Yezhov. In this case, it is not even clear in which institutional capacity Yezhov resolved such conflicts. He was both head of the KPK (the plenipotentiaries' boss) and Orgburo member (entitled to speak for the Central Committee). That Yezhov's formal role is not made clear in the documents speaks for itself: it was he as powerful person who resolved the conflicts, and nobody cared or asked what formal institutional position gave him the power to do so.

Yezhov's position on the Orgburo (and a year later as a secretary of the CC) put him in a position to resolve other disputes as well. In Tajikistan, First Secretary Shadunts and Second Secretary Ashurov got into a spat; Ashurov wanted more energetic investigations of "enemies," while Shadunts was more cautious. Ashurov went behind Shadunts's back, publishing embarrassing secret speeches. Shadunts retaliated by claiming that Ashurov had signed an antiparty platform. All this also landed on Yezhov's desk. He recalled Ashurov to Moscow and sharply criticized Shadunts, whom he removed a short time later. Then Shadunts went over Yezhov's head to Stalin, complaining about Yezhov's solution: "Today I was removed. It was a surprise. Yezhov said I couldn't maintain a normal situation in the Buro of the CC of Tadzhikstan." Stalin referred the letter back to Yezhov, who noted in the margin of Ashurov's note, "We have to settle this." Shadunts, understanding that Yezhov would be the final judge, wrote a conciliatory letter to Yezhov, admitting his "mistakes." Yezhov decided to receive him personally and found him another position.[58]

In addition to finding himself a higher-level referee, Yezhov continued his basic personnel assignment work. As head of Raspredotdel, he had made recommendations to the Orgburo. Now, from the Orgburo, he confirmed appointments himself or, if they were very high ranking, recommended them to Stalin, who as far as we can tell always accepted Yezhov's suggestions. Often, like the personal spats, these appointments required negotiations, and Yezhov was good at these. In March 1935 he wrote to Stalin (who reserved senior territorial party appointments for himself): "Comrade Stalin. I summoned Pshenitsn. He agrees to become Second Secretary in Sverdlovsk. I had a telephone conversa-

tion with Kabakov [Sverdlovsk First Secretary]. He is very satisfied with Stroganov [the outgoing Second Secretary] being placed at the disposal of the CC. He agrees with the candidacy of Pshenitsn, and asks for quick approval." Stalin approved.[59] Sometimes Yezhov was more direct: "Comrade Stalin. To name Kalygin to work as secretary of Voronezh city party committee. Riabinin agrees. Comrades Kaganovich and Molotov agree. I ask your approval. Yezhov." Stalin approved.[60] In all such cases, Yezhov confidently included with his note to Stalin a pretyped draft resolution of the CC approving the request he was making. These drafts became the formal CC orders when Stalin approved—which he did routinely.[61]

By the end of 1934 Yezhov had become a member of the inner circle of the Stalinist leadership, with the broad portfolio and refereeing powers that such leaders enjoyed. His duties—personnel allocation, regulating party size and composition, and participation in various commissions—were vast, and there is every reason to believe that he was among the hardest-working and most efficient leaders. To this point, he was not particularly concerned or associated with police or security matters, and had political developments continued along their normal course, he probably would have worked to a ripe old age along with Molotov, Kaganovich, Mikoian, Kalinin, and others of Stalin's inner circle.

But on the first day of December 1934 an event took place that would put Soviet history on a new and horrible path. The Politburo member and Leningrad party chief S. M. Kirov was shot to death in the corridor outside his office by Leonid Nikolaev, an unbalanced and disappointed office seeker. The assassination sent shock waves through a leadership already (and always) anxious and afraid of conspiracies of foreign agents, peasants, White Guards, former oppositionists, and others.[62] Fearing that some kind of coup might be in progress, Stalin and his lieutenants did what they had done several times before when they thought the regime was in danger or needed quick brute force. As they had done in the past in retaliation to perceived attacks, the Politburo quickly drafted a Draconian law. The "Law of 1 December 1934," or the

"Kirov Law," gave the courts the right to pass and carry out death sentences without the participation of the accused and without appeal.[63]

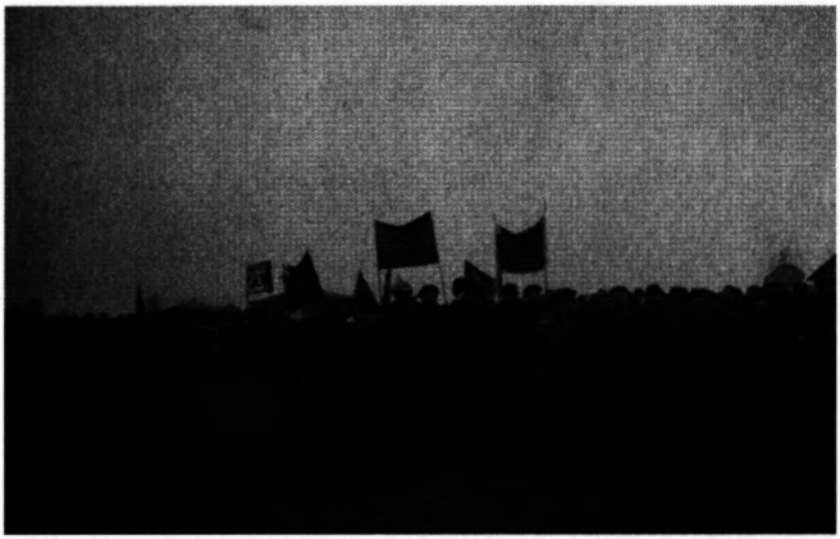
Stalin immediately went to Leningrad to see for himself what had happened. Yezhov was among the small group he took along with him, and Stalin would leave him there for three weeks to oversee the investigation of Kirov's murder. This train ride would catapult Yezhov into police matters, make him the most powerful person in the Soviet Union except for Stalin, and eventually cost him his life.

Yezhov in 1916. RGASPI

Yezhov (standing), 1916. RGASPI

Graduates of Radio Specialists, Kazan, 1920. Yezhov is at the center of the front row. RGASPI

Yezhov (on platform, right) addressing a mass meeting after suppression of Bukhtarma revolt, Kazakhstan, 1923. RGASPI



Yezhov (second from left, front) at a mass meeting after suppression of Bukhtarma revolt, Kazakhstan 1923. RGASPI

Yezhov (seated, at right) with Kazan comrades, 1926. RGASPI

Molochnyi Lane, no. 20, Yezhov's apartment from 1927. J. Arch Getty

Stalin (far left) and Yezhov (far right) with Politburo members,
May Day Parade, 1935. RGASPI

Sergo Ordzhonikidze (left) and Yezhov, 1936. RGASPI

Left to right: Yezhov's adopted daughter Natalia, Yezhov, Yezhov's second wife, Yevgenya, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, Ordzhonikidze's wife, Zinaida, unknown person, 1935. RGASPI

SEVEN

Yezhov and the Kirov Assassination

Judging from what I saw in Leningrad, I must say that those people do not know how to conduct an investigation.

N. I. YEZHOV

At 4:30 P.M. on 1 December 1934, Leonid Nikolaev, a troubled young man who had been expelled from the party, walked into Leningrad party headquarters at Smolny, climbed the stairs to the office suites of city party leaders, and shot to death Serge Kirov, Leningrad party chief, secretary of the Central Committee, Politburo member, and Stalin's close collaborator. When party officials rushed out of their offices, they saw Kirov bleeding on the floor; beside him lay Nikolaev, who had fainted after unsuccessfully trying to shoot himself. NKVD security agents came running, doctors were summoned, and Kirov was taken into his office, where he soon died on the sofa. Party officials placed a call to Stalin in Moscow. When Stalin heard the shocking news, he quickly assembled a team of senior officials and boarded a fast train to Leningrad.

We can only imagine what ran through the minds of the leaders as they sped to the scene of the killing. How could this have happened? Politburo members were guarded by an entire section of the NKVD.

The strange incompetence of the Leningrad police in failing to prevent the assassination was alarming, if not suspicious. Who could have done it? The traditional counterrevolutionary "enemies" were former White Guards and foreign agents, and these possibilities must have run through their minds. There was also the chance that oppositionists, in the persons of present or past party members, could be involved; Stalin was keen to explore this particular variant.

Stalin would later use the Kirov assassination as a justification for persecution of his enemies. In fact, some historians believe that he worked through the NKVD to organize the assassination for this very purpose. The question is of more than antiquarian interest for two reasons. First, if Stalin was involved, it would be possible to argue convincingly that he had a long-range plan to launch a terror of the elite and, indeed, of the entire Soviet Union. If, on the other hand, the assassination was not his work, other explanations for the terror would have to be sought besides the framework of a grand plan. Debates about Stalin's possible involvement in engineering the Kirov murder have been fierce but inconclusive because of the lack of official documentation and because official statements in the Soviet period were vague and contradictory.

In his speeches to party congresses in 1956 and 1961, Nikita Khrushchev hinted that indeed "much remained to be explained" about the assassination, although he stopped short of actually accusing Stalin. In the 1980s a new official investigation into the assassination was chaired by Politburo member Alexander Yakovlev, an intimate of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Assembling an interagency team from the Communist Party, the KGB, and other bodies, this committee reexamined the evidence. But like all previous investigators, the Yakovlev commission failed to produce a report. Their efforts dissolved into mutual recriminations among the members that leaked into the press, as Yakovlev pressed for a conclusion implicating Stalin while several of the staff researchers argued that the evidence pointed the other way.[1] Despite the high-level political advantages of implicating Stalin in the Khrushchev and Gorbachev years, no official investigation by even the most anti-Stalin Soviet administrations had accused Stalin of the crime,

though he was directly accused of murdering many equally famous politicians.[2] The leading scholars on opposition to Stalin in the 1930s now make no judgment on the matter, and the memoirs of V. M. Molotov (perhaps unsurprisingly) observe that Kirov was never a challenger to Stalin's position. The most recent scholarly work on the Kirov assassination from a Russian scholar, based on Leningrad party and police archives, concludes that Stalin had nothing to do with the killing. It seems safe to say that the question is still open.[3]

A full examination of the Kirov assassination is beyond the scope of this book. Here we are concerned primarily with Yezhov's role in the investigation, which is well documented in his archive. Although the "motive" and "means" for Stalin to kill Kirov are unclear and disputed, an examination of these materials may shed light not only on Yezhov's role but on the assassination itself. In other words, if we make no assumptions about Stalin's purported motive and means to kill Kirov and thus suspend a priori judgment on his role in the killing, investigating Yezhov's investigation could tell us a lot about whether his inquiry was a cover-up or not.

When Stalin and his entourage arrived in Leningrad, they knew nothing of the circumstances of the crime, but they certainly had reason to wonder about the competence (or complicity) of Leningrad's NKVD. As a Politburo member, Kirov should have been heavily guarded by competent NKVD officers. That an assassin could get close enough to Kirov and shoot him with no one present surely made the Politburo members suspicious of those charged with Kirov's security. With unknown culprits and possible police complicity, it would be a complicated investigation and one hard to run objectively. It was necessary to find a professional policeman to investigate the circumstances of the killing, but with the local police under suspicion, it made no sense for the Leningrad NKVD to investigate itself.[4] Someone else had to be found who was not tied to Leningrad police cadres and who also intimately knew the backgrounds of party cadres to look into the possible involvement of party members. Stalin's solution was to quickly take the

Leningrad NKVD out of the investigation altogether and put Yezhov, a party man specializing in personnel files, in overall charge, with particular responsibility for looking into the possible involvement of both the local NKVD and former oppositionists. This would therefore be a party-controlled inquiry. To conduct the technical investigation of the murder itself, a job requiring police expertise, he selected Yakov Agranov, a deputy commissar of the NKVD, but with no personal ties to his Leningrad colleagues and no close ties to Genrikh Yagoda, chief of the USSR NKVD.[5] Agranov was a secret police veteran, having joined the CHEKA in 1919 and subsequently serving in various police departments involved in "especially important" political cases. He had been a secret police (OGPU) deputy chief since 1931 and deputy commissar of the NKVD since the formation of that organization in 1934.[6]

Stalin fired Leningrad NKVD chief Filip Medved and replaced him with Leonid Zakovsky, a veteran policeman whom he transferred in from his NKVD post in Belorussia. Stalin had brought both Yezhov and Agranov with him on the train to Leningrad; Zakovsky arrived in the city shortly thereafter.

Yezhov was given overall supervision of the investigation of the Kirov assassination and was charged by Stalin with pursuing an investigative line aimed at Zinovievists. All of Agranov's investigative reports and Zakovsky's subsequent punitive operational reports were copied to Yezhov, as well as to their NKVD chief, Yagoda. Yezhov had the rank and prestige to overrule anyone on the scene if necessary and had a direct channel to Stalin. Already on 3 December the well-organized Yezhov had drafted a "plan" for his tasks in his notebook. They included:

1. Direction of the investigation;
2. Borisov affair;
3. Nikolaev affair;
4. The affair of Nikolaev, Draule and others;
5. On families of those arrested;
6. List of Zinovievists;
7. Continuation.[7]

In the immediate aftermath of the killing, and separate from Yezhov's investigation, the regime's reaction was locally savage but spasmodic and unfocused. As they had done during the Civil War, the police immediately executed groups of innocent "hostages" with no connection to the crime. According to Bolshevik "us" vs. "them" thinking, the world forces of counterrevolution ("they") had with the Kirov killing collectively launched an attack on "us." Therefore "we" are justified in retaliating against "them." Several dozen opponents, labeled as "Whites" and already languishing in prison, were summarily executed in cities around the Soviet Union.[8]

Several thousand persons in Leningrad, described as "former people" (nobles, prerevolutionary industrialists, and others) were evicted from the city.[9] This mass deportation was the job of the new Leningrad NKVD chief Zakovsky. In late February 1935 Zakovsky enthusiastically reported that his Leningrad NKVD had expelled 11,095 persons from the city (see Table 7.1).

NKVD chief Yagoda wrote to Stalin on 26 February, rather belatedly pointing out that Zakovsky wanted to carry out "mass operations" in Leningrad. Yagoda agreed that those with incriminating materials

TABLE 7.1

"Former people" expelled from Leningrad, December 1934–February 1935

Expellees	Number
Families of those shot for terrorism	941
Former aristocrats and princes	2,360
Former tsarist military officers	1,545
Former large merchants, speculators, landowners	5,044
Former tsarist police officers	620
Upper and middle clergy	585
Total	11,095

Source: Zakovsky report 16 February 1935, RGASPI, f. 671, op. 1, d. 148, ll. 1–14. These figures are incomplete, as the operation continued sporadically through March, during which time Zakovsky reported regularly.

against them should be deported to the provinces and particularly that Leningrad educational institutions should be purged of "socially dangerous elements." But he pointed out that many of these targets were connected to western circles through the intelligentsia, and he observed that a sudden mass operation could generate unfavorable propaganda abroad. He advised stretching the operation out, doing it gradually over two to three months.[10] As we have seen, however, Zakovsky's mass operation was already in full swing by then, and it had Yezhov's explicit support.[11] This would not be the last time that Yezhov and Yagoda disagreed on operational measures that Yagoda was supposed to be responsible for. And it would not be the last time that Yezhov undermined Yagoda by siding with one of his deputies.

