YEZHOV

The Rise of Stalin's "Iron Fist"

J. Arch Getty &
Oleg V. Naumov

YEZHOV

"Using recently 'unsecreted' documents, J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov reconstruct the extraordinary career of Stalin's executioner, Nikolai Yezhov. The man who gave his name to the Great Purges—*Ezhovshchina* in Russian—is revealed as a talented, ambitious party bureaucrat whose skills in the appointment of personnel led eventually to the job of top policeman. There he supervised and promoted the decimation of both elite and rank-and-file Soviet citizens—monstrous deeds by a rather ordinary person. This Soviet Eichmann fabricated the crimes of his victims in the dark reign of Joseph Stalin in the belief that the Soviet system was threatened by a vast conspiracy."
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"*Yezhov* is based on very thorough research, bringing to light many new and dramatic sources from the archives. The historiographical originality and verve of the work will make it an instant classic."
—**Lynn Viola,** author of *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements*

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J. ARCH GETTY AND OLEG V. NAUMOV

With the assistance of Nadezhda V. Muraveva

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Soviet Organizational Acronyms and Abbreviations

CC	Central Committee. See also TsK
CCC	Central Control Commission. See TsKK
ChK (CHEKA)	Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-revolution and Sabotage (1918–22). Political police; predecessor of GPU, OGPU, NKVD, MGB, KGB
gorkom	City Committee of the VKP(b)
GPU	State Political Directorate attached to the Council of People's Commissars (SNK) of the USSR. Successor to CHEKA and GPU and predecessor of NKVD
GUGB	Main Administration for State Security of the NKVD of the USSR
IKKI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
kolkhoz	Collective farm
Komintern	Communist International (1919–43), an international revolutionary proletarian organization to which the Communist Parties of various countries belonged

Komsomol	All-Union Leninist Youth League (VLKSM), a party organization for young people in the USSR
KPK	Commission for Party Control attached to the Central Committee of the VKP(b)
kraikom	Regional Committee of the VKP(b)
MOPR	Central Committee of the International Organization for Assistance to Revolutionary Fighters
Narkomvnudel (NKVD)	People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
Narodnyi Komissar (Narkom)	Head of a People's Commissariat; equivalent to minister
obkom	Provincial committee of the VKP(b)
OGPU	Unified State Political Directorate attached to the Council of People's Commissars (SNK) of the USSR. Successor to CHEKA and GPU and predecessor of NKVD
Orgburo TsK VKP(b)	Organizational Bureau of the CC of the VKP(b)
Orgraspred	Organizational-Distribution (Personnel) Department of the Central Committee
ORPO	Department of Leading Party Organs of the CC of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)
Politburo TsK VKP(b)	Political Bureau of the CC of the VKP(b)
Prezidium TsKK (or KPK)	Supreme Governing Organ of the Central [after 1934, Party] Control Commission of the VKP(b)
Raspredotdel	Personnel Distribution Department of the Central Committee
TsIK	Central Executive Committee of Soviets
TsK	Central Committee of the Party
TsKK	Central Control Commission of the VKP(b)
VChK	All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage (1918–22)
VKP(b)	All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)

Notes on Terminology

In transliterating from Russian to English we use the Library of Congress system, except for proper names, for which we adopt the form familiar to Western readers (Trotsky, not Trotskii, etc.)

In the 1930s the Communist Party was known as the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) [Vsesoiuznaia Kommunisticheskaia Partiia (bol'shevikov)], or VKP(b) in its Russian acronym. In practice, its highest policy-making body was the Politburo, which in the 1930s consisted of roughly ten full (voting) members and five candidate (nonvoting) members. In the beginning of the period covered by this study, the Politburo met about once per week; by the end of the period it was meeting about once a month. Each meeting technically had dozens or even hundreds of items on the agenda, but increasingly these were decided without formal meetings, by polling the members. Politburo meetings produced protocols, which are outlines of the questions discussed, often with an indication of the decision reached and sometimes with attachments or appendixes. Other top party committees included the Secretariat and the Orgburo, both of which were largely concerned with personnel assignments.

The Central Committee of the VKP(b) (of which the Politburo, the Orgburo, and the Secretariat were formally subcommittees) consisted

in the 1930s of about seventy full voting members and about seventy candidate members. A meeting of the Central Committee (CC) took place from two to four times a year and was known as a plenum. Minutes (stenograms) were taken at CC plena, and many of them are available in Russian archives.

Below the level of the CC, the party was divided into a hierarchy of regional party committees based on provinces, territories, districts, and places of work. These bodies also conducted meetings (plena) but the real work was usually done in an inner executive committee known as a buro.

Parallel with this hierarchy, and subordinated to the Central Committee, was another structure of party committees known as the Party Control Commission (KPK). The KPK was charged with various kinds of inspection and discipline in the party apparatus. Its mission was to investigate and punish cases of ideological deviance, corruption, and violation of party rules.

A parallel state apparatus was formally separate from the party but in reality subordinated to it. The ostensible government of the USSR was in fact closely controlled by the party and was used to implement and execute party decisions. The state structure was topped by a Congress of Soviets with hundreds of delegates; formal legislative power resided in a Central Executive Committee (TsIK) of Soviets, consisting of several dozen members. Day-to-day administration and confirmation of legislation at this level was conducted by the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee, whose chair served as nominal president of the USSR. Below the Central Executive Committee and formally subordinated to it was the government cabinet, known in this period as the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom), which consisted of ministers ("commissars") representing various branches of the economy and state administration. Finally, below this central state structure was a hierarchy of elected provincial, city, and district soviets that might be thought of as organs of local administration.

The territorial structures and designations of the USSR can be confusing. The USSR was a union of republics, with each republic being the

political organization of a nationality. The Russian Republic (RSFSR) and the Ukrainian Republic (USFSR) were the largest of a series of "states" that included Belorussians, Georgians, Armenians, Uzbeks, and the other constituent peoples of the USSR. The RSFSR was clearly the most powerful, and its administration overlapped in general with that of the USSR.

Each republic was divided into regional units, each of which was known as an oblast' (province) or a krai (territory). Thus at various times in the 1930s, the RSFSR consisted of between seventy-five and ninety provinces and territories. Although technically all republics were on an equal footing, in practice the status attached to a major province or territory of the RSFSR was equal to that of a non-Russian republic. The next subdivision (into which provinces and territories were divided) was known as a raion (district). Districts could be rural or urban, perhaps roughly equivalent to counties or boroughs. Cities had separate administrations that fell between district and provincial or territorial level.

Republics, provinces, territories, cities, and districts each had party committees, party control commissions, and state bodies. Their titles and acronyms and the translations used in this book are summarized below:

Russian territory	English usage	Political organization	Abbreviation
oblast'	province	provincial (party) committee	obkom
		provincial (party) control commission	oblkk
		provincial (state) executive committee	oblispolkom
krai	territory	territorial (party) committee	kraikom
		territorial (party) control commission	kraikk or kkk
		territorial (state) executive committee	kraiispolkom

(*continued*)

Russian territory	English usage	Political organization	Abbreviation
gorod	city	city (party) committee	gorkom
		city (party) control commission	gorkkk
		city (state) executive committee	gorispolkom
raion	district	district (party) committee	raikom
		district (party) control commission	raikk or rkk
		district (state) executive committee	raiispolkom

A Note on Sources

The vast majority of documents used or cited here are from the Russian State Archive for Social-Political History (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii, RGASPI), which is the former Central Party Archive of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (TsPA IML pri TsK KPSS). Russian archival documents are cited and numbered by collection (*fond* or f.), inventory (*opis'* or op.), file (*delo* or d.), and page (*list* or l. or in plural, ll.): for example, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 165, d. 47, l. 3.

INTRODUCTION

Constructing the Commissar

Nikolai Ivanovich Yezhov was head of the Soviet political police (NKVD, or People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) in the 1930s during the worst period of the Great Terror. As People's Commissar (minister) for Internal Affairs from September 1936 to November 1938, he was appointed by Joseph Stalin to carry out millions of arrests, imprisonments, deportations, and executions associated with the terror.

Even had he not been involved in such terrible events, his career trajectory would have made him worthy of historical notice. At the apogee of his power, he held so many key positions that, after Stalin, he was the most powerful man in the USSR. In addition to his NKVD post, he was a member of the Bolshevik Party's Central Committee and sat on its three powerful subcommittees—the Secretariat, the Orgburo, and the Politburo—as well as the inner security subcommittee of the Politburo. He was head of the Party Control Commission and a Presidium member of the Supreme Soviet and of the Communist International. His speeches arraigned, his investigations framed, and his staged trials brought down some of the most prominent members of the Lenin-era generation of "Old Bolsheviks."

During his meteoric career, poets wrote to and about him; school-

children sang songs about him; towns, schools, and districts were named for him. Dinamo Stadium in Kiev became Yezhov Stadium. His presence graced the most important ceremonial occasions. As the elderly Kazakh poet Dzhambul sang,

> Reaching the age of one hundred, old Dzhambul
> Heard the swelling sound on the steppes.
> The million-voiced resounding word
> Will fly from the people to the fighter Yezhov:
> Thank you, Yezhov, that, raising the alarm,
> You stood on guard for the country and the leader![1]

Millions may or may not have shouted their gratitude to him, but after two years at the very center of the Soviet limelight, Yezhov suddenly vanished from the public eye without a trace.[2] Even in the controlled and closed information system that was Stalinism, some reason was almost always offered to explain the sudden fall of a prominent figure. But unlike other key party leaders whom Stalin liquidated, Yezhov was never publicly accused of anything. After early 1939 he was simply never mentioned again publicly during Stalin's lifetime. Unlike L. D. Trotsky or N. I. Bukharin, his name was never dragged through the mud, and he was never labeled an enemy of the people. Millions of Soviet citizens who came of age after the 1930s had never heard of "Stalin's iron fist," although they certainly knew the name of his successor at the NKVD, Lavrenty Beria, who had arrested Yezhov and supervised his extermination. It was not until Nikita Khrushchev launched his de-Stalinization campaign in the 1950s that Yezhov's name was officially uttered. Even then, there were only fleeting mentions of him until the Gorbachev period. His career was meteoric: a striking and swift rise apparently from nowhere, followed by a short but brilliant flight and a quick burnout.

This is not a book about the Great Purges of the 1930s in the Soviet Union. Insofar as currently declassified Soviet archival material permits, that ground has been covered by numerous studies, both old and

recent.[3] Instead, this study seeks to examine Yezhov's career leading up to the point at which he took over the NKVD in 1936. Where did Yezhov come from?

We share a methodology with other studies that focus on early life and career of important historical figures.[4] Unlike them, however, our approach is not psychohistorical. Our focus here is on the "times and life" of Yezhov, rather than vice versa. Our attention is drawn not only to him as a person, but to what his rise might tell us about the Soviet system. We will examine him not only as a personality but as a product of his times and in relation to the political and social matrixes in which he functioned. Because Yezhov's life touched so many locations crucial to Soviet history (the 1917 Revolution, the Civil War, provincial administration in non-Russian areas, personnel administration, agriculture, industry, and police matters), following that career will also allow us to make some conclusions about Soviet social and political history in general. To tell his story is to unfold the first two decades of Soviet history. Accordingly, our story of Yezhov's early career organizes itself around three related biographical questions, each of which poses a larger systemic historical question about the origins of Stalinism. Our questions thus come in pairs, a biographical one and a historical one.

First, was Yezhov just Stalin's pawn? What was the scope of power for politicians working under a dictator?

The standard interpretation of Yezhov's career is simple: he was nothing more than a dimwitted and obedient tool, nothing more than Stalin's obedient executioner mindlessly carrying out a terror under the close control of the master. The tool did its work and was discarded when no longer needed.[5] This version is implausible and ahistorical on its face. Here Yezhov is not a person but rather a faceless instrument. He has no background, no independent experiences, no options or opinions. He takes no decisions or actions and makes no career choices that influence anything or anybody. He has no real existence, no agency, and is a kind of tabula rasa on which Stalin wrote. This story looks backward from his two-year career as police chief and sees nothing.

We shall see that this view has little to do with the available evidence. In fact, Yezhov was an intelligent, hardworking and ideologically committed official with a shrewd sense of the politics of handling those above as well as those below him. We shall see that Yezhov was not a mindless cipher who suffered a mysterious personality change into a robot, and at the end of our story, we will see him actively manipulate even Stalin in order to get what he wanted: leadership of the Soviet secret police.

Of course, Stalin's lieutenants all carried out his policies. But as powerful politicians in their own right, they had considerable space for maneuver, patronage, intrigue against one another, in general conducting their own politics within the limits of Stalin's General Line. We shall see that the politics of implementation can be just as significant as those of policy formulation. No one at Yezhov's level was merely a tool.

Second, how did Yezhov climb the ladder? How did one rise and prosper in Stalinist administration?

The standard view is that Yezhov, a pleasant enough fellow in his youth, was spotted early on by Stalin, who identified him as an instrument for terror and sponsored his career for years. In fact, as we shall see, Yezhov pulled himself up the ladder by means of his own considerable abilities and by mastering the Stalinist "rules of the game." We will watch him directing the most crucial elements of Bolshevik administration: personnel selection and patronage.

This was a system of personalized politics.[6] The rules of the game in Stalin's time had to do with how one maneuvered in a matrix of personal relationships. The Stalinist political system relied on bureaucracy far less than on charismatic, personalized politics from top to bottom. Yezhov steadily rose through a system governed by these rules.

