this group of responsible workers, the work environment seems to have been fairly egalitarian. The chief (*zaveduyushchii*) of Orgraspred (Ivan Moskvin), his nine deputy chiefs, and the twenty-two responsible instructors each made the same salary (225 rubles per month); the nine assistant chiefs for personnel assignments made 200–210 rubles. There seems to have been little difference among their specializations or assignments (*osnovnaia rabota*, or basic work) in terms of importance, regardless of their ranks.[51]

Despite the central importance of their jobs, Orgraspred's responsible workers did not themselves hold high party rank. Only the chief, Moskvin, was a member of the Central Committee, and there were periods in the 1920s and 1930s when Orgraspred chiefs did not hold CC rank. Of the forty or so responsible officials under him, only a handful—sometimes not even including his deputies—received invitations as nonvoting delegates to party congresses. Thus most of the party workers making the most important personnel choices were not visible or important leaders in their own right.

Nevertheless, Orgraspred's importance in the Stalinist system was manifested in at least two other ways. As we have seen, the department made most of the decisions on personnel appointment. Certainly the handful of most senior appointments (Central Committee members, territorial party first secretaries, ministers, and senior police officials) were carefully considered in the Politburo, with or without staff input. But the vast majority of the thousands of important nomenklatura and other appointments originated in staff choices. Stalin and the other elite party oligarchs of his generation "controlled" these appointments only through a loose Orgburo/Secretariat supervision that resembled rubber-stamping most of the time.

Personnel vacancies arose in a variety of ways. Party committees and state institutions requested additional staffing or prompt filling of vacancies. (Often they proposed particular candidates to Orgraspred.) Newly created organizations needed entire complements of workers. Moreover, individuals unhappy with their current assignments pleaded that they were unable to get along with their current chiefs or subordinates and requested reassignment. With the exception of the very top positions, these requests came first to Orgraspred, which studied the matter and made a recommendation to the Secretariat or Orgburo for its approval (which was nearly always forthcoming).

The simplest matters were those that involved no objections from the parties involved, all of whom were routinely consulted. If the proposed appointee's current boss had no objections, if his or her prospective chief accepted him, and if the appointee him- or herself raised no

serious objections (which would have been considered bad form in party custom), the matter seemed straightforward and moved quickly ahead. After a report from Orgraspred staff, the Secretariat or the Orgburo would "approve" (*utverdit'* or *udovletvorit'*) or note simply that it had no objections (*ne vozrazhat'*) to Orgraspred's proposed appointment. Orgraspred staff had prepared a draft Secretariat or Orgburo resolution in advance for the expected brisk confirmation and signature. Thus a typical Orgraspred recommendation read, "To the Secretariat (by polling): Comrade Vitolin, member of the party since 1918, worker, his past basic work being in the organs of the police, and recently for a short time in leading soviet work. Orgraspred CC has no objections to his candidacy, and asks confirmation of Comrade Vitolin as chief of the Mari regional department of the GPU. The Mari regional party committee and Comrade Vitolin have agreed."[52]

More complicated appointments required personal adjudication by the senior oligarchs present. Sometimes organizations resisted proposals to take valuable workers from them and reassign them elsewhere; they would then ask the Secretariat or the Orgburo for a reconsideration (*peresmotr*), or they would make a formal complaint (*protest*) to try to block the transfer. Other appointments were complicated by jurisdictional and turf issues. For example, a territorial party committee might insist on its right to approve directors appointed to factories in its province even though such placements came under the purview of the state economic agency that governed the branch of production. In yet other cases, personal requests for transfer from individuals had to be discussed and vetted by the senior Orgburo or Secretariat members, especially if the person involved was of high rank and prominence.

These complicated appointments could generate different responses from the senior leaders of the Orgburo or the Secretariat, who could overrule any objections and force appointments by "ordering" them (*poruchit'*) or, more politely, "suggesting" them (*predlozhit'*)—and given Bolshevik traditions of party discipline, such a suggestion was tantamount to an order. Alternatively, they could refuse or "decline" an appointment (*otklonit'*). If the matter required discussion or confirma-

tion by a higher or broader collection of party oligarchs, it could be tabled (*otlozhit'*) or referred upward to the Politburo (*vnesti na utverzhdenie Politburo*).[53] Whatever the final decision, however, the first step was nearly always an Orgraspred recommendation or presentation of the facts of the case.

As we shall see, Yezhov soon moved from provincial party work to Moscow. His work in Kirgizia as party secretary for cadre assignments already identified him as a personnel specialist, and his future appointment as an Orgraspred assistant in 1927 was to put him at the center of party activities in Moscow. Orgraspred was also an important part of the Stalin system because it was an incubator for future top leaders. This may or may not have been intentional, but a remarkable number of future Stalinist leaders had served time in the department or in related personnel administrations. The core of the Stalinist Politburo until 1957 all came up through the assignment apparatus: L. Kaganovich (Uchraspred chief until 1926), V. Molotov (Orgburo chairman in the 1920s), G. Malenkov (Orgraspred instructor in the 1920s). A scan of Orgraspred rosters shows other top 1930s party leaders with Orgraspred experience in the 1920s. Among future Orgraspred deputy chiefs and instructors we find Yezhov (NKVD chief); two of his NKVD assistants, Roshal' and Litvin; V. Mezhlauk (head of the Supreme Council of National Economy and Commissariat of Heavy Industry); and B. Sheboldaev, L. Petrosian, and I. Vareikis (first party secretaries of important provinces), as well as future members of the Party Control Commission Frenkl' and Meerzon.[54] Yezhov was headed for the center of things.

FIVE

Sorting Out the Comrades

Comrades who studied with [Yezhov] tell of his work on a report on Marx's theory or prices. The report gave a profound and erudite exposition of the subject.

A. FADEEV

I know of no more ideal administrator than Nikolai Yezhov. . . . Yezhov never gives up.

IVAN MOSKVIN

Despite his earnest efficiency and apparent commitment to party work in the provinces, it is easy to imagine that Nikolai and Antonina did not relish staying in Central Asia for the rest of their lives. Bolshevik discipline required that party cadres go wherever they were sent without question. Everyone recognized that provincial assignments were considered a sort of exile from the Moscow center, and even speakers at party congresses noted this rather un-Bolshevik but common belief that a post in Moscow was good, while a provincial assignment was some kind of punishment.[1] In the summer of 1923, only a few months after

their arrival, Antonina left for study in Moscow at the prestigious Timriazev Agricultural Academy "at the assignment of the Semipalatinsk Gubkom."[2] In other words, she was "assigned" by her husband, who headed the gubkom and its cadres administration. Thus began a career in agricultural research and organization for Antonina—she would spend the rest of her days as an agricultural specialist—but it is hard to avoid the suspicion that the couple were dispatching her to Moscow to make connections and to pave the way for a permanent move there. For his part, Nikolai was also trying to move to the capital by dropping a hint to Central Committee Secretary V. Molotov, whom he met at a Moscow party conference, about his desire to come to Moscow for political study courses.

In February 1924 Yezhov thought better of his personal pleading and "careerist" conversation with Molotov, and again demonstrated his adroit Bolshevik bearing in dealing with his superiors. He wrote to Molotov, ostensibly to report local party opinion on proposed British trade concessions in Central Asia. Yezhov was negative on them, reminding Molotov of the history of English colonization and the dangerous number of exiles in the area. But the letter began with a personal note from Yezhov, in which he affirmed the correct Bolshevik selflessness:

> Esteemed Comrade Molotov!
>
> On the one hand, I would not like to bother you with this letter. And it is also simply not proper to write of such, I would say, generally understood things as in the first part of this letter, but nevertheless I decided to write.
>
> 1. At the time of the last party conference, in conversation with you I took the liberty of raising the question of the possibility of my transfer and of my wish to do it, although I did not raise this question officially in the usual way, but in the course of normal conversation with a comrade, nevertheless I consider it necessary in the same [comradely] spirit to say the following:
>
> At the present moment, because of the general situation in the party, and chiefly because of Vladimir Ilich's [Lenin's] death, I think

there that cannot be any talk of personal wishes to transfer, even more to study. If one takes into account the general difficulty of the Central Committee in selecting [party] workers on the frontiers, then it seems to me that the question becomes crystal clear.[3] I would like to say, Comrade Molotov, that at the present time each party worker must remain at the weakly defended positions of the RKP(b) (and I completely consider Kirgizia to be a weakly defended position), and therefore I think that you will not pay any attention to our conversation. Now to business . . .[4]

On the surface, this text is a bit of silliness, resembling a note one would use to undo a perhaps inebriated faux pas one had committed with the boss at a social gathering. It asked for and instigated no action and seems trivial. But it is Yezhov's style and purpose that are interesting here, both in language and in the way Yezhov represented himself.