Zakovsky also stepped up NKVD "unmasking" of various purported conspiracies, as always copying everything to Yezhov. He "unmasked" a series of newly discovered counterrevolution organizations in Leningrad. With names like The Russian Party of Fascists, Land and Liberty, and The Brotherhood of Avvakum, these small-scale organizations printed anti-Soviet pamphlets and manifestos, criticized Soviet policy, conducted unauthorized religious services, and the like. In some cases, a couple of pistols were confiscated. In December and January alone, Zakovsky's agents arrested 502 participants in 94 underground groups, plus 782 individual counterrevolutionaries; 1,284 persons in all. Of these, 83 groups were categorized as "fascist-terrorist" and 11 labeled as "Trotskyist-Zinovievist." Zakovsky made a more serious case by arresting active-duty Red Army officers suspected of Zinovievist connections in Leningrad, including 25 commanders, 34 military cadets, and 4 border guards.[12] By the end of February 1935, 843 accused former Zinovievists were under arrest.[13]

On the afternoon of 1 December the assassin Leonid Nikolaev was already in custody, having been apprehended at the scene of the crime. The same day, before Agranov's arrival, the local NKVD had detained Nikolaev's wife, Mil'de Draule, and Kirov's bodyguard Borisov. The next day, several former Leningrad oppositionists whom informers had

named as Nikolaev's friends were also taken into custody, including former Zinoviev supporters Kotolynov, Shatsky, and Rumiantsev.[14]

Nikolaev's wife was the first to be interrogated, at 7:10 P.M., just two and a half hours after the shooting. In the first of many Leningrad NKVD bungles, her written statement was misdated. In that statement she said that her husband had been unemployed, lazy, and despondent. She said that he used to have a gun but had turned it in some time ago. In subsequent interrogations, she changed her story, saying that Nikolaev had kept a diary and that she had helped him write it. In a third interrogation she admitted that she knew he had a gun and that he was planning to shoot someone.[15]

The same day, Leningrad NKVD officials interrogated Borisov, who had been straggling behind Kirov when he was shot. Borisov was unable to explain why he had not been close to Kirov at the crucial moment. And in another display of the Leningrad NKVD's incompetence that would arouse suspicion, Borisov had not even been searched when he was interrogated. One interrogator became alarmed and yelled at the other, "You need to watch the old guy, he has a gun!" Borisov was then disarmed, and in yet another sign of Leningrad NKVD carelessness, it was discovered that his gun had been unloaded at the time he was supposed to be protecting Kirov. If this were not enough to make Stalin suspicious of the Leningrad police, Borisov was killed in a traffic accident while in Leningrad NKVD custody, before Stalin and company could talk to him.

It was only then that Agranov arrived and took over the criminal investigation from Leningrad's keystone kops. He organized simultaneous separate interrogations of the assassin Nikolaev, his wife, and the several arrested members of the former Zinovievist Leningrad opposition. Yezhov sat in on these interrogations, and his notebook contains a list of the accused and the rooms in which they were being questioned.[16] Nikolaev began talking freely from the start.[17] He admitted to having planned the killing for some time because he blamed Kirov for persecution of the Zinoviev group and his resulting unemployment. He said that he had initially planned the killing alone but had then talked to Kotolynov and

others, who at first tried to dissuade him. According to Nikolaev, they wanted to kill someone higher up, like Stalin, but they later approved his plan. Nikolaev also admitted to contacts with the Latvian consul in Leningrad, whom he correctly picked from a photo array. Supposedly the consul had funneled money into the plot through Nikolaev.

Agranov and his assistants conducted lengthy and grueling interrogations of Nikolaev's oppositionist friends Kotolynov, Shatsky, and Rumiantsev, along with several others of their cohort, and of Zinoviev and Kamenev themselves.[18] The thrust of these interrogations, as might be expected, was to get the accused to admit to membership in a conspiracy that organized the Kirov assassination using Nikolaev as the tool. In what has now become a well-studied scenario, some of them confessed fully, either from party loyalty or after physical pressure. Those who had not confessed were then confronted with the confessions and were worn down. These interrogation transcripts vary. In some cases, the accused refused to confess to belonging to any conspiracy and maintained his or her innocence through the drumhead trial that followed.[19] Some admitted to maintaining contacts with other former oppositionists but denied that such contacts constituted a criminal or "counterrevolutionary" organization. As Zinoviev told his interrogators:

> Zinoviev: Nevertheless there is a difference when people happen to spend the night with each other and being in an organization.
>
> Interrogator: Your answer is not serious.
>
> Zinoviev: People were associated with each other for years without carrying out any counterrevolutionary work. You can't mix them all up into one club.[20]

Others admitted to belonging to a "counterrevolutionary organization" but not to knowing of Nikolaev's plans. One of these, Kotolynov, presaged the confession scenario of the three later Moscow show trials by saying that even though he did not know of terrorist plans, the "algebra" of such an organization was such that others would be encour-

aged to take criminal action.[21] One of these suspects even thanked his interrogators for teaching him the error and implications of his ways. Another group admitted to the full accusation: belonging to a criminal conspiracy that organized the assassination.

On the issue of finding broader and higher-level oppositional involvement, Yezhov was only partly successful. All of the lower-level Zinovievist defendants at the Nikolaev trial were found guilty of conspiracy and shot. But after one month of questioning, Agranov had to report to Stalin that he was not able to prove that Zinoviev and Kamenev themselves had been directly involved in the assassination, and on 13 January the Politburo concurred: "The investigation did not find any facts that would substantiate the claim that members of the Moscow center [meaning Zinoviev and Kamenev] helped organize a terrorist act against Comrade Kirov."[22] So in the middle of January 1935 they were tried and convicted only for "moral complicity" in the crime: that is, their opposition had created a climate in which others were incited to violence. Zinoviev was sentenced to ten years in prison, Kamenev to five.

Yezhov's notes show that already from the second day after the assassination, he was looking into the records of former Leningrad oppositionists, both those exiled earlier and those still in the city. But once the focus was strictly on lower-level members of the Zinoviev opposition, Yezhov went to work. According to his report to Stalin in February 1935, there were roughly 2,500 former Zinovievists in Leningrad, of whom 1,200–1,300 had been "active functionaries." The remaining 1,200–1,300 had perhaps voted "incorrectly" once in the past but had left the opposition; Yezhov proposed leaving them alone.

Of the 1,200–1,300 "active" Zinovievists, Yezhov reported that between 1 December 1934 and 20 February 1935, he had ordered the arrest of 283. With his trademark bureaucratic precision, Yezhov divided the remaining thousand into four groups. His taxonomy was:

1. Former party members who had been expelled and not readmitted to the party. These should be exiled from Leningrad "voluntarily": each should report to an NKVD officer who

would allow him or her to leave for a new city of their choice (excepting places where wives of arrested Zinovievists were exiled). This group initially consisted of 200 persons, later increased to 265.

2. Party members who had been expelled for opposition and subsequently readmitted to the party. Such people might still be "dangerous" and should undergo a new verification (*proverka*). If reexpelled, they could appeal. Initially 463 persons, later revised to 626.
3. Party members who would be permitted to remain in the party but not in Leningrad because they were suspicious, because Leningrad party members did not want them around, or because they might group together again. These should be reassigned to party work in other regions. Initially 325, later 365.
4. Party members who had left opposition long ago and who therefore could remain in Leningrad. These should be put on a list for possible observation. Initially 200, later 270.[23]

In his archive, Yezhov kept exact and voluminous records on the implementation of measures against Leningrad oppositionists. He saved files full of memos from the Leningrad police (*militsiia*) on Leningrad oppositionists' moves to other cities, records of the Leningrad obkom's and KPK's expulsions of oppositionists from the party, and various miscellaneous notes on party expulsions.[24]

As a thorough personnel specialist, Yezhov also began to create a database of Leningrad oppositionists. Consisting of lists and card files (*kartoteki*), this database included biographies and short appraisals (*kharakteristiki*) of several categories of Zinovievists. His lists of former Leningrad oppositionists ran to nearly two thousand pages and included names and appraisals of confirmed and suspected oppositionists, including notes on each person's possible connection to Zinovievists and the source of the information. From these lists and from other sources, Yezhov began to assemble a card file of "personnel registration cards" on former oppositionists expelled from Leningrad. More than 450

cards in all, they were divided into two "volumes": family names A–L and M–Ya.[25] He did this to follow up on implementation of his orders about expulsion and/or exile and to be able to keep track of individual oppositionists. We can also be certain, however, that when the regime turned to terror in the years that followed, these lists were used for more sinister and even fatal purposes.

In addition to following the oppositionist investigative trail, Yezhov and Agranov tried to evaluate possible Leningrad NKVD complicity in the killing, but their aggressive investigation turned up nothing but incompetence. Nikolaev said that he had made two previous attempts to shoot Kirov: one on 15 October and the other on 14 November. On the latter occasion, Kirov's train was moving too fast, and on the former Nikolaev had decided not to shoot because he didn't want to hit an aide who was accompanying Kirov. On the 15 October attempt, Nikolaev's strange behavior on the street had led Kirov's Leningrad NKVD security men to detain him for questioning. According to Nikolaev, they asked him whether he had a gun. He had his pistol in his pocket but answered no and was released. He was never searched.

Nikolaev's interrogators pressed him repeatedly on two points: where did he get the pistol, and whom in the Leningrad NKVD did he know personally? It is almost as if the interrogators were trying to support the theory that someone in the NKVD had provided Nikolaev with the gun and aimed him at Kirov. Over multiple interrogations, Nikolaev's story remained consistent: he had owned the gun legally since 1918, had purchased the bullets himself in 1932, and had taken target practice in the forest. He was casually acquainted with three low-level Leningrad NKVD officers through family connections. Verification by Agranov and his team produced nothing suspicious in all this.

Another line of inquiry that Yezhov and Agranov pressed had to do with purported signals of terrorist plans against Kirov that had been ignored by the Leningrad NKVD. Yezhov wrote to Stalin that he had found an NKVD file containing statements from party members about "terrorist moods" relating to Kirov.[26] A certain Volkova had weeks before the assassination warned the Leningrad NKVD about the existence

of a "counterrevolutionary terrorist organization" that was organizing assassinations. Agranov and his team questioned Leningrad NKVD officer Baltsevich about why he had not followed up on Volkova's warnings. Baltsevich was pressed relentlessly to admit that he had been derelict (or worse) in not pursuing Volkova's leads, but he insisted that he had done his duty. He said the consensus among his NKVD team was that she was mentally unbalanced. He said that Volkova admitted that she was a wholesale slanderer; she had been crazy enough to implicate senior Leningrad NKVD chiefs Yanishevsky and Zverev as members of the nonexistent counterrevolutionary plot. When Volkova claimed to Agranov's investigators that she had retracted her charges only under pressure from Baltsevich and his team, which had consigned her to a mental institution to shut her up, Baltsevich angrily shouted, "No!" She had been put there for observation, Baltsevich said, to verify her mental condition.[27]

Nikolaev's NKVD friends turned out to be innocent social contacts. The Volkova lead went nowhere; she turned out really to be mentally unbalanced. Nikolaev's pistol had not been given to him by the NKVD. Finally, after an exhaustive inquiry and a detailed autopsy, Yezhov and Agranov told Stalin that the "death of Borisov was the result of an unlucky accident in connection with an automobile accident," not part of any Leningrad NKVD coverup.[28]

Although Yezhov turned up no incriminating evidence against the Leningrad NKVD, he made a strong case for incompetence bordering on the criminal.[29] The top leaders (Leningrad NKVD chief Medved and his deputies Zaporozhets, Fomin, Yanishevsky and Baltsevich) were removed for incompetence. Medved and Fomin were soon convicted of "criminal neglect of leads regarding plans for a terrorist act against Kirov" and sentenced to ten years each in prison.[30] If Stalin had procured Kirov's assassination through the Leningrad NKVD, it seems unlikely that Yezhov would have so aggressively and openly pursued the possibility in his investigation. Nor is it likely that the top Leningrad NKVD leaders, who would have participated in such a plot, would have been left alive to tell the tale.

Yezhov then supervised a purge of Leningrad NKVD ranks. Yezhov was convinced that those ranks were full of "clutter" (*zasorenost'*): dubious, unprofessional, useless people. So the remainder of those checked were verified only by their files—Yezhov was good at files—and were disciplined for "compromising data, socially alien origins, membership in an opposition, moral corruption, or other infractions." By the end of February 1935, Yezhov had checked the files of 2,747 Leningrad NKVD officers, 978 from state security and 1,769 from other detachments (reserves, border guards, and firemen, for example). Of the 978 state security officers, Yezhov removed 157 (see Table 7.2).

Yagoda tended to attribute the problems in the NKVD not to "clutter" but to inexperience. He complained that of thirty-eight thousand NKVD officers, only about one-fourth had served more than six years. Educational levels were low. In the next few months, he opened ten new schools to provide two-year courses for NKVD officers.[31]

Yezhov also wrote a detailed report to Stalin on 23 January 1935, ostensibly about his overall impressions of the work of the Leningrad police. But he transformed the report (which he reworked through several drafts) into an indictment of the NKVD in general. He also proposed to purge still more of the NKVD officers.[32]

TABLE 7.2

Yezhov's purge of Leningrad NKVD security officers

Action taken	Number
Sent to work in Gulag camps	50
Transferred from state security	47
Fired	21
Transferred from Leningrad	20
Convicted in court	17
Arrested, not convicted	2
Total	157

Source: Yezhov to Stalin, 23 January 1935, RGASPI, f. 671, op. 1, d. 118, ll. 48–49.

This document is a landmark in Yezhov's career because it represents his first open salvo in his campaign against NKVD chief Yagoda, a campaign that he was to prosecute relentlessly for the next eighteen months, until Stalin gave him Yagoda's job. We cannot know whether Yezhov was consciously angling for the NVKD job from the beginning, but it is clear that he began to wage a campaign of criticism and innuendo against Yagoda's performance. It seems equally clear that the initiative for the anti-Yagoda movement came from Yezhov himself. For example, his report would show that Stalin was largely uninformed about NKVD practices and structures. The extent to which responsibility for that crime might fall on Yagoda and the NKVD generally was in Yezhov's hands, since he was Stalin's representative and informant on the killing. And it was Yezhov who started it, with no known prodding from Stalin:

> In the process of discussing the investigatory materials on the cases of Zinoviev, Kamenev, and others, certain specific deficiencies in the work on the Leningrad NKVD were touched on. Because these partial deficiencies do not give a full picture, I decided to write this memo in the hope that it might be useful to you in correcting the work of the ChK [secret police] generally. It seems to me that the deficiencies of the Leningrad ChK with respect to the characteristics of Leningrad chekists (composition of people, familyness, absence of operational work, etc.) are signs of a broader problem. These deficiencies evidently exist not only in Leningrad but in other places and in particular in the central apparatus of the NKVD.[33]

According to Bolshevik discursive and social conventions, this was a bold personal attack on Yagoda. Of course, as an Orgburo member Yezhov had the rank and status to make such an assault. Nevertheless, such open offensives by one of Stalin's subordinates against another usually signaled a major struggle behind the scenes. So when Yezhov personally "decided" to write to Stalin about problems in the "central

apparatus" of the NKVD at a time when a Politburo member had been assassinated, he opened a major front against Yagoda.

His memo to Stalin was pessimistic and highly critical, sharply disparaging both the Leningrad and the central NKVD on the misuse of agents and informants, investigations, and personnel. He complained that the network of agents and informants was bloated, unresponsive, inefficient, and so carelessly recruited that double agents could easily penetrate it. He provided detailed information about the size of the informant network and how it operated. On paper, the network of unpaid NKVD agents (*rezidenty*) and civilian informants was impressive, as Table 7.3 indicates.