He became the party's leading expert in "cadres," or personnel selection. Political practice at various levels was a matter of using personal contacts, refereeing between personalities, and adjudicating disputes more than it was about policy formation or execution. In such a system, a hardworking official with career expertise in personnel selection and skill at negotiating disputes within a personalized system would be-

come a very powerful person indeed. Yezhov had these qualities; they were the same ones that had helped Stalin rise to power.

Third, who could do these things; what did he believe? How did Stalinist Bolsheviks see the world in general?

It is tempting to think that Stalinist leaders were completely cynical politicians who could not possibly have believed in such widespread conspiracies of traitors, spies, and saboteurs; they could not have believed what they said.

In fact, Yezhov was not an amoral careerist, and he took ideology seriously. When he had time to read, he read Lenin. Belief involves complex processes of identity shaping and formation and the creation of personal subjective meaning. We shall see, for example, that as a radicalized worker in a time of revolution and civil war, Yezhov's early experiences and attitudes and those of his generation can explain much about conflict and brutality of the subsequent Stalin period. He believed what he said and believed in what he did.

Who was Nikolai Yezhov? Where did he come from? Was he, like Hannah Arendt's Adolf Eichmann, striking only for his banality, his ordinariness? Historians have been able to learn little about the origins of this enigmatic figure and his career, aside from a skeletal outline of the posts he held (and disregarding contemporaneous hagiography). The secondhand sources available to us, which are mostly memoirs of people who briefly knew him, are contradictory. Some call him a "malignant dwarf," like a "Moscow street urchin." Others, including the relatives of some people he arrested, thought him "charming," "courteous," "honest," and a "good party worker." Even the surviving photographs of him are contradictory; his image in newspaper photos sometimes suggests a man with a wide head, prominent ears, and mussed hair. Other photos show him with a handsome face and styled hair. During his period of prominence (and unlike many leaders of lesser stature), he never wrote collections of speeches or articles. A long book he wrote on the sins of Stalin's enemies was never published.

Despite some recent publications, he remains a historical phantom.

In the past few years, one scholarly biography and several popular books and articles on Yezhov have been published.[7] Although they are of varying quality, even the best of them concentrates on his tenure as head of the NKVD, 1936–38, virtually ignoring the 90 percent of his life that led up to it.[8] Based on a close reading of documentary materials, primarily from the Communist Party and Yezhov's own archives, this book is meant to trace his life and career leading up to that ominous NKVD appointment in 1936.

Because of the amount of contradictory speculation about Yezhov, it seems particularly important to bring the tools of careful source criticism to bear on the problem. Our close focus on archival materials, however, does not mean that we take them at face value, or that we shall exclude other sources, which will be incorporated as warranted. Because of the Bolsheviks' starkly utilitarian attitude toward truth (which was always defined as that which served the party's interests), it is always dangerous to read their documents uncritically, and nobody does. On the other hand, to assume that Stalinist archives are by their nature filled with lies is also wrong. Soviet archival documents were written for internal consumption and use, rather than for propaganda; they were the fuel that made the bureaucratic machine run. It would have been pointless and stupid for bureaucrats to lie to one another outrageously and constantly (and it was particularly dangerous to lie to Stalin), because they had jobs to do. Of course, like all archival documents, each was written by someone for a purpose; each had a specific vocabulary and discursive style. By carefully asking of them the same kinds of critical questions we ask of all primary sources, we can learn a great deal.

By contrast, we avoid reliance on literary accounts, which come in three genres: popular Soviet journalism since the late 1980s, memoirs, and "testimonies" about Yezhov beaten out of victims by police interrogators after his fall. Even if elements of them ring true, lacking independent confirmation we cannot know which parts to trust. Journalistic articles are undocumented collections of stories and rumors. Memoirs of those who knew Yezhov, few as they are, are important

sources. Molotov's recollections, for example, although self-serving and recorded decades after the events they recount, are more important sources because he knew and worked with Yezhov. Memoirs of those who had no contact with him or who were far removed from the seat of power, whatever their other merits, are at best less important, at worst, unverifiable speculation. They may contain poignant and revealing material but cannot be taken as primary sources for our subject. The veracity of the dubious and fantastic testimonies of Yezhov's friends and lieutenants given under torture should speak for itself. Despite elementary rules of source criticism, such sources are commonly used even in scholarly works on Yezhov today. They deserve the most strict critical treatment because of their ideological and self-serving nature, and we are very chary of them.

Despite the availability of Yezhov's personal archive, on which much of this study is based, we have little to go on in trying to flesh out his personality.[9] His archive consists of 287 files, each containing from twenty to five hundred documents, with an average of about two hundred pages per file. It seems to have been formally cataloged only in May 1991 by the staff of the General Department of the Archive of the President of the USSR. At that time, the archive was organized into files (*dela*) which were sorted into sections (*razdely*) according to Yezhov's activities at various times. Some of the files are irregular, consisting of card files, book manuscripts, bundles of photographs, and in one case, a large leather briefcase. The archive does not cover all aspects of Yezhov's activities but rather falls into the category of a personal archive (*lichnyi fond*), strictly defined and accordingly "sanitized." As the archivists' introductory notes make clear, materials were removed from the archive and transferred elsewhere. These transfers include materials properly belonging in archives of other persons and, regrettably, important documents of an "operational character" belonging in the still-closed institutional archives of the agencies where Yezhov worked (KPK and NKVD, for example). The available archive, therefore, consists of the personal documents Yezhov decided to save, copies of working documents he wanted to keep personally, and copies of the corre-

spondence he received. Many of the documents bear Yezhov's handwritten instruction to his assistants, "put in the personal archive."

Many of these materials suffer from a rather dry official character. Yezhov chose to save very few personal documents in his archive, and we have no diary and few personal letters. We have supplemented the sources in his archive with extensive use of party and state archival materials touching on his life. We searched and made extensive use of archives of the Central Committee's Politburo, the Orgburo, and the Secretariat, as well as those from the party's personnel department and local committees where he worked. We have therefore a good picture of his official life but precious few glimpses into his inner personality. Still, by studying his official correspondence (especially with Stalin and other top leaders), his initiatives, and his reactions to things in the course of his duties, we can get a good picture of him and of his times.

In Chapter 1 we set the stage for an examination of Yezhov's rise by looking at his subsequent peak and fall. The well-known story of his horrifying deeds poses the questions we shall consider about his rise.

In Chapter 2 we introduce Yezhov's life from childhood through the end of the Russian Civil War in 1921. Drafted in World War I into the army, he spent 1917 in the provinces as a Bolshevik factory organizer. His activities as a founder of Red Guards in the provinces and as a political commissar in the Civil War further radicalized and hardened the young Bolshevik.

The subject of Chapter 3 is Yezhov's rise through a series of responsible party positions in the non-Russian periphery: Tataria, Kirgizia, Kazakhstan. His experience with nationalities and his skill in committee work paralleled Stalin's own party trajectory, and we will see something of Bolshevik administration in smaller republics of the USSR.

In Chapter 4 we discuss the origins and formation of the party's personnel assignment system, which was perhaps the most vital part of Bolshevik administration and in which Yezhov would play an important, and ultimately leading role.

In Chapter 5 Yezhov comes to the capital, where he found work in that system. Again distinguishing himself as an efficient administrator,

Yezhov took charge of many key personnel assignment recommendations.

In Chapter 6 we find Yezhov hard at work in the mechanics of party personnel administration. In 1929, when Stalin took the monumental decision to collectivize agriculture, he chose Yezhov to oversee personnel appointments in the new USSR Commissariat of Agriculture. The following year Yezhov was moved back to a reorganized party personnel office, this time as chief of distribution and assignment of all party personnel.

Yezhov's investigation of the assassination of Politburo member Serge Kirov is at the center of Chapter 7, along with his subsequent administration of the investigation of the NKVD. At the same time, he began carefully to angle and maneuver for Genrikh Yagoda's job as chief of the NKVD.

In Chapter 8 we discuss Yezhov's administration of the 1935 purges that followed the Kirov assassination: a new screening of the party membership and an offensive against Avel Yenukidze, a high-ranking Bolshevik leader.

In Chapter 9 we see Yezhov conduct a series of adroit maneuvers to finally undermine NKVD chief Yagoda and take over the leadership of the NKVD.

ONE

Epilogue as Prologue

THE COMMISSAR AT WORK

On 25 September 1936 Nikolai Ivanovich Yezhov, a pleasant and friendly little man who danced well and entertained guests with a fine baritone singing voice, was appointed head of the Soviet secret police (NKVD). He was a forty-one-year-old former factory worker and the son of a worker, born in 1895, the year that Marconi invented radio, Gillette perfected the safety razor, and Roentgen demonstrated X-rays. Yezhov was younger than the Stalin generation of Old Bolsheviks that controlled the party—Joseph Stalin was sixteen years his senior—but roughly the same age as the younger cohort of Stalinist insiders. He was two years younger than L. M. Kaganovich, one year younger than Khrushchev, and one year older than A. A. Zhdanov. He was three years older than Chou En-Lai, two years younger than Mao Zedong, six years younger than Hitler, and eleven years older than Adolf Eichmann. He was four years older than his successor-to-be, L. P. Beria.

Yezhov was known as a quiet fellow, a modest, self-educated former worker whom friends called "Nicky the bookworm." His predecessor at NKVD, Genrikh Yagoda, was widely disliked and distrusted as a venal and corrupt cop (a "reptile," as one of Stalin's lieutenants called him),

who blackmailed his subordinates into obedience and who fabricated cases against innocent victims.[1] Yezhov, on the other hand, had made his career in the Communist Party, not in the police. He had long been a personnel specialist there; he knew everyone and everyone liked him. It was widely assumed at the time that an honest party man with a good reputation would restore honest supervision to that nest of crooked cops, would refuse to fake cases, and would generally clean up the NKVD. N. I. Bukharin, a leading former anti-Stalin dissident who knew Yagoda's frame-ups, thought that Yezhov would not fabricate cases.[2] One of Stalin's lieutenants called Yezhov a "solid party worker," and another wrote to his friend, "Things will go well with Yezhov at the helm."[3] They did not.

As soon as he took over the NKVD, Yezhov put the persecution of former ideological dissidents into high gear. A month earlier he had helped organize the first of the three Moscow show trials, in which sixteen defendants, including G. E. Zinoviev, L. B. Kamenev, and other of Lenin's most well-known comrades had been forced to admit to treason.[4] They pleaded guilty, asked for no mercy, and were all shot. Prosecutor A. Ya. Vyshinsky's concluding speech captures the hysteria of the times:

> Before us are criminals, dangerous, hardened, cruel and ruthless towards our people, towards our ideals, towards the leaders of our struggle, the leaders of the land of Soviets, the leaders of the toilers of the whole world! The enemy is cunning. A cunning enemy must not be spared. The whole people rose to its feet as soon as these ghastly crimes became known. The whole people is quivering with indignation and I, as the representative of the state prosecution, join my anger, the indignant voice of the state prosecutor, to the rumbling of the voices of millions! . . . I demand that dogs gone mad should be shot—every one of them![5]

Yezhov took each spent bullet from the execution, carefully wrapped it in paper, labeled it with the victim's name, and put it in his desk drawer.[6]

To prepare the party for the trial, Yezhov had written a dramatic letter to all party organizations, "Concerning the Terroristic Activity of the Trotskyist-Zinovievist Counterrevolutionary Bloc," dated 29 July 1936. He wrote,

> It can be considered an established fact that Zinoviev and Kamenev were not only the fomenters of terrorist activity against the leaders of our party and government but also the authors of . . . preparations for attempts on the lives of other leaders of our party and, first and foremost, on the life of Comrade Stalin.
>
> Now, when it has been proven that the Trotskyist-Zinovievist monsters unite in their struggle against Soviet power all of the most embittered and sworn enemies of the workers of our country—spies, provocateurs, saboteurs, White Guards, kulaks, and so on, when all distinctions between these elements, on the one hand, and the Trotskyists and Zinovievists, on the other hand, have been effaced—all party organizations, all party members must come to understand that the vigilance of Communists is necessary in every area and in every situation. The indelible mark of every Bolshevik in the current situation ought to be his ability to recognize and identify the enemies of the party, no matter how well they may have camouflaged their identity.[7]

As soon as the 1936 trial was completed, Yezhov began a dragnet of further arrests. Known associates of the trial's leading defendants who had long ago broken with the dissident leaders Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Bukharin were rounded up and subjected to harsh interrogations in the cellars of NKVD prisons. Yezhov bombarded Stalin with transcripts of their interrogations.[8] Through a combination of tactics that included threats to their families, appeals to their party loyalty, sleep deprivation, and physical torture, each was forced to admit to membership in some sinister underground conspiracy and to name other coconspirators. In turn, these others were rounded up and subjected to the same process. The circle of victims from former oppositionist circles expanded rapidly.

