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The Great Terror

From 1937 on, Stalin was expecting war, and preparing for it. Contrary to his usual custom, during the summer he did not take a vacation in the south (a pattern he was to maintain during the following years, until 1945), apparently because he felt that conditions demanded his constant presence at the nerve center. In view of the danger, he wanted the purge of the Party and state apparatus to coincide with a grand purge of society at large. The potential “fifth column,” in Stalin’s perception, had to be deprived of its social base. Thus, the NKVD “mass operations for subjecting anti-Soviet elements to repression,” as they were officially termed, were conceived. Similar operations had already been applied in 1930, during the campaign to deport the kulaks. The first of the mass operations was the arrest and shooting of “quotas” of former kulaks, criminals, and anti-Soviet elements, as decided by NKVD troikas.

It may be assumed that the idea of large-scale arrests among those categories of the population traditionally considered to be hostile definitively ripened with Stalin during the Central Committee Plenum from 23 to 29 June 1937. Ezhov’s Plenum report on the enemies exposed by the NKVD during the previous months

had set forth a harmonious and consistent outline of an all-embracing "hostile conspiracy," but, Ezhov had ominously added, only the conspiracy leaders had been liquidated, whereas a whole range of institutions and sectors of the Soviet society and economy had been seized by the organization's anti-Soviet work. It was the run-up to a large-scale purge operation not only among the Party and economic executives, where in fact it was already going on, but at the lower level as well.

That such a plan was put on the agenda by Stalin as early as June 1937 is indirectly confirmed by the Politburo decision of 28 June (before the Plenum had finished its work) to form a troika in Western Siberia, consisting of the provincial NKVD chief (chairman), the procurator, and the first Party secretary. It was to review in a summary way the cases of "activists belonging to the counterrevolutionary insurrectionary organization among the deported kulaks" that had allegedly been uncovered, with a view to applying the death penalty.¹ Moreover, somewhat earlier, on 21 and 23 June, Ezhov's deputy, M. D. Berman, the Gulag chief, had urged the regional NKVD chiefs in good time to thin out the investigation prisons of convicts by transferring them to camps.² This adds to the evidence that mass arrests were being prepared.

The deported former kulaks had been considered a problem for some time. Ignoring instructions, more and more "special settlers" (*spetspereselentsy*) left their places of detainment, merging with free laborers. Others ran away and joined bands of social marginals around the cities. In many speeches at the February–March Plenum of 1937 the audience was alerted to the existence in the country of a large number of "anti-Soviet elements" and "offenders." According to Robert Eikhe, the Western Siberian Party chief, in his province there were a great number of exiled former kulaks, including "a not insignificant group of inveterate enemies." Turkmenian Party Chief Popok also pointed out the evident danger posed by former kulaks who had returned from imprisonment and exile and were making all kinds of demands. Other speakers brought up the existence of millions of believers.³

In early 1937, together with USSR Procurator Vyshinskii,

Ezhov addressed the Soviet government and the Central Committee about the question of the settlers' legal status. Because the new Soviet Constitution promulgated in 1936 declared them to be rehabilitated, Ezhov and Vyshinskii recommended that settlers who according to NKVD evidence were anti-Soviet should be sentenced to camp terms of three to five years by the NKVD Special Board. For the time being, settlers who had been rehabilitated should not be allowed to leave their places of detainment; only in 1939 should they be entitled to leave, though remaining within the bounds of the province, and in 1940 within the bounds of the entire country.⁴ On 8 April 1937 in a letter Ezhov alerted Stalin to the dimensions criminality had assumed in the country, giving examples of the conduct of "incurable" criminals who "defy their unwillingness to work":

The main contingent committing disruptive criminal offenses (robbery, brigandage, murder, aggravated theft) are people who have been convicted before, in most cases recently released from camps or places of detention. [This paragraph was marked in pencil by Stalin.] . . . Per month all over the Union more than 60,000 people are released from the camps and places of detainment after serving out their sentences; of these, no more than 6,000 to 7,000 (the shock workers) are placed in jobs by the NKVD organs, the others disperse over the Union, looking for work. . . . If left to themselves, those released from the camps are unable to find regular jobs and revert to the criminal path.

Ezhov went on to enumerate measures that in his opinion were necessary in the struggle against criminality. Most of them were rather traditional for the Soviet system, such as promoting the employment of former prisoners through the trade unions or exerting pressure on enterprises to make them employ criminals released from the camps. One point in Ezhov's proposals draws our special attention, however, especially in light of the decision a few months later about the execution of criminals. In April Ezhov

did not yet go that far in his desire to finish with the criminal world; in point four of the letter he simply proposed with respect to recidivist, hooligans, recalcitrants—in short, all those who “have not reformed”—not to release them from the camps but to have them sentenced through the camp court or the NKVD troika to an additional term of three years at most (the maximum penalty these bodies could then impose).⁵ Ezhov pointed out that his proposals had been submitted for Vyshinskii's approval, with the exception of point four. He probably feared that the “lawyer” Vyshinskii would criticize him for an antilegal attitude—that is, that prisoners who had not yet committed any offenses could be sentenced to an additional term only because of “bad” behavior in the camp. (Of course, Vyshinskii was not against repressions, but he preferred to have corresponding laws so as to observe the outward appearance of legality.) In the end, Stalin took far more radical measures than those proposed by Ezhov. The obsession with “kulak saboteurs infiltrating the enterprises” and “kulak bandits roaming the cities” explains why this “category” was designated for the first mass operation of the Great Terror.⁶

On 2 July, three days after the conclusion of the June Plenum, Stalin submitted a Politburo decision, “Concerning Anti-Soviet Elements,” to the regional Party and NKVD chiefs. According to it, the “main instigators of all kinds of anti-Soviet and diversionary crimes” were the many former kulaks and criminals who had been deported and had returned home after their terms expired. The regional Party and NKVD chiefs were charged with “registering all kulaks and criminals who have returned home, in order that the most hostile among them be forthwith administratively arrested and shot by means of a troika”; within five days they were to present the composition of troikas and the number of those subject to the first category of punishment (execution) as well as the number of those subject to the second category of punishment (camps or prisons).⁷

Local officials responded by presenting estimates of numbers of kulaks and criminals to be confined or shot. During the following days, the Politburo approved the composition of “troikas for

the verifying of anti-Soviet elements” and quantitative indices of the repressions, or “quotas,” for each of the republics and provinces. From 5 to 31 July 1937, thirteen such decisions were taken, directly preceding the confirmation by the Politburo of order No. 00447 itself.⁸ In early August, the Politburo continued confirming the personal composition of regional troikas, as a rule consisting of the NKVD chief (chairman), the first Party secretary, and the procurator. The troikas passed the requested information to the center. So on 8 July the NKVD chief and troika chairman of the Western Siberian province, S. N. Mironov, reported to Ezhov to having registered 25,944 people—10,924 of the first and 15,036 of the second category.⁹ Two days later, the Moscow Party leader, N. S. Khrushchev, informed Stalin that 41,305 people had been registered in Moscow province—8,500 of the first and 32,805 of the second category.¹⁰ Together with his deputy Frinovskii, Ezhov collected the data and streamlined the quotas.

By way of preparation for the forthcoming campaign of mass arrests, a briefing was held for regional NKVD chiefs. On 16 July, four days after having been invited,¹¹ the NKVD chiefs of the republics and provinces where the operation was to begin first (most of the RSFSR and the Ukraine) were summoned to Moscow for an “operational meeting” (in Central Asia, Kazakhstan, and the more distant part of Siberia the operation was to start somewhat later). There is no stenographic report of the conference, but we have information of Ezhov’s words from the above-mentioned Mironov, testifying after his arrest in January 1939.