But Yezhov noted that not only the informants but NVKD agents themselves were carelessly recruited and inadequately vetted. Agents recruited each other, often in batches according to planned quotas, without any background checking by superior officers. The unpaid agents were the only ones who knew their informers; the NKVD knew only the agents, who were controlled not by NKVD department chiefs but by their deputies. All this was hopelessly sloppy and loose, Yezhov argued, making it easy for foreign intelligence agents to place their people in the network. As an example, Yezhov cited the case of one Zalozhev, recruited to work in the Government Garage by the Special Department of the OGPU—that is, by one of Yagoda's central departments. Zalozhev had "turned out to be a terrorist," and only luck had prevented him from harming members of the government.[34]

Yezhov advised establishing precise order about who had the right to recruit and control agents in each department. Recruiters of agents who turn out to be spies or terrorists should be held accountable. Finally, the bloated network of agents should be sharply pruned; otherwise control of it was impossible.[35]

Yezhov also criticized the work of NKVD investigators. In general, he said, there was no independent professional apparatus for investigations. The same officers ran agents and informers as investigated cases, so they were able to fabricate and polish the cases as they liked. These officers were information gatherers and good at conducting searches,

TABLE 7.3

Numbers of NKVD agents and informers

Province/Territory	"Rezidenty" (agents)	Informants
Moscow	3,625	41,483
Leningrad	2,693	21,284
Ukraine	2,450	23,890
SKK	1,225	13,382
AChK	1,051	10,145
Stalingrad	473	5,522
Saratov	120	1,200
Zakavkaz	402	6,248
DVK	190	2,700
Belorussia	943	14,003
Western	725	7,387
IPO	885	7,827
Tataria	640	5,624
Crimea	342	2,621
Kazakhstan	962	10,424
Bashkiria	707	6,048
Sverdlovsk	542	5,193
Cheliabinsk	595	6,200
Northern Krai	1,123	11,942
Middle Volga, Orenburg	1,397	12,972
Voronezh, Kursk	1,886	18,730
East Siberia, Krasnoiarsk	630	6,091
Kirov, Gorky Krais	636	3,712
West Siberia, Omsk	1,919	18,452
Kirgizia, Uzbekistan, Tadzhikstan, Turkmenistan, Karakalpak	1,389	16,617
Totals	27,550	279,697

Source: Yezhov to Stalin, 23 January 1935, RGASPI, f. 671, op. 1, d. 118, l. 40.

but not competent investigators. "Judging from what I saw in Leningrad, I must say that these people do not know how to conduct an investigation."[36] Yezhov did not say that Yagoda had ignored agent recruitment, organization of investigations, and the composition of his cadres. He did not need to.

Despite his scarcely veiled attack on Yagoda, Yezhov was careful not to violate protocol and etiquette too much. He made a show of consulting with Yagoda before addressing a meeting of regional NKVD chiefs to brief them on the disorder and incompetence he had found in Leningrad and written about in his memo to Stalin. It was, of course, a major embarrassment for Yagoda to have an non-NKVD "outsider," however authoritative, criticize the work of the NKVD and by implication Yagoda's leadership. Such a speech could only diminish Yagoda's prestige and authority with his own men. Therefore Yezhov first asked Yagoda for permission and told Stalin it would be improper to make the speech without the dictator's express order. Stalin gave his approval. In this light, the humiliated Yagoda had no choice but to agree, and Yezhov addressed the assembled NKVD regional chiefs in Yagoda's embarrassed presence.[37] He reiterated to them the criticisms he had made in his letter to Stalin, adding that they lacked professionalism. Among other things, they were too close to the local party committees, often acting as plenipotentiaries for them rather than as independent agents.[38] Security was far too lax; anyone with a party card could enter government buildings. Actually, security had never been tight before the Kirov killing. As late as the end of 1930 the Politburo had to pass a resolution "to oblige Comrade Stalin to immediately stop walking around the city on foot."[39]

Yagoda deeply resented Yezhov's meddling in his bureaucratic bailiwick. He complained to his subordinates about it, and hinted that they should frustrate Yezhov's efforts. He told his assistant Deputy NKVD chief Molchanov that he was worried that Yezhov might uncover NKVD mishandling of old cases and told Molchanov not to talk business with Yezhov without Yagoda's permission. When Molchanov did so anyway, Yagoda exploded. Molchanov later related, "He screamed at

me, demanding to know why I had not sought permission from him" before talking to Yezhov. "He told me that Yezhov was not the Central Committee, that his orders were not directives, and that only he—Yagoda—had the right to deal with the Central Committee on questions of the NKVD's work."[40] When Agranov told his boss Yagoda that a certain measure should be coordinated with Yezhov, Yagoda raged at him too, "If you are not the boss in your own house, then go ahead and coordinate your work with him." Agranov also later noted that by the middle of 1935 Yezhov was starting to bypass Yagoda and giving direct orders to the NKVD chief's lieutenants, and by that time they were starting to choose sides between Yagoda and Yezhov. As long as Yezhov's inquiries had Stalin's backing, there was little Yagoda could do.[41]

Yezhov's painstaking investigation of the Leningrad NKVD makes no sense as an attempt to cover up their (and thereby Stalin's) supposed complicity in the assassination. It was too thorough. It was rather an attempt to embarrass Yagoda. Although he did not accuse Yagoda personally of complicity in the Kirov killing (he would do so later), he was suggesting that chaos in the central NKVD apparatus—which was Yagoda's personal responsibility—could have very dire consequences, as the recent Kirov events showed. It did not take a genius to see that Yezhov's implication was that Yagoda's performance created a situation in which the regime, and the lives of Stalin and other Politburo members, were in danger. In terms of implications and possible consequences, therefore, the matter was very serious; Yezhov was throwing down the gauntlet to Yagoda.

The overall public lesson of the Kirov killing was that the former "left" opposition, particularly that led by Zinoviev, was still dangerous. From party meetings to the nonparty press, a new campaign took shape against these dissidents. At the grass roots of the party, a virtual witch hunt ensued in which anyone with the slightest past connection to the Zinoviev or Trotsky oppositions was likely to be expelled. Former oppositionists publicly repented their past sins, and current party members called for their heads.

In its own counsels, the Stalinist leadership established a particular

interpretation of the Kirov affair, which it promulgated to the party in an 18 January 1935 closed letter to party organizations on the Kirov killing. The assassination had been the work of disgruntled, younger, low-level oppositionists. The senior members Zinoviev and Kamenev did not know of the assassination and did not organize it, but their dissidence and contacts with former followers had facilitated the crime by providing "moral justification" for the act of terror.[42] There is no reason to think that party leaders did not believe what they said, because their private texts matched their public ones.

It was a sign of Yezhov's status that he was given the task of drafting the circular letter in January 1935 to all party organizations on "Lessons learned from the events connected with the villainous murder of Comrade Kirov."[43] In the letter Yezhov sought to educate party members about the continuing danger posed by "two-faced" oppositionists who claimed to support the party but worked against it:

> Now that the nest of villainy—the Zinoviev anti-Soviet group—has been completely destroyed and the culprits of this villainy have received their just punishment—the CC believes that the time has come to sum up the events connected with the murder of Comrade KIROV, to assess their political significance and to draw the lessons that issue from an analysis of these events. . . .
>
> 1) The villainous murder was committed by the Leningrad group of Zinoviev followers calling themselves the "Leningrad Center."
> 2) Ideologically and politically, the "Leningrad Center" was under the leadership of the "Moscow Center" of Zinoviev followers, which, apparently, did not know of the preparations for the murder of Comrade KIROV but which surely knew of the terrorist sentiments of the "Leningrad Center" and stirred up these sentiments. . . .
>
> As for the Leningrad Party organization and especially the organs of the NKVD in Leningrad, it has turned out that cer-

tain of their links [*zven'ia*] have been infected with a sense of complacency dangerous for the cause and with a negligence in matters of security unbecoming a Bolshevik. . . .

5) The teaching of party history to members of the party ought to be raised to a level worthy of the party. This includes the study of each and every antiparty group in the history of our party, its methods of struggling against the party line, its tactics, and—all the more so—the study of the tactics and fighting methods of our party in its struggle against antiparty groups, tactics, and methods which made it possible for our party to overcome and crush these groups.

Although the January 1935 letter turned up the heat on present and former dissidents, it was not a call for terror. The implication of the first sentence—that "the nest of villainy . . . has been completely destroyed"—is that there were no further nests of villains. Zinoviev and Kamenev would not be charged with direct organization of the Kirov killing for more than a year and a half, and then only on the basis of "new materials" unearthed in 1936. The January 1935 letter identified the "followers of Zinoviev" (but not Zinoviev himself) and other former oppositionists as counterrevolutionary enemies. This political transcript was read out at all party organization and cell meetings. It proved to be a bit of an embarrassment in 1936, when it was announced that the nest had not, in fact, been "completely destroyed."

Privately, Yezhov began in early 1935 to write a book entitled "From Factionalism to Open Counterrevolution (On the Zinovievist Counterrevolutionary Organization)." In the 1935 draft of the manuscript, which he circulated to Stalin and other top leaders for their comments, he maintained that continued opposition to the party line—by Zinoviev, Kamenev, and others—inevitably led to counterrevolution and terror by inspiring others, even if they were not the direct organizers of the killing.[44]

During the rest of 1935 the party's strategy followed this assessment: that the problem and danger had existed primarily in the unknown

lower ranks of the party, but that they were facilitated by more prominent people whose attitudes or carelessness made them unconscious enablers of those who might turn to violence. Accordingly, three strategies would be used to deal with the problem: a traditional screening of the general party membership, a campaign of political education to teach party members the danger of opposition, and the promulgation of "lessons" about complacency higher up.[45]

EIGHT

Enemies Large and Small

For all we know, a certain liberalism may have been shown with respect to individual party members.

N. I. YEZHOV

In the investigation of the Kirov assassination Yezhov had demonstrated his willingness to relentlessly pursue any hint of disloyalty. For him, as for Stalin, it was a matter of the party "us" vs. the oppositionist "them," and he put his personnel expertise to good use in checking former oppositionists and compiling files on them. Events of 1935 would again demonstrate Yezhov's indefatigable capacity for work, as well as Stalin's trust in him to handle important matters. Yezhov took the lead in two of the most important party initiatives of 1935: a new screening of party members and the grilling of A. S. Yenukidze, Secretary of TsIK. With his meticulous handling of the Kirov assassination investigation, Yezhov had once again shown his efficiency.

As a sign of his growing status, in February 1935 Yezhov became a secretary of the Central Committee, taking the place vacated by the late Kirov. He became cochairman, with A. A. Andreev, of the Orgburo; together they set the agenda for that body, which in turn set the agenda

for the Politburo.[1] Yezhov continued his work as the party's personnel chief: Raspredotdel had been reorganized into a Department of Leading Party Organs (ORPO), and Yezhov became its head in February 1935; later that month he took over leadership of KPK from Kaganovich.

Despite his increased top-level responsibilities, he continued to participate in a variety of other initiatives. He was everywhere at once: in the first half of 1935 he continued to be involved in education questions, aviation, and other matters. During that time he gave speeches to conferences of timber harvesters, outstanding collective farm workers, geologists, and even chauffeurs.[2] He chaired commissions of the Orgburo and the Politburo on paper production targets, party salaries, the allocation of dachas to party leaders, business trips abroad for government officials, and the dissolution of the Society of Old Bolsheviks.[3]

In Moscow in the early summer of 1935, 110 employees of the Kremlin service administration (including Kamenev's brother) were accused in the "Kremlin affair" of organizing a group to assassinate government officials in the Kremlin. Two were sentenced to death and nine others received nineteen years each in prison; the remainder received prison or camp terms of five to ten years.[4] Yenukidze—Secretary of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets (TsIK), chief of the Kremlin administration, and longtime Stalin friend—was accused of carelessness that amounted to aiding and abetting the "terrorists."

Avel Yenukidze, as Secretary of TsIK, was responsible for administration of the Kremlin. The arrests of Kremlin employees obviously cast suspicion on Yenukidze's supervision. The suspicion was compounded by Yenukidze's softhearted tendency to aid old revolutionaries who had run afoul of the Bolsheviks.

On 22 March 1935 Yezhov had received a letter from one Tsybulnik, a Central Committee worker in that body's Secret Department. The letter alerted Yezhov to the existence of "anti-Soviet elements" in the apparatus of TsIK. Tsybulnik noted that there had been "signals" about suspicious elements in TsIK since 1933 but that they had been ignored.[5] Yezhov ordered his secretaries to send copies of the letter immediately to the NKVD and KPK, and within two days Yezhov had convened a

working group from his KPK to investigate Yenukidze's apparatus and leadership, again bypassing Yagoda's NKVD.[6] Within a week, Yezhov's group had investigated TsIK finances and personnel policy and reported to Stalin, recommending that Yenukidze be disciplined for carelessness and corruption and that the NKVD commandant of the Kremlin, Karl Peterson, also face "party responsibility."[7] In the course of his investigations, Yezhov displayed his usual efficiency, which here was relentless, if not ruthless. He later reported that of 107 workers whom he "checked" in the TsIK Secretariat, only 9 could be left in their positions.[8]

Already in late February 1935, Yezhov had begun to supervise an investigation into the backgrounds and loyalties of TsIK employees, many of whom were "suspicious" nonparty people. Numerous workers in Yenukidze's Kremlin apparatus, especially from the Kremlin Library and including Kamenev's brother, were arrested and interrogated by Yezhov's partner from the Kirov investigation, Yakov Agranov. Zinoviev and Kamenev were brought from prison and reinterrogated. Minutes of these numerous and lengthy interrogations were forwarded to Yezhov through Yagoda, sometimes daily, from 3 March until at least 5 May. By April, Agranov had started to bypass his formal superior Yagoda and was sending the transcripts directly to Yezhov.[9]

Yezhov made his debut as a visible player in the Central Committee at the June 1935 plenum, where he delivered the official accusation against Yenukidze. He began not by criticizing Yenukidze but rather with a lengthy dissertation on the crimes of Zinoviev and Kamenev.[10] To this point, they had been accused of only "moral complicity" in the death of Kirov. Now, however, Yezhov for the first time accused them of direct organization of the assassination and introduced the idea that Trotsky was also involved from his base in exile. Despite Yezhov's claim to the contrary, this was a radical new theory and one that could give no comfort to political dissidents. "Facts show that during the investigation of the circumstances surrounding the murder of Comrade Kirov in Leningrad, the role of Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Trotsky in the preparation of terroristic acts against the leaders of the party and Soviet state has not yet been fully revealed. The latest events show that they were

not only the instigators but in fact the active organizers of the murder of Comrade Kirov, as well as of the attempt on the life of Comrade Stalin that was being prepared within the Kremlin."