The first show trial had featured former leftist anti-Stalin figures Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev as defendants. (Left oppositionists had thought Stalin too conservative.) They were said to have allied with Lev Trotsky, who had been abroad in exile since 1929, to plot the assassination of Stalin and the overthrow of the government. The trail of NKVD interrogations of their former followers gradually led to arrests of former right-wing oppositionists in the fall of 1936. (Right oppositionists, led by Nikolai Bukharin, Aleksei Rykov, and Mikhail Tomsky, had thought Stalin too radical.) By the end of 1936 thousands of former dissidents were under arrest and confessing to all kinds of conspiracies. At the end of the year, Yezhov addressed the Central Committee and directly accused not only the Trotskyists but also followers of Bukharin, Rykov, and Tomsky of being part of the monstrous conspiracy:

> Many attempts were made to carry out terrorist acts of assassination. Comrades, it is well known to you that already at his investigation Zinoviev testified that the rightists Rykov, Tomsky, Bukharin, and Uglanov, at least so far as he knew about it, shared the views of the Trotskyist-Zinovievist bloc in their entirety and were informed of it. . . . Now this has been corroborated not only by the testimonies of Trotskyists and Zinovievists but also by the more concrete cases of the rightists recently arrested. . . . As for the work of the Cheka [NKVD], Comrades, I can only assure you that we shall pull up this Trotskyist-Zinovievist slime by the roots and physically annihilate them.[9]

Yezhov's move against Bukharin shocked the party. The popular Bukharin had been factual coleader of the party along with Stalin in the 1920s. Unlike Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Trotsky, who were considered odious and suspicious has-beens, Bukharin enjoyed a more positive reputation. Lenin had called him the "favorite of the party," and as late as 1936 Stalin called him by the familiar "you" (*ty*).[10] His opposition to Stalin at the end of the 1920s had not been as pointed and insulting as had that of the left. He had made his peace with Stalin quickly, and in

the 1930s was still a prominent and even well-liked leader, a candidate member of the Central Committee, and the editor of the government newspaper *Izvestiia*. Now Yezhov was accusing him of treason. At the following meeting of the Central Committee in February-March 1937, Yezhov renewed his attacks on Bukharin and secured his arrest and interrogation for a future trial.

Meanwhile, Yezhov's police assault on the left continued, and in January 1937 the second show trial featured the former leftist leaders G. Piatakov, K. Radek, and fifteen others in the dock. As in the first trial, the defendants pleaded guilty, and most received death sentences. Referring to Piatakov, Yezhov said, "These swine must be strangled! We cannot deal with them calmly."[11] With the arrest of each former dissident, the circle of suspects widened, and Yezhov ordered the arrest of them all, both leftists and rightists.

With a Bolshevik voluntarism that did not worry about legal niceties, Yezhov recommended brutal punishments for those he arrested. He suggested shooting Piatakov and Radek without any trial. In the fall of 1936 he wrote to Stalin dividing those he had arrested into categories: "The first category, to shoot. . . . The second category, ten years in prison plus ten years in exile. . . . We should shoot a pretty large number. Personally I think that this must be done in order to finally finish with this filth. It is understood that no trials will be necessary. Everything can be done in a simplified process."[12]

Meanwhile, Yezhov had begun to build treason cases against Yagoda's former NKVD leadership. He did this gradually, because to go after all of Yagoda's men would leave the NKVD without experienced officials, and Yezhov needed them for the time being. But slowly he "turned" several of Yagoda's deputies to his cause and then arrested the others. Over the course of the next year, all of Yagoda's former lieutenants would be accused of treason and would join the growing numbers in NKVD jails. Yagoda himself was arrested in March 1937 and joined Bukharin, Rykov, and others in the dock of the third Moscow show trial the following year. Yezhov claimed that all the former NKVD leaders were German spies and is said to have demanded "purging,

purging, and more purging!" More than two thousand of them were arrested, and most of these were summarily shot.[13]

Yezhov drove his interrogators hard to get the maximum number of confessions from those arrested. He ordered his subordinates to prepare invented confessions for those arrested even before the interrogations. He often attended the brutal interrogations personally, exhorting his subordinates to "beat the necessary testimony out of them" and to force the accused to sign the prepared confessions. Later, he changed and edited those confessions to "improve" them. Once when the future Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev visited Yezhov's office, the NKVD chief proudly showed Khrushchev blood spatters on his uniform that he had gotten while attending an interrogation.[14]

Beginning in the spring of 1937, Yezhov turned his attention to persecuting foreign Communists who had sought refuge in Moscow.[15] He ordered the roundup of virtually all former members of long-banned Russian socialist parties (Socialist Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, and others). He also ruthlessly purged the foreign members of the Communist International (Comintern). "The biggest spies are in the Comintern!" he declared, while devastating their foreign delegations resident in Moscow.[16]

At the June 1937 plenum of the Central Committee, Yezhov gave an amazing speech in which he announced the discovery of a grand conspiracy that united leftists, rightists, Trotskyists, members of former socialist parties, army officers, NKVD officers, and foreign Communists. This "center of centers," he said, had seized control of the army, military intelligence, the Comintern, and the Commissariats of Foreign Affairs, Transport, and Agriculture. He claimed that it had its representatives in every provincial party administration and was thoroughly saturated with Polish and German spies. The Soviet government was hanging by a thread![17]

In June 1937 his axe fell on the Soviet military high command. On 11 June the world was shocked by the Soviet press announcement that eight of the most senior officers of the Red Army had been arrested and indicted for treason and espionage on behalf of the Germans and Japa-

nese. The list included the most well-known field commanders in the Soviet military: Marshal M. N. Tukhachevsky (Deputy Commissar of Defense) and Generals S. I. Kork (commandant of the Frunze Military Academy), I. E. Yakir (commander of the Kiev Military District), and I. P. Uborevich (commander of the Belorussian Military District), among others. Arrested the last week of May, the generals were brutally interrogated by the NKVD and had "confessed" by the beginning of June. On 12 June, at an expanded session of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court, all were convicted, and they were shot the same day. In the nine days that followed, Yezhov arrested a thousand military officers. One week later, Yezhov received the Soviet Union's highest decoration, the Order of Lenin, "for his outstanding success in leading the organs of the NKVD in their implementation of governmental assignments." In 1937–38 more than 9,500 officers were arrested, and 14,500 were expelled from the party for suspicious personal connections to conspirators.[18]

The destruction of the party and state elite in the terror defies imagination. Yezhov issued orders "to confine all wives of condemned traitors," and even children over the age of fifteen years who were defined as "socially dangerous" were to be arrested.[19] Lev Kamenev's sixteen-year-old son was executed. Paranoia and xenophobia reached new heights. Yezhov's police arrested anyone who had worked for a foreign firm in tsarist times. Speakers of the international language Esperanto were rounded up. Bird watchers in Leningrad were arrested—could the birds carry cameras to photograph border regions? Stamp collectors with foreign correspondents were put under surveillance and arrested.

In the course of this hysterical hunt for "enemies of the people," Yezhov spared no one. His first boss after the revolution, A. T. Uglov, was shot. Lev Razgon, Yezhov's boss and patron in the 1920s in the party personnel office, was also shot, along with his wife, who had fed the sickly Yezhov in those days. Yezhov personally ordered the arrest and execution of many of his former close friends and colleagues. Ya. A. Yakovlev and Lev Mar'iasin had worked closely and socialized with Yezhov in the 1920s. Yezhov had the latter tortured with particular

cruelty, even ordering him beaten after he had confessed. He ordered the arrest and execution of everyone from his own former doctor to his mistress.[20]

In July 1937 Yezhov turned his attention to purging outside the elite and directed the terror against ordinary citizens. On 30 July he composed the infamous NKVD order no. 447 "Concerning the punishment of former kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements." This order targeted former kulaks (well-to-do peasants exiled in 1930–32), as well as "church officials and sectarians who had been formerly put down, significant cadres of anti-Soviet political parties . . . horse and cattle thieves, recidivist thieves, robbers, and others who had been serving their sentences and who had escaped and are now in hiding. . . . The organs of state security are faced with the task of mercilessly crushing this entire gang of anti-Soviet elements." As he had done in the past, he recommended harsh sentences by category and without trial:

a) To the first category belong all the most active of the above-mentioned elements. They are subject to immediate arrest and, after consideration of their case by the troikas, to be shot.
b) To the second category belong all the remaining less active but nonetheless hostile elements. They are subject to arrest and to confinement in concentration camps for a term ranging from eight to ten years. . . . The investigation shall be carried out in a swift and simplified manner.[21]

Yezhov prescribed "limits" of victims to be persecuted, broken down by province. In his initial order 75,000 were slated for summary execution and another 194,000 for confinement to camps. But by the time Yezhov was finished with this "kulak operation," 385,000 had been shot and 316,000 sent to camps.[22] Nearly all of them were ordinary citizens, not members of the party-state elite. Practically anyone could be caught up in these vague categories, and huge numbers of innocents perished. Yezhov is reported to have told his investigators, "beat, destroy, without sorting out!" When a lieutenant asked what to do with elderly

people who were arrested, Yezhov ordered them shot. Yezhov is said to have told one of his assistants, "better too far than not enough," and "if during this operation an extra thousand people will be shot, that is not such a big deal."[23]

Following the "kulak operation" Yezhov launched a series of "national operations." His NKVD assistants, themselves later arrested, remember him telling them that "everyone should prepare for mass arrests of Poles, Germans . . . and anti-Soviet groups in the party and state apparatus."[24] But it was not only in the apparatus that Yezhov arrested foreigners. In a series of NKVD orders in the second half of 1937, Germans, Poles, Latvians, Estonians, Finns, Greeks, Afghanis, Bulgarians, and others resident in the USSR—and even citizens descended from these nationalities—were targeted for arrest as spies and traitors.[25] In the case of Poles, Yezhov sent out a hysterical circular letter positing the existence of a large-scale Polish Military Organization underground in the USSR that had supposedly "paralyzed" Soviet intelligence. He ordered the arrest of all former Polish prisoners of World War I who had elected to stay in the USSR, all Communist and other political refugees from Poland, all former members of the Polish Communist Party, and "the most active" anti-Soviet citizens of Polish extraction.[26] "The Poles should be completely destroyed!" Yezhov is reported to have shouted to an NKVD conference.[27] In a short time, more than three-quarters of those arrested (more than 111,000 people) had been shot in the "Polish Operation."[28]

Germans slated for arrest included Soviet citizens of German nationality, former German prisoners of war, German political émigrés, inhabitants of German districts, "consular contacts," former personnel of German firms, and others with "ties to Germany." Forty-two thousand were shot in the "German Operation."[29]

Yezhov ordered the NKVD to arrest immediately all Soviet citizens personally connected with diplomatic representatives and visiting either their working or living quarters. The national operations even devastated faraway regions. One hundred seventy thousand Koreans were deported from border regions. In Outer Mongolia, 11,000 were ar-

rested and 6,000 of them were summarily shot. By the end of these "national operations," 247,000 people—almost all of them ordinary citizens—had been shot by lists.[30] In October, Yezhov decided that "as a result of the Polish, German, Korean, Kharbintsy, and other operations, it is clear that all countries are using refugees as spies." He complained that of 6,000 refugees stopped by border guards "only 244" spies have been found. He ordered the NKVD to arrest all refugees in the USSR. "Agents" were to be shot. The remainder, "suspected but not unmasked," were to be sent to prison camps.[31]

The terror that Yezhov administered hit hard among the elite. Ninety-eight of 139 members of the party's Central Committee were arrested, as were 1,100 of the 1,966 delegates to the most recent (1934) party congress. The Military Tribunal of the Supreme Court, which prosecuted most elite victims, passed death sentences on more than 40,000 people in 1937–38. But although the elite was hardest hit, most of the terror's victims were ordinary citizens. During Yezhov's tenure as NKVD Commissar, more than 1.5 million persons were arrested, and about 700,000 of them were shot, mostly without trial.[32]

In March 1938 Yezhov organized the third of the major Moscow show trials, that of Nikolai Bukharin and twenty other prominent officials. As in the other trials, the defendants were accused of fantastic crimes: organizing the assassinations of Soviet officials, for example, and the sabotage of the economy in the service of British, French, German, and/or Japanese espionage services. Yezhov is said to have promised Bukharin and others to spare their lives if they cooperated. But this time things did not go smoothly. Bukharin, while admitting overall responsibility for the crimes, systematically denied personal involvement or guilt, thereby putting the entire spectacle in doubt.

There are signs that by the middle of 1938 the winds were shifting against Yezhov. In April he was named Commissar of Water Transport, while retaining his leadership of the NKVD and the Party Control Commission. The appointment to Water Transport was not an illogical post for a chief of the secret police. The NKVD (and OGPU before it) had always been heavily involved in purging transport agencies and

building canals with forced labor, and Yezhov brought a number of NKVD officials with him to Water Transport. On the face of it, the appointment seemed to be a promotion; he now headed three important agencies: NKVD, the Commissariat of Water Transport, and the Party Control Commission. Still, it could not have escaped notice that when Yezhov's predecessor Yagoda had been eased out of his police position, he was first appointed to a similar post.

In the summer of 1938 several signals pointed to a decline in Yezhov's status. In August, G. Liushkov, NKVD chief in the Far East Territory, fled across the Manchurian border and defected to Japan. A Yezhov intimate and assistant, Liushkov had participated in key police investigations from the Kirov assassination through the purge trials. His defection represented not only a serious security breach but a black mark against his chief.

At the end of August, Stalin brought L. P. Beria from Georgia to be Yezhov's deputy at NKVD. Beria was a career police official, but he was not part of Yezhov's central NKVD circle and represented an outsider inside Yezhov's administration. By the fall of 1938 Beria was signing NKVD documents on his own without Yezhov's approval and had begun his own investigation of a "conspiracy" within Yezhov's NKVD.