According to Mironov, Ezhov threatened those NKVD chiefs who showed “operational inertness,” whereas at the same time others had already “fully started to disclose counterrevolutionary formations within and outside the Party.” The laggardly chiefs (those of Omsk and Krasnoiarsk provinces, the mid-Volga region, and a few others) should be fired and called to account: “All should prepare for mass arrests among Harbin returnees, Poles, Germans, kulak and White Guardist groupings, as well as anti-Soviet groupings within the Party and in the state apparatus.” A few days later, while the NKVD chiefs were still in Moscow, the

four to six chiefs mentioned by Ezhov were arrested, according to Mironov's testimony. The others departed "in a very depressed mood."¹² According to M. P. Shreider, who himself did not attend but learned about it from his chief, A. P. Radzivilovskii, the Omsk NKVD chief, E. P. Salyn', who dared protest the quotas system, was even arrested right at the conference.¹³

Here again, discrepancies arise. Salyn' was arrested no earlier than 10 August, long after most participants to the conference had departed, though he was dismissed on 23 July and remained in Moscow. The others who were allegedly criticized—I. P. Popashenko (Kuibyshev, the former mid-Volga region) and F. A. Leonuk (Krasnoiarsk)—were not arrested in 1937 at all; in the autumn of that year they were even promoted to the central NKVD apparatus. All the same, some regional NKVD chiefs were indeed arrested in mid-July: A. B. Rozanov (Voronezh, 11 July), I. M. Blat (Cheliabinsk, 13 July), Ia. S. Agranov (Saratov, 20 July), R. I. Austrin (Kirov, 22 July), and possibly P. G. Rud' (Tataria, shortly before the conference, since on 12 July his deputy was invited there). Of these, only Agranov and Austrin were arrested shortly after the conference.¹⁴

These arrests undoubtedly worried their colleagues, but the notion that the regional NKVD chiefs silently opposed Ezhov's plans and that Ezhov forced them to conduct mass operations under threats of arrest is contradicted by the testimony of another conference participant, the Orenburg NKVD chief, A. I. Uspenskii (given during investigation in April 1939). In his words, they "tried to surpass each other with reports about gigantic numbers of people arrested." Uspenskii is of course incorrect in speaking of "people arrested," since the conference dealt with quotas of *future* arrests in each region. According to him, Ezhov's instruction amounted to, "Beat, destroy without sorting out," and he quotes Ezhov as saying that in connection with the destroying of the enemies "a certain number of innocent people will be annihilated too," but this was "inevitable."¹⁵ Two other sources offer similar wording: Ezhov announced that "if during this operation an extra thousand people will be shot, that is not such a big

deal.”¹⁶ The style suggests that Ezhov was repeating Stalin’s words. Stalin may indeed have spoken to Ezhov in such terms, explaining that the initial quotas for the regions could be rounded off, which inevitably led, as both Ezhov and Stalin well understood, to extending the repressions to people who had not been registered before—an “extra thousand.”

During the conference, Ezhov and Frinovskii talked with each of the attending NKVD chiefs, discussing the quotas for arrest and execution put forward by them and giving instructions for the necessary measures in view of the preparation and the conduct of the operation. Mironov informed Ezhov about a “Rightist-Trotskiist bloc” that had been discovered within the Western Siberian leadership. When he called the evidence against some of those arrested unconvincing, Ezhov answered: “Why don’t you arrest them? We are not going to work for you, imprison them, and then sort it out afterward, dropping those against whom there is no evidence. Act more boldly, I have already told you repeatedly.” He added that in certain cases, with Mironov agreeing, department chiefs could also apply “physical methods of influencing.”¹⁷ When Uspenskii asked Ezhov what to do with prisoners older than age seventy, he ordered them to be shot.¹⁸

The unfolding correspondence of the center with the regional NKVD organs suggests an atmosphere much like that of the preparation of a wartime military operation. They were ordered to take into account all categories of “hostile” elements, to return from the judicial organs all cases of the “rural, kulak, rebel, and church counterrevolution” in order to pass them to the NKVD troikas for examination, and to continue registering “kulaks, White Guards, members of punitive expeditions [*karateli*], SRs, Mensheviks.” Local functionaries were to be recalled from leave. The regional NKVD chiefs were ordered to summon all NKVD city and district chiefs to provincial instruction meetings.

An example is the “operational conference” of the heads of the “operational points,” “operational sectors,” city and district departments of the Western Siberian NKVD directorate on 25 July in Novosibirsk. Here the provincial NKVD chief, Mironov,

explained that the operation was a state secret and that the divulging of any details was punishable. Straight after the meeting, the participants had to board the first train to their place of work in order on 28 July to begin arresting those belonging to the first category. Western Siberia had been given a quota of 10,800 for the first category, but Mironov assured the participants that they were allowed to surpass this figure and that if necessary they might just as well arrest 20,000 people; "I don't even pin you down on this figure." For they could be selected afterward—Mironov gave the operational workers a time of two and a half months. The task of an operational sector head was: "Finding a place where the sentences will be executed and a place where you can bury the corpses. If this is in a wood, a turf should be cut off beforehand so that for full secrecy's sake the place can be covered with this turf afterward." Even the apparatus was to know nothing about such details.¹⁹

The start of the "operation with respect to the first category" was planned for the end of July, as becomes clear also from a telegram Salyn' sent to his deputy in Omsk on 21 July (two days before he was replaced by G. F. Gorbach). He insisted on preparing orders for arrest, detaching the necessary number of Chekists to be sent to the districts, and leaving only 50 percent of them in the provincial center for the conduct of current affairs. The operation was to begin on 28 July, Salyn' added.²⁰ This explains the haste with which some of the North Caucasian NKVD chiefs, having returned home, began carrying out the operation without waiting for the appearance of order No. 00447. On 29 July, the Ordzhonikidze NKVD chief, Bulakh, informed Ezhov that the kulak operation had been started there prematurely; the next day, the NKVD chiefs of North-Ossetia, Checheno-Ingushetia, and Dagestan by wire justified their decision.²¹ They all had attended the Moscow operational meeting and should have known that the operation was to start only after they received the order, but for some reason they were in a hurry. In all probability, the operation was initially planned for 28 July, and the remote regions had not been informed about the delay in time, and Ezhov himself, sup-

posing the forthcoming order would soon be ready and confirmed by the Politburo, in this way had directed the participants of the meeting toward an earlier term.

Order No. 00447, "Concerning the Operation Aimed at the Subjecting to Repression of Former Kulaks, Criminals, and Other Anti-Soviet Elements," which Ezhov presented to the Politburo on 30 July, observed the existence in the country of a significant number of anti-Soviet elements: former kulaks who had escaped from camps or exile or had returned home after serving their time, priests, sectarians, SRs and members of other anti-Soviet parties, insurrectionists, White Guards, criminals, and others. Because not enough was being done to combat them, they could practice their criminal activities with impunity, but these anti-Soviet elements were the "main instigators" of all kinds of anti-Soviet and sabotage activities, and it was the NKVD's duty to annihilate them, in an "operation aimed at the subjecting to repression of former kulaks, active anti-Soviet elements, and criminals." The order split the target into two categories: the most hostile elements, the first category, were to be arrested immediately and shot, after consideration of their case by the troikas; the others, the second category, after arrest were to be confined in camps or prisons for a term ranging from eight to ten years, as determined by the troikas.