First, we can note that Yezhov was playing the Bolshevik system of personalized politics. He was asking for a transfer not "officially in the usual way" but rather by appealing to a powerful personality, thereby short-circuiting the institutional channels. He was trying to use a personal connection, to nurture a client-patron relationship with Molotov.

His language is that of a humble plebeian petitioner. His first paragraph follows a Russian petition tradition in which one first regrets disturbing the lofty recipient but says the writer simply could not do otherwise. The subordinate then makes another implicit apology by reminding the lord of a careless incident and begs him to forget the entire matter as a matter of principle and honor. The style is supplicating, respectful, flattering, and ancient. The long, run-on sentences with many reflexive constructions and few subject-agents was typical not only of what was to become the "Stalinist" bureaucratic style but also of the actual labored prose of uneducated Russian commoners.

On the other hand, behind the flowery language and almost chivalrous posturing, there is much in the letter that is Bolshevik, couched shrewdly in the service of personal tactics. Yezhov draws on a set of cultural tools to make a text meant to do political work. First, there is no

formal apology or direct personal flattery. Indeed, the entire tone of the letter is one of great events and duties that deny the personal and make individual wishes and apologies irrelevant. Bolsheviks don't linguistically abase themselves (much) with their bosses, and their democratic tradition makes explicit flattery inappropriate. They don't make personal requests for the same reason. The text itself is meant to demonstrate the fidelity of the writer to the common values of the organization—selflessness, discipline, sacrifice for the common good—and also serves as a statement of allegiance to these values. Packaged as self-abnegation, therefore, the letter really is meant to be self-recommendation.

Similarly, the underlying tactic behind the letter may have been precisely the opposite of what the text superficially says. Yezhov pretended to ask that a request be forgotten, when in fact the a real reason for writing the letter was the opposite: to remind Molotov of the incident, and of the request. Yezhov was not concerned that Molotov remembered the remark; he was really afraid that Molotov had forgotten it. The letter served to remind Molotov to keep Yezhov's request alive and current. Yezhov wanted out of Semipalatinsk. He picked a discursive strategy that affirmed his subordinate status, linguistically demonstrated his prime plebeian origins, swore allegiance to Bolshevik values and virtues, and reminded his superior of his existence and desire to be favored.

It did not work with Molotov, an experienced Bolshevik chief, who doubtless saw all this but who decided to pass the buck to another senior CC secretary whom he knew would do nothing. Molotov scribbled "for the Semipalatinsk gubkom file" and routed the letter to L. M. Kaganovich without taking any action. Molotov and Kaganovich took Yezhov at his self-effacing word and kept him in Semipalatinsk. But the failure of Yezhov's literary sally is not as important as what it shows us about power relations in the party and the uses of discursive strategies from the bottom of the hierarchy. It shows that Yezhov had learned how to play the Bolshevik bureaucratic game with some skill.

His bureaucratic talent failed to extricate him from Central Asia. On the contrary, he performed so well that his chiefs wanted him to stay exactly where he was. A performance report on him (*kharakteristika*) from

Kirgizia called attention to his initiative and good organizational abilities. He was able to orient himself quickly to local conditions, paying no attention to "trifles." Apparently he had learned from his "irascibility" and "blunders" in Mari, because now he was said to be tactful and self-critical. His self-taught, practical Marxism allowed him naturally to orient himself on political questions.[5]

Yezhov needed another route to Moscow because no highly placed patron was about to bring him to the capital. At the beginning of 1926, he found it. Shortly after the new year, the Kirgiz party committee again elected Yezhov to his leading position and voted to send him on temporary assignment to Moscow to complete a series of party courses in Marxist theory.[6] Such courses provided a means for Bolsheviks with little formal education to improve their qualifications, and performance reports on Yezhov had mentioned his lack of theoretical sophistication. Before anyone could change their minds, Yezhov presented himself at the Communist Academy in Moscow to begin study in early February. But nobody had cleared this with Moscow party leaders, and the Central Committee's Orgburo, at its meeting of 8 February 1926, resolved "to disapprove the request of Comrade Yezhov (from Central Asia) to register for Marxism courses at the Communist Academy."[7] Not easily discouraged, Yezhov remained in Moscow and persisted, and the following month he was granted admission.[8]

Party committees who dispatched a valuable worker to Moscow for study expected that the comrade would return after completion of the course and take up his former, or a better, position. After all, the sending party agency shouldered part of the expense of such education for its workers. Yezhov, however, had no intention of returning to the desert; he would never return to Kirgizia. He had finally made it to Moscow, and he and Antonina were together after nearly three years' separation. He arrived in Moscow not as the client of some powerful patron in the party who had cultivated him in the provinces and then brought him to the capital; rather, he was there despite the efforts of his superiors to keep him where he was. At this point in his life, he was nobody's creature, nobody's tool. Insofar as he had been "spotted" by

high-ranking party leaders, it was as a good party worker doing a good job in a difficult place. He had a "good reputation."[9] The leaders' reflex was to continue to take advantage of his solid work in the provinces.

But now he was in Moscow by dint of his own efforts. His time in party service on the periphery stood him in good stead. He had assimilated the cultural values of the Bolshevik bureaucracy (and indeed of any bureaucracy): obedience, discipline, use of the correct political language, uncomplaining hard work, clear and subtle report writing, and self-promotion covered by modesty. By now he also had an attractive party résumé. He was a former factory worker of proletarian stock and had been a worker-activist in the most famous revolutionary factory in Russia. He had been a Bolshevik before the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, a leader of Red Guards, and a participant in the Civil War. He had completed two difficult assignments in areas troubled by one of the Bolsheviks' biggest fears: ethnic conflict. Just as important, as part of these assignments he had mastered what was becoming the key party specialty: personnel assignment.[10] Yezhov was therefore not an insignificant party member. Even though he was not one of the party's great orators or theoreticians and had never worked in Moscow, few in the party could boast his pedigree and accomplishments. One could predict a great career for him, and he intended to make it himself.

By the middle of March 1926, Yezhov had taken up his studies at the Communist Academy in Moscow.[11] We know little about the fifteen months he studied there, except that he seems to have emerged as a student leader of sorts. An adoring (but unpublished) biographical sketch written by the Socialist Realist writer A. Fadeev a decade later, when Yezhov had already become chief of the secret police (NKVD), claimed that he threw himself into his theoretical studies with the same enthusiasm as he had applied to his party work. "Comrades who studied with him tell of his work on a report on Marx's theory of prices. The report gave a profound and erudite exposition of the subject."[12]

Given what we know about Yezhov's background and about how and when such texts were produced, we may perhaps be excused for doubting Yezhov's erudition and theoretical profundity. Nevertheless,

other sources confirm that he did stand out among his fellow students. He seems to have been the representative of the student party group (*kurskom*) to the administration. In October 1926 he presented a report to Communist Academy leaders on the stipends students received. Even though most of them had families to support, no more than 40 percent of the students could receive the maximum party salary. Yezhov distinguished himself in another way. Of the 114 students currently enrolled, he had the largest family to support. He claimed eight dependents: a wife, a mother, and six nieces and nephews, five of whom were under age eighteen. Aside from Nikolai, with his monthly 225-ruble salary, and Antonina, with her 175, no other family member was earning income.[13]

Unfortunately, we know little about Yezhov's extracurricular activities and connections in the capital, but one way or another he had attracted the attention of the Central Committee's personnel administration. Ivan M. Moskvin had recently taken over direction of the Central Committee's organizational-assignment department (*Orgraspred*), the main party office for assignment and distribution of personnel.[14] Yezhov was a capable and highly regarded provincial party secretary. In July 1927 Moskvin hired him to be one of his nine assistants at Orgraspred. Even though senior party leaders preferred for Yezhov to stay in Kazakhstan, a request from so authoritative a Bolshevik as Moskvin could not be ignored, and the appointment was confirmed.[15]

At first it might seem that appointment as a personal assistant to one of many department heads in a Central Committee staff of more than 650 employees was not a great leap up the career ladder for Yezhov. After all, he had been practically running a huge province the previous year, and his new job entailed an 11 percent pay cut from his recent student stipend. Yet despite appearances, his new post placed Yezhov at the very heart of the Central Committee's activities and power, and therefore represented a huge rise in his status. In the mid-1920s, about 80 percent of the work of the Central Committee involved personnel assignment, and the vast majority of those assignments were handled by Orgraspred, with higher bodies (Politburo, Orgburo, and Secretariat)

unable to discuss more than 5 percent of personnel questions and only rubber-stamping or refereeing these staff recommendations.[16]

Yezhov was confirmed by the CC Secretariat as the ninth of Ivan Moskvin's assistants for cadres assignment at Orgraspred. He joined a staff of responsible workers that also included nine deputy chiefs (*zamestitely zaveduiushchego*), seven assistants for organizational work, and nineteen responsible instructors.[17] These forty-five officials were responsible for recommending virtually all personnel appointments in the expanding party and state bureaucracies.