In October and November 1938 a special Politburo commission investigated NKVD "abuses" and produced a series of resolutions reining in the NKVD's power. The mass operations of the summer of 1937 were condemned, and henceforth no arrests could take place without the approval of the procuracy.[33] In effect, the NKVD was being blamed for the excesses of the past two years, which Stalin had, of course, authorized. Yezhov felt his power (and Stalin's confidence in him) slipping away. In self-defense, he began to assemble compromising materials on Beria and other Politburo members, including Stalin himself.[34] He began to drink heavily and to stay at home drunk with his cronies rather than going to work. Stalin complained that when Yezhov was needed, he couldn't be found.[35]

Toward the end of 1938, Yezhov's assistants began to be arrested. Beria encouraged them to testify against their boss, and Stalin was sent

the records of their testimony. Yezhov's wife, accused of suspicious contacts, committed suicide. Finally, after a Politburo session in which Yezhov was attacked for protecting enemies, hiding files from Stalin, and neglecting Kremlin security, Yezhov resigned from the NKVD on 23 November 1938.[36] Based on the testimony of his former assistants, Yezhov was arrested on 10 April 1939.

Although we can never know Stalin's motivations in removing Yezhov, we might imagine several. First, and most obviously, Yezhov knew too much about the abuses of the terror and Stalin's role in it. More than that, however, Stalin may have perceived Yezhov as a security risk. When his assistant Liushkov fled to Japan, suspicion fell on Yezhov's circle in general.[37] Liushkov was sure to betray important secrets to Japan. Stalin always believed in the collective responsibility of groups; when one person fell, so did his associates, and the possibility could not be excluded that Liushkov's boss Yezhov had known in advance of his treason. Yezhov's chronic drinking with cronies also held out the possibility that he would babble secrets to those with no business to know them. Stalin may have decided that he could not take the chance that Yezhov's connections might find out too much.

Yezhov spent nearly a year in prison under interrogation. Now victim of the system of forced false confessions he had pioneered, Yezhov humbly admitted to a variety of imaginary crimes based on the fantasies of the investigators: plotting to assassinate Stalin, being a Polish and German spy, homosexuality, and abuse of position, among others. In the farcical rewrite of history that was Yezhov's "testimony," he became a Lithuanian. His father was transformed from a worker into a brothel operator, his mother became a bar hall dancer. The sadistic interrogators must have had a perverse amusement in inventing lurid details of Yezhov's supposed homosexual practices and beating others into admitting engaging in them with Yezhov.[38]

But at his perfunctory trial, he retracted his jailhouse confessions and lashed back. Nevertheless, he really believed in omnipresent conspiracies, spies, and in his righteous behavior:

It is better to die, it is better to leave this earth as an honorable man and to tell nothing but the truth at the trial. . . . During the twenty-five years of my party work I have fought honorably against enemies and have exterminated them. . . . I did not organize any conspiracy against the party and the government. On the contrary, I used everything at my disposal to expose conspiracies. . . .

Coming to the NKVD, I found myself at first alone. . . . After crushing the Polish spies, I immediately set out to purge the group of turncoats. . . . I purged fourteen thousand Chekists. But my great guilt lies in the fact that I purged so few of them. . . .

I request that Stalin be informed that I am a victim of circumstances and nothing more, yet here enemies I have overlooked may have also had a hand in this. Tell Stalin that I shall die with his name on my lips.[39]

We do not know whether he kept that vow, but he was executed by shooting immediately after his trial on 2 February 1940.

What kind of system could produce a Yezhov? What kind of person could do these things? What lifetime prepared him for his terrible deeds of these two years? What did he think he was doing?

TWO

The Making of a Bolshevik

No matter what happened at the factory, he was out front.
Nowadays [1936] we call this efficiency. . . .
What a lively and smart guy.

DRIZUL

It was a hot and muggy St. Petersburg day and the seventeen-year-old boy slipped down the muddy path on his way to work. The factory where he worked was near the coastline of the Gulf of Finland, and even though the plant was near the center of the capital city of the Russian Empire, the way to work passed through stinking slums and marshy low ground that often resembled a fetid swamp. It was easier walking in winter, when the ground froze hard and the mosquitoes did not attack him, but then the damp and frigid howling wind off the gulf cut through his threadbare clothes and made him hurry to get inside the unheated but sheltered buildings of the factory. His father, himself a factory worker, had wanted his son to become a tailor, and as he made his way to the factory's gigantic, stuffy, and dirty shops, he must have wondered about his choice.

Still, Nikolai Yezhov was lucky. First of all, he was alive. Of all babies born to working-class parents, one in four died before their first birthday. Times were hard for workers, who typically spent half their income on food and another quarter on housing and clothing. The overall annual death rate for workers was twenty-three to twenty-six per thousand.[1] Living four persons per room on average, St. Petersburg workers paid the highest rents in the empire. In 1912 the governor general of St. Petersburg warned the tsar, "The most serious sanitary deficiencies continue to remain in the capital." The city lacked any underground system of sewage disposal; cesspools in backyards were the norm, and rubbish was piled on the streets.[2] Seven out of ten workers shared a room, but Nikolai still lived with his parents, and the extra income he brought home kept the family from starving or living in the miserable barracks that housed so many.

Second, Nikolai was lucky to be an urban born, literate Russian in a multiethnic peasant country dominated by Russians. Some 60 percent of the population of the capital were peasants who flocked to the city to take jobs in its rapidly expanding industries. They came in groups from particular villages or provinces, and once in the city they brought village friends and village ways with them. They tended to live together in collectives with others from the same place, baffled by city ways. To the city's longtime residents, they were a dark, rude, ignorant lot who took the most unskilled jobs for the lowest wages. Similarly, tens of thousands of non-Russians were constantly being recruited to work in the city's factories, among them Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Finns, and Jews (who were considered a separate nationality). Anti-Semitism and ethnic intolerance infected the Russian Empire and society from the bottom all the way up to the royal family. Not only was Nikolai a city Russian, he was apprenticed to become a skilled metalworker and therefore on the way to becoming a high-status proletarian of the "class-conscious" variety targeted by radical socialist labor organizers. As with many of his fellows, the proletarian class consciousness so prized by the Marxists did not prevent him from resenting and even detesting the peasants and non-Russians who worked alongside him.

Russians and non-Russians competed for jobs and often found themselves on opposite sides of union struggles; fistfights were common.[3]

Third, Yezhov worked at the "Red" Putilov Plant, the largest factory in the capital, employing some thirty thousand workers. He was proud to be a Putilov worker, to be a participant in the solidarity of Russian factory workers there. The factory's workers had played a major role in the radicalism of the 1905 revolution, and the new legal labor unions (among the concessions Tsar Nicholas II made to revolutionary pressure in that year) quickly took root in the giant plant. The workers there were well organized and prided themselves on their sick fund and strike fund. The anger they felt toward management, indeed toward any authority, led to a tight cohesion, and the young Nikolai felt that he was part of something great and just. And he was not unusually young: two-thirds of Putilov's workers had started work at age fifteen or sixteen, receiving the same bitter, class-conscious education as Nikolai.

There was little love lost between workers and management in most large Russian factories. The hierarchical lines of authority in the plants mirrored those in Russian society at large. As one historian has written, workers "were subjected to immeasurable exploitation, to the unrestrained arbitrary power of the factory administration, both large and small, inside the workplace, and to the savage law of the fist enforced by the tsarist police regime on the outside."[4] Another has noted, "The close propinquity in which rich and poor lived in the central quarters, as well as the greater social and physical distance between privileged and underprivileged in the outskirts, contributed to the crystallization of the class consciousness of at least a minority of skilled workers and to the inchoate, inarticulate, diffuse resentments of the unskilled."[5]

There was a clear class line in the factory. Managers and engineers thought of themselves as members of the intelligentsia, and their self-image caused them rarely to appear on the shop floor or talk to or consult with workers. Those in charge of the factory seemed unconcerned that workers worked ten-hour days in dark and poorly ventilated shops. They provided little or nothing in the way of safety rules or equipment, and Putilov averaged one accident resulting in a worker injury every

two days. Foremen thought of themselves as part of management and bossed the workers around like medieval bailiffs with serfs. Capriciously administered petty fines were inflicted on the workers for even minor infractions, and there was rarely any attempt to reconcile or negotiate disagreements. Workers were angry and resentful and naturally united against the other side. In the words of the veteran worker Ivan Babushkin, "Old methods of struggle die hard; the workers couldn't think of a strike unless it entailed the beating up of a foreman."[6] Riots usually began with workers attacking their factory or mine and the residences and persons of their superiors.[7] As V. A. Giliarovsky quoted a Moscow proletarian,

> And happy-go-lucky directors walk up and down the factory; they don't allow us to buy groceries in other stores: for example, if you want onions, send your son to a factory store to buy on the account of the next month's salary! Cheap and rotten! . . . In the city the factory owner is like a count; he benefits from fines [from workers] and from [selling to them] groceries—so he is winning everywhere. The production also gives him extra percentage; that is, he gets his money from everywhere. "We'll not lose a cent of our own, we'll cheat anyone out of their money. What could be better!"[8]

And as a popular poem had it,

The happiness of life dies.
The people suffer torture.
All day long, from morn to night,
It's "work!" It's "toil!"
The parasites, the bosses,
Beware of them, watch out!
No one appreciates our work,
Our labor's not for us:
He who lives and thrives from it
Is he who tortures us.[9]

Workers "challenged in a variety of ways the all-pervasive authority of factory managers, foremen and petty workshop proprietors." Younger workers were particularly concerned for their dignity and demanded polite address. "It represented a desire for respectful treatment in place of the arbitrary abuse of power by supervisory staff—the foul language, beatings, ill-treatment of women, fines, searches and medical inspection."[10] Because of the peculiar nature of Russian industrialization, their anger was not limited to the shop floor. Economic grievances easily blurred into political ones. Beginning in the 1890s the Russian government had embarked on a program of top-down, state controlled industrialization. Skipping the smaller, gradual stages of spontaneous industrial capitalism that had characterized industrial revolutions elsewhere, Russia plunged headlong into a rapid process that favored large-scale heavy industry from the start. Eager to attract European and American capitalists, the Russian government offered powerful incentives to those investing in or building factories in Russia, including tax breaks, low labor costs, and financial participation with the government itself, generally putting the power of the state at the disposal of management.

In labor-management disputes, the Russian state was never neutral, and more than once saber-wielding Cossacks attacked crowds of strikers. Small wonder, then, that Russian workers saw little difference between factory management and the government. Economic demands could quickly become political. Reformist sentiments never amounted to much in the Russian labor movement, and radical organizers who claimed that only revolt against the establishment could solve the workers' problems got a sympathetic hearing from the sullen and resentful workers in the factories.

Stormy Putilov, and factories like it, were the sites of young Nikolai Yezhov's first education. Born in 1895 into a working-class family, he had dropped out of school after only a year of primary education. In line with his father's ambitions for him, Nikolai seems to have been a tailor's apprentice for a short time. The work apparently did not appeal to him, and at age thirteen or fourteen he went to work in the factories.

He may have left Petersburg for a time; one source has him in Poland and Lithuania at this time, looking for work and working for a time in the Til'mans Factory in Kaunas (Kovno), Lithuania.[11]

Returning to St. Petersburg, Yezhov worked first at the Prelovsky Necktie Factory and then at Putilov. Twenty years later, the Socialist Realist writer Alexander Fadeev claimed that Yezhov was "a genuine son of this most-revolutionary-in-the-world proletariat . . . an active participant on the fighting barricades of Petersburg."[12] Yezhov himself more modestly recalled, "I was no different than any other of the masses, except that I read a lot. I was never a strikebreaker, I participated in strikes, demonstrations and so forth, suffered repression like many others." His friends called him "Nicky the bookworm."[13]

But even as a young teenager, Nikolai participated in radical activities in the factory, taking part in his first strike in 1912, at age seventeen.[14] This action may have been part of the reaction to the Russian government's massacre of striking workers in the Lena goldfields in April 1912, which caused a wave of protest strikes to sweep across the country. For the next twenty-eight months, until the beginning of World War I, Russia experienced a dramatic upsurge of worker radicalism, strike activity, and labor violence that recalled the revolutionary days of 1905. Delegates from the radical Bolshevik faction of the Marxist-oriented Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDRP) replaced representatives of the more moderate Menshevik wing on union committees as workers voted for drastic solutions.[15] The Lena massacre had brought things into sharp relief for Yezhov and his fellows, to whom the struggle seemed black and white. The government was intransigent, the battle lines were drawn, and it had become a matter of violence and killing.

The lesson young Nikolai and his fellows took from this, and indeed the essence of his early education, was that the world was a stark and irreconcilable conflict between "us" and "them." This binary view of the world was not limited to the Russian working class before 1917, and indeed had deep roots in Russian plebeian culture. According to Russian Orthodox traditions (of which Russian socialists and even atheists were

cultural products), there was always a black and white, correct and incorrect, true and false, us and them. "To an unusual degree, the sense of community in Russia was always in opposition to some other group . . . exhibiting a tendency toward a dual experience of the world in terms of 'we' versus 'they.'"[16] We shall see that this binary view of the world would show itself in the deep divisions in Russian society in 1917 and in a particular understanding of democracy during and after the revolutions of that year. Later, in the Soviet period when Yezhov and his generation came to power, it would manifest itself in an intolerance of dissent or any concept of a "loyal opposition," in a view that "enemies" were ubiquitous and ultimately unreformable, and in a conviction (expressed in Nikolai Yezhov's 1935 book manuscript "From Factionalism to Open Counterrevolution") that any dissidence inevitably led to treason. Although these attitudes are often associated uniquely with Stalin, they were in fact shared by a generation of Bolsheviks who came of political age along with Yezhov.