Subsequently, the order indicated the number of people subject to repression, split up in the first and the second category, according to data presented by the regional NKVD chiefs; this was done for each of the sixty-four listed republics and provinces, plus the Gulag. All in all, 268,950 people were to be arrested, 75,950 of them to be shot and 193,000 to be confined in camps. The indicated figures were tentative; regional NKVD chiefs desiring higher figures should submit a substantiated request. In specific circumstances, family members could also be confined or exiled. The operation was to start on 5 August and to be completed within four months. The first category should be dealt with first. In view of the operation, republics and provinces were divided into "operational sectors"; in each sector an "operational group" was created under the leadership of an NKVD executive, who had

means of transport and communication and military and police units at his disposal. The operational groups were charged with registering the candidates for arrest, with the investigation, with confirming the indictments, and with the execution of the troika sentences.

Incriminating facts should be collected for each person subject to repression on the basis of which lists for arrest were to be drawn up; these should be signed by the head of the operational group and sent to Ezhov and the regional NKVD chief for confirmation. On the basis of these lists, the head of the operational group should carry out the arrests. Then followed the investigation—in a swift and simplified manner, in which “all criminal connections of a prisoner are to be disclosed.” Finally, the case was to be submitted for consideration to the troika, supplied with a short indictment. The order listed the approved troikas of all republics and provinces. The troika should pronounce the sentences, which were to be carried out under the direction of the head of the operational group. Ezhov’s deputy, Frinovskii, was charged with the general direction of the operation, having at his disposal a special group for the purpose. Reports on the course and results of the operation were requested every five days.²²

The next day, 31 July, the Politburo confirmed the order and directed that 75 million rubles from the reserve fund of the Soviet government were to be issued to the NKVD to cover expenses associated with the implementation of the operation, of which 25 million were to be earmarked for payment of railway fees for transport of those condemned to the camps. An advance of 10 million rubles from the same fund was issued to the Chief Directorate of the Camps, or Gulag, for the purpose of organizing camps. The prisoners were to be utilized on construction projects and forest works.²³ On 7 August, USSR Procurator Vyshinskii instructed the regional procurators to take note of order No. 00447 and to attend the troika meetings. “The observance of legal procedure and the preliminary approval of arrests are not demanded,” he added. “I demand your active cooperation to the successful conduct of the operation.”²⁴ (At the Novosibirsk instruction

meeting of 25 July, the regional NKVD chief Mironov had urged the participants that it was not necessary to consult the procurators: only after the operation these should be sent the lists of people arrested, without mentioning whether they belonged to the first or the second category.)²⁵

Within two weeks, more than 100,000 people had already been arrested.²⁶ The procedure first to complete the operation with respect to the first category was not maintained very long: on 4 September Ezhov allowed the regional NKVD authorities to begin work on the second category.²⁷ The figures quoted (268,950 people to be arrested, 75,950 of them to be shot) were known to be incomplete, and the regional authorities had the right—were even encouraged—to request enlargement of the quotas. So in October 1937 Ezhov told the new Smolensk NKVD chief, A. A. Nasedkin, that he could get any quotas he needed: “Purge your apparatus, and imprison whomever you should”; “better too far than not far enough.”²⁸ Very soon many regions had used up their quotas. The Western Siberian province, for example, had been given a quota of 17,000, including 5,000 of the first category, but already in early October more than 25,000 people had been arrested and almost 14,000 of these had been sentenced to death by the troika.²⁹ Omsk province had been given a quota of 1,000 for the first and 2,500 for the second category. On 10 December the Omsk NKVD chief, Valukhin (Gorbach’s successor), informed Ezhov that 11,050 people had been condemned in the first category and 5,004 in the second; he requested approval for the 50 people who surpassed the quota of the first category.³⁰

In response to such requests, between 28 August and 15 December 1937 the Politburo sanctioned increasing the quotas for various regions by almost 22,500 in the first category and 16,800 in the second. On 31 January 1938, it allocated an additional 57,200 people, 48,000 of them for execution. The Politburo directed that the operation under order No. 00447 should be completed before 15 March (in the Far Eastern province, 1 April). However, although in many regions the operation was already completed during the winter of 1938, here and there it continued

until the autumn of that year. Between 1 February and 29 August 1938 the Politburo sanctioned the repressing of almost 90,000 more (including quotas of 30,000 and 20,000, respectively, for the Ukraine and the Far East, confirmed on 17 February and 31 July). No categories were stipulated, most likely implying first category sentences.³¹

Thus, the operation, originally intended to take four months, extended over more than a year. As a result of the extra quotas allotted in the process of the implementation of order No. 00447, the total number of arrests almost tripled to 753,315.³² The Politburo allotted extra quotas amounting to 183,750, including 150,500 of the first category. Indeed, in the regions executions sometimes exceeded those authorized by the center.³³ On the whole, however, this local initiative followed the policy of the center, which constantly encouraged the local authorities in that direction. Moreover, part of the allotted quotas (amounting to some 300,000) were approved by Ezhov himself without a formal Politburo decision. In these cases as well, there was always a request from the regional Party or NKVD leadership, supplied with arguments, to approve an additional quota—sent to Stalin directly or via Ezhov. Most likely, in these cases too, the approval came not from the Politburo but from Stalin's instructions, noted on incoming requests from regional authorities or by way of Stalin's oral instructions to Ezhov.³⁴

For example, in September 1937 Stalin wired to the Far Eastern Party chief, I. M. Vareikis, who apparently had expressed doubts regarding the NKVD arrests: "Ezhov's orders for arrests in the Far Eastern province are usually made with the approval of the Central Committee."³⁵ See also Stalin's permission to extend the execution quota for Omsk province from 1,000 to 8,000, or his permission—together with Molotov's—to give Krasnoiarsk province an extra quota for the first category of 6,600.³⁶ Though Stalin's papers in the Presidential Archive are still inaccessible, it seems probable that Ezhov did not on his own make arbitrary decisions that allowed the increasing scale of the repressions. In any event, in the national operations there were no quotas at all,

and the regional NKVD chiefs could arrest as many people as they wanted. All in all, in the operation with respect to order No. 00447, from August 1937 to November 1938, 767,397 people were condemned by the troikas, including 386,798 to the death penalty.

Hence, the current thesis that in 1937–38 NKVD authorities withdrew from the control of the Party is unfounded. On the contrary, the NKVD was in strict subordination to the center. “In the first place we are Bolsheviks, and for us all Central Committee decisions are the law,” Ezhov had stressed in December 1936 in an NKVD conference speech; “and if our departmental laws go against the Party laws, nothing good can be expected of it.”³⁷ If there was any spontaneity in the Party purges and repressions of the time, it is to be explained first of all by local Party politics, when district or provincial committees, or conferences, decided to carry out arrests of expelled Party functionaries, while at the same time the NKVD authorities now and then found no grounds to arrest those expelled.