Yezhov's assertion was at least an exaggeration if not an outright lie. In the interrogations, Agranov and his assistants had secured testimony from Kremlin employees (including Kamenev's brother B. N. Rozenfeld) that they had received "terrorist instructions" from Zinoviev and Kamenev.[11] The interrogators then pressed Zinoviev and Kamenev in detail about their activities since 1932, trying to catch them in inconsistencies and confronting each with incriminating statements from the other. They succeeded in getting each to criticize the other and express doubts about the other's activities and loyalty. First Kamenev claimed that Zinoviev was more guilty and tried to limit admission of his own counterrevolutionary activity to the period before 1932. Zinoviev denied this at his own interrogation: "I must state to the investigation that the evidence which Kamenev gave, that over the past two years he conducted no counterrevolutionary activity, is a lie. In reality, there was no difference between my and Kamenev's counterrevolutionary activities. This relates to our relations to the Central Committee and particularly to our relations with Stalin. . . . Kamenev was no less harmful to the party and its leadership than I was before our arrest."[12]

Confronted with Zinoviev's testimony, Kamenev again tried to distance himself from his former collaborator:

> Interrogator: We show you evidence of arrested G. E. Zinoviev given on 19 March which shows that you along with him conducted counterrevolutionary activity right up to the time of your arrest in connection with the murder of Comrade Kirov.
>
> Kamenev: I deny this testimony![13]

Both Zinoviev and Kamenev steadfastly denied ordering, encouraging, or even knowing about any terrorist plans. They would admit only, as they had after the Kirov killing, that their opposition may have created an atmosphere in which others might be inspired to act.[14] As

Kamenev told his interrogators in a rather contorted formulation: "On me lies responsibility that as a result of the situation created by me and Zinoviev in our counterrevolutionary activities, a counterrevolutionary organization arose, the members of which intended to commit foul evil—the murder of Stalin."[15]

Thus the only evidence Yezhov had for his far-reaching claim was the dubious testimony of minor figures who had cooperated with their interrogators only after lengthy and exhausting police interrogations.

Yezhov then turned to Yenukidze and said that despite numerous warnings about anti-Soviet elements and sentiments among his employees, Yenukidze had taken no action. To Yezhov, Yenukidze's passivity "border[ed] on treason against the interests of Party and country. . . . Comrade Yenukidze must be punished in the most severe way because he bears responsibility for the events [*fakti*] that occurred in the Kremlin. Comrade Yenukidze is the most typical representative of the corrupt and self-complacent Communist who not only fails to see the class enemy but in fact affiliates himself with him, becomes his involuntary accomplice [*posobnik*], opening the gates to him for his counterrevolutionary, terroristic acts." Yezhov concluded his speech by formally proposing to expel Yenukidze from the Central Committee.[16]

Yezhov's speech had three political implications. First, it introduced a new version of Zinoviev and Kamenev's guilt, depicting them as not only enablers but organizers of the Kirov assassination. Yezhov's claims about Zinoviev and Kamenev were a kind of trial balloon (Yezhov's or Stalin's). Oddly enough, it was unsuccessful. Stalin did not speak in support of Yezhov's theory. This in itself was not strange; Stalin often used others to make his points while remaining silent. But this time, the usual speakers at the plenum did not strongly back Yezhov. Despite Yezhov's accusations, no capital charges would be brought against Kamenev and Zinoviev for more than a year, when they were brought to trial for the crime.

There could be two possible explanations for the failure of Yezhov's initiative against Zinoviev and Kamenev in June 1935. On the one hand, there could have been quiet opposition in the Central Committee that

forced Stalin to stay his hand. Or it may well have been Stalin himself who was unsure about what to do with Zinoviev and Kamenev. He might have allowed Yezhov to float his trial balloon, then left him dangling by telling him that it was possible to follow up only if Yezhov could prove the charges. On numerous occasions, in order to condemn prominent oppositionists, Stalin insisted on "proof" in the form of their own confessions.[17] It would take Yezhov a year to get that "proof" by forcing Zinoviev and Kamenev to confess.

The second political implication and, for Yezhov, useful by-product of his sally against Yenukidze was the further embarrassment of Yagoda and the NKVD. Although Yezhov gave some credit to the police for warning Yenukidze of the danger in his staff, the fact remained that it was Yezhov, not Yagoda, who made the indictment at the plenum. It was the party, not the police, that was blowing the whistle on the traitors. Yagoda sensed that he was under attack here no less than Yenukidze, so he tried to be more Catholic than the pope and made a hysterical and vicious speech against Yenukidze and proposed punishment more severe than had Yezhov: expulsion not only from the CC but from the party:

> I think that by his speech Yenukidze has already placed himself outside the bounds of our party.
>
> What he said here, what he brought here to the Plenum of the Central Committee, is the pile of rubbish of a philistine. . . . For a long time now Yenukidze has been the gravitational center for elements that are hostile and [class]-alien to us. . . . If we follow the thread of facts from 1928 to the events of 1935, we are compelled to state that Yenukidze not only helped the enemy but that he, from an objective standpoint, was also an accomplice of the counterrevolutionary terrorists. . . .
>
> But let us assume that the NKVD really did not raise these questions with Yenukidze. Did Yenukidze show the most elementary vigilance on his side? . . .
>
> In fact, Yenukidze, having taken under his wing people whose

removal we had demanded, had undermined our work and demobilized those of our officials who were engaged in the work of checking up on these people. Yenukidze did this because, as Secretary of TsIK, he enjoyed sufficient authority among us.

What is more, Yenukidze not only ignored our signals but introduced into the Kremlin his own parallel "GPU," and, whenever he recognized one of our agents, he immediately banished him.

Of course, none of this removes responsibility from my shoulders.

I admit my guilt in that I did not in my time seize Yenukidze by the throat and did not force him to kick out all those swine.

Everything that Yenukidze has said here is nothing but unadulterated lies.[18]

Just before the plenum Yenukidze had handwritten a letter to Yezhov saying that he could not remember a single instance in which he had proposed hiring someone whom the NKVD questioned.[19] At the plenum, Yenukidze expressed his regret that Yezhov had not mentioned the letter, and in his own defense he tried to blame Yagoda and the NKVD, making explicit Yezhov's more veiled criticism of Yagoda, forcing the besieged police chief to defend himself:

Yenukidze: Every candidate for employment in the Kremlin would first undergo a predetermined probationary period and only then would he be enrolled on the staff. The probation was carried out with the participation of organs of the NKVD. No one was hired for work in the Kremlin without their security clearance. This applies to all officials without exception.

Yagoda: That's not true.

Yenukidze: Yes, it is.

Yagoda: We gave our security report, but you insisted on hiring. We said not to hire, and you went ahead and hired.

Yenukidze: Comrade Yagoda, how can you say that?[20]

The third implication of Yezhov's initiative against Yenukidze was to offer the public lesson that prominent leaders, even if not implicated in conspiracies like the Kirov killing, could through inaction function as enablers of the terrorists. It fell to L. M. Kaganovich, as a real insider, to provide this "lesson" of the Yenukidze affair. In the process, he cast another shadow on Yagoda's NKVD:

> And you people think that the party can let a Communist holding such a responsible post go unpunished?. . . .
>
> No, Comrade Yenukidze, you are responsible for the Central Executive Committee apparatus. In your selection of personnel, you approached the matter in an unbusinesslike, unparty, un-Communist manner. And for us this aspect of the matter is of foremost importance. . . .
>
> If you are sincere, Comrade Yenukidze, about your readiness to accept punishment so that others can draw their lesson from it, then you ought to have analyzed your situation more honestly, you ought to have told us how enemies had wormed their way into the apparat, how you gave cover to good-for-nothing scoundrels. Instead, you slurred over the matter and tried to prove that nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. [Voices: That's right!]
>
> We must expose, uncover, to the last detail, this whole affair, so that it can serve as a lesson to all Communists who suffer from opportunistic complacency, a subject discussed by the Central Committee in its letter concerning the murder of Comrade Kirov.
>
> Our party is strong by virtue of the fact that it metes out its punishment equally to all members of the party, both in the upper and lower echelons.
>
> This matter, of course, is important not only as it pertains to Yenukidze but also because we undoubtedly have in our party people who believe that we can now "take it more easily": in view of our great victory, in view of the fact that our country is moving forward, they can now afford to rest, to take a nap.[21]

Kaganovich also revealed that the inner leadership, including Stalin himself, was having difficulty deciding what to do with Yenukidze. Various punishments had been discussed. Yezhov's personal papers contain three draft decrees on Yenukidze prepared before the meeting.[22] The first proposed only removing him from the TsIK position and appointing him TsIK Secretary in Transcaucasia. By the third draft, because of "new facts coming to light," the punishment had been escalated to "discussing Yenukidze's Central Committee membership." This was the proposal that Yezhov brought to the meeting: expelling Yenukidze from the Central Committee.

But just as Yezhov's accusations against Zinoviev and Kamenev had had only limited success, his proposed punishment of Yenukidze also created an awkward scene. The Bolsheviks set great store on unanimity, especially in the Central Committee, but Yezhov did not get it for his suggestion. Yezhov had moved to expel Yenukidze from the CC, reflecting the Politburo's prior decision. But the increasingly angry nature of the discussion at the plenum led to a second, surprise motion to expel him from the party altogether. At the end of the plenum, both proposals were put to the vote. Yezhov's motion passed unanimously, and the second motion to expel Yenukidze from the party altogether also passed, albeit on a split vote.[23]

The split vote (itself an extreme rarity in the Central Committee) was not something the top party leadership wanted to broadcast to the party rank and file. In the version of the plenum minutes printed for distribution in the party, the event was portrayed differently. History was rewritten to make it seem that there had been only one proposal and that the ultimate decision, to expel Yenukidze from the party, was based on Yezhov's motion.[24]

Stalin himself showed ambiguity about what to do with Yenukidze. After his preplenum indecision and the split vote at that meeting, Stalin changed his mind again. In September 1935 he wrote to Kaganovich that NKVD materials suggested that Yenukidze was "alien to us, not one of us [*chuzhdyi nam chelovek*]".[25] But at the first plausible opportunity, two plenums later in June 1936, Stalin personally proposed that Yenukidze be

permitted to rejoin the party.[26] Then a few months later he approved Yenukidze's arrest and subsequent execution for espionage.

Aside from the year's delay between the Yenukidze affair and the actual terrorism accusation against Zinoviev and Kamenev, there are other signs at this time that Stalin was not prepared to go as far as Yezhov in prosecuting leading oppositionists. Yezhov had just finished his ponderous book manuscript "From Fractionalism to Open Counterrevolution (on the Zinovievist Counterrevolutionary Organization)," and he asked Stalin to edit it. Stalin was apparently unable to get through more than about fifty pages of Yezhov's masterpiece, but in several phrases in the initial sections he did edit, he changed Yezhov's characterization of Zinoviev and Kamenev as "counterrevolutionary" to the less harsh "anti-Soviet and harmful to the party."[27]

Central Committee members took several lessons from Yezhov's speech and the discussion of it at the June 1935 plenum. First, they were introduced to the idea that the guilt of Zinoviev and Kamenev might be greater than previously thought. Second, Yezhov had become a visibly important player: he had brought down the Secretary of the Central Executive Committee and stepped forward as the herald of a modified (albeit temporarily unsuccessful) narrative. Third, Yagoda and the NKVD had been discredited. Fourth, and most uncomfortable for CC members, one of the highest-ranking members of the elite (and a personal friend of Stalin's) had violated discipline. For some members of that elite, this action must have been personally disquieting: if Yenukidze could fall, no one was safe. For others, however, the lesson was that the dangers and threats of the new situation had infected even the inner circle of the *nomenklatura*.

Yezhov's debut in the role of hatchet man against "enemies" was not an unqualified success. Not only was his main "thesis" on Zinoviev and Kamenev ignored, but the proposal he put forward on Yenukidze was superceded. Given that everyone must have assumed that his recommendation on Yenukidze had been approved by Stalin and the Politburo beforehand, the impression created was that Yezhov's authority had been taken down a peg at the moment of his triumph. Still, he had

presided over the demotion of a very high ranking leader, and in the process had cast doubt once again on Yagoda's NKVD leadership.

As we have seen, the Stalin leadership took two "lessons" from the Kirov assassination: that prominent persons (like Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Yenukidze) could be enablers of terror, and that the main danger came from lower-level rank-and-file hotheads who were either present or past members of the party. Accordingly, in the middle of 1935 another party membership screening operation, or purge, was undertaken: the verification (*proverka*) of party documents. Yezhov was entirely in charge of this operation, which turned out to be less than successful, if not a complete failure.

Actually planned long before the Kirov assassination, this purge was in the tradition of party screenings since 1921 and was designed to rid the party of "ballast": corrupt bureaucrats, those who had hidden their social origins or political pasts, those with false membership documents.[28] The fact that Kirov's assassin had a party card and thus access to Leningrad party headquarters gave new impetus to the stalled plans to screen the party membership, and in April 1935 Yezhov chaired a committee that included Shkiriatov, Malenkov, Kosarev, and four others that met to plan the membership verification.[29] In writing the 13 May 1935 order for the operation ("On Disorders in the Registration, Distribution, and Safekeeping of Party Cards and on Measures for Regulating this Affair"), Yezhov dutifully characterized the verification as a nonpolitical housekeeping operation to bring some order to the clerical registration of party membership documents.[30] Although the announcement of the proverka did not specifically call for the expulsion of former oppositionists, it was inevitable that many of them would be targeted even in a traditional background screening, and Yezhov constantly tried to put this spin on it. He personally conducted the proverka. He authored the central directives and closely monitored local and regional compliance.[31] He held a series of periodic conferences of both central and regional party leaders during the operation and produced regular summary reports (*svodki*) for Stalin.[32]

Yezhov tried to give the 1935 operation a combative stamp by calling for verifiers in the party organizations to concentrate on expelling ideological enemies of all kinds. His remarks to a closed meeting of party personnel officials emphasized the hunt for enemies. As he told regional party secretaries at a conference on 25 September 1935, "Everywhere the same methods are practiced by Trotskyists who have held out in our party. Trotskyists try at all costs to remain in the party. They strive by every device to infiltrate the party. Their first device is to remain at all costs in the party. . . . He always has in reserve a registration card, approaches another organization and is registered. Such people are expelled three or four or even five times each. They move from one organization to another—we have quite a few people like that. Trotskyists try at all costs to keep their party card."[33]

He bombarded party leaders at all levels with stories of enemies who had entered the party.[34] But despite Yezhov's concentration on Trotskyists and other enemies, the results of the verification, like previous party screenings, struck hardest at rank-and-file party members with irregularities in their documents, most of whom were charged with nonideological offenses having to do with malfeasance or "alien" class background. As a percentage of total expulsions, very few oppositionists were expelled. Two reports, one from Yezhov's 1935 report and another from an internal Central Committee memo written by G. M. Malenkov, are summarized in Table 8.1 and show the categories expelled. In Yezhov's 1935 operation only 2.9 percent of those expelled were oppositionists.

Yezhov constantly complained that local party leaders responsible for the proverka did not take the operation seriously, that they trusted its implementation to subordinates, or that they underestimated the need for vigilance. Frequently during the summer of 1935, he stopped the verification in a given region, issued a CC order denouncing the party leadership there, and ordered them to begin again.[35]

There were two problems preventing the smooth implementation of the verification operation Yezhov wanted. First, in a departure from previous practice, Yezhov entrusted the screening to party committees

TABLE 8.1
Reasons for expulsion, 1935–36 (% of all expelled)

Reason	Yezhov 1935 report	Malenkov 1937 memo*
Spies	1.0	0.9
Trotskyists/Zinovievists	2.9	5.5
"Swindlers"	7.9	8.0
Former Whites, kulaks, etc.	19.1	27.5
Moral corruption		20.6
Incorrect documents		15.6
"Other"		17.7
Unexplained	69.1	4.2

Sources: RGASPI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 177, ll. 20–22; op. 120, d. 278, l. 2.
*Includes persons expelled in 1936 after the completion of the proverka.

themselves.[36] His quite reasonable idea was that local party leaders knew, or should get to know, the party members in their organization by conducting the screening of party members individually and in person.