In 1915, as World War I went into its second year, Nikolai Yezhov was drafted into the infantry of the Russian Imperial Army. He was wounded at the front and given a six-month recovery leave. He returned to Petrograd, where he worked again in the Putilov plant, by his recollection, until the end of 1916.[17] At that time he was remobilized, this time into the noncombatant 3rd Reserve Regiment in the rear, first in Petrograd and Peterhof and then in Vitebsk.[18] The Russian government was reluctant to send radical troublemakers to duty at the front, and it is not clear whether his noncombatant status derived from his wounds, political unreliability, or simple good luck.[19] In Vitebsk he was assigned work as a metalworker in the 5th Artillery Works of the Northern Front, where he worked until the middle of 1917.

The overthrow of the tsar in February–March 1917 propelled the country into a frenzy of political activity. Exiled radicals returned from Siberia and from abroad, and political parties appeared or were reorganized into new forms. In the cities and towns of Russia, local soviets representing workers and soldiers competed with moderates and liber-

als and affiliated with the radical Petrograd Soviet or the more moderate Provisional Government in Petrograd, respectively.

The "us" vs. "them" element in Russian social psychology came to the fore in 1917. Several historians have noted that the deep divisions in Russian society between the poor bottom and everyone else were reflected in conflicting loyalties to the Soviet (us) and the Provisional Government (them).[20] One study of documentary texts produced in 1917 shows that "freedom and power both, as should be evident, were often understood in the light of a view of the social and political world as divided between enemies and friends, between others and oneself. . . . We find in these texts a dualistic vocabulary of enemies and traitors on the one side and friends, comrades, and brothers on the other." The "language of otherness" became the "language of class" in 1917.[21] Workers and peasants viewed those above them as an undifferentiated "them," using words like "Junkers" (military officers), "burzhui" (bourgeois), and "pomeshchik" (rural landowner) interchangeably.[22] From the other side of the social abyss, one officer wrote home in 1917 of the lower classes: "When we talk about the narod [the people], we mean the nation as a whole [*natsiia*], but when they talk about it they understand it to mean only the democratic lower classes [*demokraticheskie nizy*]."[23] Such views could bode no good for any inclusive understanding of democracy or equality.

In Vitebsk, as in the capital and elsewhere, political prisoners were freed and a city soviet sprang up parallel with the assumption of administration by representatives of the Provisional Government. The first soviets of 1917 were dominated by moderate leftist or liberal groups with names like Trudoviks, Mensheviks, Bundists, and Socialist Revolutionaries. These stood against a resurgence of tsarism or a takeover by rightist conservatives, and in watchful association with Petrograd's Provisional Government, where liberal Kadet influence was strong.[24] Radicals like Lenin's Bolsheviks or the anarchists had little presence or influence early in 1917, largely because the tsarist police's repression of them had been so thorough during the war.[25]

By all accounts, the twenty-two-year-old Nikolai Yezhov soon became a radical activist in the local Marxist group in Vitebsk. In most towns in 1917 there was little or no formal distinction in Marxist circles between "hard" Bolsheviks and "soft" Mensheviks, and they tended to work together in loose organizations. In Vitebsk the local group was called the RSDRP "Internationalists"—Marxist groups with a strong antiwar stance typically were called internationalists—and like many soldiers, Yezhov quickly joined it. Exiled Bolsheviks soon began returning to Vitebsk, where they found sympathizers among the workers of the 5th Artillery Works and the 4th Aviation Park. Within weeks, some members of the RSDRP Internationalists had renamed themselves "Bolsheviks," although it is not clear that they formed a separate organizational entity until autumn.

The date at which one joined the Bolsheviks would later become a kind of credential for party members, but it is difficult to fix for thousands of other new party members who "joined" in the confusion of 1917. In Vitebsk, as elsewhere, organizations were informal and overlapping. Yezhov would later date his Bolshevik Party membership from March or April 1917, but archival records show him on the rolls and still paying dues to the RSDRP Internationalists as late as August–September of that year. Elsewhere the files indicate his formal entry into the Bolshevik Party in October. Given the fluidity of organizations and their names during the year, there is no necessary contradiction among the dates.[26]

His Putilov past and affiliation with the radical Bolsheviks early in 1917 are not the only signs of Yezhov's radicalism.[27] During the stormy months of the revolutionary year, he devoted himself to politics. He organized Marxist cells and workers' committees in the factory where he worked and was frequently elected secretary of them. He helped organize street kiosks in the city to distribute revolutionary literature. He maintained communication with comrades arrested by the Provisional Government after the crackdown on the left in July.

Yezhov's activities during 1917 in Vitebsk seem to mirror Stalin's in the capital, although the two had never met. The impression is of men

who worked behind the scenes, on committees doing organizational work and coordination. Both were self-taught commoners who had read widely but independently and naturally took to administration; both were probably heavily involved with paperwork in 1917. Neither was a good orator. A fellow worker in Vitebsk later remembered that in mass meetings and rallies, "Yezhov said little. He would say two or three words. He was a laborious orator, and this trait remained with him. He did not love speaking."[28] The same things were said of Stalin. The events of 1917 transformed Yezhov and many plebeian autodidacts like him from workers to politicians, from proletarians to organizers. It is perhaps symbolic of this tremendous social transformation that during the year, Yezhov stopped being listed as "metalworker" on various forms and started being listed as an "office clerk."[29]

But even though he was not a charismatic public "face," Yezhov was not without personality or ability to influence people. His fellows remembered not only his efficiency and tireless work but his enthusiasm and a lively sharp wit, which he directed against particularly unpopular foremen and military managers in the factory. He was, in the memory of a comrade, "everyone's favorite" among the workers and "one of those unique people who always stood at the head. No matter what happened at the factory, he was out front. Nowadays [1936] we call this efficiency. . . . What a lively and smart guy." The same contemporary waxed eloquent to the point of hagiography and remembers Yezhov as a passionate but methodical political worker. "I think he burned, just at the point of exploding, but at the same time logical and consistent." A colorful young man, he went around town in military uniform complete with bandoliers and belts, although his dashing image might have been somewhat reduced by his stature: full-grown, he stood a shade under five feet tall.[30]

Vitebsk was an important town at the time. Its artillery works, where Yezhov worked, was an important defense plant employing more than one thousand skilled workers. The city was the rear supply point for the Russian 12th Army and an important railroad junction. From Vitebsk rail lines went west to the front, and the city controlled the southern rail

approach to the capital. As a place where soldiers, railroad, and factory workers were concentrated, it was also fertile ground for radical organizing. Leftist organizations grew in strength all year, and young Nikolai Yezhov took an active part in forming a Red Guard, or workers' militia detachment, in Vitebsk.

The political, economic, and social crises facing Russia intensified during 1917; the fall of the tsar had in itself done nothing to alleviate the collapse of the economy or the bloodshed at the front. The Provisional Government's reluctance to end the war, embark on land reform, or control prices had led by autumn to the loss of any mass support it may have enjoyed. Finally, in October, a Bolshevik-led coup in the capital overthrew the Provisional Government in Petrograd and placed power in the hands of the soviets, which by now were dominated by the Bolsheviks.

Local soviets also took power in provincial towns, but the process was often more complicated. In Vitebsk in October, the local Bolsheviks already dominated the factory committees and soviet and now used their influence to eject any competitors from political authority in the town. A Menshevik speaker at one of the factory meetings protested the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd; he was physically ejected from the meeting and thrown into the street. Several workers grabbed a broom and demonstratively swept away his footprints "so that none of this bastard's tracks remain."[31] Other stories from around the country recount similar popular violence against moderates.

Although Lenin and his Bolsheviks had taken power in the capital and in several key cities, their regime was hardly secure. It had been ratified by the national Congress of Soviets only after the moderate socialists had walked out in protest, leaving Lenin a voting majority. And it still remained to be seen what position the long-awaited Constituent Assembly would take on the Bolshevik regime. But the most immediate threat to the Bolshevik government was military. In the period after the October Revolution, there was no shortage of military units at the front and near the capital that were commanded by officers hostile to the Bolsheviks. The undisciplined and poorly equipped pro-Bolshevik garrison

and Red Guards in Petrograd would have been no match for a trained and well-equipped unit entering the city. The Bolsheviks sent a barrage of telegrams to their comrades in provincial cities, ordering them to do everything to delay or stop hostile forces from approaching the capital. Nikolai Yezhov had been elected deputy, then leading political commissar, of the Vitebsk railroad station in October.[32] It became his job to help organize these blockades.

Already before October, Yezhov and his fellows had turned back a military force summoned by Provisional Government head A. F. Kerensky to the capital. At that time, the Vitebsk Red Guards had turned the soldiers back with propaganda and fraternization. A more serious challenge arose after October, when a force of several thousand hostile Polish Legionnaires (Polish soldiers attached to the former Russian Imperial Army) approached Vitebsk on the way to Petrograd. The local Red Guards numbered only about three thousand and understood that they would lose any open battle with the Poles, who refused to negotiate or talk with the Vitebsk Reds. The local Bolshevik leaders, Yezhov among them, decided on a combination of "playing to their human feelings" and trickery.

They selected a local Polish woman sympathetic to the Bolsheviks. She led a Red Guard delegation to the Polish camp waving a red flag and declaiming herself to the Polish soldiers as "your sister." It worked: the Poles admitted a half-dozen Vitebsk Bolshevik negotiators. As the discussions proceeded, the Poles could hear and see train after train arriving from Vitebsk. With each arrival, a mounted courier arrived at the talks and asked the Bolshevik commander, one Krylov, where the arriving echelon should deploy. Krylov gave directions each time and returned to the talks. After several such interruptions, Krylov then presented the Poles with an ultimatum: either surrender or we open fire. Convinced that the Vitebsk Bolsheviks must have marshaled several thousand troops in the area, the Poles dispersed. They should have been suspicious that the doors to the train wagons were always closed when in their view. Actually, the trains had been empty; there were no arriving echelons.[33]

Thus at the age of twenty-two, Nikolai Yezhov had played a significant role in defending the Bolshevik Revolution. Histories of 1917 stress the well-known revolutionary leaders in Petrograd or in Moscow who made the headlines and staffed the prominent positions in the new government. But it was provincial radicals like Yezhov who manned key points in the post-October days and provided vital breathing room for the new regime to consolidate itself. Because of Vitebsk's strategic location, Yezhov's position there was one of the most important of these.

Yezhov was one of many radical activists spontaneously thrown up in the chaotic historical upheaval of 1917. Not all of these were Bolsheviks, however, and few of those who played important roles in defense of the Bolsheviks were lifetime professional revolutionaries. Many of them faded into the historical background or were killed in the subsequent Civil War of 1918–21. Many who had been active revolutionaries in October now considered that with a socialist government in power, their revolutionary days were over.

At first, Yezhov seemed to be one of these. After an unsuccessful campaign for a seat in the Constituent Assembly, he returned to life as a worker. After a short time in Petrograd, he moved to Vysshy Volochek, the second-largest industrial town of Tver province, where he found work in the Volotin glassworks. His mother and sister were there, and for more than a year he worked in the factory. Although he was not a professional Bolshevik, he was a consistent rank-and-file member of factory workers' committees, trade unions, and Bolshevik Party cells until 1919, when he was drafted into the Red Army at the height of the Civil War.[34] The sources are silent about why, given the parlous straits in which the Bolshevik regime found itself, Yezhov had not volunteered for army service along with so many of his comrades. It is entirely possible that his short stature disqualified him from military service until the Bolsheviks became desperate and began large-scale conscription.

After being drafted in a "party mobilization" of 1919, Yezhov served for several months in the town of Zubtsov as a "specialist" in a Special Designation Battalion (*osobogo naznacheniia*). Yezhov's autobiographi-

cal sketch is silent about this battalion or his duties in it. Such battalions carried out a wide variety of special tasks, from guarding railroads to punitive operations. Many of them were involved in catching and shooting spies and deserters in cooperation with the secret police (CHEKA), or in preventing unauthorized Red Army retreats by stationing themselves in the rear and shooting those who fell back without orders. Given the generally unsavory reputation of such formations and the silence of those who served in them, it is safe to imagine that Yezhov was involved in missions having to do with intelligence or punitive force.[35]

If so, this preview of his future life did not last long. In August 1919 he was sent to Saratov province on the Volga to help reorganize sagging party organizations among military garrisons, and later that month, in the face of Red Army losses along the Volga, he was evacuated to Kazan, where he was assigned to the 2nd Radiotelegraph Base. He spent the remainder of the war in Kazan, and by his own account never saw combat.[36] Nevertheless, he held a fairly important position, serving first as political commissar of the radiotelegraph school, and from April 1921 as commissar of the entire base, making him effectively second in command. The 2nd Radiotelegraph Base was an important research and training institution for telephone and radio technicians and operators. Professor A. T. Uglov, who had installed Lenin's Moscow telephone system, worked there. During the Civil War, the base graduated nearly eight thousand specialists and was well known throughout the country.[37] During this time, Yezhov also worked as a propagandist for and member of the Tatar Party Committee, based in Kazan.