Consider the objections raised at the time of the July 1937 Moscow conference by the Western Siberian NKVD chief, Mironov, to Ezhov against the First Party secretary, Robert Eikhe. Mironov reported to Ezhov—according to his testimony after arrest—that Eikhe “interfered in NKVD affairs.” He had ordered the chiefs of the Kuzbass NKVD town branches to arrest Party members, although in most cases evidence was missing. Mironov thought his position difficult: either he had to liberate part of the prisoners and clash with Eikhe, or the NKVD organs were forced to “create fictitious cases.” When Mironov suggested to orally instruct the NKVD organs concerned only to carry out orders approved by him, Ezhov answered: “Eikhe knows what he is doing. He is responsible for the Party organization; it is useless to fight with him. You better report to me the moot points arising, and I will settle them. . . . Comply with Eikhe’s instructions, and don’t strain your relations with him.” Mironov added that it was Eikhe’s habit to “suddenly come to the NKVD apparatus, attend interrogations, interfere in the investigation, and then exert pres-

sure in this or that direction, thereby muddling the investigation.” But Ezhov stuck to his opinion.³⁸

This episode relates to the purge of the Party apparatus conducted since the February–March Plenum of 1937, which was a quite different process from the mass operations that began in July of the same year. In the documents it is often described as the “Rightist-Trotskiist organization,” tried by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court and other judicial bodies, not by the troikas. Another example of friction between provincial Party and NKVD authorities is offered by Andreev in February 1938 reporting to Stalin on the situation in Kuibyshev province under the Party chief Pavel Postyshev, who had been dismissed only a few weeks before. According to Andreev, many arbitrary arrests had taken place in the province, but “the NKVD organs offered a certain resistance to the arbitrariness, coming from the provincial committee and secretaries of district committees who have now been exposed as enemies of the people.”³⁹

Local Party politics gave the repressions some spontaneity. Expelling was the business of Party bureaus and conferences and inevitably brought on arrest. As a result, the arrest of the Party leadership was determined by the Party, with the NKVD only supplying evidence. It would be wrong to think that in 1937–38 there was no inner-Party life left and that there were only repressions against the Party, organized by Stalin with the help of the NKVD. The February–March Plenum of 1937 made the Party purge of infiltrating “Rightist-Trotskiist” and other enemies the heart of Party life—that is, by the Party itself, be it with the help of the NKVD. Besides, however, traditional elements of Party life had been preserved, although under the sauce of sharpened class struggle and intensified political vigilance.

Another aspect of local initiative was a certain degree of “socialist competition” between regional NKVD departments with respect to the number of arrests. So when the Chekists in Western Siberia were told that in 1937 their province had reached the second place throughout the country in liquidating enemies of the people, according to one of them, the mood “reached ecstasy.”⁴⁰

Kareliia showed “exceptional competition between NKVD departments and local organs to reach quotas.”⁴¹ But this sort of local initiative is inherent in any mass campaign. All in all, it did not change the general direction of the repressions. In some regions there may indeed have been cases of exceeding the bounds of the quotas established by Moscow, but these were exceptions. In most regions the extent of the repressions with respect to order No. 00447 strictly conformed to the allotted quotas.

Another target was that of the so-called “national contingents.” In general, Soviet authorities aimed at not extending the residence permits of foreigners living in the USSR, who were seen as an “organizing source of espionage and sabotage.”⁴² Embassies and consulates of states that were considered dangerous (especially Germany, Japan, Italy, and Poland), as well as their employees, were placed under “continuous observation.”⁴³ Specifically, an aspect of the Great Terror was the liquidation of the “potential intelligence base” of enemy states, the so-called “national operations” (terms used in NKVD orders and by Ezhov in his June 1937 Plenum report). The main victims were ethnic minorities, representing the nations of the “bourgeois-fascist” states bordering on the USSR, such as Germans, Finns, Estonians, Latvians, and Poles. The relevant people were arrested, their cases being examined regionally by so-called “dvoikas.” After brief assessment and approval in Moscow, the sentences were executed by the regional authorities.

At the February–March Plenum of 1937 and at an enlarged session of the Military Council in June 1937, Stalin had dwelt upon the war preparations against the USSR by Germany, Poland, and Japan; he had insisted on precautionary measures against a possible “fifth column” and agents of foreign intelligence services. As we have seen, according to S. N. Mironov, already in mid-July, at the NKVD briefing, Ezhov had talked about forthcoming arrests of Harbin returnees, Poles, and Germans. Apparently, the national operations had been planned simultaneously with the

kulak operation. Thus, from late July on NKVD orders appeared for repressions against “national contingents.”

On 20 July, at Stalin's instigation, the Politburo instructed Ezhov to arrest all Germans employed in the defense industry and to deport part of them.⁴⁴ Five days later (that is, a few days before the issuing of order No. 00447) Ezhov signed operational order No. 00439, which stated that the Gestapo and German General Headquarters were using German citizens in main Soviet enterprises, especially the defense industry, for espionage and sabotage. Ezhov demanded lists of German citizens working (or having worked) in the defense industry and the railroads sector and ordered arrests starting 29 July, to be completed within five days. An exception was made for German political émigrés working in the defense industry, who were to be arrested only if they still held German citizenship. The order further stated that no later than 5 August a detailed memorandum with an exposition of the compromising materials was to be presented to Ezhov on each of the political émigrés who had accepted Soviet citizenship, in order to resolve the question of arrest. Those exposed as spies, saboteurs, or terrorists were to be arrested immediately.⁴⁵

Although the order was originally intended for German citizens proper, from the autumn of 1937 on it was interpreted much more broadly. Now, Soviet citizens of German nationality were also arrested, as well as representatives of other nationalities who had ties with Germany or Germans: former German prisoners of war, political émigrés, deserters, inhabitants of German districts, former German citizens working in the defense industry, “consular contacts,” Russians who had spent time in German captivity, former personnel of German firms, and so on. It had become a genuine “German operation,” in accordance with the other national operations. It did not mean that all Germans were arrested, however; Germans in the autonomous republic of Volga Germans, for example, were not especially hit. All in all, in the German operation some 65,000–68,000 people were arrested; 55,000 of them were condemned, including 42,000 to the death

penalty; only a little over one-third of those condemned were Germans.⁴⁶

On 11 August 1937, two days after Politburo approval, Ezhov signed order No. 00485 for the liquidation of the “Polish diversionist and espionage groups and organizations of the Polish Military Organization (POV).”⁴⁷ This order stated that the investigation materials in the case of the POV “disclose the picture of a long-standing and relatively unpunished sabotage and espionage activity by the Polish intelligence service on the territory of the Soviet Union.” Although the Moscow POV Center had been liquidated and many active members had been arrested, according to the order, the Polish intelligence service still maintained a sabotage network within the Soviet economy, especially defense objects. It was the duty of the state security organs to destroy this anti-Soviet activity and to “fully liquidate the large-scale sabotage and insurgent rank and file of the POV, untouched up to now, as well as the basic human contingents of the Polish intelligence service in the USSR.”⁴⁸

On this account it was decreed as of 20 August to start a “large-scale operation, directed at the full liquidation of the local POV organizations and, first of all, its sabotage-espionage and insurgent cadres in industry, transport, the sovkhozy, and kolkhozy.” The operation was to be completed within three months—that is, before 20 November. Subject to arrest were prisoners of war from the Polish army who after the 1920 war had remained in the Soviet Union, deserters and political émigrés from Poland, former members of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) and other anti-Soviet political parties, and inhabitants of Polish districts in border regions. The investigation was to be carried out by a special group of operational executives. Again, those arrested were divided into two categories: the first category was to be shot, the second to be confined in camps or prisons for five to ten years. For this purpose, lists were to be drawn up by regional dvoikas (the NKVD chief and the procurator) and sent to Moscow for confirmation. After confirmation by Ezhov and the USSR Procu-

rator (Vyshinskii), "the sentence should be executed immediately."⁴⁹

Together with the order, the regional NKVD chiefs received a detailed secret letter, also signed by Ezhov, "On the Fascist-Insurgent, Espionage, Sabotage, Defeatist, and Terrorist Activity of the Polish Intelligence Service in the USSR." The letter, which had been approved by the Politburo, together with order No. 00485, confirmed Ezhov's report at the June 1937 Plenum. It summed up the various accusations against the Poles: espionage, sabotage, terrorism, armed revolt, anti-Soviet agitation. For a long time, the letter said, POV agents had taken over the leadership of the Polish Communist Party and the Polish Comintern section and had penetrated all levels of the Soviet state apparatus, including the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, the NKVD, and the Red Army; POV activity on Soviet territory was directed by a "Center" with Unshlikht, Muklevich, Ol'skii, et al.⁵⁰