They apparently worked as a more or less egalitarian collective. Chief Moskvin's salary of 225 rubles per month was the same that his deputies and instructors received, and Yezhov's wage of 200 rubles was only slightly lower. Moreover, the division of responsibilities seems to have been fairly distributed. Each deputy, assistant, and instructor covered three to five areas of specialization that seem to have been based more on work load than on importance or prestige.[18]

Yezhov settled quickly into his new job and showed his superiors his customary efficiency and value. After slightly more than a month on the job, he was writing Orgraspred reports for the Orgburo on party education and other matters.[19] By September he was soliciting and receiving reports from provincial party organizations about a variety of political affairs, including checkups on political dissidents.[20] Moskvin must have found him as useful an assistant as had Yezhov's former bosses in Kazakhstan (whose work Yezhov took over), because sometime in November, after only four months as Moskvin's assistant, Yezhov was promoted over the heads of the other eight assistants to the post of deputy chief.[21] As we shall see, less than two years after that he would be running the entire personnel apparatus of the Communist Party.

The writer Lev Razgon survived years in the Gulag camps to recall his impressions of the young Yezhov at this time. Razgon grew up in Moskvin's household, where Yezhov was a frequent guest. "For some reason" Moskvin "took a liking to this quiet, modest, and efficient secretary." Razgon spent several evenings at Moskvin's table with Yezhov,

whom Moskvin's wife doted over and called "little sparrow." Razgon remembered her cooing: "'Come on, my little sparrow,' she would fuss encouragingly around him, 'try some of this. You must eat more.'" Razgon recalled Yezhov as "a small slender man, . . . always dressed in a crumpled cheap suit and a blue satin collarless peasant shirt. He sat at the table, quiet, not very talkative and slightly shy; he drank little, did not take much part in the conversation but merely listened, with his head slightly bowed. I can understand how attractive such a person, with his shy smile and taciturn manner, must have been to Moskvin."

Aside from this possible attraction of personality, Moskvin thought Yezhov was a trustworthy and competent worker. He told Razgon, "I know of no more ideal administrator than Nikolai Yezhov. . . . Entrust him with some task and you have no need to check up—you can rest assured he will do as he is told."[22] Yezhov's efficient obedience would ten years later lead him to carry out Stalin's order to arrest Moskvin and Razgon, along with their wives and hundreds of thousands of others.

Moskvin found Yezhov to be a valuable worker in Orgraspred. At one point, probably in 1928, M. Khataevich was being transferred out of the Tatar regional party committee. According to one source, he wrote to Central Committee Secretary S. V. Kosior, proposing that Yezhov take his place. Yezhov, he wrote, was a "strong guy . . . who will put the Tatars in order." Moskvin, however, was successful in keeping his favorite assistant.[23]

Success at Orgraspred was not only a matter of firmness and strength. The politics of personnel appointment was sometimes complex and required negotiation and tact. To appoint someone to a new post, it was customary to secure the agreement of the candidate's current boss, his future boss, and the candidate himself. Thus, for example, in 1928 the political police (OGPU) wanted to replace a provincial secret police chief. Because such posts were on Nomenklatura List no. 1, the appointment required CC approval. But in the process of consultation, Orgraspred discovered that one of the parties objected. Yezhov drafted an "explanatory note" to the Secretariat, outlining the history of the issue and making a recommendation: "The OGPU requests that

Comrade Agrov be relieved of his duties as chief of the Viatsk city OGPU and put at the disposal of the OGPU. Comrade Shiiron, former OGPU chief in Ulianovsk city, is to replace Comrade Agrov. The Viatsk city party committee objects to the transfer of Comrade Agrov from its organization. Orgraspred CC considers the replacement of Agrov with Shiiron advisable and asks for confirmation."[24]

Like the other assistants, instructors, and deputies at Orgraspred, Yezhov was responsible for particular areas or specializations. These were somewhat fluid, but the documents suggest that he had three main areas of expertise: rural cadres for the five-year plans, studying proposals to enact a seven-hour workday, and promotions from the ranks of workers and peasants into managerial posts (*vydvizhenie*).[25] Orgraspred responsible workers were also expected to handle other issues as they came up, however, and at various times in the late 1920s Yezhov prepared recommendations on a wide variety of other issues, including personnel assignments to the Commissariats of Justice and Labor, the trade unions, and the food industry. He also wrote memorandums on party political education and supervised the formation of presidia for various ceremonial conferences.[26] Although he had no defined specialty as such, in a preview of his subsequent career he seems often to have drafted recommendations for staffing of several judicial procuracies and police (OGPU) positions.[27] These varied assignments in Orgraspred gave Yezhov and his colleagues wide experience and familiarity with many areas of the regime's activity. The tasks would stand them in good stead and help to explain why so many of them went on to higher positions in the party and state.

The fragmentary records we have do not give a complete picture of Yezhov's work at Orgraspred, but surviving transcripts of some departmental conferences do allow us to form a general impression of his approach to problems and his style of work. Orgraspred was as much think tank as personnel bureau. It regularly received written reports and heard in-person explanations from virtually all sectors of party and state activity, and it conducted a constant series of in-house conferences on many themes. The idea was apparently to build up a store of infor-

mation and knowledge about how the state and the economy worked in order to be able to assign cadres more intelligently. Yezhov participated in (and often chaired) conferences on agriculture, labor, state institutions, and the specifics of party committees in various provinces.

Such Soviet conferences, following the true Russian bureaucratic style, tended to be long-winded displays of oratory replete with vague generalities, repetition of correct slogans and terminology, and little in the way of concrete proposals. It was important for everyone to go on record with as many remarks, however inconsequential, as possible. Speaker after repetitious speaker outlined the problem, summarized the (often negligible) accomplishments to date, beat his breast with self-criticism for not doing more, and then pledged to do better. The conferences resembled scripted rituals in which the point was as much to be heard speaking and to affirm values as to move problems forward. It must have been the case that at the end of the Orgraspred conferences, which sometimes lasted many hours, the participants were too exhausted to do much in concrete terms. A typical finale was the decision to go back and study the question further, appoint a new commission to look at the matter, or draft a resolution that repeated—often verbatim—previous pronouncements on the matter. That way everyone had gone on record, identified the problem, and said the right words, but no one risked going out on a limb with some new proposal that might fail or offend some bureaucratic interest.

Reading transcripts of party meetings at all levels, one gets the impression that those who would rise to prominence often took a different approach. In the 1920s leaders like Stalin, V. M. Molotov, L. M. Kaganovich, G. K. Ordzhonikidze, M. F. Shkiriatov, S. V. Kosior, and others expressed impatience with interminable talk. It was often their voices that interrupted a speaker (a hallowed Bolshevik tradition) and called on him to get to the point, stay on the subject, or provide specifics. Thus meetings of the Orgburo and the Secretariat chaired by such leaders rarely put things off and often covered more of the agenda than might have otherwise been the case. Compared with other Bolsheviks, especially those with roots in the intelligentsia, these Stalinists

were men more of action than of words. Their style was practical and pragmatic; getting the job done was more important than talking about it. They were often praised as "businesslike" (*delovoi*), "firm" (*tverdyi*), or "reliable" (*nadezhnyi*), and their "Stalinist style of work" was posed as a model for others.