But local and regional officials had territories to run and economic targets to meet. Their administrations contained subordinates who had to be qualified and loyal to the local leader. Because previous membership in the Trotskyist or Zinovievist organizations implied party membership dating back to the twenties, ex-oppositionists still in the party were likely to have worked their way up from the rank and file into leadership positions in local political machines by 1935. Yezhov's call for vigilance, therefore, was implicitly a demand for local leaders to purge their own "family circles" of capable officials, an idea that they must have disliked. This resulted in some of them expelling too few, according to Yezhov's standards. There was also a natural tendency of local party secretaries to deflect the purge downward to the rank and file, resulting in batch expulsions of too many. From Yezhov's point of view, by entrusting the purge to party organizations themselves he was giving them the chance to put their own houses in order.[37] Instead, they pro-

tected their own and displayed their "vigilance" by expelling large numbers of helpless party members outside the local elite leadership families. This meant that Yezhov frequently had to intervene against local party secretaries to force them back on the track he wanted.[38]

They were able to do this because of the second fundamental problem with the proverka: vague instructions allowed the locals to interpret and implement the operation in ways that suited them. As we have seen, the original order for the screening had not even mentioned rooting out oppositionists but had rather characterized the goals of the operation in terms of cleaning up party files, restoring order to the membership cards, and ridding the party of (nonideological) "ballast": careerists, crooks, those not paying dues, those losing their party cards, and other "chance elements."[39] So when Yezhov pressed local party secretaries to go after locally prominent former dissidents who were valued members of local elites, the secretaries were able implicitly to invoke the proverka's original instructions to justify mass expulsions of rank-and-file "ballast."

This friction between central and local party leaders explains why the proverka, originally planned for June–August 1935, was never finished and had to be overtaken by a replacement operation, the Exchange of Party Cards in 1936. The mass, inconsistent, and chaotic expulsions of the proverka also produced a huge number of appeals and complaints that were still being cleaned up in 1937. As late as February 1936, Yezhov was still castigating some regional party leaders. He refused to confirm the completed proverka in Sverdlovsk, for example: "Really we don't know how many members and candidates we have there. We asked three times for data. You sent reports, but we doubt the data. . . . After several of these conferences I see that we didn't sufficiently explain how to do this concretely."[40] Yezhov had little to brag about with the proverka.

Another structural problem with the proverka had to do with institutional conflict, particularly the role of the NKVD. Privately, to Stalin, Yezhov never missed an opportunity to criticize Yagoda's secret police. More than once in his summary reports to Stalin on the proverka,

Yezhov noted that the NKVD was "standing aside" or "not sufficiently active" in the struggle with oppositionists.[41]

But publicly Yezhov was respectful toward the NKVD. According to his final report on the proverka, as of December 1935, 9.1 percent of the party's members had been expelled, and 8.7 percent of those expelled had been arrested; he gave a corresponding figure of 15,218 arrests out of 177,000 expulsions, or a little less than 1 percent of those passing through the verification.[42] The level of arrests varied considerably from province to province, and there is strong evidence that relations between party and police were not always smooth. Some local party leaders complained about police interference in the party's political turf.

In fact, three different agencies were involved in the proverka: party organizations, the NKVD, and the Procuracy (which had to approve any arrests). In the course of the proverka, party organizations verified their membership. At the same time, local NKVD units passed along information to the party committees on suspicious party members who had somehow attracted police notice.[43]

Official resolutions and reports piously and confidently stressed the

TABLE 8.2
Party Expulsions and Police Arrests, 1935

	Party organization		
	Ukraine	Ivanovo	Western
Number of persons about whom the NKVD sent information to party organizations:	17,368	3,580	3,233
Number and % expelled by party orgs.	6,675 (38%)	1,184 (33%)	1,337 (30%)
Number and % arrested by NKVD	2,095 (31%)	261 (22%)	312 (23%)
% ultimately arrested	12%	7%	10%

Sources: RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 184, ll. 63–66; d. 183, ll. 60–65, 92.

close cooperation between the party and police.[44] Such reports were meant to display unanimity for the middle party leaders. But behind the scenes, the story was different, and Yezhov once again displayed the essential function of Bolshevik leaders at any level: that of referee and moderator. He noted privately that cooperation between party and police organizations was not good. Party organizations had been reluctant to concede a political monitoring role to the NKVD, preferring instead the former system in which the NKVD investigated state crimes not involving members of the party and left political offenses to the party organs. The information in Table 8.2 shows, in fact, that party and police organizations worked badly together and frequently disagreed on who was "the enemy." Of the suspicious persons referred to party organizations by the NKVD, about one-third were expelled from the party. Of those, fewer than a third were arrested by the NKVD.

Yezhov also demonstrated his refereeing skills at a September 1935 conference of regional party secretaries and is worth quoting at length:

> The problem here is not that of directives. We are, perhaps, a little guilty ourselves in this matter. The top brass are also human, and we haven't given attention to this matter in time. But I think that here we are dealing with people who simply do not understand what's at issue; I mean certain officials who have gotten the NKVD involved where it is not needed, who have dumped work on the NKVD that they should have done themselves and who, on the other hand, do not permit the NKVD to concern itself with that which the NKVD should concern itself with.
>
> I want to talk about the division of labor and about the mutual relationship that ought to normally arise between [the NKVD and the party organizations].
>
> First, I want to say that the matter comes down to this, that you conducted the verification. But in verifying a member of the party, the authenticity of his party documents—that is, his entire past and present—you may run across a swindler, an adventurist, a scoundrel, a spy, and so on. You may have some grounds for sus-

picion, so you finish the case and then you hand over this person to the NKVD. [Voice: But the procurator doesn't always give his approval.]

You are a true bureaucrat. Excuse me, but the way you are conducting your verification in Eastern Siberia shows that it is the procurator who is boss at your place and not you. Perhaps we'll entrust the verification process, then, to your procurator, if that's what you want! The territorial committee cannot make the procurator give his sanction—you are talking nonsense. And secondly, it is not the procurator who sanctions the arrest of a party member but the secretary of the territorial committee. The secretary of the territorial committee coordinates his work with the NKVD when deciding whom to arrest. If you are afraid of taking on the responsibility, we'll reassign the task to the procurator. If you want a party member to be arrested, don't you think you can have it done yourself? . . .

In practice, there are differences of opinion here. Either you send people to the NKVD about whom there are no doubts—you just simply need to have him arrested, to have him convicted—or else you send to the NKVD people who have nothing to do with the matter in question, and often you send all of them to the NKVD. . . .

You [the party] should organize your work with the NKVD in such a way that full daily contact is established with it, so that you can unmask a certain person. . . . And there is no need, no purpose to arrogating their work to ourselves. What is needed is a definite relationship to these [NKVD] organs. . . . And the heart of the matter lies in this, that you establish contact with the NKVD in a way that will make possible unified work.[45]

The messy and confusing screening generated another problem: massive appeals from expelled members. Party rules allowed for someone expelled from the party to appeal that decision, first to the local or regional party committee and eventually to Moscow's KPK if necessary.

With thousands of members being expelled in the proverka, the number of appeals mounted quickly. In September 1935 Yezhov had tried to restrict the appeals process by telling regional party secretaries to speed up the process:

> Concerning the question of appeals [of those expelled from the party] and time periods for appeal: I believe that we will have to establish one general appeals time period for all party organizations. . . . Because if we permit a member of the party who has been expelled and whose party card has been taken from him to continue his appeals for six months, a year, two years, or three years and so on, it goes without saying that we shall never be rid of these appeals. . . . Besides, for all we know, a certain liberalism may have been shown in respect of individual party members, a liberalism which we have plenty of in our Party Collegium. . . . Of course, if you have no doubts whatsoever regarding the materials of the case in your possession, then you may hear the case without summoning the appellant.[46]

Moscow party leaders were concerned that the mass expulsions could create embittered enemies among ex-party members.[47] By the end of 1935 the Central Committee staff was investigating the numbers of expelled and finding that some party organizations had as many former members as current members.[48] Moscow party officials not only kept an eye on those expelled, they checked into their moods.[49]

The Proverka of 1935 was followed in early 1936 by the Exchange of Party Documents. At the December 1935 plenum of the Central Committee, Yezhov reported on the completion of the proverka, which had begun in May 1935 and was to have been completed in three months. As it happened, its term was extended for another three months, and as Yezhov spoke in December it still had not been completed. Despite Yezhov's claims for its success, the need to launch yet another screening, the Exchange of 1936, testified to the failure of the initial effort and was a bad mark against Yezhov. He was also the target of considerable

criticism, including some from Stalin, about the number of appeals and complaints.

Appeals that had been pouring in to central party bodies were being processed unevenly, and the June 1936 plenum of the Central Committee took up the question. *Pravda* noted that Yezhov had given a report and that decisions were reached on the basis of his report as well as on "words from Comrade Stalin."[50] No corresponding Central Committee resolution was published, but a series of press articles in subsequent days reported that lower-level party officials had taken a "heartless attitude" toward party members, had expelled many of them for simple nonparticipation in party life, and had been slow to consider appeals and readmissions of those wrongly expelled.[51]

Careful readers of even this minimal public text could discern the outlines of something curious. The press formulation "on the basis of Comrade Yezhov's report and words from Comrade Stalin" was unusual. It suggested that somehow Yezhov's speech was not sufficient or completely authoritative: additional "words" from Stalin had been required. These additional words had been a criticism of Yezhov.

When Yezhov reported on the proverka operations, Stalin complained about the numbers expelled in Yezhov's operation and Yezhov defended himself by pointing out how many enemies had been ejected:

> Yezhov: Comrades, as a result of the verification of party documents, we have expelled over two hundred thousand party members.
>
> Stalin: That's quite a lot.
>
> Yezhov: Yes, quite a lot. I'll talk about it. . . .
>
> Stalin: If we expel thirty thousand—(inaudible), and if we also expel six hundred former Trotskyists and Zinovievists, then we would gain even more from that.
>
> Yezhov: We have expelled over two hundred thousand party members. Some of the expellees, Comrades, have been arrested.[52]

In the final version of the plenum transcript, prepared for party members' consumption, Stalin's criticism of Yezhov's operation was muted:

> Yezhov: You know, Comrades, that during the verification of party documents we have expelled over two hundred thousand Communists.
>
> Stalin: That's quite a lot.
>
> Yezhov: Yes, that is quite a lot. And this obligates all party organizations all the more so to be extremely attentive to members who have been expelled and who are now appealing.[53]

As we have seen, in his remarks to regional party secretaries the previous September, Yezhov had taken a rather hard line on appeals from expelled party members. He had complained that "a certain liberalism may have been shown in respect of individual party members." A few months later, in March 1936, he had again complained about excessive appeals, noting that it had become a "whole industry" in which lawyers charged twenty-five rubles per appeal.[54] Now, however, in June 1936, Stalin suggested a much more attentive attitude toward appeals:

> But let me raise a question: Is it not possible for us to reinstate some or many of the appellants as candidate members? . . . To this day, a certain, if I may say so, wholesale attitude towards party members has held sway among party leaders. They expel you. You appeal. . . . For this reason, it would be a good idea if the Orgburo of the CC [that is, Yezhov] clarified this as soon as possible, if it explained that it doesn't follow from the party rules, from the traditions of the Bolshevik Party, that a party member who has been expelled could not be reinstated as a candidate member or a sympathizer. This, after all, will allow a man to retain certain spiritual and organizational ties with the Party. This opens up real prospects for him.

At his September conference, Yezhov had also set a firm deadline by which all appeals had to be considered. Now Stalin openly questioned the practice:

> Stalin: Naturally, appeals must be handled in timely fashion, without dragging them out. They must not be put on the shelf. This goes without saying. . . .
>
> Shubrikov: . . . According to instructions issued by the CC [that is, by Yezhov], this work should have been completed by the twentieth of May.
>
> Stalin: Perhaps it was a mistake, then, to have set a deadline?[55]

Under fire for his handling of these matters, Yezhov quickly jumped on the bandwagon and reversed everything he had been saying for a year:

> I must tell you that no one has shown any attentiveness to the expellees. Some district committee secretary expels someone from the party and considers his role in the matter finished. What happens to this person, where he'll end up, will he find work or won't he—this concerns absolutely no one. . . . As you can see, it is vigilance turned upside down. Of course, that kind of vigilance isn't worth a farthing. . . . Naturally, this has nothing to do with vigilance. [Voices: That's right!] It is not vigilance but nonsense. It is nothing but a case of bureaucrats protecting themselves, so that no one will say that they are not vigilant.[56]

Yezhov's limitless capacity for hard work meant that he was practically everywhere at once in 1935. He was a member of the Orgburo, a secretary of the Central Committee, and party overseer of the NKVD. He headed the Party Control Commission and ran a large-scale national party purge. He spoke to meetings of chauffeurs and Central Committee members. He ran several Central Committee departments and

served on countless ad hoc Politburo commissions. By the end of 1935 nobody had more official party positions than Yezhov, and, it is fair to say, nobody had more influence on party operations save Stalin.

Still, 1935 was not a shining year for Yezhov's career and his prominence was matched by a string of embarrassing failures. Twice, in January after the Kirov assassination and again in June, he had pointedly failed to prove his theory that Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Trotsky were the direct organizers of the Kirov assassination. Stalin refused to proceed on the slim evidence Yezhov had produced.

Yezhov's 1935 proverka, although he portrayed it as a great success, was a dismal failure. It took three times as long as planned and in the end had to be repeated in the guise of an Exchange of Party Documents.[57] The vague instructions of the proverka meant conflict and confusion among party committees, the NKVD, and local procurators, all of which Yezhov had to referee. There are no signs that he was more than temporarily successful at this, but it did give him the opportunity to take a few more slaps at Yagoda's NKVD.

Conflicting instructions also meant that the local and regional party leaders had considerable leeway in interpreting the screening (and defining the victims) in ways that suited them more than they suited Moscow. The resulting categories of those expelled showed that despite Yezhov's constant urgings to go after oppositionists, most of the victims were rank-and-file people with minor offences whom the local party people found safe to eject. Stalin was annoyed at the mix of oppositionists and average members in Yezhov's operation, and said so.

This central/regional tug of war also meant that the fallout from the proverka—mass appeals flooding into Moscow—clogged the party bureaucracy and created large numbers of discontented former members, both of which bothered Stalin.

Despite Yezhov's failure to convict Zinoviev and Kamenev and the dubious proverka that he ran, his stock remained high because of the other major effort he led in 1936. A new investigation of the Kirov assassination and other oppositionist conspiracies had come to the top of Stalin's agenda. At the beginning of 1936 Stalin approved an effort by

Yezhov to reopen the Kirov murder investigation and to broaden the investigation to include virtually all Trotskyists and Zinovievists. This put him in Yagoda's office and on his back to an even greater extent before; ultimately, this assignment would catapult Yezhov into the NKVD leadership by autumn.

NINE

Angling for the Job

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.

N. I. YEZHOV

Even before Yezhov assumed the NKVD leadership in the fall of 1936, he had become one of the most powerful persons in the USSR. Most of his main activities in 1936, as we shall see, were related to the growing campaign of repression against former dissidents: followers of Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Bukharin.[1] Since most of his activities related to matters within the sphere of NKVD security, they gave him occasion, either implicitly or explicitly, constantly to snipe at Yagoda's leadership of the police.

