



Chapter Five

The Great Terror

Directive No. 00447

The first category includes the most dangerous and most hostile of the above listed elements. They [75,900 of them] should be immediately arrested and after examination of their cases by troikas—**BE SHOT**.

—*Nikolai Ezhov, Head of the NKVD, July 30, 1937*

The Chief of the Security Police and the SD then gave a short report of the struggle which has been carried on thus far against this enemy, the essential points being the following: a) the expulsion of the Jews from every sphere of life of the German people, b) the expulsion of the Jews from the living space of the German people.

—*Protocol of the Wannsee Conference on the Final Solution, Berlin, January 20, 1942*¹

Background

The tragic decade, 1935 to 1945, saw two mass slaughters ordered by heads of state—Stalin’s Great Terror and Hitler’s “final solution of the Jewish problem.” State-sponsored terror campaigns such as these cannot be improvised. They need careful preparation. Victims must be identified according to some system; they must be arrested and transported; and they must be executed or imprisoned. Records must be kept on them. The “plan” for Hitler’s final solution was put in place on January 20, 1942, at a villa-held meeting in Berlin’s Wannsee district,

attended by mid-level functionaries. The plan for Stalin's Great Terror was outlined by Stalin himself and was announced on July 30, 1937, by NKVD chief Nikolai Ezhov's Operational Decree No. 00447 "About operations for the repression of former kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements." Eighteen months later, 681,000 persons had been shot under this decree.

Ezhov shared the same fate as his victims. Needing a scapegoat for the excesses of the Great Terror, Stalin fired him in November of 1938. Ezhov was executed the night of February 2, 1940. According to an official witness: "He started to hiccup, weep, and when he was conveyed to 'the place,' they had to drag him by the hands along the floor. He struggled and screamed terribly."²

This chapter tells the story of Operational Order No. 00447's pre-history, implementation, and consequences.³ It is largely told in the words of the order itself. Ezhov's July 30, 1937, decree qualifies as the most brutal state decree of the twentieth century. It is remarkable in that it clearly and without euphemisms (such as the Nazi use of "emigration" in place of "extermination") spells out the logic and procedures of Stalin's mass repressions with absolutely no effort to hide its intentions. As its title implies, it was an operational order—a cookbook used by thousands of NKVD officials and party activists to carry terror to the remote corners of the vast Soviet Union.

The Great Terror

Stalin's Great Terror⁴ is often confused with his purge of the party elite, which began on the day of Leningrad boss Sergei Kirov's assassination: December 1, 1934. Of the 1,966 elite party delegates to the Seventeenth Party Congress of 1934, 1,108 were arrested on charges of anti-revolutionary crimes and 848 were executed in the course of these purges. The decimated party elite was replaced by a new generation of leaders. But party losses, even of these magnitudes, account for only a small fraction of one percent of total repressions between 1937 and 1938. The average victim was a regular person, holding a normal job and leading an average life.

It was not until the end of July 1937 that Stalin was ready for the "mass operations" stage of his Great Terror. In September of 1936, he replaced the soon-to-be-executed Genrikh Iagoda with the fanatical

The photo of Ezhov is not available on the web.

Photograph of Nikolai Ezhov on top of the Lenin Mausoleum, May 1, 1938.

Nikolai Ezhov as head of the NKVD. Over the next year, Stalin and Ezhov prepared the “once and for all time” elimination of enemies of Soviet power.

Despite earlier mass campaigns, Stalin remained convinced that his enemies were multiplying. Members of banned political parties had been removed from responsible offices, but they were still alive. German, Lithuanian, and Polish workers were still employed in defense factories. Two million citizens had been “disenfranchised” as politically unreliable.⁵ The victims of the 1930–1932 collectivization and dekulakization campaigns were finishing their prison or exile terms, and as many as a quarter million kulaks had fled to the cities or illegally blended into collective farms.⁶ Regional party secretaries and NKVD officials warned Stalin of “growing bases for insurgent

rebellions” and of large influxes of “alien elements” into their territories. Outlandish tales of mass poisonings and sinister plots spread, encouraged by the fantastic confessions of former party leaders at the Moscow Show Trials. An alarmed Stalin called for increased vigilance to “check every party member and every non-party Bolshevik.”⁷

Ezhov’s Order No. 00447 was designed to solve a major logistic and operational task: the elimination, through execution or long prison sentences, of a large number of persons whom Stalin considered to be his enemies in a short period of time. In its original form, Order No. 00447 called for the execution of 75,950 and the imprisonment of 193,000 in four months’ time, from start to finish. With a five-day week, this target required 883 executions and 2240 prison sentences per day. Victims had to be identified quickly, evidence had to be kept to a minimum, and the pace of operations could not be slowed down by judicial proceedings. Even with its limited protection of civil rights, the “regular” justice system could not produce such numbers. Rather, extraordinary measures had to set aside existing rules and “justice” had to be dispensed with “simplified procedures.” Ezhov’s decree constructed a “conveyor” (the term used in 1937–1938 to describe the Great Terror) to process large numbers of victims.