Stalin valued such personality types around him not only for their obedience but also for their directness and efficiency and, when it came to that, their brutality in completing an assignment. In a system where personnel staffing, or "finding the right cadres," was more important than the formal structure of institutions, those who could reliably cut to the chase and quickly and efficiently break a bottleneck rose quickly in Stalin's regime. Moreover, such lieutenants as Molotov, Kaganovich, Ordzhonikidze (and later N. S. Khrushchev, N. M. Shvernik, L. D. Mekhlis, and A. S. Shcherbakov) functioned as roving troubleshooters rather than as specialized bureaucrats. They were sent to trouble spots to organize solutions, regardless of their previous expertise or specialization, and were known for seeing tasks through to a conclusion, regardless of cost.

Molotov worked in the party apparatus and later served as prime minister and foreign minister. Kaganovich also started in the party apparatus and then had a series of positions in many fields, including railroad administration, running Ukrainian and Moscow party organizations, and building the Moscow subway. Ordzhonikidze's assignments ranged in the 1920s and 1930s from the Caucasus to enforcement of party discipline to heavy industry. Whether the hot spot was railroads, foreign affairs, agriculture, or heavy industry, Stalin often dealt with it by dispatching one of these firm businesslike troubleshooters. He apparently liked their impatience with inefficient conservative approaches, and their combination of hard work, organizational ability, and, when necessary, a brutal steamroller approach.

Nikolai Yezhov seems to have been such a type: what today we might call a "can-do" or "results-oriented" manager who got things done. We have already noted his propensity for hard work and timely fulfillment of assignments. As we shall see, his work experience would

also be that of a troubleshooter, touching on a wide variety of fields and subjects. Even in the late 1920s, as a young official in his early thirties, Yezhov also showed the relentless, Stalinist steamroller quality. This is perhaps what Ivan Moskvin (who himself never became a Stalin lieutenant) meant in another prophetic remark to Lev Razgon; after praising Yezhov's ability to complete tasks, he observed, "Yezhov has only one shortcoming, although it is significant: he does not know how to stop. Sometimes you have a situation where it is impossible to do anything and you have to stop. Yezhov doesn't stop, and sometimes you have to keep an eye on him in order that he stops at the right time."[28]

We can see glimpses of Yezhov's approach to work in the minutes of various Orgraspred meetings at which he spoke. The impression is that of a young official concerned with proper and efficient organization of his department. In a meeting of a commission on verifying the composition and work of agricultural cadres, Yezhov as chair gave a succinct but detailed summary of progress to date. Without the cheerleading attestations of the task's importance or the verbose global phrases that were common to the work of such committees, he came immediately to the point. He outlined the functions of each subcommittee and prioritized the issues needing immediate decision.[29]

At an Orgraspred conference in 1928 he reflected at some length on how Orgraspred itself should be organized. Having been formed from the merger of the cadres assignment-registration (*uchraspred*) and organizational (*orgotdel*) departments, Orgraspred retained the previous departmental structures of both its predecessors. There was considerable sentiment in favor of retaining the bifurcation, because as Moskvin and others noted, assigning cadres and communicating with territorial organizations were two distinct functions. Yezhov agreed that it would be dangerous to merge both apparats into one, but he also bemoaned the overlap and lack of efficiency inherent in the current structure. He noted that when a new issue or question came to Orgraspred, it was often assigned to one of the responsible workers according to workload. But the person in charge of the issue found that various registration, assignment, and/or organizational sectors were involved, either in

the past or because of the nature of the question. This made for confusion and inefficiency, and Yezhov impatiently argued for a kind of one-man management:

> What happens now, comrades? [As an assignment worker] I have a series of trade union conferences [to staff and organize]. I must tell you from experience that it happens that I have to conduct negotiations with the Organizational Subdepartment to reach any conclusion. There has been talk that such problems would be dealt with and that we need one person to do such things. . . . If things are worked out [elsewhere, in subdepartment] without my leadership, whether or not the conclusion coincides with my opinion, [as the responsible official] I will have to redo everything because I am the one who will report to the [Orgburo] commission. That is the downside [of how we do things now.] . . . If you are going to work out a question, then make it so that I am responsible for it, that I have the possibility to work it out, to co-operating as needed [with the sub-departments].[30]

Another theme in Yezhov's discourse in Orgraspred related to political adherence and obedience to the party line of the Central Committee. Pushing the need for a centralized political approach to various questions, he argued that cadres assignment officials at various levels should function as "agents" of the Central Committee. He believed that they should know the past and current decisions of the Central Committee in their essence, "not bureaucratically." After hearing a report in Orgraspred from cadres officials from the State Bank and that conservative, nonparty banking officials were trying to block party appointments, Yezhov said,

> When we hear talk about us as agents of the CC . . . many comrades imagine their role completely other than what it really is. I think that our essential strength as agents of the CC of the party must be that we perfectly know the policy of the CC of the party.

> This is basic for us: to know the CC's policy in every institution, in every situation in which we find ourselves, to know the party's policy and how to push it forward. . . . This is a crucial thing. And from the report we just heard, obviously the comrades don't feel this. The basic evil here is that he [the speaker] is helpless in this crucial matter, that he essentially cannot influence the selection of personnel [in the State Bank], mainly because he himself has an extremely weak understanding of the party's policy. . . . We have to say that in the essence of the matter this kind of thing cannot move things forward one iota. We have no need for such agents, in my opinion. We have to get rid of such agents because they cannot carry out the party's policy.[31]

Yezhov argued that conservative institutional resistance to party appointments could be overcome by proper use and citation of party resolutions. If party agents at Gosbank could show "that the resolution says *this*, that the resolution says *that*, that you have this or that practical plan, then I do not think that Sheinman or Spunde could do anything against it." Otherwise, he said, you end up with bureaucracy and petty relations to party decisions, "and nothing moves forward."[32]

But his spirited defense of party resolutions was not universal, and he strongly condemned the practice of party organizations avoiding real decisions by passing vague resolutions or appointing an endless series of commissions to study problems to death. After prolonged discussion of an issue, Yezhov said,

> Now some comrades here have suggested passing a resolution. Comrade Riabokon' suggests passing a resolution that would serve as a guideline. Bogomolov wants to form a commission. What a joke. We will pass ten resolutions, convene another commission, and so forth. We do not need any commissions here. Here we need concretely and directly to recognize that nothing has been done, that we need to carry out the [party's] line and make corresponding conclusions. What, every six months we hear a re-

port and every six months repeat the same thing? Why do we waste so much energy? Not to mention how much the CC wastes energy and resources when we gather all this material and just take a resolution; we take a resolution and after six or seven months things have not moved forward one iota. . . . I suggest that we not take a resolution, but limit ourselves to the existing ones. There are enough of them. We need to verify fulfillment of the old decisions.[33]

Similarly, Yezhov was impatient with those of his colleagues who either did not work as hard as he did or thrived on covering their laziness with vague suggestions. At one Orgraspred conference a colleague of Yezhov's, one Comrade Farber, presented a report on the trade unions and the question of replacing "bourgeois specialists" for discussion at a meeting chaired by Orgraspred chief Moskvin.

Moskvin: Any additions to the agenda?

Farber: In view of the fact that a whole group of comrades have not acquainted themselves with the report, maybe it would be advisable to put off discussion of my report for a week so that comrades would be able to acquaint themselves with my materials.

Moskvin: When were the materials circulated?

Farber: On Saturday.

Bogomolov: I myself feel ready to hear Comrade Farber's report today. Even Comrade Yezhov, who only now returned from vacation, has succeeded in reading the report.

[Farber reads his report]

Yezhov: The weakest part of the report is the absence here of any concrete conclusions. This is not like discovering America, but rather a simple matter of the Central Committee giving practical help to the trade unions in the nearest future. That's the essence of the matter. . . . I think the report mainly gave a snapshot, not a bad snapshot, but the real work is yet to be done.