Once again, Nikolai Yezhov found himself in the midst of a powerful political struggle. The Russian Civil War swept back and forth across the country for three years, killing hundreds of thousands of people. As the pro-Bolshevik "Reds" and anti-Bolshevik "Whites" traded territory in bloody battles, the industrial and agricultural base of Russia was destroyed. In the midst of this, the influenza epidemic of 1918 and recurring typhus outbreaks may have killed more people than the fighting. As agricultural lands were laid waste, famine broke out and a large

number of people starved. Hunger was particularly severe along the Volga, where Yezhov worked, and there were numerous verified reports of cannibalism, even in Kazan.

It was a fight to the death. It was also a time of betrayal. Defection, desertion, and sabotage plagued both sides. Few prisoners were taken, and executions of hostages and civilians were common. Those suspected of treason were routinely rounded up and killed by the Bolshevik secret police, the CHEKA, which originated and grew powerful during the Civil War. Foreign intervention on the side of the Whites led to a kind of siege mentality among the Bolsheviks, in which enemy spies and saboteurs could be everywhere: foreign, domestic, across the front, or even in our midst. The bitter, uncompromising struggle again reduced politics to the simple dichotomy "us" vs. "them." Workers and peasants had long understood the gulf between them on the one hand and the oppressors on the other. Even before the bloodshed started, these lines had hardened in 1917. Already during that revolutionary year we find documents about traitors, enemies, and betrayers and calls to "be merciless with enemies of the people." Even ideas of freedom and democracy in 1917 had been socially specific. "True freedom necessitated silencing the voices of those who opposed the struggles and demands of workers, soldiers, and peasants."[38]

Wars are always brutalizing experiences for those who actually fight them, but in this case the preexisting binary social attitudes both increased and focused the brutality. Shades of political difference and theoretical platforms were forgotten, and each side took the view that one was either for us or against us. And those against us, the enemy, were to be killed.

The writer Isaac Babel traveled with a Cossack cavalry group during the Civil War and has left us with vivid pictures of the brutality of the times. Even though he was a supporter of the Red cause, his class origins made it difficult to fit in with his plebeian comrades. When he arrived at his new Red Army unit, complete with Bolshevik credentials and recommendations, the commander told him: "With spectacles on your nose! Ha, you lousy little fellow, you! . . . Here you get hacked to

pieces just for wearing glasses!" One Cossack told Babel, "Then I started kicking Nikitinsky, my master, I kicked him for an hour, maybe even more than an hour, and I really understood what life actually is. With one shot, let me tell you, you can only get rid of a person. A shot would have been a pardon for him. . . . But there are times when I don't spare myself and spend a good hour, maybe even more than an hour, kicking the enemy."[39]

Babel also witnessed a good bit of mindless violence himself. In one episode, red Cossacks were sorting out prisoners they had taken, trying to decide which were officers and which were soldiers. When captured by the Reds, the officers had shed their uniforms to avoid identification as class enemies. "'Our mothers don't knit drawers like that for us,' he told me slyly. [Then to the prisoners,] 'Your officers threw their uniforms here!' he yelled. 'We're going to have a little fitting now, and whoever the uniforms fit, I'm going to finish off.' He picked out a cap without a brim [a junior officer's cap] from the pile of rags and put it on a lanky man's head. 'It fits,' Golov whispered. He stepped up closer to the prisoner, looked him in the eyes, and plunged his saber into his gullet."[40]

It was a time of brutality in which an entire generation came of age. For those like Yezhov and his peers, the Civil War was their formative education. It taught them that politics (as well as life) was revolutionary and combative, rather than evolutionary and peaceful. It taught a relentless struggle to the death with "them," the class enemy whose Russian and foreign representatives were allied against the people. It taught them that political dispute and difference could best, or even only, be solved with violence and that compromise was treason. "Implacable" and "iron-willed" and "merciless" were to become positive attributes used to describe the "best Bolsheviks."

The profound and bitter struggle of the Civil War had a lingering effect on many levels. First, death and dying at the hands of the enemy produced deeply embedded memories and grudges. Decades later, service (however minor) on the White side was cause for expulsion from the party and arrest. Second, the war militarized the Bolsheviks for years to come. In the following decades, a simple military tunic and

shaved head became the fashion for hard, uncompromising party members, and Bolshevik propaganda long used images about storming fortresses, even when referring to education, agriculture, or other peaceable policies. Third, the paranoia of siege mentality would long remain in the consciousness of Bolsheviks, who drew no distinction between what they regarded as ubiquitous internal and external enemies. Internal conflicts were internationalized (and vice versa) in Bolshevik thinking, leading to the attitude that the party was always at war even when the international scene was peaceful. The enemy never slept, whether in his domestic or foreign incarnations, and the struggle was constant. In the dire conditions of the Civil War, with people dying everywhere, the use of terror did not seem evil or outrageous, as it does to us. In short, we see in the Civil War the genesis of the political outlook and mentalities that would support Stalinism.[41]

So even though Nikolai Yezhov was behind the lines, he was never far from the violence, hatred, and suspicion that were everywhere. In this sense, no place in Russia was really a rear area because conflict, violence, disease, and hunger were everywhere. Even government and party officials, whose lower ranks Yezhov joined in Kazan, were close to the brutality wherever they worked. Yezhov and his fellows remembered being hungry and seeing dead people by the road. They were to remember the masses of starvation victims. Among the major activities and party jobs Yezhov's wife listed on her questionnaires in this period was organizational "struggle against hunger." Even the First Secretary of the Bolshevik Party, Yakov Sverdlov, apparently safe behind Kremlin walls, died of typhus. Nobody was safe in these years, and nobody was shielded from the terrible violence and suffering. It would be a mistake to imagine that Yezhov's service at the radio school was somehow removed from the war, hatred, and mass death.

It was in this terrible milieu that Nikolai Yezhov met Antonina Alekseevna Titova. Two years younger than Yezhov, Titova was Russian born and raised in the Tatar Volga region around Kazan. Her father was a poor tailor who had died of tuberculosis in 1917, leaving a wife and two hungry children. Surviving for a time by working a small piece of

land she rented from a peasant, Titova's mother had recently moved to Kazan with her children. When she finished school and entered the local university in 1917, Titova had gravitated to a circle of local Bolshevik radicals, and she formally joined the party in 1918. She was active in educational-propaganda work for the Tatar party committee. She organized women's party circles along with her mother, who was also a party member, and wrote for local party newspapers. In the middle of 1919 she became an organizer for the local branch of the Chemical Workers' Union, and she became a prominent local party activist at about the time she met Nikolai Ivanovich Yezhov. The two apparently hit it off right away and were married almost immediately, probably in the summer of 1919. The following year, Antonina was promoted to head the Cultural Department of the Central Committee of the Chemical Workers' Union in Moscow. Her work took her back and forth between Moscow and Kazan, where she organized local union conferences and congresses and continued her agitation and propaganda work.[42]

With the end of the Civil War early in 1921, Nikolai was demobilized from the Red Army. At the time he mustered out in June, he moved seamlessly into civilian party work, and there was every reason to believe that his party career was on a fast track. He was soon named the party's chief of agitation and propaganda (*agitprop*) for the Tatar Republic party organization, member of the Kazan city executive committee (city administration), and member of the Tatar Republic executive committee (provincial administration).[43] These posts made him one of the top party and state leaders of the Tatar region and put him on the list of leading officials (*nomenklatura*) whose appointment had to be initiated or confirmed by the Central Committee in Moscow. Moreover, his service as a political commissar during the Civil War would prove to be an important credential, one shared by the likes of such prominent Bolsheviks as L. M. Kaganovich, G. K. Ordzhonikidze, S. M. Kirov, and Stalin himself. In fact, the vast majority of Stalinist Politburo and Central Committee members before World War II had seen Civil War service as political commissars.

Yezhov was thus a member of an elite club, and his career was only

beginning. On 15 February 1922 the party's Orgburo appointed Nikolai Yezhov to the post of "Responsible Secretary" for the Mari regional party organization.[44] On the Volga above Kazan and below Nizhny Novgorod, Mari was not a particularly important province, but this was a big job for a young man. It would be difficult to find in other European countries many twenty-six-year-old provincial governors of working-class origin and with virtually no formal education. Such appointments were not uncommon in these years, and, as we shall see, they speak volumes about the early Bolshevik regime.

Nobody could have imagined that the boy trudging to work in the Putilov factory before 1914 could, in the space of a half-dozen years, become one of a small team running an entire province and climb into the circle of politicians running the entire country. His unimpressive stature and lack of formal education (he would always write ungrammatical and misspelled Russian) might appear to doom him to a life of poverty and obscurity. But the earthshaking turmoil of the Russian Revolution made paupers of the great and catapulted simple people into leadership positions.

Not everyone climbed the ladder, however. Revolution alone did not guarantee power and status. To begin with, one had to have the luck not to be killed or disabled, as so many millions were in the world war and internal strife. Those who survived and benefited from the overturn of society had to exhibit a bundle of qualities that included energy, activism, capacity for hard work, and loyalty. Although Nikolai Yezhov's work history in the party was just beginning and we have little information on his job performance at this stage, his work in the next period of his life would confirm that he had these attributes. With the end of the Civil War, he was placed into positions of power and trust by those above and below him.

Moreover, the same qualities that attracted certain people to the hard and uncompromising Bolshevik positions were reinforced during the terrible storm of 1914–21. Those who followed Lenin tended to be those who saw the world in black and white, friend and foe, proletarian and bourgeois, us and them. Consciously or unconsciously, they felt

that history and human progress (even understood in terms of conditions for workers) advanced and improved through conflict; this they shared with Marx and Lenin. Bolsheviks, especially working-class Bolsheviks, dreamed of turning the tables, overthrowing the upper crust, and building a society of economic and social equality. Such dreams and beliefs had little to do with elaborate theories or the ideas of philosophers. They were elemental parts of plebeian mentality in prerevolutionary Russia, and there is every reason to believe that Nikolai Yezhov shared them. Writing to a friend in 1922 of his comrades in Kazan, Yezhov was proud that "they put their hopes on me thinking I can uphold the class line."[45]

And this complex of attitudes and ways of understanding the world were only reinforced by the Civil War. Horrible as it seems to us, the savagery, brutality, and terror of that conflict were not inconsistent with the worldview of the Bolsheviks who fought through it. Brutality, after all, had always been part of the lives of poor Russians, so the Civil War was different only in degree and severity. Bolsheviks like Yezhov were hard men—even at a tender age—before the time of war and revolution, and that disaster only confirmed and reinforced the ways of their lives.

Although we have precious little information about him as a person, what we do have suggests something other than a monster, a murderer, a brutal soldier-commissar. From those of his fellows who shared his class and experience, we see numerous glimpses of a not unpleasant fellow. Those who remembered him from Putilov, Vitebsk, or Kazan recalled a warm and personable friend, someone with a lively wit and sense of humor. Nikolai Yezhov seems to have been a modest young man without pretense or affectation. He was the first to volunteer and the last to quit; his persistence and diligence would also surround his reputation in the future. And, perhaps oddly for someone as politically hard as he, contemporaries remembered his kindness and generosity. Years later, a fellow soldier and friend from Kazan days recalled riding in a train with Yezhov as he traveled from one assignment to another. Yevgeny Sudnitsyn recalled a friendly fellow whose subordinates called him by his first name, who shared his ration packet with hungry sol-

diers around him, and who loaned money to his traveling companions. Later, when times improved, Yezhov would refuse to accept repayment. Sudnitsyn never became great; he never left Kazan and ended his days as a simple worker in an obscure soviet office.[46] He would have seen no contradiction among a competent administrator, an "implacable" and hard Bolshevik, and a kind and generous young man. For such as Sudnitsyn and Yezhov, there was no conflict between brotherhood and solicitude toward "us," combined with hatred and terror for "them." Such were the people and their times.

When the Civil War ended early in 1921, the Bolsheviks faced truly daunting problems. The country was wrecked; industrial production had collapsed, and hunger stalked the population. A desperate attempt to win the loyalty, or at least neutrality, of the Russian peasantry had forced Lenin and his followers in 1921 to abandon confiscatory policies and immediate socialist dreams and implement a semi-market economy under the rubric of the "New Economic Policy," which would last until the end of the 1920s.

Although the White forces had been defeated on the battlefield, anti-Bolshevik political parties still existed, either legally or underground. Recent uprisings in various provinces and of the Bolsheviks' own supporters at the Kronstadt naval base signaled that violence could break out at any moment. Foreign military detachments had withdrawn by 1921, but the continuing hostility of most other countries, and a recent short war with Poland, also showed that further fighting with foreign invaders was always a possibility.

In order to remain in power, the Bolsheviks were ready to use whatever force was required. The CHEKA, although reorganized and variously renamed, lost none of its powers, and although it had been created in the wartime emergency, it continued to function as the "unsheathed sword of the revolution" in peacetime. Opposition political groups were hounded and arrested, newspapers were closed down, and elections to the soviets at all levels were controlled and rigged to exclude meaningful opposition to the regime. Factional groups within

the Bolshevik Party critical of Lenin's majority were formally banned at the 10th Party Congress in early 1921.

One might think that the transition from revolutionaries to Red soldiers to government officials would have softened plebeian and Bolsheviks "us" vs. "them" attitudes, and to some extent it did. But the idea of government that the Bolsheviks instituted owed much not only to the Civil War violence but to basic notions of government that had already appeared in 1917. The entire 1917–21 span was a single period of class violence, without firm lines between Revolution and Civil War. Already in 1917, for workers "a just government would not mediate among interests, for the competing interest of the factory owner had no legitimacy. . . . Everything was interpreted in terms of a binary conception of class opposition . . . friend versus enemy; we versus they; loyal worker vs. saboteur; and the like. All problems were caused by ill-intentioned people, by enemies of the people. . . . Formal rights, procedures, and laws have no place in a world where what is good and right is already known."[47] Peacetime implied only a slight relaxation for the Bolsheviks, whose siege mentality and defensive drive for party unity continued for years.