Later, during investigation, the Moscow NKVD executive A. O. Postel' testified that Ezhov's order aimed at the arrest of "absolutely all Poles, Polish émigrés, former prisoners of war, members of the Polish Communist Party, etc." The NKVD executives were told that "the Poles should be completely destroyed."⁵¹ Ezhov subsequently added "consular contacts" to the Polish operation as yet another category for repression.⁵² He had in mind persons connected with official Polish diplomatic representatives in the USSR. By analogy with the German operation, in this way the Polish operation, originally meant as an almost pure Polish matter, was transformed into an operation for the repression of all unreliable and suspicious people who were in any way linked to Poles and Poland.

Within a month, however, the Polish operation had clearly begun to stall, and Ezhov urged the regional NKVD chiefs to "speed up the termination of cases."⁵³ Even so, Stalin seemed to be very satisfied with the course of the operation, for on 14 September he noted on Ezhov's report: "Very good! Dig up and purge this Polish espionage mud in the future as well. Destroy it in the interest of the USSR."⁵⁴ On 2 October the NKVD decided to ex-

tend the Polish repressions also to family members of those arrested, in accordance with Ezhov's order No. 00486 of 15 August 1937.⁵⁵ As a result, their wives were arrested and their children under age fifteen were sent to children's homes.

Ezhov's order No. 00593 of 20 September 1937 (approved by the Politburo the previous day) decreed a "national operation" against returnees from Harbin. Almost 25,000 *kharbintsy* had been registered by the NKVD, mostly former personnel of the Eastern-Chinese Railway who had reemigrated from Manchuria to the USSR after the sale of the railway in 1935. According to the order, the overwhelming majority had turned out to be agents of the Japanese intelligence service, which had sent them to the Soviet Union for purposes of terrorist, diversionary, and spying activities. An operation for their liquidation was to be carried out from 1 October to 25 December. As in the Polish operation, the family members of those repressed should be treated according to order No. 00486.⁵⁶ But the stream of family members turned out to be much too large to handle so that in November the NKVD decided to restrict itself in the Polish and Harbin operations to exiling wives.⁵⁷ In addition to the German, Polish, and Harbin operations, there were other so-called "national operations" against Latvians, Estonians, Finns, Romanians, Greeks, Afghans, Iranians, and so on, though in these operations order No. 00486 was not applied (nor was it applied in the kulak operation, order No. 00447).⁵⁸

The national operations used the so-called "album procedure." Every ten days the regional NKVD organs were to draw up lists with a "brief account of investigation and secret service materials, characterizing the degree of guilt of the prisoners," and send them for confirmation to Moscow in the form of albums. Those arrested were divided into categories by the regional NKVD chief, together with the regional procurator: the so-called *dvoika*. In Moscow their decision was assessed by the USSR NKVD chief and the Procurator—meaning by Ezhov (or his deputy Frinovskii) and Vyshinskii. After being confirmed, the sentence was carried out regionally.⁵⁹ In practice, this procedure led

to large-scale delay; the decisions of the regional dvoikas sometimes waited months for confirmation.

No quotas were set in the national operations; the regional NKVD chiefs were given free rein. As a result, people were arrested indiscriminately and on a large scale. In the words of the Krasnoiarsk province Party secretary, Sobolev: "Stop playing internationalism, all these Poles, Koreans, Latvians, Germans, etc. should be beaten, these are all mercenary nations, subject to termination . . . all nationals should be caught, forced to their knees, and exterminated like mad dogs." This may have been an exaggeration, but (after Ezhov's fall) he was accused of this by the Krasnoiarsk state security organs' Party organization: "By giving such instructions, Sobolev slandered the VKP(b) and comrade Stalin, in saying that he had such instructions from the Central Committee and comrade Stalin personally."⁶⁰

The Polish operation was to have been completed before 20 November, but early in November the regional NKVD organs were directed to speed up their work and finish before 10 December.⁶¹ When that, too, proved to be out of the question, the term was extended to 1 January 1938, and on 31 January the Politburo allowed the NKVD to extend the operation aimed at the destroying of the saboteurs and spies among the Poles, as well as Latvians, Germans, Estonians, Finns, Greeks, Iranians, Harbin returnees, Chinese, and Romanians, to 15 April and at the same time ordered it to extend the operation to Bulgarians and Macedonians.⁶² Again, the date had to be moved forward: on 26 May the Politburo allowed the NKVD to extend the operation with respect to all the above-mentioned nationalities, plus Afghans, to 1 August.⁶³ Two days later the NKVD passed the decision on to its regional organs, adding that the cases were to be examined in a simplified manner.⁶⁴ In this way the arrest and the extrajudicial procedure of the examination of cases with respect to the national operations continued until 1 August 1938. The album procedure was causing major delays, mainly owing to the inability of the Moscow NKVD center to cope with the stream, and on 15 Sep-

tember the Politburo decided to give jurisdiction to regional troikas (*osoby troiki*).⁶⁵

The national operations were completed in mid-November 1938. All in all, almost 350,000 people went through these operations; 247,157 of them were condemned to death, 88,356 to camp or prison.⁶⁶ Almost 144,000 people were arrested in the Polish operation alone—more than 111,000 of whom were given the first category of punishment and almost 29,000 the second.⁶⁷ Nearly the entire Polish Comintern section was annihilated, and of the Polish Communist Party 46 members and 24 candidates of its Central Committee were executed.⁶⁸ In August 1938, the Polish Communist Party was even officially disbanded by the Comintern Executive Committee.⁶⁹ In the Greek, Finnish, and Estonian operations, the percentage of those sentenced to death was even higher, though in the Afghan and Iranian operations most of those arrested were deported.⁷⁰

Indeed, the Great Terror years saw an extension to all border regions of deporting “unreliable elements.” As early as April 1936 the Soviet government had decided on resettling by the NKVD to Kazakhstan some 45,000 Poles and Germans from the Ukrainian border region with Poland—over 35,000 Poles were deported.⁷¹ In July 1937 it extended the new regime to territory bordering on Iran and Afghanistan; as a result, in 1937–38 over 1,000 Kurdish families and 2,000 Iranian families were deported. In November 1937 the Odessa provincial Party committee ordered the deportation of 5,000 German households.⁷²

In August 1937, after the Japanese invasion of North China, the Soviet government deported all Koreans—theoretically if not actually still Japanese legals—from the Far Eastern province. A Central Committee and Soviet government decree of 21 August, signed by Stalin and Molotov, ordered regional Party and NKVD organs to begin deporting all Koreans from the Russian Far Eastern border regions at once and to finish before 1 January 1938. As a potential fifth column in the threatening war with Japan, they were deported to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan; during transport many of them died. The operation, personally directed by

the Far Eastern NKVD chief Liushkov (who had recently replaced Deribas), was completed within a few weeks. In late October Ezhov reported to Stalin that 171,781 Koreans had been resettled in Central Asia.⁷³ In addition, the NKVD arrested more than 2,500 Koreans.⁷⁴ Some 11,000 Chinese were also deported.⁷⁵