> The basic thing is to make it concrete, to say that in such and such a time, such and such a number of [bourgeois] specialists are to be replaced, and to say exactly how replacements are to be prepared according to a concrete plan, and then to figure out where to find those replacements. . . . Of course, it's not hard to chase away hundreds of specialists, but we need to replace them with others. Such concretization should have been the task of Comrade Farber.[34]

The belief in strict obedience to Central Committee decisions also pertained the political struggles with the oppositionists. Clearly, as part of its mission to gather information on party cadres, Orgraspred was involved in identifying political dissidents, but because archival materials on this subject are so scanty, we cannot judge its extent. The only document bearing Yezhov's name from this period relating to the opposition is a memo from the Voronezh provincial party committee to "Orgraspred, Comrade Yezhov or Comrade Mogil'nyi." It reads, "In response to your request, Orgotdel of the provincial VKP(b) sends this list of oppositionists working in the Voronezh organization with short biographies (*kharakteristiki*) of them."[35]

Nikolai Yezhov's early work in the Moscow personnel apparatus of the Central Committee showed him to be his usual diligent, hardworking self, indispensable to his boss and probably again taking over much of his work. He was an excellent administrator and organizer who took an interest in making Orgraspred run efficiently. What we know of his psychology and approach to problems also suggests parallels with those of the effective troubleshooters Stalin favored. Although there is no evidence that Yezhov had yet met Stalin or that Stalin took any special interest in him, the young Orgraspred worker displayed the can-do, relentless, get-it-done-regardless-of-consequences attitude that characterized successful Stalinist lieutenants like Molotov, Kaganovich, and Ordzhonikidze.[36] He seems to have had the right personality, as well as the right biography, for the era of Stalinist dictatorship.

He also mastered new areas of expertise from party education to

agriculture. In Orgraspred in the 1920s he added other elements to his résumé that would be important to his future career: his experience placing cadres in the courts, procuracy, and the secret police (OGPU), as well as his activities in keeping track of oppositionists, presaged his involvement in the horrible purges of the 1930s.

Most immediately relevant to his upward career path, however, was his newfound interest in and knowledge of rural cadres working in agriculture. By 1929 Stalin and his circle had decided to deprive the peasants of their private landholdings and launch the full nationalization and collectivization of agriculture. Up to this time, the state had supervised farming through commissariats (ministries) of agriculture at the republic level. Thus in the Russian Republic the RSFSR Commissariat of Agriculture had been in charge. But many of the agronomists and specialists in these republic-level agencies thought that the collectivization scheme was ill-advised and dragged their feet in the planning process. By the end of 1929 Stalin had decided to solve this problem with his usual strategy: using personnel appointment and the creation of a new agency to circumvent the old ones. He created an all-union-level USSR Commissariat of Agriculture to push collectivization forward.

Characteristically, the higher reaches of the new commissariat were filled with stalwart, radical party workers transferred from hard-line party disciplinary agencies, including the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection.[37] Cadres selection for the new agency was a main component of the plan because the new commissariat's selection of "correct" personnel—those willing to carry out the crash plan for collectivization—would be crucial. Who better to direct this effort than the modest, hardworking personnel specialist who had shown himself to be dedicated to obeying Central Committee resolutions to the letter? On 15 December 1929 the Politburo, upon the recommendation of L. M. Kaganovich and Ya. A. Yakovlev (the new USSR Commissar of Agriculture) appointed N. I. Yezhov Deputy Commissar of Agriculture of the USSR, "with instructions to him to work on personnel."[38]

Yezhov's move to the USSR Commissariat of Agriculture took him out of the party's formal personnel assignment system, but it did not

take him away from cadre assignments. The order appointing him to his new position noted specifically that he was to be the deputy commissar "to work on personnel."[39] The new agency and Yezhov's job within it put him at the very center of Stalinist policy implementation at the time.

SIX

Yezhov on the Job

"CADRES DECIDE EVERYTHING"

The party leads by appointing people. Power is not power if it cannot appoint people.

N. I. YEZHOV

Stalin's decision to end private agriculture and to force peasants into collective farms led to the most dramatic upheaval since the 1917 Revolution and the Civil War. The collectivization struggle would last from 1929 well into the 1930s; the main stages would feature violent struggles between regime supporters and peasants, tremendous confusion and chaos, and the deaths of millions due to famine and deportation.[1] The policy change of 1929 was so drastic that the Politburo found that it had no bureaucracy willing and able to implement it. When the leadership created one and cast about for a reliable, hardworking, experienced personnel specialist, they could do no better than Nikolai Yezhov.

The first three months of 1930 were given over to establishing Narkomzem SSSR and its staff. The order from newly appointed Commissar Ya. A. Yakovlev formally appointing Yezhov as deputy commissar in

charge of cadres was followed by orders appointing Yezhov's deputies, creating a personnel department (*Orginstrukt otdel*) under Yezhov, and fixing salaries for the new top staff.[2]

In addition to ongoing and routine personnel appointments, much of Yezhov's year at Narkomzem was taken up in simply organizing the new agency.[3] He wrote to Avel Yenukidze, the chairman of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets (TsIK), pointing out that the new agency had no housing of its own and asking that apartments be assigned to it.[4] He was involved in creating new departments, schools, and laboratories, all with new staffs. It was a sign of the primitive nature of Soviet infrastructure that Yezhov discovered that no telephone communication existed between Moscow and Tashkent in 1930. Work on the phone line proceeded slowly, and pressure from Yezhov led to a promise from the Commissariat of Posts and Telegraphs to establish radio-telephone contact pending completion of a telephone line.[5]

In addition to the ongoing location and appointment of suitable cadres for the new agency, one of Yezhov's first major projects was the reorganization of existing training institutions (and the creation of new ones) for agricultural specialists.[6] As early as 3 February he was issuing orders for the reorganization of the prestigious Timriazev Agricultural Academy (where Antonina had studied in the mid-1920s), whose existing staff was too much prisoner of the old thinking on collectivization.[7]

During this time, Yezhov wrote a series of short articles on education that showed his radical views, which were fully in line with the radical "cultural revolution" spirit of the times. Yezhov had never been a major supporter of the mixed-economy NEP of the 1920s. In the early 1920s he had written to his friend Petr Ivanov, "NEP is annoying. Everything is extremely expensive, e.g., a pound of butter costs 8 to 10 million, sugar 8–18, etc. Bread, a pound of white, 1,200,000, rye bread 400,000, in a nutshell people are screaming 'robbery,' and me as well."[8]

We have seen that he had written to Molotov in 1924, sharply opposing the extension of economic concessions to the British in Central Asia and noting the dangerous history of British imperialism at Russian expense. Now, in the late-1920s, he wrote to celebrate the demise of old-

fashioned universities in favor of the radical plan to replace them with institutes to train cadres in the specialties needed for agriculture and industry in the Stalin Revolution. Educational institutions were to become "a sort of factory" to quickly produce specialists for the economy.[9]

The decision to plunge ahead with full and rapid collectivization required expanded training facilities for politically reliable cadres to push the campaign forward. In conversation with Stalin, the dictator had "suggested" that Yezhov organize courses for higher command staff in agriculture, in order to prepare leaders for full collectivization in the provinces. Yezhov had set to work on the matter with his usual energy, but by February he was frustrated with bureaucratic foot-dragging on a matter he considered politically important. On 16 February 1930 he wrote to Molotov complaining that the movement to organize new courses was following a "catastrophic tempo."[10] His letter illustrates several important characteristics of Bolshevik administration and administrative tactics.

Yezhov blamed the "bureaucratic slowness" of several organizations, including his former Orgraspred, which he claimed was constantly submitting revised plans to the Orgburo, thereby "sabotaging" Narkomzem's educational plans. He noted that it took more than two years to finish the courses, making for inexcusable delay; more than two hundred applications had been received, but confirmation of applicants' assignments and enrollment was not forthcoming. "Therefore we insist that one thousand comrades be mobilized from party, soviet, trade union, and economic work" to enter the new courses. He asked Molotov to intervene to short-circuit the bureaucratic logjam: "Viacheslav Mikhailovich, please pose this question directly to the Orgburo, without the usual 'study' by your departments, in order to decide this question quickly."[11]

Yezhov's letter is an example of the common tactic of social blame-shifting. He blamed the delays, among other things, on the presence of non-Bolshevik "alien elements." "It is sufficient to say that in the leading composition of our regional and territorial land administrations there are 40–50 percent former SRs in order to understand how serious is the

problem of preparing new leading cadres for us in agriculture." Yezhov noted to Molotov that in the few months that Narkomzem had existed, "we have sent more than seventy people to court for criminal work in land organs." As early as 10 March 1930 he had established an All-Union Action Society to Struggle with Wrecking in Agriculture and Timber.[12] He also established special sectors in Narkomzem to "struggle with wrecking."[13] Although such measures might be thought to presage his future work in the secret police, in the heated atmosphere of collectivization they were not unusual. Like most Bolsheviks, Yezhov was sensitive to the presence and presumed activity of "aliens" and "enemies" in the bureaucracy, and, as we shall see, he practically defined good personnel policy in terms of removing "them" and appointing "ours" to key positions.