No opportunity to trip up Yagoda escaped his notice. For example, Yezhov kept files on suspicious "unusual events" that the wary Stalinists thought might be threatening. This file contained investigations of potentially suspicious airplane crashes, automobile accidents, and even muggings. A Soviet pilot had misnavigated and accidentally strayed

into Latvian air space. In the Azov–Black Sea region, a collective farmer had discovered the theft of some bread and had been murdered for his trouble. A party member had been killed while walking along the railroad: the investigation continued. (This "terrorist act" had been forwarded to Yezhov by the NKVD.) A schoolteacher had committed suicide after pressure from a corrupt local government chief. Another schoolteacher had committed counterrevolutionary acts by getting her students to write subversive rhymes, including the politically dangerous "The steamship goes, water through the wheels, we will feed the young Communists to the fish!" The son of a regional soviet chief was playing with guns and shot a playmate. (It turned out that elite children of party officials often took their fathers' pistols into the woods for target practice.) Anonymous leaflets were scattered about in Gorky Park in Moscow.[2]

The attention senior Soviet leaders paid to such random events is a reflection of their constant anxiety about even the smallest matters.[3] Moreover, the Stalinists were inclined to attach sinister political meanings to everyday events. A farmer had murdered his children, claiming that he had no means to feed them. When an investigation showed that he did have food, the conclusion was that the affair had antiregime "political meaning." In another case, the sloppy police investigation of a fire on a farm "did not uncover the possible counterrevolutionary role of religious believers and sectarians."[4] According to a Politburo resolution, an apartment fire at Kaganovich's residence was "to be regarded not as an accident but as having been organized by enemies." The NKVD was ordered to investigate along those lines.[5]

Yezhov's file on "unusual events" reflected not only the usual extreme Stalinist suspicion. On his own initiative, Yezhov was checking up on Yagoda, looking for events that Yagoda might fail to investigate. He also saved particularly embarrassing material on Yagoda's deputies. In October 1935 NKVD Deputy Commissar Agranov (with whom Yezhov had worked on the Kirov investigation) had let his wife drive his car. She had crashed into a taxi, killing the occupants. Agranov's NKVD colleagues, department heads, and Yagoda intimates Pauker and Volo-

vich quickly repaired his car, found a poor chauffeur to accuse, and covered up the incident. Yezhov put this in his file.[6]

In addition to his multilevel campaign against Yagoda, Yezhov still had time to tend to other matters as well. His capacity for work meant that he had other portfolios as well, and continued close participation and supervision in many other spheres, ranging from high-level dispute resolution to KPK disciplinary activities to approving travel abroad to investigating the Communist International. He supervised a variety of schools and educational administrations, continued to oversee Soviet aviation, helped organize a National Committee to Struggle for Peace, ruled on efforts to restore Stalin's birthplace in Georgia, and even worked on rules for buying train tickets and distributing automobiles to party committees.[7] Meanwhile, as head of ORPO he worked as chief editor of the party journal *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo*.[8]

Yezhov also continued his work with personnel, but at a higher level. Although G. M. Malenkov replaced him as head of ORPO early in 1936, his positions as CC secretary and Orgburo member meant that he actively worked as personnel referee at high levels, resolving disputes at the level of CC members. In July 1936 he intervened in and resolved a dispute between CC member and Voronezh region First Secretary Riabinin and Commissar of Heavy Industry Sergo Ordzhonikidze. It seems that Ordzhonikidze had removed one Shablygin as director of the Voronezh Radio Factory and replaced him with one Nude without consulting Riabinin's provincial party leadership. Riabinin pointed out that Nude had lost his previous job at a Moscow factory for being "unfit" and claimed that Ordzhonikidze's deputies were always sending unqualified specialists who then intrigued against director Shablygin. Clearly, Shablygin was part of Riabinin's circle in Voronezh, and the First Secretary had leapt to his defense.

Such disputes between a CC member and a People's Commissar could be handled only at the highest level, and short of Stalin there was now no senior leader higher than Yezhov. Yezhov began by soliciting briefs from the CC Industrial Department and Ordzhonikidze's departments. Of course, Ordzhonikidze's deputies claimed that Shablygin

had been a poor factory director and asserted their right to remove him without anyone's agreement or permission. The Industrial Department, however, supported Riabinin, considering his protest to be "correct." They said that the newly appointed director Nude was in fact "worthless" and that the Heavy Industry administration had smeared outgoing director Shablygin in order to hide its own mismanagement. Yezhov decided in favor of Riabinin, inviting him and Shablygin to an Orgburo meeting and copying the decision to Ordzhonikidze.[9]

Similarly, in Smolensk, CC member and First Secretary I. P. Rumiantsev wrote to Yezhov on 27 August 1936 complaining about one Loginov, a Moscow plenipotentiary for harvest matters. Rumiantsev said that Loginov was insulting and, "under the guise of Bolshevik directness," discredited the regional party committee. Yezhov wrote across Rumiantsev's letter, "Have to send someone else to Smolensk and send Loginov to another region."[10]

The origins of Yezhov's savage 1937–38 "mass operations" against foreigners and Soviet citizens of foreign extraction go back several years. As we have seen, Hitler's rise to power in early 1933 had led to increasing numbers of foreign Communists fleeing to the USSR for asylum from Fascist regimes. And more broadly, Soviet concern about foreign security and threats increased in the 1930s, eventually to a full-blown spy mania in 1937–38. Yezhov was to play a key role in these xenophobic terror operations, but long before that he had concerned himself with foreign connections, and as secretary of the CC, already by 1934–35 he was charged with overall supervision of such things.

For example, he had authority to approve or disapprove foreign travel by Soviet citizens and delegations. We have numerous examples of how seriously the Soviet leadership took these matters. In March 1936 N. I. Bukharin was sent to Paris to arrange the purchase of some of Marx's manuscripts. Writing to Yezhov through Soviet Foreign Minister Litvinov, Bukharin asked for permission for his new wife, Larina, to join him there. Yezhov benevolently wrote across the top of Bukharin's letter, "For my personal files. Send the wife."[11]

In July 1935 French Communists wrote to Yezhov asking permission

for a Soviet sport delegation to visit Paris in August. They complained that they had written before but had received no answer. Such a matter would be routine in most countries and resolved at a much lower level, but in the Soviet Union of the 1930s it was a security question for the highest authorities. Across the top of the letter, Yezhov scrawled, "Put the question to the Orgburo." Yezhov also directed a similar request from Sweden to the Orgburo.[12]

The highest leadership of the country occupied itself with the details of delegations traveling abroad. A Soviet delegation was to visit RCA Corporation in New York in 1936 pursuant to a formal agreement on technical assistance. Stalin was personally interested in the precise composition of the delegation, and Yezhov, as secretary of the CC, was expected to interview and vet each one. Late in 1935 Yezhov reported to Stalin on how the Soviet delegation members had been screened and selected, pointing out that each member had undergone a "strict checking" of party membership history, education, and occupation. His report was accompanied by detailed lists and charts of the delegation composition.[13]

Before the delegation's departure for New York, Yezhov, who himself had been abroad only for short vacations, lectured its members on how to conduct themselves abroad.[14] They were to be constantly vigilant against attempts by devious capitalists to subvert their loyalty or recruit them as foreign spies. They were to exhibit Soviet patriotism but not brag; be respectful of Western technological progress but not fawn over it. They were to dress properly, but not overdress. Yezhov solemnly advised them to follow Western customs by bathing more often than they did at home.[15]

As early as 1934 Yezhov had been involved in checking the activities of Soviet citizens working abroad. On 26 February of that year, a letter reached him about purportedly suspicious comments made by ambassador to England Ivan Maisky, who had praised the moderate socialist Sydney Webb. (Yezhov took no action.) Other reports on the conduct of Soviet diplomatic personnel abroad routinely crossed his desk over the next two years.[16] By 1936 Yezhov's position as CC secretary author-

ized him to make unilateral decisions on such matters. On 25 January of that year, Soviet ambassador to the United States Troianovsky wrote to Yezhov about one V. V. Gombard, who had been arrested back in 1930. Troianovsky informed Yezhov that Gombard's brother in the United States "had provided us several useful services" and asked Yezhov to look into the matter. Yezhov ordered the release of the imprisoned Gombard brother, who then successfully appealed to Yezhov to help him find an apartment.[17]

As we have seen Yezhov played a leading role in checking on the backgrounds of foreign Communists in the USSR. His recommendations in 1934 for more careful verification of these immigrants had not been implemented by MOPR and the Comintern, and late in 1935 the Politburo stopped free entry to the USSR from Poland and invalidated entry permits issued by these organizations for Polish Communists entering the USSR. Henceforth these immigrants would have to receive permits directly from Yezhov in his capacity as secretary of the Central Committee.[18]

On 4 January 1936 Comintern Secretary Dmitri Manuilsky wrote to Yezhov warning about spies entering the USSR under cover of foreign Communist Party membership. Despite Yezhov's earlier efforts, Communists from Poland, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia had found it easy to enter the USSR through a simplified procedure known as the "green corridor." Manuilsky wrote that this mass influx must stop and that applicants for entry should be considered on a case-by-case basis; "only people we know" through the Comintern or fraternal party leadership should be admitted. In good Soviet bureaucratic style, Manuilsky deflected major blame from his Comintern onto MOPR, whose "current leadership" he advised changing. In the margin of Manuisky's letter, Yezhov noted, "We need to call a conference."[19]

A month later, after soliciting memos from the NKVD on the problem, Yezhov got an earful. On 11 February the NKVD reported that there were 9,600 registered political émigrés in the USSR, but because MOPR kept such bad records, the actual number was probably more than 15,000. Since 1931 the NKVD had arrested more than 2,000 émi-

grés for espionage. One example was a German named Guber, who had entered the USSR through Inturist with MOPR sponsorship but who "turned out to be a Gestapo agent."[20]

A week later Yezhov wrote to Stalin and enclosed a suggested draft resolution for the Central Committee. As usual, he did not miss the chance to smear Yagoda and his NKVD for negligence. Already the week before he had sent Stalin a memo on the arrest of the Omsk NKVD counterintelligence chief, a Yagoda appointee, for being a Polish agent and had raised the suspicion that the exposed spy had friends higher up in Yagoda's NKVD.[21] Yezhov's subsequent letter said that it was pathetically easy for foreign powers to use political émigrés for espionage and that the NKVD had "let this slip out of their hands." MOPR was no better; since 1927 the CC had let MOPR handle these matters, but they had conducted no verification to speak of. Adopting the NKVD estimate of fifteen thousand political émigrés in the USSR, Yezhov claimed that MOPR knew about only fifty-five hundred of them. Something needed to be done, he wrote.[22]

Based on Yezhov's draft, the CC ordered the liquidation of MOPR's entrance commission. It ordered the NKVD to adopt a completely revised procedure to check émigrés, putting it in the hands of NKVD chief of border guards M. Frinovsky.[23] All political émigrés in the USSR were to be reregistered within three months, and procedures for entrance were drastically tightened: the foreign affairs ministry could no longer give visas to such persons, nor could cultural organizations with international ties; the number of schools for foreigners was to be sharply reduced; finally, a special commission consisting of Yezhov, Manuilsky, and NKVD counterintelligence operative M. I. Gai was to review political émigrés, especially in MOPR, and purge them of "harmful people." The Politburo approved Yezhov's recommendations within a week.[24]

Yezhov's new commission met for the first time on 15 March 1936 and every few weeks until June. At that time, Gai reported that they had found "compromising material" on 39 percent of those checked (Table 9.1). These proportions closely mirror the nationalities targeted in the notorious "mass operations" of the following year.[25]

TABLE 9.1

Verification of political émigrés, March–June 1936

	Checked	Compromising material found	%
Latvians	73	67	92
Koreans	42	25	60
Germans	811	414	51
Finns	145	58	40
Poles	1,289	489	38
Bulgarians	673	236	35
Estonians	317	96	30
Hungarians	603	174	29
Austrians	576	142	25
Americans	52	9	17
Czechs	88	10	11
Totals	4,669	1,720	37

Source: Gai spravka to Yezhov, RGASPI, f. 671, op. 1, d. 73, l. 96.

The commission got tougher as time went on, in keeping with the rising political temperature of the hunt for enemies in mid-1936. In June it considered 368 people, of whom it proposed to punish 83 percent: to arrest 53 and deport 238, with an additional 13 to be exiled "to the periphery."[26] During June and July the commission considered the cases of 515 Polish émigrés. Nearly all were to be arrested, except for the students who were to be deported, even if there were no incriminating materials on them![27] The xenophobia that was to reach lethal levels in 1937 was beginning, and Yezhov was instrumental in raising the temperature.

As was often the case in Soviet politics, any campaign or initiative was accompanied by widespread blame shifting. In the present case, Comintern leaders Manuilsky and Georgi Dmitrov also launched an attack on Elena Stasova, the head of MOPR. We have seen that Manuilsky's January 1936 letter blamed MOPR for allowing spies into the USSR. On 8 June 1936 he renewed his attack in a joint letter with Dmitrov to Yezhov, advocating the total reorganization of MOPR.

They attacked Stasova personally, suggesting that she be removed because she was incapable and unwilling to do what was necessary.[28]

Yezhov's most famous activities in 1936 were his preparations of cases against major figures of the former anti-Stalin oppositions. We saw previously how he had supervised the investigation of the Kirov assassination, searching for any trails that might lead to oppositionist conspiracy. We also saw how he made a strong if ultimately unsuccessful case before the Central Committee in June 1935 for Zinoviev's and Kamenev's direct participation, with Trotsky's inspiration, in organizing the assassination.

Although Stalin had been unconvinced by Yezhov's evidence and had not followed up directly against Zinoviev and Kamenev, in the summer of 1936 he authorized Yezhov to push new investigations of lower-level oppositionists. This mandate not only involved Yezhov more deeply in investigations but gave him new opportunities to discredit Yagoda. Yezhov invited NKVD Deputy Commissar Agranov (with whom he had worked on the Kirov investigation and who was known not to be part of Yagoda's inner circle) to a private meeting at Yezhov's dacha. Yezhov told Agranov that the Central Committee — implying Stalin — was suspicious that not everything about oppositionist conspiracies had been uncovered at the time of the Kirov investigation. Agranov was ordered to conduct an "operation" against Trotskyists and Zinovievists in Moscow. But Yagoda and his deputy Molchanov in the NKVD Secret Political Department were unwilling to conduct such "operations," and apparently nothing happened. Yagoda even told his deputies that Yezhov did not speak for the CC and implied that he was acting personally.[29]

Did Stalin actually authorize Yezhov to go behind Yagoda's back and give Agranov orders? Stalin and Agranov had known each other for years, and if the dictator really wanted Agranov to act, it would have been a simple matter to call him in.[30] Stalin frequently involved himself in NKVD operations and personnel decisions, and such interventions were not understood to usurp Yagoda's authority. To work through Yezhov to contact Agranov would appear to be the long way around.

Yezhov was constantly working to undermine and embarrass Yagoda and may well have taken the initiative with Agranov. Yezhov as Central

Committee secretary also had the right to say what "the Central Committee" thought, whatever Yagoda might say. Sending Agranov off on a mission against oppositionists would strengthen the case Yezhov had made at the Yenukidze meeting if testimony could be produced from those arrested. And getting Agranov to act without his boss's knowledge or permission would have been an ideal strategy against Yagoda. It would not only undermine his authority in general but also begin to pry one of his deputies away from him, enlisting him as a Yezhov client and weakening Yagoda's control over his bureaucratic fief.