On 5 July 1937 the Politburo approved an NKVD proposal to “confine all wives of the condemned traitors from the Rightist-Trotskyist espionage and sabotage organization in camps for 5–8 years.” For this purpose special camps were to be organized in Naryn province and Turgai district. Children under fifteen years should be taken under state protection.⁷⁶ Operational order No. 00486, of 15 August 1937, “on the repressing of the wives of the traitors from the Rightist-Trotskyist espionage and sabotage organizations who have been condemned by the Military Collegium and military tribunals,” specified that wives as well as children above fifteen years who were “socially dangerous” should be arrested and sent to camps by the Special Board; children under fifteen years were to be sent to special children’s homes (infants in arms accompanied their mothers).⁷⁷ (This was the order later applied in the Polish operation.) More than 18,000 wives of enemies of the people were arrested, and approximately 25,000 children were taken away.⁷⁸

While the “mass operations” raged, the Party purge continued. During the summer of 1937 and after, Party leaders, including Stalin’s adjutants Kaganovich, Molotov, Zhdanov, Andreev, Malenkov, Khrushchev, Mikoian, and Ezhov himself, made for the republics and provinces in order to accelerate the purge of the Party and state apparatus.⁷⁹ They gave instructions for arrests to the regional NKVD organs—that is, through them the Party directed the repressions and the NKVD, and not the other way around. As a result, in the regions one shift of old cadres was repressed after another. The Belorussian NKVD chief, B. D. Berman, complained to the republican Party secretary: “What can I do, it’s beyond me? Ezhov has again sent an allocation of old communists. Where can I find them? There are no more left.”⁸⁰ All too often, the executioners became victims themselves, result-

ing, for example, in a changed troika composition. During the second half of 1937, some 97,000 Party members were expelled, mainly old cadres. Now, expulsion often meant arrest.⁸¹

The purge of the Comintern also continued. In 1937, between January and September, 256 people were dismissed from its central apparatus; in general, dismissal resulted in arrest.⁸² In October that year Dimitrov and Manuil'skii acknowledged that the NKVD had "discovered a broad espionage organization in the Comintern apparatus."⁸³ In November, Stalin told Dimitrov: "The Trotkiists [in the Comintern] should be persecuted, shot, destroyed. These are worldwide provocateurs, the most vicious agents of fascism."⁸⁴ Foreign communist parties residing in the Soviet Union were decimated.

The terror did not stop at the USSR borders. During the 1930s, Outer Mongolia, though a sovereign state, was treated as a Soviet republic; after mid-August 1937, S. N. Mironov, the former Western Siberian NKVD chief, was the USSR plenipotentiary there, at the same time representing the NKVD. Frinovskii accompanied him to Ulan-Bator, from where, on 13 September, he wired to Ezhov about plans to liquidate the lamas.⁸⁵ Six days later, the Politburo approved Frinovskii's proposal to institute a special troika for the examination of lama cases, consisting of the First Deputy Prime Minister Kh. Choibalsan, the Minister of Justice, and the Party chief.⁸⁶ On 18 October Mironov informed Frinovskii (who had returned to Moscow) about the disclosure of a "large-scale counterrevolutionary organization" within the Ministry of Internal Affairs; four months later (13 February 1938) he asked Ezhov's permission to arrest a new group of "conspirators" and urgently requested the sending of new NKVD instructors.⁸⁷ On 3 April Mironov reported to Frinovskii that 10,728 "conspirators" had been arrested, including 7,814 lamas, 322 feudal lords, 300 ministerial officials, 180 military leaders, 1,555 Buriats, and 408 Chinese; on 31 March, 6,311 of them had already been shot—3–4 percent of the male adult population of Mongolia. According to Mironov, the intention was to arrest over 7,000 more.⁸⁸

The mass operations of 1937–38 were resisted only on a very small scale, mainly in the traditionally rebellious North Caucasus, where leading NKVD executives were attacked and murdered, convoyed people liberated, and so on. According to A. Avtorkhanov, thousands of Chechens and Ingush joined guerrilla groups, assassinating several local NKVD chiefs. Between February and December 1938, Chechen and Ingush insurgents carried out ninety-eight armed raids, killing Party and state officials and stealing 617,000 rubles' worth of property.⁸⁹ Therefore, on 13 July 1938, the First Party Secretary of Checheno-Ingushetiia asked Stalin and the Moscow leadership for permission to organize a Special Troika with exceptional powers during from four to five months in order to finally liquidate the insurgent elements.⁹⁰

The simultaneous conducting of a purge of the Party and state apparatus and of mass arrests among the population was no coincidence. Precisely against the background of the exposure of highly placed leaders as “enemies, spies, conspirators, and wreckers” and the conducting of show trials against them with the accompanying stir and hysteria, it was possible to organize large-scale arrests among the population, even with mass approval. During the second half of 1937 Ezhov was master of the situation. The arrests carried out by his department knew no limits. With good reason Khlevniuk arrives at the conclusion that the mass terror of 1937–38 was “a purposeful operation, planned on a state scale.” The purge was conducted “under control and on the initiative of the supreme leadership of the USSR.” This “particular centralization” did not, however, exclude a certain “spontaneity” and “initiative” on the part of the local authorities, but these were “planned” and “followed the essence of the orders from the center.”⁹¹

Some information on the scope of the terror was already available more than four decades ago. In 1956, in his “secret speech” to the Twentieth Party Congress, Khrushchev reported that, out of a total of 15, 5 Politburo members had been repressed: Chubar’ and Kosior (full members), and Eikhe, Postyshev, and Rudzutak

(candidates); of the 139 Central Committee members and candidates elected at the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934, 98 had been arrested and shot; 1,108 of the 1,966 delegates to the same congress had been arrested.⁹² Khrushchev further revealed that the NKVD drew up lists of leading Party, Soviet, Komsomol, military and economic functionaries, writers, artists, and others whose death or other sentences had been determined before trial. Ezhov sent the lists to Stalin and a few other Politburo members for approval. According to Khrushchev, in 1937–38 Stalin received 383 such lists, containing the names of over 44,000 people, 39,000 of whom were to be sentenced to death by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court.⁹³ Between February 1937 and September 1938, Stalin and a few of his Politburo colleagues indeed approved the death sentence through the Military Collegium for 38,679 people, as had been proposed by the NKVD (16,606 in 1937, 22,073 in 1938), including 3,167 people on 12 September 1938 alone.⁹⁴ This extraordinary procedure, in which Stalin, together with a few adjutants, in fact acted as judge, concerned only the Party and state elite. By signing the lists, Stalin pronounced sentence.