Yezhov's latest letter to Molotov, in its criticism of his former boss and agency, also illustrates *vedomstvo*, or loyalty to one's agency instead of compromise or understanding of a common good or bigger picture. Yezhov fought for his agency, even though three months earlier, when he worked for Orgraspred, he might well have dragged his feet precisely in the same way he now found so intolerable in his new post. In many ways, scarce resources (especially skilled personnel) dictated that agencies battled with each other constantly, hurling accusations and denunciations of sabotage and obstructionism when they did not get what they needed. Each agency would be judged on results, more than on politeness or accommodation, and this led to competition among them for resources and for recognition, and to a corresponding tendency to denounce other bodies for obstructing them.

We saw in our discussion of the Orgburo and the Secretariat that these agencies functioned often as councils of elders: leaders of top rank and prestige who blessed proposals from below or adjudicated disputes. In this Darwinian struggle among agencies, one of the important roles of top leaders was that of referee or moderator among disputing agencies and officials. When Yezhov wrote to Molotov, he was asking a top baron to intervene, to cut across the formal existing channels, to use personal power to resolve a dispute. As we shall see, in this system

of personalized power, one's rank or position in the party hierarchy did not necessarily mean a change in duties or spheres of activity. Rank, symbolized by the accumulation or holding of top positions, positioned one to resolve disputes at higher levels. When Bolsheviks spoke of the "authority" of a top leader, they meant the level at which he functioned more than the concrete office he held. And that functioning was inseparable from the role as mediator and referee.

As a new agency without personnel, Narkomzem had to staff itself with personnel drawn from other organizations, many of which resisted parting with their valuable specialists and administrators. In such cases, Yezhov often appealed to higher instances to settle the dispute. On 12 April 1930 he wrote to the Central Committee about one Dzhian, who had agreed to come to work at Narkomzem. But Dzhian's boss, Melnichansky, objected to the transfer. Yezhov wrote, "We strongly request, despite Comrade Melnichansky's objection, to assign Comrade Dzhian to us."[14] On another occasion, the Moscow Land Administration refused to release one Protasov, an agronomist, to Narkomzem. Yezhov wrote to the Moscow party committee that "we need an experienced agronomist" and asked that committee to overrule the land administration.[15] Yezhov often used forceful language in such appeals; in letters to higher party bodies, he often "categorically insisted" on personnel transfers he wanted.[16]

Yezhov was just as tough with his subordinates. He demanded that all complaint letters, even those from ordinary peasants, be answered in twenty-four hours and that reports on them be made to the Narkomzem Collegium every ten days.[17] He took Narkomzem's regional representatives to task when they failed to report in a timely fashion: in one case, he formally censured an entire organization, writing, "We regard your silence on the question of staffing district land administrations as complete negligence." Yezhov found himself using this language so often that he printed up forms containing the reproaches with blanks to be filled in with the names of offending organizations.[18] But he was also aware of the limits of paper reproaches. On one occasion, he admitted that some of his local officials were mishandling some peasants: "Writ-

ing a paper will not do any good. We will have to send some of our people there to straighten it out."[19] Ultimately, Bolshevik leadership was about sending out "our people" more than about the rule-bound procedures of a bureaucracy.

He was also a smooth bureaucrat. In early June 1930 he presided over a conference of ordinary peasants who had left the collective farms following Stalin's "Dizzy with Success" article in March. His visitors complained that local officials were refusing to give land to individual peasants. Yezhov was understanding and conciliatory, admitting that the peasants had a point. After unsuccessfully trying to convince them to reenter the collective farm, he agreed to take their complaints seriously and get to the bottom of the affair. Whether he did so is unknown. But the peasants left feeling that a powerful official had heard their grievances and would right the wrongs. Notwithstanding whether he actually did anything, his petitioners left with a smile: clear evidence of a bureaucrat's silky charm.

Once the new agricultural commissariat was on its feet, Yezhov got a new and important job. On 14 November 1930 he was given responsibility for the selection and distribution of all party personnel. That month Sergo Ordzhonikidze, a Stalin intimate, was named to head the Supreme Council of National Economy (VSNKh). As Yakovlev had done when he took over the USSR Commissariat of Agriculture, Ordzhonikidze tapped the party cadres apparatus for a deputy to handle personnel for him. Yakovlev had taken Yezhov from Orgraspred to be his deputy, and now Ordzhonikidze asked for Orgraspred chief Ivan Moskvin to move with him to VSNKh, leaving Orgraspred without a chief.

The Politburo met on 14 November to consider Ordzhonikidze's request and at this meeting sent Moskvin to VSNKh and moved Yezhov from Narkomzem back to the personnel apparatus. Orgraspred had recently been reorganized and divided into a party cadres–assignment department (Orgotdel, or organizational department) and a department for distribution of cadres to all state agencies (Raspredotdel, or distribution department). Yezhov was named chief of the new Raspredotdel.[20]

Although Yezhov had worked in the agricultural commissariat less

than a year, there are no signs that his work there had been unsatisfactory. On the contrary, he seems to have done his usual efficient job and put Narkomzem personnel assignment on a firm footing. Moreover, his new position was a dramatic promotion: he now answered for cadres assignment not only in a single organization but for the entire state apparatus. Having arrived in Moscow only three years before, he had managed largely through his skill and abilities to move from the bottom to the top of the most important part of the Bolshevik bureaucracy. As Stalin would say, "personnel assignment is the most important factor."

Scholars writing on Yezhov have long sought the origins of his later police job in his early career. Thus one study implies that his 1930 work in agriculture had somehow been connected with the cruel and devastating repression of peasants during collectivization.[21] In fact, as we see in this case and others, Yezhov was a personnel specialist—by 1930, the leading personnel expert—who was assigned to whatever institution or initiative needed specialized knowledge of cadres and their qualifications. This kind of work involved personally knowing a large number of party members, knowing how to mobilize and direct their assignments, and arranging their education and job conditions. Sometimes these assignments were to institutions involved in repression, but more often they were not, and there is no evidence or reason to believe that his work at the USSR Commissariat of Agriculture during collectivization had anything directly to do with the persecution and devastation of the peasantry. Yezhov was sent wherever specialized knowledge of personnel was needed.

The latest biography of Yezhov mentions only two of his activities as head of Raspredotdel in 1930–33: his participation in a commission to set up the Dalstroi forced labor gold mining trust in November 1931 and his position as member of the central commission that carried out the *chistka* (purge, or screening) of party members in early 1933.[22]

Associating Yezhov with repressive or police activities before 1933–34 is highly misleading. First, his membership in the commission to establish the Dalstroi mining trust was standard practice. Whenever any institution was formed or reorganized, the chief personnel specialist was

an essential participant. In a system based largely on personalized politics, assignment of cadres and patronage are naturally important factors. Moreover, the Bolsheviks conceived of institutions largely as collections of personalities, so for them the most essential element of any organization was staffing. Thus, as the party's chief personnel specialist, Yezhov was a member not only of the Dalstroi organizing committee in these years but also of commissions to organize or reorganize the Wheat Trust, the Commissariat of Supply, the Timber Trust, the Commissariat of Light Industry, and many others.[23] Similarly, Yezhov's participation on Stalin's 1934 commissions to reorganize the secret police (OGPU) into a new Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) had the same routine character. It was natural and common practice to include the chief personnel specialist in such reorganizations to advise on staffing, personnel policies, and the like, by no means reflecting some new specialization in repression.