Yagoda had long resented Yezhov's meddling in NKVD affairs. He had also dragged his feet, at least from Yezhov's point of view, in moving against the opposition. Later Yagoda and Molchanov were accused of direct participation in the oppositionists' terrorist plans, and their reluctance was seen as protecting their fellow conspirators. In reality, though, Yagoda had good bureaucratic reasons for limiting investigations. If he conducted the kind of serious sweeps and interrogations that Yezhov wanted, NKVD investigators overseen by Yezhov would certainly produce whatever confessions might be required to posit or fabricate a vast and dangerous conspiracy. Such a scenario would cast doubt on Yagoda's previous leadership: how could the NKVD have been so sloppy and incompetent in previous years to have let this conspiracy go undetected? A year later, when Yagoda himself was under arrest and interrogation, he refused to admit that he had been a conspirator but explained that his limited investigations against the opposition had been a familiar Soviet practice to protect the reputation of his *vedomstvo* (bureaucratic organization).[31]

In this light, Yezhov's co-option of Agranov and his pressure for sterner investigations of oppositionists (at Stalin's behest or not) was not only about persecuting dissidents. In fact, Yezhov's moves can be seen as parts of the personal and bureaucratic struggle between Yezhov and Yagoda, with the oppositionists as pawns in that game. At any rate, Agranov did nothing. Perhaps he was blocked by Yagoda and Molchanov.[32] Perhaps he was chary of becoming a pawn in the Yezhov-Yagoda game. Perhaps he was afraid of his NKVD boss's retaliation.

Having failed again, in the second half of 1935 Yezhov turned his attention, as we have seen, to running the proverka of party documents. Here too he tried to steer things in the direction of incriminating the oppositionists, and here too he met resistance, this time from the regional party secretaries. But with the completion of the proverka at the beginning of 1936, he returned full-time to his "supervision" of the NKVD, pushing it in the direction of persecuting the opposition and embarrassing Yagoda in the process.

Sometime in the first days of 1936, Yezhov had received a mandate from Stalin to reopen the Kirov assassination investigation. He later said that for Stalin something "did not seem right" about that investigation, and Yezhov was charged with taking a new look.[33] This did not mean that Stalin intended to replace Yagoda, or that he was grooming Yezhov for the job. Stalin had not criticized Yagoda openly, nor had he supported Yezhov at CC plena when he did. It is more likely that the Kirov and Yenukidze affairs made Stalin wonder about the competence (or enthusiasm) of Yagoda's NKVD. Yagoda ran a tight ship, and his organization was compartmentalized and secret. It was therefore not so easy even for Stalin to know exactly what was going on there; Yezhov's early 1935 report on how informers were deployed by the NKVD provided information that was new to Stalin. Attaching a diligent bulldog like Yezhov to inquire into and oversee NKVD affairs was as likely to be an attempt to gather information as part of a plan to replace Yagoda. In any event, arrests of former Trotskyist and Zinovievist oppositionists now began in earnest. They, along with some oppositionists already serving prison or camp terms, were interrogated anew.

Yagoda and his deputies had not been completely lax in investigating oppositionist and other conspiracies. Throughout 1935 they had sent Yezhov reports of investigations of their arrests of various "counterrevolutionary organizations" around the country.[34] Sometime in early 1936 they produced a compilation ("Svodka No. 1 of Investigatory Materials on the Case of the Trotskyist Terrorist Organization of V. P. Olberg, I. K. Fedotov and others"). But in these reports, they steered away from any discussion of assassination and limited themselves to listing mem-

bership in various dissident organizations, prison networks, mutual aid groups, and so forth.[35]

Yezhov wanted more. His trail of investigations began with the arrest on 5 January 1936 of V. P. Olberg, who within a month confessed to being a Trotskyist agent dispatched to the USSR by Trotsky to organize the assassination of Stalin. His wife testified that Olberg had received money and false passports from Trotsky's son Sedov and other Trotskyists in Paris and Prague. The Olbergs provided names of alleged coconspirators, who were in turn arrested. By the end of March, 508 former oppositionists were under arrest.[36] Yagoda forwarded the transcripts of all the interrogations to Stalin, Molotov, and Yezhov. Yezhov put them in his growing "file on Trotskyists."[37]

By February 1936 Yagoda realized that he had better act quickly to protect his organization and get on the new oppositionist-as-terrorist bandwagon. On 9 February his deputy G. E. Prokofev wrote to local NKVD organizations that there was evidence of activation of Trotskyist-Zinovievist underground cells with terrorist intentions. "Our task is the complete and total liquidation of the Trotskyist-Zinovievist underground."[38] Two weeks later, Prokofev reported directly to Stalin, announcing the discovery of a Trotskyist "archive" during the search of a Trotskyist's apartment. Across the top of Prokofev's letter, Stalin wrote "To Molotov and Yezhov. I propose transferring the whole Trotskyist archive and other Trotsky documents to Comrade Yezhov for analysis and reporting to the Politburo, and to conduct NKVD interrogations together with Comrade Yezhov. Stalin." Yezhov filed the Prokofev report into his Trotskyist file.[39] By the end of March a newly vigilant Yagoda was suggesting to Stalin that all Trotskyists participating in "terrorist acts" of any kind be summarily convicted and shot.[40]

Building on a growing network of confessions, on 19 June 1936 Yagoda and USSR Procurator A. Ya. Vyshinsky proposed the trial and execution of eighty-two members of the Trotskyist "terrorist organization." Their list was limited to Trotskyists, but they included in a cover letter the possibility of including Zinoviev and Kamenev, even though they had not confessed.[41] By limiting the scenario to Trotskyists, Ya-

goda could show that the center of the conspiracy was abroad, where Trotsky lived, rather than in the USSR, where the Zinovievists were. By implication, his failure to prosecute distant Trotskyists would not be as damning as his failure to move against Zinovievists in the country itself. In this light, it is not a surprise that Yezhov wanted to include Zinovievists in the dock as well. Yagoda was afraid that including Zinovievists in the dock would reflect badly on his own investigation, which he had limited to Trotskyists, and he rejected the Zinovievist "evidence," writing "nonsense," "rubbish," and "impossible" across the top of the papers.

Stalin sided with Yezhov, whom he empowered to order Yagoda to prepare a joint Trotskyist-Zinovievist scenario.[42] This required securing confessions from Zinovievists and from Zinoviev and Kamenev themselves. In June and July, NKVD interrogators worked hard to break Zinoviev and Kamenev, under Yezhov's watchful eye. By 23 July, Kamenev was admitting membership in a counterrevolutionary center that planned terror, but he denied being one of the organizers; he implicated Zinoviev as being closer to the matter. Three days later Zinoviev was confronted by one of his followers, Karev, who directly accused him. Zinoviev asked that the interrogation be stopped because he wanted to make a statement that, in the event, amounted to a full confession of organizing assassination and terror.[43] Shortly thereafter, he submitted to his interrogators a 540-page manuscript he had written in prison. In "A Deserved Sentence" he wrote,

> There is no question about it. . . . It is a fact. Whoever plays with the idea of "opposition" to the socialist state plays with the idea of counterrevolutionary terror. . . . Before each who finds himself in my position this question stands in sharp relief. If tomorrow war comes—it stands yet a million times sharper and bigger. And for myself this question in prison for a long time is irreversibly decided. Rise from the dead! Be born again as a Bolshevik! Finish your human days conscious of your guilt before the party! Do everything in order to erase this guilt.[44]

Zinoviev's confession supported Yezhov's long-term contention that Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev were associated in a combined monstrous plot of terror and assassination to overthrow the Soviet leadership. Less than a week later, Yezhov drafted a secret letter to all party organizations about the upcoming trial, which now was to be a smaller affair of sixteen defendants drawn from both Trotskyists and Zinovievists. Stalin put Yezhov in charge of organizing the trial and supervising press coverage. This included issuing press bulletins, coordinating daily coverage in *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, and arranging for passes to foreign correspondents to cover the trial.[45]

Stalin paid close attention to how the trial was presented and covered, and on at least one occasion was not satisfied with the press coverage Yezhov supervised. On 6 September 1936 he wrote to Kaganovich and Molotov that a *Pravda* article about the trial was "wrong." *Pravda* had made the conspiracy sound too personal, a matter of one group of politicians against the other. Rather, it was important to assert that the oppositionists did have a political platform — the restoration of capitalism — but were afraid to speak of it. "It was necessary to say that he who struggles against the leaders of the party and government of the USSR also struggles for the defeat of socialism and the restoration of capitalism."[46] Stalin made a similar point to Comintern leader Georgi Dmitrov: "Workers think that everything is happening because of a fight between me and Trotsky, from the bad character of Stalin. It is necessary to point out that these people fought against Lenin, against the party during Lenin's lifetime."[47]

Despite Stalin's rebuke, Yezhov had won a major victory: the current official formulation was identical to the line he had defended more than a year ago at the Yenukidze accusation meeting but which had not been accepted at that time. As a bonus, Yagoda appeared to have been dragging his feet. As Yezhov wrote in the July 1936 letter to party organizations:

> On the basis of new materials gathered by the NKVD in 1936, 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 direct instructions regarding both the murder of S. M. Kirov as well as preparations for attempts on the lives of other leaders of our party and, first and foremost, on the life of Comrade Stalin. . . .

Similarly, it can be considered an established fact that Zinovievists carried out their terroristic practices in a solid bloc with Trotsky and Trotskyists. . . .

From abroad, Trotsky, who was directing the activities of the all-Union, united Trotskyist-Zinovievist center, has used every means at his disposal, especially after the arrest of Kamenev and Zinoviev, to speed up the murder of Comrades Stalin and Voroshilov. He has been systematically sending directives and practical instructions through his agents concerning the organizing of the murder. . . .

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.[48]

Experienced readers of party documents surely noticed Yezhov's implicit swipe at the NKVD. If the conspiracy dated from 1932, why had the NKVD uncovered it only four years later?[49]

Yezhov was also able to emphasize the dilatory negligence of Yagoda and his police through another trail of arrests and interrogations in 1936. Back in 1934 one Kotsiubinsky, an official of the Ukrainian Marx-Lenin Institute, had been arrested along with his associates and interrogated for alleged participation in Trotskyist circles. At that time, the evidence the NKVD produced against him and his friends was inconclusive, and he was allowed to continue in his job.[50] With Yezhov's new round of in-

terrogations in 1936, the same people were reinterrogated. In February 1936 one Rappoport-Darin directly implicated Kotsiubinsky as a conspirator, and D. B. Naumov-Lekakh, another member of Kotsiubinsky's circle, led interrogators to N. V. Golubenko. Golubenko told Yezhov's men that G. L. Piatakov, a deputy commissar of heavy industry, had said in 1932 that it was necessary to kill Stalin.[51] Piatakov, a former Trotskyist but in 1936 the trusted deputy of Heavy Industry Commissar Sergo Ordzhonikidze, was said to have been the leader of a cell of Trotskyist terrorists in Ukraine.[52]

In Ukraine in spring and summer 1936, Trotskyists were being arrested and interrogated by V. A. Balitsky, NKVD chief for Ukraine. As he had done with Agranov, Yezhov pried Balitsky away from Yagoda and established a direct relationship with him outside the NKVD chain of command. At the beginning, Balitsky was sending records of his interrogations to Yagoda, who was supposed to forward them to Yezhov. But at some point, Yezhov stopped getting the copies and complained to Balitsky. Balitsky replied, "I've checked all the protocols of interrogations about which you chewed me out. All protocols have been sent to NKVD center; they decide who to send them to. If you have not received certain protocols, it can be explained only by the fact that someone in the central [NKVD] apparat goofed, or didn't consider it necessary to send them to the CC [Yezhov]." Balitsky was no fool: after this interchange, he began to send the interrogation protocols directly to Yezhov, signing his reports "I send you greetings! Balitsky."[53]

The trail to Piatakov eventually led to the second Moscow show trial in January 1937, when Piatakov, K. Radek, and fifteen other prominent Soviet leaders were accused of treason.[54] Now, though, in the summer and fall of 1936, Yezhov used his new friend Balitsky's materials in his reports to Stalin that "recent protocols" and "new materials" pointed directly to a conspiracy led by Piatakov and other current members of the industrial bureaucracy.[55] Once again, Yezhov implied that Yagoda's NKVD had been asleep at the switch for years.

At the August 1936 trial, some of the defendants had mentioned the names of the former rightist dissidents Nikolai Bukharin and Aleksei

Rykov, and prosecutor Vyshinsky announced the opening of an investigation of them.[56] The supposed links between the now "unmasked" Zinoviev-Trotsky conspiracy and the former rightists were the former rightists Mikhail Tomsky and G. Sokolnikov. The next day, Tomsky committed suicide.[57] Yezhov was put in charge of investigating the suicide and its circumstances, which included a suicide letter that Tomsky had left with his wife.

Tomsky's suicide letter gave Yezhov a new and powerful weapon in his struggle against Yagoda. It not only opened the door to further investigations of rightists but circumstantially identified Yagoda himself as a former secret collaborator of the right opposition. Yezhov decided to write an unsolicited letter to Stalin.

As a skilled Bolshevik official, Yezhov played his cards carefully. He did not run to Stalin denouncing Yagoda but instead pretended to be careful and circumspect while at the same time casting doubt on the NKVD chief. Because this letter represents the culmination of Yezhov's campaign against Yagoda, it is worth quoting at length. Moreover, because both the rough draft and final version of the letter survive, we have a rare opportunity to compare the texts and to see what might have gone through Yezhov's head as he tried to handle his boss.

In the final version he sent to Stalin, Yezhov cast suspicion on Yagoda by suggesting that the NKVD chief knew he was going to be named in Tomsky's suicide letter. But in the next sentence, he was scrupulously neutral about evaluating that accusation:

> [Tomsky's widow] named Yagoda. According to her, Tomsky asked her to tell you that Comrade Yagoda played an active role in the leading troika [Bukharin, Rykov, Tomsky] of the rightists and regularly passed them materials on the situation in the Central Committee. . . . This communication strangely coincides with Yagoda's own suggestion. Even before I arrived at Tomsky's, Yagoda in conversation with Agranov . . . expressed the suggestion that Tomsky named him because he [Yagoda] had visited Tomsky several times.

> Is this Tomsky's counterrevolutionary kick from the grave or a real fact? I don't know. I personally think that Tomsky chose a peculiar way to revenge himself [on Yagoda], counting on the plausibility [of the story]: dead men don't lie.[58]

Yezhov's letter to Stalin was thus noncommittal, even doubtful about Yagoda's guilt, although his even raising the issue was obliquely damning to Yagoda. In his first draft Yezhov had gone further and provided his own personal theory of Yagoda's guilt. Yezhov had written in his rough draft: "*Personally I think that [Yagoda] undoubtedly had friendly relations with several of the rightists. When he saw which way things were going, he broke with them but maintained some kind of connections.*"[59]

Upon reflection, Yezhov probably understood that Stalin did not care about Yagoda's internal struggles or motivations, much less a subordinate's self-interested speculation on them. The point was that Yagoda had "connections" (*sviazi*) with the rightists and had hidden this from Stalin. That was guilt enough, and party leaders had been punished for less. From Yezhov's point of view, therefore, the useful point had already been made by Tomsky himself. Nothing was to be gained by belaboring the point. It would also have been presumptuous of Yezhov to press it with what might seem to be an openly ambitious attack on Yagoda. So he removed these lines from the final draft to Stalin and took the high road by seeming to give Comrade Yagoda the benefit of the doubt. Yagoda was already sufficiently tarred, and Yezhov could afford to look clean and fair.