Starting the Great Terror

Stalin set “mass operations” in motion with a top secret telegram of July 3, 1937, which ordered sixty-five regions, within five days, to prepare lists of enemies “to be shot” and to staff extra-judicial tribunals (called troikas) for expeditious sentencing.⁸ Orders from Stalin or the Politburo were top secret; they could not be shared with others. It was up to the executing agency, in this case Ezhov’s NKVD, to issue detailed instructions to those on the ground. Ezhov’s Operational Decree of the NKVD No. 00447, issued on July 30, 1937, told the executors what was expected of them.

Mass operations of such magnitude, conducted in sixty-five regions in the world’s largest country according to land mass, had to be explained in clear and exacting terms. Each of the sixty-five administrative regions had to know when to start, how many to execute or imprison, how to prepare the paperwork, and who was to carry out the sentence.

Stalin's July 3, 1937, directive gave only the basic outline: Enemies were to be divided into two categories: one to be executed, the other to be sent to remote areas; enemies were labeled with the catch-all phrase "returning kulaks [the term used to describe more prosperous peasants] and criminals." In the almost four weeks between Stalin's telegram and Directive 00447, Ezhov held conferences in Moscow with regional NKVD leaders and met fifteen times with Stalin (often with the indispensable Molotov in attendance) in meetings sometimes lasting more than three hours.

Ezhov had only an elementary education; his drafting skills were weak. The decree was written by his deputy M. P. Frinovskii, whom Ezhov placed in charge of overall operations. Stalin knew and approved its contents. Upon receipt of the Frinovskii draft, Stalin instructed his personal secretary: "I am sending you Operational Decree No. 00447. I request you send this to members of the Politburo for voting and send the results to Comrade Ezhov."⁹ The result of the vote was preordained; no Politburo member would dare oppose Stalin on such an issue.

Initially, the regions were told they had five days to prepare lists of victims; so their activity was frantic. Ezhov's NKVD had extensive card catalogs of citizens (internal passport records, criminal records, those expelled from the party, and records of disenfranchised persons) from which centralized lists could be compiled. The regional party and NKVD departments also had extensive regional records from local surveillance, factory lists, and local prosecutors. Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev officials even kept lists of relatives of those expelled from the party and of former oppositionists.

The decree itself was a classic Soviet "extraordinary decree" that set aside existing legal codes for a designated period of time—a sort of declaration of martial law—and put in place new rules that were to guide the terror campaign from start to finish.

Ezhov's Operational Decree No. 00447 is a document that can largely tell its own story in its own words.

Statement of Purpose

Operational Decree No. 00447 begins by emphasizing the acute danger posed by the enemies of Soviet power. Enemies are described as

those who were repressed in earlier campaigns, such as kulaks, supporters of the old regime, sectarians, former officials, or those who escaped repression by hiding in villages and by working in strategic factories and construction sites. This time there was to be no dilly-dallying. The most merciless measures were to be used to put an end “once and for all time” to the “foul subversive work” of the masses of enemies at large in Soviet society. In the language of 00447:

Formations of substantial numbers of former kulaks, earlier repressed persons, those concealing themselves from repression, escapees from camps, work colonies, or deportation have been detected by investigations of anti-Soviet groupings. There are many formations of formerly repressed religious persons and sectarians, and former active participants in anti-Soviet armed activities. They have remained almost untouched in the village. They include large cadres of anti-Soviet political parties (listed), and also cadres of former activists in bandit rebellions, members of White punitive organizations, repatriates, and so on. Some, leaving the village for the city, have infiltrated industrial enterprises, transport, and construction. Moreover, significant numbers of criminals, thieves-convicts, pillagers and others serving out sentences, escaping from places of confinement, and hiding from repression are accumulating in villages and cities. The inadequate battle against these criminal contingents has created conditions that support their criminal activities. The organs of state security are faced with the task—in the most merciless fashion—to destroy this band of anti-Soviet elements, to protect the working Soviet population from their counter-revolutionary intrigues and, finally, once and for all, to put an end to their foul subversive work against the foundations of the Soviet state.¹⁰

Schedule

As an extraordinary decree, Order 00447 set aside existing criminal laws for the period of the campaign. Given the size of the Soviet Union and transport difficulties, the campaign could not start everywhere at once. Ezhov set the starting date for August 5 for the central regions and an ending point four months later. Also, instruction had to be given on which enemies to attack first; namely, the most dangerous “first category.” A notable feature of the Order is Ezhov’s

use of the first person, establishing his personal role and instructing NKVD subordinates to contact him directly for orders. In the language of 00447:

In connection with this, I ORDER: to begin in all republics, regions and provinces operations for the repression of former kulaks, active anti-Soviet elements and criminals on August 5, 1937. Operations will begin in Uzbek, Turkmen, Tadzhik and Kirgiz republics on August 10, and in the Far Eastern and Krasnoyarsk regions and in Eastern Siberia on August 15. Operations should end within a four-month period.¹¹

Contingents of the second category are not to be repressed until special instructions are issued. In cases where a commissar of the republican NKVD, or a head of an administration or of a provincial department, having completed first-category operations, considers it possible to begin operations on the second category, he is required to ask my permission and only after that to start the operation.¹²

Contingents of Enemies

Order No. 00447 lists nine categories of “contingents” of enemies. Although the list appears to focus on kulaks and criminals, Ezhov’s definition of enemies includes virtually anyone associated with the former regime, belonging to a political party other than the Bolshevik party, active in a church or religion, returning from abroad, or engaging in “diversionist” activity (whatever that might mean). Striking, also, is the fact that having served out a sentence did not provide an exemption. The most hated contingent, “former kulaks,” were to be repressed even after “serving out their term of punishment.” Although enemies are characterized in many cases as “conducting anti-Soviet activity,” implicit is the fact that individuals are enemies for being who they are not for what they do. No matter how sincere their current support for the Bolshevik regime, former White Guard officers, priests, or Mensheviks remain “enemies of the Soviet state.” They are “socially dangerous” without actually doing anything against the state. Whereas earlier certain groups were left untouched, such as members of collective farms, now anyone in any location or employment can be an enemy of the state. In the language of 00447:

I. CONTINGENTS (QUOTAS) SUBJECT TO REPRESSION

1. Former kulaks, returning after serving out their punishment and continuing to conduct active anti-Soviet subversive activity.
2. Former kulaks escaping from camps or labor colonies carrying out anti-Soviet activity.
3. Former kulaks and socially dangerous elements, belonging to rebellious, fascist, terrorist, and bandit formations, serving out their terms, hiding from repression or escaping from places of confinement and resuming their anti-Soviet criminal activity.
4. Members of anti-soviet parties (listed), former Whites, gendarmes, officials, members of punitive organizations, bandits, and gang members, accomplices, those assisting escapes, re-emigrants, those hiding from repression, fleeing from places of confinement and continuing to conduct anti-Soviet activity.
5. Those exposed as a result of investigations as the most hostile and active participants in currently-being-liquidated Cossack-White Guard insurgent organizations, fascist, terrorist, espionage-diversionist counter-revolutionary formations.
6. The most active anti-Soviet elements among former kulaks, members of punitive bodies, bandits, sectarian activists, church officials and others currently being held in prisons, camps, work colonies and continuing to carry out active anti-Soviet insurgency work.
7. Criminals (bandits, thieves, recidivist thieves, professional contrabandists, swindler-recidivists, livestock thieves) carrying out criminal activity and circulating in criminal milieu.
8. Criminal elements located in camps and work colonies and conducting criminal activity.
9. All the above elements currently located in villages—in collective farms, state farms, agricultural enterprises and in cities—in industrial and trade enterprises, transport, in Soviet institutions and in construction are subject to repression.¹³

Limits and Requests for Higher Limits

Order 00447 was a Soviet-style plan; only its product was not steel or trucks, but executions and prison terms. A plan is not a plan without plan targets, and, insofar as enemies of the Soviet state are distributed

geographically, Operational Decree No. 00447 assigned execution and imprisonment targets—called “limits”—on a regional basis. Each of the sixty-five regions was assigned “limits” for the number of first category, or “most dangerous and hostile,” offenders to “be shot” and for a second category to be sentenced to eight- to ten-year terms in camps. The Gulag camps were grouped together as a sixty-fifth region; its inmates were automatically placed in the first category; they were already in prison. The sixty-five regional limits (which we do not reproduce due to space limitation) ranged from lows of four hundred for small areas like Komi or the Kalmyk province to a high of 35,000 for Moscow province. The largest numbers of executions were scheduled for the Gulag (10,000) and for Moscow and Leningrad province and Western Siberia (4,000 each). The totals are not given but they add up to 75,950 executions and 193,000 prison sentences.