In determining the total of the mass operations, we have at our disposal the act on the transfer of authority for the NKVD from Ezhov to Beria in December 1938. According to this source, from 1 October 1936 to 1 November 1938, 1,565,041 people were arrested, including 365,805 in the “national operations” and 702,656 in the operation with respect to order No. 00447; during the same period, 1,336,863 people were condemned, including 668,305 to the first category of punishment (death).⁹⁵ According to more detailed information in the same source, during the same period 1,391,215 people were condemned in NKVD cases, including 668,305 to the death penalty. Of these, 36,906 were condemned by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court (including 25,355 to the death penalty), 69,114 by the Special Board (no death penalties), 767,397 in the operation with respect to order No. 00447 (including 386,798 to the death penalty), 235,122 in the national operations (including 172,830 to the

death penalty), 93,137 in the operation with respect to order No. 00606—that is, those national operations that after 15 September 1938 had been handed over to the special troikas (including 63,921 to the death penalty), 189,539 by military tribunals and special collegia of the republican and provincial courts (including 19,401 to the death penalty).⁹⁶

Staggering though these figures are, the total should come out somewhat higher because the mass operations between 1 and 15/16 November 1938 (that is, until the end date) have not been taken into account. According to information from the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs of December 1953, during 1937–38, a total of 1,575,259 people were arrested (936,750 in 1937, 638,509 in 1938); 1,372,382 of them were arrested for counter-revolutionary crimes (779,056 in 1937, 593,326 in 1938); 1,344,923 of them were condemned (790,665 in 1937, 554,258 in 1938); 681,692 of them were condemned to death (353,074 in 1937, 328,618 in 1938).⁹⁷ However, these figures, too, are incomplete. All in all, during the “Ezhovshchina” probably some 1.5 million people were arrested, 700,000 of whom were shot.

These figures are confirmed by the increase in the number of prisoners in camps and other places of detention during 1937–38. According to information from the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs of 1960, on 1 January 1937 there were 1,196,369 people in the camps; on 1 January 1938, 1,881,570; and on 1 January 1939, 1,672,438, plus 352,508 in the prisons (together, 2,024,946 people).⁹⁸ This means that, from early 1937 to early 1939, the total number of prisoners was increased by approximately 800,000 people. If one adds the almost 700,000 people executed, a total figure of approximately 1.5 million people repressed during 1937–38 is reached again. During 1937–38, according to M. Wehner, some 160,000 people died in the camps, but this figure could include those executed as a consequence of order No. 00447—that is, they have already been counted among the almost 700,000 above.⁹⁹ Khlevniuk adds that it is unclear how, or even whether, those who perished during investigation have been counted.¹⁰⁰

As concerns the repression of Party members, those condemned by the Military Collegium were mainly victims of the Party and state purge—*nomenklatura* victims, although there are some exceptions. According to the journal *Istochnik*, 779,056 people were repressed in 1937, including 55,428 Party members and candidates (7 percent); 593,336, including 61,457 Party members and candidates (10 percent), in 1938.¹⁰¹ Thus, less than 10 percent were Party members, though one should keep in mind that those expelled during the Party purges of 1936 and before are not included in this figure.

Who were these people, and why were they repressed? The total purge unleashed by Stalin allowed him to strengthen his personal power, which considerably centralized the regime, and made it easier to run the country. It replaced the Old Bolsheviks and “bourgeois specialists” by a new, obedient bureaucracy, consisting of young “specialists” who had been educated in the Stalinist spirit of the 1930s and would execute any order by Stalin without protesting. In this way repetition of the problems with the verification campaign of 1935, having met passive opposition by the local Party leadership, should be prevented. A second aim was the elimination of all “socially dangerous elements,” both “people of the past” (*byvshie*) and “spies.” Consequently, the Great Terror meant the hunt for spies, meaning anyone who maintained any contacts with the world outside the USSR, and the liquidation of a potential and mythical “fifth column.”¹⁰² By isolating the country from foreign influence, an iron curtain was drawn up.

Decades later, a surviving member of Stalin’s circle, Molotov, maintained that “1937 was necessary”: “Enemies of various tendencies were left over, and in the face of the growing threat of fascist aggression they might unite. Thanks to 1937 we had no fifth column during the war.” According to him, “in the main it was the guilty who suffered, those who needed to be repressed to one degree or another.” In the process errors were made and “innocent people were sometimes caught. Obviously one or two out of ten were wrongly caught, but the rest rightly. . . . Any delay was

out of the question. War preparations were under way.” In his words, Stalin’s policy was, “better an innocent head less, than hesitations during the war.”¹⁰³ Echoing Molotov, his colleague Kaganovich contended that, apart from a few innocent victims, the country had rightly been purged in order to defend the revolution from its enemies and to prevent the hostile activity during wartime of a “fifth column.” The Trotskiists, Rightists, and so on may perhaps not have been “spies,” but they had thought it possible to “come to an agreement against the people.” Moreover, everything had been done in accordance with the law: “We did not break the law, did not sign just like that, at will. These are lies. Ul’rikh [chairman of the Military Collegium] gave reports. There was a court, an indictment, there were sentences: everything as it should be, everything according to the law.”¹⁰⁴

As a result, the main categories subject to repression were: Party and state functionaries, including Chekists and Red Army officers, that is, former oppositionists or loyal Stalinists refusing to break with them completely; “people of the past,” that is, former tsarist functionaries, White Guards, SRs, Mensheviks, kulaks, priests, part of the old intelligentsia; and “spies,” that is, foreigners or people with foreign contacts.

Why were these people repressed just at this time? Apart from the war scare, there was yet another element. The adoption in 1936 of a new USSR Constitution reinforced the Soviet leadership’s fear of a possible activation of oppositionist elements. Already in October 1936 NKVD reports had been received about commotion among anti-Soviet circles, who wanted to take advantage of the new Constitution and the forthcoming elections.¹⁰⁵ During an NKVD conference in December 1936 Ezhov strongly contested that the new Constitution would result in more legality and freedoms: “Now, the question of the struggle against the counterrevolution stands sharper, and if you want to do the new Constitution a good turn, then your main task is to guard it against any encroachment by the counterrevolution with all strength and possibilities.”¹⁰⁶ At the February–March Plenum of 1937, many orators stressed the danger arising from kulaks re-

turning from exile, as well as the threat from believers and activists of Church organizations during the forthcoming elections.¹⁰⁷

One should keep in mind that operations proceeding from order No. 00447 were supposed to have been completed within four months—that is, by early December 1937. This suggests a close connection between the campaign of mass arrests and the elections for the Supreme Soviet, set for 12 December. It is no coincidence that the question of the Supreme Soviet elections was discussed at the same June 1937 Plenum, where Stalin took the decision about the operation against “anti-Soviet elements.” Whereas several categories of citizens had previously been deprived of suffrage, the new Constitution enfranchised the entire adult population, with the exception of those who had been sentenced and lunatics. In this way quite a lot of these “anti-Soviet elements” were given the vote. Moreover, a system of secret-ballot elections had been introduced, with multiple candidates campaigning for each seat.

Regional Party leaders feared that class enemies would take advantage of the freedom offered at the elections. At the June 1937 Plenum the Kazakh government leader, U. D. Isaev, warned: “We will clash here with a situation of direct class struggle. Even now, mullahs, Trotskiist, and every kind of other counterrevolutionary elements are preparing for the elections.”¹⁰⁸ At the October 1937 Plenum the Moscow Party leader, A. I. Ugarov, again pointed to intensifying utterances of hostile activity. By now, however, his Western Siberian colleague R. I. Eikhe was able to establish that, on the contrary, thanks to the crushing of the organized counterrevolutionary base the situation had much improved. Stalin agreed: “People are glad to have freed themselves of the wreckers.”¹⁰⁹ For safety’s sake, during the same month it was decided to ban contested elections and introduce uncontested single candidacies.