THREE

In the Provinces

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.

N. I. YEZHOV

In addition to the problems of staying in power and resurrecting the economy, the Bolsheviks faced a more basic challenge: proving that they could govern the country. It was not enough to moderate economic policy and repress real or imagined opponents. In hundreds of areas from finance to transport to communications, the new regime found itself facing real difficulties. In the capital, many former tsarist-era ministries still existed, and until the Bolsheviks could staff them with their own people (a process that would take nearly a decade), they had to work with the old administrators. Many of the old regime's bureaucrats had died or emigrated during the Civil War, and those who remained in place were largely hostile or indifferent to the Bolshevik regime. Lenin's party was able to staff the tops of the ministries with Bolsheviks who were loyal, but their inexperience often made them

little more than watchdogs over the office staffs that really ran things. Strikes and slowdowns of office workers and administrators were common in the early 1920s, and even when the "former people" worked, the Bolsheviks suspected them of foot dragging, passive resistance, and general obstruction. Referring to the central bureaucracy as a "pile," Lenin said in 1922, "I doubt very much whether it can truthfully be said that the Communists are directing this pile. In truth, they are not doing the directing, they are being directed."[1]

But it was in the provinces that the administrative problem was most acute for the new regime. The huge Russian Empire had spanned a dozen time zones and encompassed more than a hundred languages and nationalities. A single railroad line connected the two ends of the country, and it was a perilous lifeline. During the Civil War, first the Czech Legion and then other hostile groups had been able to seize most of Siberia simply by controlling the thread of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, along which most of the population east of the Urals lived. Telephone connections with much of the country were still in the future, and muddy primitive roads made travel to many settlements a seasonal matter. In the south, in Central Asia, and in Siberia "bandit" gangs (political, criminal, or both) disrupted transportation and made communication difficult and administration perilous.

In the provinces the former tsarist administration had largely evaporated during 1917, as peasants seized the land and drove off the former tsar's representatives. Townspeople had elected soviets, which replaced urban administration, and neither peasants nor townspeople had paid much attention to the rudimentary commissioners of the short-lived Provisional Government. Whatever orderly government remained was destroyed during the Civil War when Reds and Whites traded territory and took turns imposing ad hoc, wartime emergency bureaucracies on the localities. Years of chaos had followed the time when government functioned in Russia. In short, the Bolsheviks faced the problem of governing the largest country on earth without technical means, experienced administrators, or a governing structure.

Although Lenin had stridently claimed in 1917 that ordinary workers

and peasants could easily learn the skills of government, few people around the world believed that, and by the early 1920s even Lenin and his comrades were starting to have their doubts. Much of the loyal cadre of factory workers and soldiers had been killed or dispersed by the Civil War and had been replaced in the soviets, trade unions, and other organizations by people the Bolsheviks considered "petty bourgeois" latecomers, who had signed on to the regime only when it had won or who simply lacked the socialist consciousness the regime valued and needed. Without the leavening of their loyal 1917 plebeian supporters, the Bolsheviks worried that the mass democracy from below they had formerly championed could be turned against them, either consciously by hostile political forces or unconsciously because of the "primitive" mentalities of the masses.[2] Until his death in early 1924, Lenin spent much of his time reflecting on this problem, thinking about "cultural revolution" to raise the level of the population and devising schemes and organizations to run the country, or to watch over those who did.

Obviously the Communist Party offered a vehicle for administering the territories, and this was the strategy ultimately selected. Battle tested, loyal to Lenin, and relatively disciplined, the party was actually the only tool to hand. But the Bolsheviks feared that if the party took direct charge of the country's administration, it could become "contaminated" by petty bourgeois, administrative mentality and lose its class edge and content. So the pattern that emerged was one of parallel government. The formal government, charged with implementation, would comprise a hierarchical structure of soviets from village to national level and including ministries, renamed commissariats. Behind the government, however, and parallel to it, another network of party organizations would exercise supervision and control over the system. And, as soon became clear, it was the party chain of command that mattered. Unlike the state structures, which contained a high proportion of nonparty people, the party was (at least in theory) a disciplined machine for transmission of orders and policies from top to bottom. According to the party's rules, obedience to superior party bodies was obligatory

for party committees and their members, and in 1921 the point was driven home when Lenin sponsored a "ban on factions," which made programmatic splinter groups illegal in the party.[3]

It would be a mistake, however, to overstate the efficiency, discipline, or administrative capabilities of the party in these years. For many reasons, the party was not really a well-honed tool easily converted to political administration. First, the business of the party for most of its existence had been revolution. Its experienced members were skilled in organizing strikes and revolts, editing newspapers, evading the police, and working underground. They had never had to run anything. Only during the three years of the Civil War had they been forced to direct and administer, but at that time administration had been largely an ad hoc affair. The tides of war often forced party members to flee their posts. Communications were poor and such structure as existed often consisted of special emissaries (commissars) sent from Moscow to the localities for special purposes. Bolshevik administration during the Civil War was more about shooting, shouting, threatening, and waving revolvers than it was about any chain of command or reporting structure. If the goal in the 1920s was the creation of government, the experience of the Civil War would appear to have been a poor teacher.

Second, the distribution of party members in 1921 had more to do with accident and exigency than with the needs of an administrative network. When the fighting stopped early in 1921, Bolsheviks were stationed in haphazard locations around the country, corresponding to their chance locations in 1917–20, based on the concentrations of workers they were organizing, their assignments for special purposes, or the places where they happened to be demobilized from the Red Army. Thus in 1921, Nikolai Yezhov found himself in Kazan, in Tatar country, simply because that had been his wartime location and place of his demobilization.

Moreover, when Bolsheviks did move, they tended to locate themselves in the cities, where conditions were better and where their working-class supporters were concentrated. The Politburo member G. Zinoviev complained in 1923 that the party was concentrated in the cities and had barely begun to penetrate the countryside. In the early 1920s

most villages (where most of the population still lived) contained no Communist Party members, and depending on the province, there was only one party member per ten to thirty villages. Only about 7 percent of the membership of village soviets were party members.[4]

Third, since 1917 the party had swollen into a mass organization. At first glance, this might seem an advantage, insofar as it could permit better coverage of a large area with party members. From a membership of about 24,000 in 1917, the party grew to 390,000 by March 1918 to 732,000 in March 1921.[5] The majority of the new recruits had less administrative experience than the Old Bolsheviks (party members before 1917) and were of uncertain political reliability, containing in large measure persons of all classes who were merely joining the winning side. Throughout the party's history, there would be such swellings of the membership as the leadership tried to recruit more party soldiers, preferably from the proletariat. In the Bolsheviks' understanding, behavior and political outlook were class determined, and social origins represented an important credential for the party. These mass intakes of new members were usually followed by a membership screening (*chistka*, or purge) aimed at expelling the uncommitted, the criminal, the incompetent, the "class-alien," and often the political deviant. In the screening of 1919 half the party had been expelled.[6] In 1921 a quarter of the new members were kicked out.[7]

But new party soldiers did not necessarily mean more or better party officers. Party leaders constantly complained about the political illiteracy of even provincial party secretaries, to say nothing of the membership as a whole. Training courses and stints at the Communist Academy or the like in Moscow were constantly prescribed for serving party secretaries. (Yezhov attended such courses later in the decade.) The inexperience of provincial party leaders translated into a crying shortage of "cadres," or personnel, for party leadership assignments, and much of the party's early history of personnel assignment was governed by this supply-and-demand fact of life. As a response to the shortage of politically experienced administrators, the party in March 1922 ordered that secretaries of *gubkoms* (provincial party organizations) must have been

party members before the October 1917 Revolution; for secretaries of district (*uezd*) party committees the requirement was a mere three years in the party. The following year, however, the Central Committee was forced to admit that the rule could not be sustained even in Moscow province, due to a shortage of qualified party members.[8] The records of the party's Orgburo throughout the decade show the scant supply of qualified party leaders for assignment and, as we shall see, their appointments were at the center of intense bargaining and competition, as provincial party committees jealously protected their proven party personnel and demanded more from Moscow, which did the best it could to meet the demand.

On 10 February 1922 the Central Committee emissary (*instruktor*) N. A. Kubiak reported to the party's Orgburo on his recent inspection trip to the Mari Oblast' (province). Things were a mess there. Kubiak described ethnic conflicts between Russians and Mari, political cliques expelling one another from the party, personality squabbles and spats.[9] Five days later, the Secretariat of the CC, with V. M. Molotov presiding, accepted a staff proposal to send Nikolai Yezhov from Kazan to Mari, recommending him to the Mari Bolsheviks as their new provincial party secretary.[10] We do not know whether Yezhov's previous work in Kazan had been so good as to attract the attention of Moscow party personnel specialists, or whether desperation led them to select what appeared to be a competent candidate conveniently at hand. At any rate, the following month Nikolai and Antonina set off for Krasnokokshaisk (formerly Tsarevokokshaisk, today Iokshar-Ola), the capital of the Mari region.

His designation as "responsible secretary" illustrates one aspect of the centralization of the national party structure in this period and the growth in influence of party over state organizations. Gradually, by the mid-1920s, the party leadership insisted that one person be held responsible for a territorial party organization. Before this, during the Civil War and before, party organizations tended to be run by committee. But the resulting fragmentation, confusion, and even disobedience to Moscow's policies led the leadership to require that one person, the responsible secretary, be in charge and be responsible to Moscow.[11]

Although party leadership of a province was a major promotion for Yezhov, Mari was hardly a prestigious appointment. With a population of about 367,000, it had a party organization of only 398 members and 154 candidate members: a membership smaller than in a single large Russian factory and representing a tenth of one percent of the province's population. There were only forty-nine party cells in the entire province, and thirty-six of them were rural. The population was overwhelmingly peasant. There were only two substantial factories (both glassworks) in the entire province, employing some five hundred workers altogether, and only 3 percent of the working population belonged to trade unions. Given that Bolsheviks found their bases of support in urban areas, factories, and trade unions, running a party organization in Mari was not an enviable task.

Yezhov also walked into a human disaster in Mari. In the spring of 1922 the oblast' had not recovered from the disaster of the Civil War. About the time Yezhov arrived, the secret police were reporting to Moscow on famine and disease in Mari. Using the word "starvation," the police reported on 6 March that "hunger has assumed enormous proportions" there.[12] By 4 April the police reported that 97 percent of the population regularly suffered from hunger and that a typhus epidemic had broken out. The starvation did not abate until October. Recent forest fires had devastated the timber industry, producing what one party report called "a colossal loss of state resources." A lack of resources for clearing and restoring the burned territory meant that the losses would be practically permanent. Timber was a large employer in a forested region like Mari, and the provincial party organization had no resources for coping with and reassigning the unemployed.[13] By August severe shortages of raw materials also led to the closing of several factories in the province.[14]

Moreover, there were severe ethnic conflicts. The Mari, an Asian people related to the Tatars, outnumbered Russians two to one among the population; their educational and "cultural levels" were said to be low. Kubiak had seen the problem for himself, and his CC report noted that "the nationality question produced great friction" in the province,

even within the Bolshevik Party organization.[15] Yezhov would soon discover this firsthand.

The duties of territorial party secretaries were many and varied. As Moscow's principal representatives out in the countryside, they came ultimately to be responsible for all areas of political and economic life. In addition to their traditional activities in the areas of "party work" (agitation, propaganda, press, journals, workers' organizations, rallies, and so forth) they came to supervise the work of trade unions and economic organizations as well. Thus although there were state procurement agencies separate from the party, the local party secretary ultimately answered for collection of the agricultural tax-in-kind. Even though various nonparty agencies were supposed to manage their own personnel appointments, the shortage of administrative talent for both party and nonparty posts meant that the local party secretary came to control these functions as well. Finally, the party secretary served the role of mediator in the myriad turf and personal conflicts that plagued the new, inexperienced, and frequently overlapping government agencies. In March 1922 CC Secretary Molotov had complained that local party organizations were forced to spend 70 percent of their time on questions other than their primary jobs of party work.[16] We shall see that party leadership involved refereeing and settling disputes as much as it did policy formation or implementation.

Overwork and a shortage of help were not the only problems territorial party secretaries faced. Depending on the area, they could find themselves literally in hostile territory. Non-Russian populations were sometimes antagonistic toward the mostly Russian Bolshevik administrations, and even where they were not, their cultural traditions often ran counter to Bolshevik understandings. For example, family and clan ties often cut across the class lines the Bolsheviks wanted to find. Similarly, the Bolsheviks' relatively modern ideas about women's rights frequently conflicted with ancient patrimonial societies in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Moscow party leadership paid a good deal of attention to these sensitive ethnic and cultural frictions and worried about escalating conflicts. More than once, complicated ethnic alliances

between and among Russian and native groups paralyzed local politics, and Moscow's Russian representatives were sometimes forced out by national hostility. As we shall see, Moscow's response to local friction in nationality areas was frequently to recall all of its feuding representatives and to send an entirely new team.[17]

So Nikolai Yezhov's appointment as responsible secretary in the Mari region was a mixed blessing: it was a promotion to an important position but one that threw him into the chaos of local ethnic politics in the early 1920s. He would serve there a little less than a year. On the one hand, it was here that he learned the routines of party leadership and demonstrated his abilities to his superiors in Moscow. On the other hand, though, he became so embroiled in vicious struggles between cliques in the local leadership and so entangled in the delicate "national question" that his subsequent autobiographies and official biographical blurbs would fail to mention his time in Mari at all.