In the final letter, Yezhov went on to tell Stalin that there might be reason to take another look at the possible guilt of the rightists, including V. V. Shmidt, an Old Bolshevik since 1905, who had briefly sided with the rightists in the late 1920s: "In light of recent testimony from previously arrested people, the role of the rightists has to be seen differently. . . . I think that earlier we did not get to the bottom of it. . . . In any case, there is every reason to suppose that we will uncover much that is new and will look anew at the rightists and in particular Rykov, Bukharin, Uglanov, Shmidt, and others."

But in his rough draft, Yezhov once again had gone much further, again proposing his own theory and suggesting harsh action:

The Trotskyists and Zinovievists were so discredited that the rightists were afraid to ally with them.[60] *I think that the rightists knew about the existence of the Trotskyist-Zinovievist bloc, knew about terror, informed each other, and watched from the sidelines, thinking that if the Trotskyists were successful in their terrorist activity, they could use the results without discrediting their own organization. Accordingly, they doubtless had their own rightist organization which also obviously stood for terror. . . . I now request that the chekists [NKVD] gather together for me the materials on the rightists and in particular on certain groups of them in order to again carefully examine the rightist line.*

Independently of the results of this work, the rightists are so compromised that to leave them unpunished is impossible. Now practically all party organizations are bombarding the Central Committee and the press with questions about what measures to take against the rightists. The most minimal punishment, which is politically completely justified, is in my view expulsion from the Central Committee and exile to work in far away regions. To leave things the way they are is impossible. But for this it will be necessary to have your firm order.

Once again, though, Yezhov decided that this was not the right way to deal with Stalin. Stalin could draw his own conclusions, and Yezhov must have sensed that the dictator was wavering on how far or fast to move against Bukharin, Rykov, and the other leading rightists.[61] Moreover, in the draft letter, Yezhov would have been proposing punishments and ambitiously asking Stalin to put him in charge of a full-blown repression of the rightists. Bukharin and Rykov were still big fish, and it was not Yezhov's place to suggest their fates. As with undermining Yagoda, Yezhov had planted the seed with Stalin: there were still possible conspiracies still to be uncovered. "Personally" expressing his theories and opinions to Stalin was immodest and not useful. Thus fear of presumption and explicit ambition made Yezhov delete these two paragraphs.

In his final letter to Stalin, Yezhov went on to propose harsh punishments for many of those previously arrested. After reexamining "all lists of those arrested in current matters and all punished in the Kirov and other matters," Yezhov recommended mass secret executions and punishments of former oppositionists. He divided them into five categories:

> The first category, to shoot. Here go all immediate participants in terrorist groups, provocateurs, double agents and the most important active organizers of terror.
>
> The second category, ten years in prison plus ten years in exile. Here go the less active participants in terrorist groups, people knowing of terrorist activities and those helping terrorists.
>
> The third category, eight years in prison plus five years exile.
>
> The fourth category, five years in prison plus five years exile.
>
> And the fifth category, to send to the NKVD Special Conference, which has the right to specify punishments up to five years.

Once again, though, his first draft had been much more strident. To the recommendations above, he had originally added: "*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 according to the Law of 1 December 1934 without formal court sittings.*"

In his draft he also recommended the immediate arrest and secret execution of Radek and Piatakov, and while noting that this would be noticed abroad and could result in bad publicity, "nevertheless, we have to do it." Upon reflection, Yezhov surely again decided that he was being presumptuous in telling Stalin what to do with senior colleagues. Again he pulled back and deleted these sections.[62]

Finally, in his letter to Stalin, Yezhov could not resist returning to the matter of Yagoda and the NKVD:

> On the matter of clarifying the connections of Trotskyists with the ChK [NKVD], at the moment nothing concrete has turned up. I

have collected quite extensive materials, but they only show that there were signals of the Trotskyist-Zinovievist activities in 1933 and 1934. All this, however, went barely noticed. . . .

I very much want to tell you about several inadequacies in the work of the NKVD which cannot long be tolerated. Without your intervention in this matter, nothing will come of it.

The corresponding part of his rough draft was, like the above deleted sections, much more direct. More than that, it sounded like a personal play for Yagoda's job. In the first draft, Yezhov had written:

There have been uncovered so many inadequacies that it is impossible to tolerate them any more. I have held back on this until now [!] *because the basic emphasis has been on the destruction of the Trotskyists and Zinovievists. Now, it seems to me, it is necessary to reach some kind of conclusion on all these affairs to rebuild the work of the NKVD itself.*

It is all the more necessary that among the top leadership of the NKVD one sees a mood of self-congratulation, tranquility, and bragging. Instead of drawing conclusions from the Trotskyist business and criticizing and correcting their own deficiencies, people dream now only of medals for exposing that business. It is hard to believe that those people do not understand that in the final analysis, it is not the merit of the NKVD to have uncovered a five-year-old conspiracy that hundreds of people knew about.

Yezhov managed to control himself again; he deleted this part too. With such an approach—with his claim that in Yagoda's NKVD there were "so many inadequacies that it is impossible to tolerate them any more"—Yezhov would have exceeded the limits of self-effacing Bolshevik tact. Although ostensibly a routine advisory from one senior party leader to another about the poor performance of a state agency, Yezhov's language was too strong, and he knew it. Combined with the suspicion of Trotskyist infiltration of the secret police and the ever-darkening shade Yezhov was casting on Yagoda, a set of "intolerable

shortcomings" left only one conclusion: Yagoda had to go. There was really only one plausible candidate to take his place, Nikolai Yezhov, but it would have been too direct to say so.

Yezhov's agenda in writing the letter is clear. He wanted to finally undermine Yagoda in order to get his job. He wanted summary shootings of Trotskyists already under arrest, and he sought a license to move against the rightists. The question was how to get what he wanted.

In his rough draft, he had taken the direct approach. "Personally," he spelled out a theory of Yagoda's unquestioned criminal association with the rightists. He accused those rightists of having a terrorist organization and claimed that there was an uproar in the party demanding punishment of them. "Personally," he demanded that the NKVD turn over all its materials to him on the rightists and even proposed the level of punishment they should get. He proposed summary shootings of "a pretty large number" of those already arrested without trial. He told Stalin that to tolerate the NKVD's incompetence was now "impossible," that Yezhov had patiently restrained himself in criticizing that incompetence, but that now, "it seems to me," something had to be done.

Upon reflection, however, Yezhov knew how to handle the boss tactfully. He realized that it was unseemly for a subordinate to present Stalin with personal unsolicited opinions, theories, demands, and proposed policies and punishments. He removed those opinions, the shrill attacks on Yagoda and his NKVD, and his various theories about Yagoda and the rightists. Without offering opinions, conclusions, or recommendations, he pretended to be neutral on Yagoda's association with the oppositionists. He rather blandly suggested that some further investigation of the rightists might be in order. He did not call them names, did not suggest how many should be shot, and did not suggest doing it without trial. Finally, he sounded an alarm about the deficiencies within the NKVD, but removed the crisis language that would appear to force the issue. Even with his tactful, toned-down text, he was a bit worried about how Stalin might react, so he closed the actual letter he sent to the dictator with: "Comrade Stalin, I hesitated about

whether it was right to write about such things in a letter. If I did wrong, [you will] curse me."

We do not know whether Stalin cursed him, or indeed how he reacted to Yezhov's letter. We do know, however, that Yezhov was given permission to expand the investigation of rightist "terrorism." Stalin approved summary shootings of arrested Trotskyists (although not yet mass executions without trial). We do not know whether Stalin had planned all these things in any case. We do know, however, that in terms of his letter Yezhov knew exactly how to ask, and he got what he wanted.

The content and tone of Yezhov's letter to Stalin allow us to speculate a bit about Stalin's intentions at this point, as well as about his relationship with Yezhov. Hypothetically, Stalin could already have decided to remove Yagoda, and on an escalation of harsh repression of the opposition. In this scenario Stalin would encourage his creature Yezhov to make the severe proposals, allowing the dictator to appear to be a neutral decision maker and to avoid blame if something went wrong. This was a common Stalin tactic over the years.[63]

If that was his intention here, however, Stalin would have been better served by, and could easily have solicited, the strident language and demands of Yezhov's rough draft. Stalin could then have taken Yezhov's "proposals" to the Politburo for consideration, presenting them to the party leadership as having originated with someone else. The Politburo would certainly have approved, and if problems or embarrassments ensued later, Yezhov would have been the convenient scapegoat and, in light of his "personal" opinions in the letter, an obviously ambitious one at that.

Instead, Yezhov sent Stalin a relatively restrained letter that ended with a timid apology. Absent specific proposals and personal opinions, as a discursive strategy the letter left everything to Stalin's discretion. If Stalin planned to use Yezhov as his stalking horse, this letter was not the most useful possible document; it was not the work of a robot acting under orders. From this, one might draw two conclusions. First, Stalin did not have a specific agenda, and the letter was not a put-up job:

Stalin may not have decided what he wanted to do and in any event had not told his servant. Yezhov's letter was exactly what it seemed to be: a modest series of reports on the current situation that originated with Yezhov, not Stalin.

Second, Yezhov was a skilled bureaucratic player who understood blame shifting as a Soviet way of life. He deliberately avoided personal opinions and specific proposals that could leave him exposed later. Of course, Stalin made the final decisions anyway and could in any event blame Yezhov. But with this letter, Yezhov made that a bit more difficult. He was conducting a subtle, self-protective discursive manipulation, using language to dance with the boss as all subalterns do with all masters, even though the boss seemed to call the tune. He was not making policy, but by packaging and presenting the issues as he did, he was certainly influencing it. Yezhov could not escape Stalin's power, but he could maneuver within it. He was not new to Stalinist personalized politics, nor was he stupid. He may have seemed to be a servant, but he deployed the same weapons of the weak that all servants command.

All Yagoda needed now was a push. It might at first glance seem strange that Stalin had tolerated Yagoda as long as he did. After all, he had been under a cloud more than a year and a half, since the Kirov killing in early 1934. One answer might have to do with the technical police skills required to run the NKVD; it was considered a place for professional policemen. Years later Molotov emphasized the shortage of such technical professionals. Speaking of Yagoda, he said, "We had to work with reptiles like that, but there were no others. No one!"[64] Party leaders like Stalin, Molotov, and Kaganovich had no experience running a specialized investigative organization. Replacing a professional like Yagoda could lead to disruptions and inefficiencies in the secret police unless advance preparations were made. The NKVD, like other Soviet institutions, was organized according to a patronage system. When a boss was removed, all his clients and appointees were removed as a matter of course, and it may well be that Yagoda could not be fired until Yezhov had pried away senior NKVD leaders from their boss and patron.

Replacing the head of the NKVD was therefore a serious step, and one that Stalin did not take lightly. By September 1936 Yagoda was discredited and the work of his agency was considered deficient. But there was still no directly incriminating evidence against Yagoda himself. Yezhov had to supply that in order to tip the balance.

Back in March 1935 the chief of the Voronezh NKVD, S. S. Dukelsky, had written to his boss Yagoda about poor operational work and administrative confusion in the NKVD. In 1936 Yezhov had discovered Dukelsky (or vice versa), and Dukelsky wrote to Yezhov on 13 July with an amazing story.

According to his letter, at the beginning of 1933 Moscow NKVD agent Zafran had informed NKVD central about a group of Trotskyists that included one Dreitser, who would become one of the defendants at the August 1936 trial. Yagoda's NKVD had refused to arrest Dreitser and had instead arrested the informant Zafran, who was sentenced to five years in a camp.[65] After the Kirov assassination, Zafran escaped from camp and returned to Moscow and told his story. Yagoda's NKVD arrested him again, but KPK leader M. F. Shkiriatov secured his release. Then, in 1936, Zafran was arrested again, and this time his file was sent by the Yagoda team to the military tribunal with a recommendation for a death sentence.

Yezhov sat on the Dukelsky revelations for two months. But now, when the time was right, Yezhov sent a handwritten memo to Stalin on 12 September about the Dukelsky revelations. The clear implication was that Yagoda and/or his men were dirty: they had silenced and tried to kill Zafran to favor the convicted Trotskyist Dreitser. If this was true, that would make Yagoda complicit in Trotskyist conspiracy as a protector. The next day, Yagoda fired Dukelsky from his Voronezh job for going to Yezhov out of the chain of command with his revelations about Zafran, and the same day Dukelsky appealed to Yezhov and asked to be transferred to nonoperational NKVD work. Yezhov called a conference on the matter, writing that all this deserved serious review.[66]

We do not know whether Zafran was in fact executed, but we know the fate of the whistleblower. Yezhov reversed Yagoda's order to fire

Dukelsky, who kept his job in Voronezh.[67] The Dukelsky letter was only the last nail in Yagoda's professional coffin. But it was not unimportant: it suggested to Stalin that Yagoda's team was not only incompetent but possibly complicit in the Trotskyist treason. Later, when Yagoda's chief assistant Molchanov was arrested for protecting traitors, the Zafran affair played a prominent role in his interrogation.[68]

Less than two weeks later, Stalin dropped the other shoe. While on vacation, he telegraphed the Politburo, removing Yagoda and appointing Yezhov to head the NKVD. Stalin's telegram, which he drafted by hand at his Sochi vacation location, blamed Yagoda for not uncovering the Trotskyist treason sooner: "The NKVD is four years behind in this matter," a fact Stalin said was recognized by all party workers and a majority of the NKVD officers. Yagoda was shifted to be People's Commissar of Communications, from which post former rightist Rykov was now ejected: "No need to explain this, it is clear." The telegram noted that Yezhov had [doubtless!] agreed to the appointment. He retained his position as head of KPK, although he was to devote 90 percent of his time to the NKVD, and "it is understood" that Yezhov would remain a secretary of the Central Committee.[69]

Yagoda was distressed; Kaganovich wrote to Ordzhonikidze that Yagoda "took his transfer quite painfully."[70] Stalin tried to soothe Yagoda's ruffled feathers, writing to him, "The Commissariat of Communications is a very important business. It is a defense commissariat. I do not doubt that you will know how to put this organization on its feet. I very much ask that you agree to work as Commissar of Communications [*narkomsviaz*]. Without a good narkomsviaz, we will feel ourselves without hands. It is impossible to leave it in its current condition. We have to put it on its feet quickly."[71] Yagoda agreed to take the job.

Yezhov's appointment represented the first time a senior party official, a secretary of the Central Committee instead of a professional policeman, had headed the police since the time of Feliks Dzerzhinsky in the early 1920s. Some thought that a "party atmosphere" would be a refreshing improvement at the NKVD.[72] Indeed, Yezhov quickly began to recruit new NKVD staff from party schools.[73]

Yagoda had been widely unpopular. He had a reputation for being a corrupt patronage boss who controlled his subordinates through pressure and even blackmail. He was said to have had his circle of favored clients; other NKVD officials could expect few favors or promotions. One senior NKVD official outside Yagoda's circle hoped that Yezhov would "overcome the unhealthy atmosphere and careerist, degenerate, and falsifying tendencies" that had characterized Yagoda's work.[74] Even former oppositionists like Bukharin "got along very well" with Yezhov, considered him an "honest person," and welcomed the appointment.[75]

L. M. Kaganovich wrote from the Politburo in Moscow to his friend Sergo Ordzhonikidze with the news: "The latest news from here concerns the appointment of Yezhov. . . . Surely, things will go smoothly with Yezhov at the helm."[76]