Second, the vast bulk of Yezhov's work in the 1931–34 period had absolutely nothing to do with policing or repression. In these years his name appeared forty-seven times in the protocols of the Politburo. More than half of these instances (twenty-nine) reflect Yezhov mobilizing party cadres for work in industry or for higher education. He was appointed to commissions or ordered separately to propose cadres for work in the wheat, sugar, gold, construction, airplane, metal, timber, and soap industries.[24] He also recommended party cadres for appointment to the several Soviet military academies (army, navy, and air force).[25] Another twelve instances reflect Yezhov's recommendations of senior individual appointments in various commissariats.[26] The remainder of Yezhov's personnel assignment citations in the Politburo protocols pertain to Yezhov's mobilization or assignment of cadres for the regions or for delegations abroad.[27]

Third, even when Yezhov's assignments related to police activities, sometimes his commission memberships were parts of initiatives against repression. In 1931 in the Urals, he headed a commission that found that exile victims were being abused in "horrendous conditions": they were owed wages, were impoverished, and had difficulty feeding

their children.[28] Yezhov also participated in the Kuibyshev Commission that sought to reform the judiciary and correct police abuses. In September a memo from Stalin proposed the formation of this commission and ordered it to "free the innocent" and "purge the OGPU of practitioners of specific 'investigative tricks' and punish them regardless of their rank." The Kuibyshev Commission prepared a draft resolution censuring the police for "illegal methods of investigation" and recommending punishment of several secret police officials.[29] In these years we find Yezhov exactly where we would expect to find the party's hard-working personnel specialist.

Yezhov's leadership of Raspredotdel again demonstrated his diligent style.[30] He paid close attention to the structure of his organization; he was a good manager. At a 1933 staff meeting he chided his staff for their excessive paperwork, their careless and narrow bureaucratism, and (as he had in the 1920s at Orgraspred) their rudeness to guests and other officials.[31]

At another staff meeting he made a long, detailed speech to his subordinates in which he carefully outlined his comprehensive restructuring plan for the personnel assignment agency into specialized subgroups, departments, and territorial specialty groups of instructors. He expected his underlings to be as conscientious as he was, and emphasized the Bolsheviks' cardinal principle of leadership: knowing "our people" and how to assign them. To his department's officials he said, "You must know each of your [territory's party] workers personally. If I call you and wake you up any time of night, you have to be able to tell me where such and such a worker works, how he conducts himself, and so forth. . . . I repeat: a responsible instructor of the CC must do this. . . . He has to know cadres not only from their files, not only personally; he has to study them daily, hourly." He also chided his subordinates for their misunderstanding of the importance of what they were doing:

> Up to now, there has been this careless attitude toward working with cadres: "Cadres really aren't an interesting thing—you just have to sit, shuffle papers, read forms." That is, you have had a

> primitive and simplified understanding of it. You people don't understand that we really lead through people. . . . The party leads by appointing people. Power is not power if it cannot appoint people. Strength consists in the fact that we first of all keep the appointment of people and the nomenklatura system in our hands — this is the political expression of party leadership in its organizational form.[32]

In 1933 Yezhov became involved in a series of measures to regulate the membership of the party, activities that flowed naturally from his role as the party's chief personnel specialist. That role was understood to be concerned not only with personnel assignment but also with a range of other duties. We saw earlier, for example, that personnel assignment in the 1920s included close study of the work and needs of economic agencies. In the 1920s and 1930s it also included overall supervision of the party's size and composition, both internally and externally.

Internally, in early 1933, the party leadership decided to conduct a membership screening, or purge, of the party's membership. Purges had been traditional events in the party's history since 1918 and had been aimed at a wide variety of targets. Most often, the categories of people specified for purging were not explicitly related to political oppositional dissidence and included traditional targets like careerists, bureaucrats, and crooks of various kinds; members of oppositionist groups were not mentioned in the instructions.[33] This 1933 screening was part of a cyclical dynamic of party membership. In periods when the party needed more members to accomplish some task (1924, 1929–32), admission was opened to masses of new recruits. This was always followed by a pruning of the membership to weed out what the party called uncommitted "chance" elements: "The party has increased its membership the past two years by 1,400,000 persons, bringing the total to 3,200,000 (members: 2,000,000; candidate members: 1,200,000). Nevertheless, in some places this mass admission into the ranks of the party was frequently carried out indiscriminately and without thorough checking."[34]

The largest single group expelled were "passive" party members:

those carried on the rolls but not participating in party work. Next came violators of party discipline, bureaucrats, corrupt officials, and those who had hidden past crimes from the party. Members of dissident groups did not even figure in the final tallies.[35] The vast majority of those expelled were fresh recruits who had entered the party since 1929. The 1933 purge expelled about 18 percent of the party's members.[36]

The 1933 purge was managed by a specially appointed committee to oversee implementation of the operation locally, and as head of the party personnel office, Yezhov was made a member. The archival evidence does not suggest that he played a major role in the 1933 screening. His papers do contain various summary reports on the screening in various regional organizations and commissariats, but no correspondence or indications that he played an active role.[37]

Yezhov played a much greater, indeed a leading, role in checking on the backgrounds of foreign Communists, who with the rise of Fascism and National Socialism in Europe were beginning to flee to the Soviet Union in significant numbers. From January to December 1933 Yezhov had chaired a committee looking into the backgrounds of foreign Communists entering the USSR through the auspices of the Communist International (Comintern). Early in 1934 Yezhov, as head of Raspredotdel, made his report to Stalin, Molotov, and Kaganovich. He wrote that as the Fascists became stronger, especially in Germany, the stream of Communist political refugees to the USSR had become a flood. He claimed that German and Polish intelligence agencies were "turning" these political émigrés and using them as agents against the USSR, noting that in the past six months the secret police (OGPU) collegium had worked more than fifty cases of Polish infiltrators alone.[38]

Yezhov observed that there was a wide circle of Soviet agencies with the right to invite and vet foreign Communists—the Comintern, Inturist, the OGPU, and MOPR (International Organization for Aid to Revolutionaries)—and that none of them had much in the way of verification of refugees or indeed elementary record keeping. He proposed that with the exception of Communists invited on specific CC or Comintern business, the already stringent rules about entry into the

USSR be enforced for Communists as for others. Uninvited Communist immigrants were to be quarantined and checked by the OGPU, and particularly suspicious types were to be sent to camps for further investigation. No political émigrés were to be allowed to work in border areas, military factories, important electrical stations, and the like. The verification commission of MOPR (which sheltered most Communist immigrants) was to be strengthened.[39] Although Yezhov's recommendations were apparently accepted, they seem not to have been enforced in practice. As we shall see, he and the leadership would return to the question of suspicious foreign Communists in 1936.

From 1933 to 1934 Yezhov's activities began to expand in other directions. In part because the party moved away from mass personnel mobilizations, which had occupied Yezhov in the 1920s and in 1931–32, and in part as a sign of his increasing reputation as a careful and hardworking official, his portfolio grew. Now, in addition to his personnel assignment job, he began to participate in policy matters on a national scale. He took on several assignments relating to verification and checking agreements between various economic agencies, in both domestic and foreign trade.[40] He took charge of certain party investigations, including, for example, checkups on corruption in customs offices and in the aircraft industry.[41] By the end of 1933 he was signing documents as chairman of both the Aviation and Budget Commissions of the Politburo, even though he was not a Politburo member. Thus by the end of 1933 Yezhov had his finger in many pies.[42]

It is not surprising, therefore, that at the Seventeenth Party Congress in February 1934 Yezhov received appointments commensurate with his skills and activities. At that meeting he gave the report of the congress's Credentials Commission, as was expected of the Raspredotdel chief. He was also elected a member of the CC and of the newly organized Party Control Commission (KPK, the successor to the Central Control Commission), which had overall responsibility for checking and punishing infractions among party members. By March 1934 he had become a member of the Orgburo, chairman of the CC's Commission on Foreign Travel, and head of the CC Industrial Department.[43]

The Orgburo appointment was routine: it was customary for the party's personnel chief to be a member, and Yezhov took Ivan Moskvin's seat, this being the first party congress since Yezhov had replaced Moskvin in Orgraspred/Raspredotdel. Moreover, for two years as Raspredotdel chief, Yezhov had already had a major hand in senior appointments. In January 1932, for example, he had nominated the deputy commissars and members of the Collegium for the newly formed People's Commissariat of Timber, and his recommendations were approved by the Orgburo automatically without that body even meeting.[44]