Stalin himself later acknowledged one of the main reasons for order No. 00447. In March 1939, in his report to the Eighteenth Party Congress, he explained the successful conduct of the elections to the USSR Supreme Soviet in December 1937 and to the Supreme Soviets of the republics in June 1938 with the timely

conduct of the repressions.¹¹⁰ Apart from these immediate, practical tasks, by means of the mass operations Stalin wanted to bring Soviet society in accord with the theoretical tenets of his report of 25 November 1936 on the Constitution project with respect to the erasing of class borders. He had added that former White Guardists, kulaks, priests, and so on, would no longer be deprived of suffrage.¹¹¹ Thus, they were given suffrage—but by means of order No. 00447 they were not given the chance to participate in the elections of 12 December 1937. By physically destroying the alien people whom it was impossible to reeducate in socialism, Stalin speeded up the process of erasing class borders. It is to be noted that the preamble to order No. 00447 set the state security organs the task “to put an end, once and for all” to the activities of anti-Soviet elements. It shows that Stalin indeed aimed at a “final solution” of the problem of anti-Soviet elements.

Legality was of no concern to Ezhov's NKVD. In January 1939, after his fall, a commission consisting of Andreev, Beriia, and Malenkov accused Ezhov of having used illegal investigation methods: “In a most flagrant way, investigation methods were distorted, mass beatings were indiscriminately applied to prisoners, in order to extort false testimony and ‘confessions.’” During twenty-four hours an investigator often had to obtain several dozen confessions, and investigators kept each other informed about the the testimony obtained so that corresponding facts, circumstances, or names could be suggested to other prisoners. “As a result, this sort of investigation very often led to organized slander of totally innocent people.” Very often, confessions were obtained by means of “straight provocation”; prisoners were persuaded to give false testimony about their “espionage activity” in order to help the Party and the government to “discredit foreign states” and in exchange for the promise of release. According to Andreev et al., “the NKVD leadership in the person of comrade Ezhov not only did not cut short such arbitrariness and excesses in arresting and conducting investigation, but sometimes themselves encouraged it.” All opposition was suppressed.¹¹²

The functioning of the troikas was also sharply criticized. Andreev et al. reported that there had been “serious slips” in their work, as well as in that of the so-called Grand Collegium [*bol'shaia kollegiia*], where during a single evening session from 600 to 2,000 cases were often examined. (They were referring to the examination in Moscow of albums in the national operations; before being signed by the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs and the Procurator, the albums were examined by a number of department chiefs of the central NKVD apparatus.) The work of the regional troikas was not controlled by the NKVD at all. Approximately 200,000 people were sentenced to two years by the so-called militia troikas, “the existence of which was not legal.” The NKVD Special Board “did not meet in its legal composition even once.”¹¹³

As an executive of the Tiumen' operational sector of the NKVD testified later, arrests were usually made arbitrarily—people were arrested for belonging to groups that did not actually exist—and the troika duly fell in line with the operational group: “At a troika meeting, the crimes of the defendants were not examined. In some days during an hour I reported to the troika cases involving 50–60 persons.” In a later interview the Tiumen' executive gave a more detailed account of how the operational group carried out the troika's “first category” sentences. Those sentenced to death were executed in the basement in a special room with covered walls, with a shot in the back of the head, followed by a second shot in the temple. The corpses were then taken away to a cemetery outside town. In Tobol'sk, to which the person involved was transferred in 1938, they executed and buried right in prison; for lack of space, the corpses were piled up.¹¹⁴ The assistant chief of the Saratov police administration gave similar testimony: “The basic instruction was to produce as many cases as possible, to formulate them as quickly as possible, with maximum simplification of investigation. As for the quota of cases, [the NKVD chief] demanded [the inclusion of] all those sentenced and all those that had been picked up, even if at the moment of their seizure they had not committed any sort of concrete crime.”¹¹⁵

After arrest, Ezhov's deputy, Frinovskii, explained that the main NKVD investigators had been the "butchers" [*sledovatel'kolol'shchiki*], mainly selected from "conspirators or compromised people." "Unchecked, they applied beatings to prisoners, obtained 'testimony' in the shortest possible time." With Ezhov approving, it was the investigator rather than the prisoner who determined the testimony. Afterward, the protocols were "edited" by Ezhov and Frinovskii, usually without seeing the prisoner or only in passing. According to Frinovskii, Ezhov encouraged the use of physical force during interrogations: he personally supervised the interrogations and instructed the investigators to use "methods of physical influencing" if the results were unsatisfactory. During interrogations he was sometimes drunk.¹¹⁶

As one of the investigators later explained, if somebody was arrested on Ezhov's orders, they were convinced of his guilt in advance, even if all evidence was lacking. They "tried to obtain a confession from that individual using all possible means."¹¹⁷ Under arrest, the former Moscow NKVD deputy chief A. P. Radzivilovskii quoted Ezhov as saying that if evidence was lacking, one should "beat the necessary testimony out of [the prisoners]." According to Radzivilovskii, testimony "as a rule was obtained as a result of the torturing of prisoners, which was widely practiced both in the central and the provincial NKVD apparatuses."¹¹⁸

After arrest both the chief of the Moscow Lefortovo investigation prison and his deputy testified that Ezhov had personally participated in beating prisoners during interrogation.¹¹⁹ His deputy, Frinovskii, had done the same thing.¹²⁰ Shepilov recalls how after Stalin's death Khrushchev told his colleagues that one day, while visiting Ezhov's Central Committee office, he saw spots of clotted blood on the skirt and cuffs of Ezhov's blouse. When asked what was up, Ezhov answered, with a shade of ecstasy, that one might be proud of such spots, for it was the blood of enemies of the revolution.¹²¹

In this respect, however, Ezhov did not act on his own authority. During the 1950s the former Moscow NKVD executive A. O. Postel' tried to justify himself by stressing that the "physical meth-

ods of investigation” had “emanated directly from the People’s Commissar Ezhov and the Party leader Stalin.”¹²² Ezhov indeed acted according to Stalin’s instructions. In one such case Stalin ordered Ezhov to rake over the coals a prisoner who was not making the demanded confessions: “Isn’t it time to squeeze this gentleman and force him to report on his dirty little business? Where is he: in a prison or a hotel?”¹²³ Besides signing Ezhov’s lists, Stalin sometimes gave instructions concerning certain individuals; for instance, in December 1937 he added to M. I. Baranov’s name, “beat, beat!”¹²⁴

From the summer of 1937 on, beating and torturing were practiced on a broad scale, with the permission of the Party leadership. In early 1939, Stalin informed the regional Party and NKVD chiefs that “from 1937 on in NKVD practice the use of physical pressure [on prisoners] was permitted by the Central Committee.” It was permitted (“exceptionally,” according to Stalin), “only with respect to such overt enemies of the people who take advantage of humane interrogation methods in order to shamelessly refuse to give away conspirators, who for months don’t testify and try to impede the unmasking of those conspirators who are still free.” Stalin considered it a “totally correct and expedient method”—though later the practice had been soiled by scoundrels like Zakovskii, Litvin, and Uspenskii, Stalin added, after these NKVD executives had been liquidated themselves. They had turned it “from an exception into a rule,” applying it to “accidentally arrested honest people.”¹²⁵ Of course, the point is that they had acted on Stalin’s instructions and had been dealt with only after they were no longer of use.

Stalin made no secret of his intentions. According to the Secretary General of the Comintern, Georgii Dimitrov, in November 1937, at a dinner on the anniversary of the October Revolution, Stalin proposed a toast to Politburo members and a few other leaders with the words: “We will destroy every enemy, even if he is an Old Bolshevik, we will destroy his kin, his family. Anyone who by his actions or thoughts encroaches on the unity of the socialist state, we shall destroy relentlessly.”¹²⁶