One of the most important duties of territorial party secretaries was the writing of reports to Moscow. During and after the Civil War, Moscow had only intermittent contact with many of the party organizations in the country. In early 1919 party leaders had complained at party congresses that Moscow had little knowledge of who its cadres were in the provinces; the locals refused to complete questionnaires or provide other information to the center. By the end of that year one-quarter of the district party committees (*ukomy*) were still not sending regular reports on their activities; 5 percent of party committees never sent any information at all.[18]

Yezhov quickly mastered the form and format of report writing. Using the prescribed categories of information that interested Moscow (state and morale of the party committee, agitational work, economic life of the area, morale of the population, and so on), he produced crisp, well-written reports that showed him a quick study in the mores of party life.[19] His reports were neatly typed, well written, factual, and to the point. In fact, they seem too good to have been his alone, and he may have had help in correcting his texts from his newspaper editor wife.[20] Just as important, they show that Yezhov was learning the re-

porting style of the party's representatives. Party reports were expected to supply the established categories of information. But perhaps more important, they were texts that allowed their writers to demonstrate their adherence to specific aspects of party culture. A specific genre of document, the party report (like its relative, the "informational letter") was expected to embody particular stylistic conventions that helped to construct and reinforce the self-representation that party leaders had of themselves and which their superiors expected.

A Bolshevik Party secretary was supposed to be self-effacing, impersonal, and detached in his reports, emphasizing party virtues of hard work, discipline, selflessness, and party unity. Even though he was the single author of the report, he never used the first person; if it was necessary to refer to himself, he did so in the third person. Bragging or complaining was inappropriate, as were personal attacks on others in the committee (although the latter proscription was as often violated as observed). Because of the tradition of self-sacrifice, whining about the personal problems and difficulties of the author were also inappropriate. Personal pleading for reassignment was out of place, as was begging for more resources (although the latter was often done in an "objective" way to "help" the party committee). Overall, the tone was to be honest, frank, and hard-hitting about both accomplishments and failures.

Success in a given area of party activity was usually attributed to endless hard work, discipline, and the "help" given by the Central Committee, whether such had actually been given or not. Failures were explained by disunity, shortage of personnel, pressure of work in other areas, and lack of discipline. The "objective conditions" impeding successful party work (economic or cultural backwardness of the region, hostility of the population, shortages of everything) were often enumerated in descriptive parts of the report, but were rarely adduced to explain away failure. The idea was that a well-organized party committee could overcome any objective difficulty with discipline, careful planning, and the support of the Central Committee, and blaming failures on the impossibility of the environment and the tasks to be done was considered bad form.

Naturally, though, the writers of these reports were real people worried about their reputations and careers. They therefore found ways to emphasize success and background failure in an apparently objective, honest, and neutral textual style. Already by the 1920s party reports and reporting speeches had adopted the "*odnako*" ("although") discursive style that would characterize party discourse until the end of its existence. In the case of general success in a given area, for example, the accomplishments were first enumerated. This was followed by some variant of "but it is necessary to note that" or "however, serious problems and shortcomings remain" or "we also do not wish to hide our shortcomings," followed by a list of things not done or badly done. In the case of failure, a reverse grammar was followed: "The party committee has failed to . . . " or some problem "has resisted our efforts," followed by the predictable "however" and a section itemizing plans and promises for correction.

Yezhov quickly mastered the "although" style: "In the area of agitation and propaganda work, there has been a noticeable improvement in local newspapers, although their content is far from satisfactory."[21] He was also able to use these reports to maneuver. Although it was not proper to blame failures on one's comrades by name, it was possible in the reports to deflect blame from oneself by pointing to the collective shortcomings in the work of various nonparty organizations. In so doing, a skilled party secretary could denounce local rivals under the pose of objectivity.

Thus in 1922, collection of the tax-in-kind had been disorganized and poorly planned, thereby stirring up the population's resentment. Although the party organization of the province, headed by its responsible secretary, was ultimately answerable to Moscow for tax collection and a peaceful population, Yezhov shifted the blame to the state procurement representatives who did the actual collection. After taking responsibility for the difficulties, he pointed out that he had been the one to call attention to the failures of the provincial tax collectors, who were after all technically part of the state apparatus, not the party. He had requested that Moscow replace key members of the local tax apparatus; things

would run smoothly now.[22] Laying the blame for failures on subordinates was something less than ideal etiquette for a party secretary, but it became common practice, and those like Yezhov who were good at it managed to avoid or minimize blame. At the same time, however, he took measures to improve the situation by lobbying for permission to retain more of the tax for local use in feeding the population. He wrote to a friend, "Today I'm going to the tax people to talk about us leaving a part of tax-in-kind to ourselves."[23]

The fuss over tax collection was, however, symptomatic of a more serious problem in the Mari party organization. Throughout the early 1920s many provincial party committees were rent by factional struggles. Most of the time these had less to do with the well-known differences among oppositional groups like the Democratic Centralists or Workers' Opposition[24] than with the effort by personal cliques for influence and control over the local party organization.[25] Given the shortage of qualified party personnel and the scant party membership among the populace, it was natural for the local Bolsheviks to band together in teams around an authoritative leader. In the absence of strong and stable institutions, such groups rapidly developed into cliques and eventually into the patron-client groups that came to characterize party organization throughout the period.[26] In the early years the vagueness or absence of concrete instructions from Moscow, combined with echoes of factional disputes in the center, led to disagreements and squabbles (*skloki*) among local party leaders about how to proceed, providing additional impetus to the formation of personal circles around local leaders.

Almost from the moment of his arrival in Mari in the spring of 1922, Yezhov became embroiled in such a personal "squabble," as the Central Committee called them. His counterpart in the state apparatus was I. P. Petrov, chairman of the Mari Soviet Executive Committee (*ispolkom*), and it seems that the two of them fought constantly. The documents we have do not tell us of the personal or political issues involved, if any, although Petrov later complained of Yezhov's "Russian chauvinism" in his relations with the Mari locals. Yezhov's supporters returned the

favor by accusing Petrov of an "incorrect understanding of the party's nationality policy," and noted that even the Mari members of the provincial party committee had accused Petrov of "Mari chauvinism."[27] Such charges are hard to evaluate. Moscow's vague nationality policy could easily expose leaders to such accusations in their dealings with non-Russians. Moreover, any factional split between groups of Russians in a non-Russian area almost inevitably resulted in one group accusing the other of chauvinism of one kind or another. A Moscow-based party referee noted in a report that there was probably guilt on both sides.[28]

Petrov and Yezhov each wrote to Moscow complaining about the other. Shortly after his arrival in Mari, Yezhov wrote that on the instructions of the CC in Moscow, he had formed a Marxist study circle for "about fifteen young comrades" to combat the "almost complete indifference" of local party members to political events in Moscow. But almost immediately, Petrov's friends began to whisper that this was a "Yezhov group." Yezhov complained that party morale was seriously sagging: "the differences [*raskhozhdeniia*] among the activist comrades has become clearly evident [*sic*]. There is talk about the organization of two groups, a 'Yezhovist' and a 'Petrovist.'"[29]

Two months later, in August, Yezhov wrote again to the Central Committee complaining about Petrov and his followers. He noted that the provincial tax collectors, who were subordinate to Petrov, were "issuing their own directives" and ignoring the party committee, producing a "total breakdown" in tax collections. Yezhov had arranged for the arrest of two senior tax collectors and their replacement with new officials from Moscow. In the same report, obliquely observing party etiquette that valued party discipline and proscribed personal attacks as beneath the dignity of a serious "businesslike" Communist, Yezhov said that Petrov had made himself so unpopular that he nearly had failed to be elected to the provincial party or soviet committees. Despite the fact that Petrov "had struggled against my [political] line since I arrived here," Yezhov wrote that only honorable, comradely, and persistent efforts by the (Yezhov-led) party group had saved everyone from embarrassment and secured Petrov's election.[30]

Petrov replied in kind with his own letters to Moscow officials. He had demanded the appointment of a Mari (instead of Yezhov) as party secretary, rather colorfully writing that "either Mari Oblast' will exist or else she will fall under the influence of Russian chauvinism, be tormented, and then die."[31] He wrote of the "degeneration and demoralization" of the Mari party under Yezhov, and asked the Central Committee to send an observer to the August 1922 Mari party conference to see for himself. This, he wrote in his usual hyperbole, was "necessary to save the party organization."[32]

This showdown conference in August 1922, with Central Committee Instructor Avdeev present, went badly for Petrov and marked the beginning of his fall, although he later remarked that "the beginning of the collapse started with Yezhov's arrival" in the spring.[33] In any event, Avdeev reported back to Moscow that of the two, Petrov bore more guilt for the dispute and consequent paralysis of the Mari organization. Even though Petrov was reelected to the leading party committee with Yezhov's "help," shortly after the conference the Buro of the Provincial Party Committee (doubtless with Central Committee support based on Avdeev's recommendation) voted to fire Petrov from his ispolkom chairmanship and place him "at the disposal of the Central Committee" for another assignment. The buro accused him of factionalism, causing a split in the obkom, discrediting party members, "uncommunist behavior," "compromising friendships" with dubious elements, and a relapse into his "old alcoholism." Soon after, the expanded leading party group, the obkom plenum, confirmed Petrov's firing on a 9–1 vote.[34] Later, Yezhov's supporters in the Mari Control Commission piled on additional charges, accusing Petrov of trying to "spark revolts" among the Mari and of writing to his supporters in Mari that they should get "ours" into power there. The provincial Control Commission recommended expelling him from the party, and there was talk of arresting him, although this seems never to have happened.[35]

The Mari provincial party committee and Control Commission had lined up against Petrov, but when the matter reached Moscow, those friendly to Petrov on the Orgburo formed a committee that recom-

mended keeping him in Mari. Yezhov was in Moscow at the time and was ultimately successful in persuading the Orgburo to confirm the Mari decision to remove Petrov. But it was not easy, and Yezhov had to take an active hand in lobbying Moscow officials to remove his opponent. The final resolution from the CC showed signs of a compromise favorable to Yezhov and his group. Petrov was indeed to be fired, but the Yezhov group was cited for "insufficient involvement of Mari nationals" in leading party work. As Yezhov wrote to his friend Petr Ivanov back in Mari:

> And now, I came to the CC from Kislovodsk, and—horror—I found out that, OK, you had removed Petrov and the Control Commission approved the removal, but when the question was discussed in Orgburo [Moscow], they formed a committee, and the committee thought that Petrov should be sent back to Mari oblast' [Mari oblast'] to have him work further in the same direction. You understand what my position was: "I didn't know anything," but had to insist and press my line. Nevertheless, after long meetings, etc. (I myself talked to each and every member of the committee), I was able to solve the question about Petrov positively, i.e., confirm the verdict of the OK [to remove him]. The decision was approximately the following: taking into account his former line/policy, and his hysterical statements, etc., he should be removed. Second, taking into consideration the insufficient involvement of the Mari nationals in the work, the oblastkom should pay attention to it. That's it. They wanted to insert something else, but it was too late.[36]

It is a sign of the shortage of administrative cadres that a character such as Petrov was eventually given a new post in Vologda.

Yezhov's victory over Petrov could be seen as another triumph of Great Russian chauvinism. After all, Petrov had championed the cause of Mari over Russian Communists, and the Central Committee had sided against him. But aside from clear indications of Mari-Russian friction, we know very few of the details of ethnic relations in the province.

It was often the case that Moscow's policies on such things as tax collection, agricultural policy, or redrawing district boundaries could stir up various ethnic frictions even though they had been adopted without nationality in mind. In several cases, proposed changes in provincial or district (*raion*) borders had the unintended effect of disadvantaging one or another ethnic group. The same land policies emanating from Moscow could hurt Mari in the Mari region and Russians in Kazakhstan, leading to charges of Mari or Kazakh chauvinism vs. Russian chauvinism. In other words, ethnic issues cut across many lines of policy in various places, and one is hard-pressed to see a consistent long-term policy of russification or nativization in this period.[37]

Moreover, Petrov's defeat seems to have as much to do with his own unpopularity and Yezhov's rapidly improving bureaucratic skills than it did with ethnic issues. Petrov was a difficult character: a loud and insulting alcoholic given to tantrums and hurling insults at his coworkers. One Moscow report described him as "so energetic as to be disturbing" and "chronically dissatisfied with everybody." On one occasion when he was offended, he refused to go to work at the provincial executive committee for two weeks.[38] By contrast, Yezhov seems to have had little difficulty winning over a majority of the local Communists, including those Mari who thought Petrov had gone too far.

His victory over Petrov left Yezhov in sole control of Mari region, but the sweetness was certainly tempered by the fact that he did not want to remain there forever. Like most party workers sent to the provinces, he dreamed of returning to the center or at least to an industrial area where he felt at home and where he could build a career. At about the time Petrov was being removed, Yezhov confided his feelings to an old friend in an informal (and characteristically ungrammatical) personal letter. Without revealing any of the details of his sordid political fight with Petrov, he wrote to his friend Berzina that he was terribly busy and lived "like a cockroach on a hot skillet." He went on:

> I tell you that you can't find holes like this anywhere in the whole RSFSR—it's the original godforsaken place—really, Krasnokok-