On the other hand, the move to Orgburo was important in other ways. It put Yezhov on the same committee as such powerful leaders as S. M. Kirov (head of the Leningrad party organization and CC secretary), A. A. Zhdanov (CC secretary), A. V. Kosarev (head of the Komsomol), and of course Stalin himself. He joined the ranks of those who not only selected and vetted senior personnel posts; he was now part of the senior team that finally blessed or rejected appointments. He was rubbing shoulders with the top brass, some of whom he now addressed (and who addressed him) with the familiar "Kolya," or as "*ty*."[45] His reputation for knowledge and hard work now led the highest leaders—including Stalin himself—to routinely refer various matters to Yezhov for his advice. Yezhov's archive and other archival sources contain many letters and memos addressed to Stalin, Kaganovich, Molotov, and others, which they forwarded to Yezhov with handwritten margin notes like, "Comrade Yezhov! Your opinion? Kaganovich" or "to Comrade Yezhov. What's this all about? I. S. [Stalin]" or "Comrade Yezhov, what to do about this? I. Stalin."[46]

Membership on the Orgburo was a recognition of Yezhov's status; no longer merely a staffer (however powerful), he had become a visible grandee and now appeared to the party masses and general public as a powerful *boyar* of the inner circle. Party officials began to associate themselves with him. Lavrenty Beria, who didn't know Yezhov well but was good at ingratiating himself, knew a rising star when he saw one and began to address letters to "Dear Comrade Kolya!"[47]

As a senior notable, Yezhov was now a source of patronage and favors, regardless of his formal areas of responsibility, in a system of personalized politics. Bukharin wrote to him for help getting a dacha, having failed to solve the problem through the regular Moscow administration. The former oppositionist Alexander Shliapnikov wrote to him for help in arranging medical treatment. Shliapnikov's wife asked for a new job. (Yezhov wrote on her letter, "We have to help and find her work.") David Kandelaki, the Soviet trade representative in Germany, first wrote to Yezhov's wife asking her to approach her husband about a dacha for Kandelaki's mother. He then wrote directly to Yezhov, who wrote to his secretary, "Comrade Ryzhova: Take care of this and let me know ASAP!" Kandelaki's mother soon got a four-room apartment.[48]

Soviet Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov was feeling smothered by what he considered excess bodyguard security while traveling abroad. But rather than write to NKVD chief Yagoda, who was responsible for such matters, Litvinov bypassed the police and wrote directly to Yezhov with a personal appeal for flexibility. Even though Yezhov had no formal responsibilities in this area, he intervened.[49] Also perhaps sensing Yezhov's personal power, Ivan Akulov too bypassed the police and wryly wrote directly to Yezhov:

> Dear Nikolai Ivanovich,
>
> I am forwarding you an envelope in which I received a letter. I would like to direct your attention to the extremely careless way the NKVD intercepted the letter: the envelope was ripped and the postmark all messed up. If the organs of the NKVD consider it proper to intercept letters addressed to a member of the Buro of the KPK and member of the government, perhaps they should do their work carefully.
>
> With strong handshake, Ivan Akulov[50]

People who saw Yezhov's name in the papers wrote to him trying to establish kinship or establish long-forgotten (or imaginary) acquaintance: "Comrade Yezhov, I don't know if you remember me, but . . ."

One L. F. Sudnitsin wondered whether they were related. Another comrade wrote from Kazan, purportedly asking for nothing except to be "remembered":

> Allow me, a former Red Army man from the detachment in which you were commissar, to congratulate you on your new post and wish you all success in work and health for many years. . . . I am proud of you, my former commissar, and joyous that I knew such a person and will be even happier if you, dear Nikolai Ivanovich, would remember me and in your spare time jot down two or three words to me about yourself and your health—I could not wish for more. . . . I am not writing about myself, and will only say that after demobilization from the Red Army I became a state employee living in Kazan the whole time. Now I'm working in the Tatar supply administration, but that's not important.[51]

Other letters came from various people recalling their real or imagined party and Civil War service together.[52] Citizens now began to write to him, as they did to Stalin and the other senior party figures, with complaints and requests for assistance and personal intervention on jobs, pensions, permission to travel abroad, and the like.[53]

Nobody had petitioned Yezhov when he was working in Raspredotdel, even though he had been powerful. Everyone understood the system to be one of personal patronage and favors, and it was now logical to write him as one of the public party elders for help in solving problems and cutting across bureaucracy.

We have also seen that in the power system of the Bolsheviks, one's place in the hierarchy put one in a position to resolve disputes at a corresponding level. In fact, formal position in the Bolshevik hierarchy operated less as the ability to make or oppose policy than as a marker or credential as a judge of disputes among a certain category of officials. In Yezhov's Orgraspred/Raspredotdel work, we saw how he moderated and judged disputes about personnel at the middle provincial and central levels. Now he continued to referee disputes below the top levels,

but as a member of the Orgburo and the KPK, he was now empowered to resolve personal and personnel disputes among senior party notables at a higher level than he could before. These 1930s disputes resembled the personal *skloki* (spats) of the early 1920s. Then, Yezhov was a participant; now he adjudicated them.[54]

In 1934 the KPK created a network of plenipotentiaries, each of whom was dispatched to a region or province to check on the work of regional party committees and ensure the "fulfillment of decisions," as the current phrase had it. These Stalinist *intendants,* representing an inquisitive Moscow center, almost immediately came into conflict with the local leadership in the person of the provincial party First Secretary.[55] Because a KPK plenipotentiary and territorial First Secretary were both powerful figures, disputes between them had to be adjudicated at a high level, and as a KPK and Orgburo member, Yezhov found himself in that role. Complaints from both KPK plenipotentiaries and party first secretaries landed on his desk.

From Rostov, First Secretary B. P. Sheboldaev complained in a letter to Yezhov and Stalin about the high-handed and secretive activities of a KPK representative named Brik, who according to Sheboldaev was end-running him and tattling directly to the CC. "Sometimes we find out what he is doing only when he makes a speech to the kraikom plenum!" Yezhov ruled that Brik should continue his investigations but keep Sheboldaev informed on his investigations. Later, Yezhov had to transfer Brik out of Rostov to pacify Sheboldaev. Brik's KPK replacement, one Shadunts, fared no better and also had to be rotated out. In Kazakhstan, First Secretary Mirzoian complained about KPK representative Sharangovich. In Sverdlovsk, First Secretary I. Kabakov complained that KPK representative Paparde was rude. Yezhov ruled that Paparde should continue his serious investigations of the economy in Sverdlovsk, but should be less rude and forceful. In his notes on conversations with his KPK boss, L. M. Kaganovich, Yezhov said that they would have to shift and rotate their KPK people.[56] Brik, Sharangovich, and Paparde were all rotated to other provinces to mitigate conflicts.

The worst conflict would come in Kuibyshev, when KPK inspector

Frenkel secretly informed Stalin and Yezhov of First Secretary P. P. Postyshev's "bad work" and "purely one-man style of work." Postyshev was a powerful personality. He had been a secretary of the Central Committee and was currently a candidate member of the Politburo. Postyshev retaliated by not only refusing to let Frenkel speak at party meetings but threatening him personally: "If you criticize us, we will criticize you. . . . We should give you orders and you should carry them out. . . . I have the right to give you orders and you are obligated to hear them and not to play here at independence. . . . You can write [to Moscow] if you want, but I recommend that you don't do it. It's very lofty there and you could break your legs."[57] Yezhov removed Frenkel.

This struggle between regional party first secretaries and KPK plenipotentiaries brings the personalized nature of Stalinist politics into clear focus in two ways. First, formally and by statute, the KPK representatives had a right to investigate and criticize the party secretaries. The institution of the KPK in 1934 was accompanied by Stalin's pointed criticism at the same 17th Party Congress of those regional secretaries who acted like "feudal lords," so it would seem that the KPK inspectors had not only the law but Stalin's sanction on their side. Were this a rule-bound system of prescribed powers, their criticisms should have won the day. But the regional party secretaries were in fact powerful barons. Nearly all of them were veterans and heroes of the Revolution, the Civil War, and the struggle against the opposition groups of the 1920s. They had carried out collectivization and five-year plans and were masters of their territories, controlling agriculture, industry, police, employment, and budgets in their realms. Many of them were themselves Central Committee members. By contrast, the KPK plenipotentiaries were lesser personalities who in a personal conflict, regardless of the rules and regulations, were no match for the secretary notables.

Second, the very process of conflict resolution in such cases speaks to the personalization of politics. On paper, according to the KPK statute, such conflicts were to be adjudicated institutionally by "appeal to the Central Committee." But in fact, this meant resolution by a powerful personality: a Central Committee secretary and Orgburo member like