In economic planning, plant managers rarely asked for higher plans; Ezhov’s terror plan, however, encouraged requests for higher limits: “In cases where circumstances demand a raising of limits,” regional NKVD offices “must present to me [again the use of first person] petitions justifying the request.” This hint from Ezhov was taken to heart by the sixty-five regions, whose leaders concluded that to not ask for higher limits would be taken as a sign of “bureaucratic inertia” or even taken as the action of a class enemy. Requests for higher limits flooded into Ezhov’s and Stalin’s offices in a frenzy of “socialist competition.” In the language of 00447:

II. ABOUT MEASURES OF PUNISHMENT AND THE NUMBERS OF THOSE TO BE REPRESSED

1. All kulaks, criminals and other anti-Soviet elements to be repressed are to be divided into two categories:
 - a) The first category includes the most dangerous and most hostile of the above listed elements. They should be immediately arrested and after examination of their cases by troikas are—TO BE SHOT.
 - b) In the second category are the remaining less active but nonetheless hostile elements. They are to be arrested and placed in camps for terms of 8 to 10 years, but the most evil and socially dangerous should be sentenced to prisons according to the specification of the troika.

3. The approved figures are for orientation purposes. The heads of the republican NKVDs and the directors of regional and provincial NKVD administrations do not have the authority to exceed them independently. No arbitrary raising of the figures is allowed.¹⁴

Family Members as Hostages

“Hostages” were allowed from the first days of Bolshevik power. Lenin’s Red Terror Decree of September 2, 1918, ordered the secret police (called then the Cheka): “to arrest as hostages prominent representatives of the bourgeoisie: merchants, industrialists, traders, counter-revolutionary priests, and officers who are enemies of Soviet power and confine them in concentration camps.”¹⁵ Under the hostage principle, relatives of those committing crimes were held criminally responsible—a principle widely applied to army deserters fleeing across the border.

During Stalin’s purges of the party elite, family members were automatically repressed. Wives and children were executed along with their husbands and parents. Promising that family members would be spared was an effective device to extract confessions. (The promises were extended but usually not honored).

Ezhov’s directive concerning family members was surprisingly restrained: They were to be spared unless they themselves engaged in anti-Soviet activity or happened to live in major cities or in border areas. In all cases, they were to be “registered and placed under systematic observation.”

4. The families of those sentenced according to the first or second category will, as a rule, not be repressed.¹⁶

Ezhov listed as exceptions family members capable of active anti-Soviet activities, and families of persons repressed in the first category living in border regions or in major metropolitan areas, who should be jailed or deported.

This leniency changed two weeks later with NKVD Decree No. 00486, “About the repression of wives and the placement of children of those convicted of betrayal of the motherland,” which ordered the wives of those convicted of counter revolution to the Gulag along with

“socially dangerous children” except for pregnant women and wives who turned in their husbands. Underage children were to be sent to NKVD orphanages for upbringing.¹⁷

Operational Groups and Arrest Procedures

The ground-level executors of the Great Terror were “deputized operational workers” of the NKVD. These seasoned and hardened officers, drawn primarily from the NKVD’s State Security Administration, headed the operational groups that arrested and interrogated (and routinely tortured) prisoners, prepared the case files for the troika tribunal, and carried out the sentences. The operational group could not turn the shooting over to others. It was a task they did themselves, often after drinking themselves into a stupor. The operational group was the backbone of the Great Terror, and its head had the power of life or death, as summarized by the declaration of one operational worker: “I am the interrogator, the judge, and the executioner.”¹⁸

According to Russian criminal codes of the time, arrests required permission of the prosecutor’s office—a civil agency nominally independent of the NKVD. This protection from arbitrary arrest was a thin reed, given that the prosecutor’s office was dictated to by Stalin. As an extraordinary decree, Ezhov’s 00447 set aside this minimal protection of civil rights. Ezhov’s “order of carrying out operations” gave arrest authority to NKVD officials at the republican, regional, or provincial levels. It was their job to gather “incriminating evidence” for the preparation of arrest lists, which were approved by NKVD superiors. In the language of section three of Order No. 00447:

III. THE ORDER OF CARRYING OUT OPERATIONS

3. According to circumstances and local conditions, territories should be divided into operational sectors. An operational group should be formed for each sector, headed by a responsible republican, regional or provincial NKVD official, who is able to organize serious operational tasks. In some cases, the most experienced and talented heads of regional and municipal departments may be named as heads of operational groups.
4. The operational groups must be staffed with the necessary number

of operational workers and should have means of transportation and communication.

In connection with the necessities of the operational situation, military or militia subdivisions may be attached to the group.

5. The director of the operational group should manage interrogations, direct the investigation, confirm the incriminating conclusions, and carry out the sentence of the troika.
6. Detailed data and compromising materials must be gathered for every repressed person. Arrest lists are to be created from such material, signed by the head of the operational group and forwarded in two copies for examination and approval by the NKVD commissar of the republic or the director of the administration of the provincial department of the NKVD, who give permission for the arrest.
7. On the basis of the approved list, the head of the operational group carries out arrests. Every arrest is designed as an order. In the course of the arrest, a careful search is to be conducted. It is necessary to confiscate weapons, ammunition, explosives, poisons, counterrevolutionary literature, precious metals, ingots, foreign currency, duplicating equipment and correspondence. All confiscated material is registered in the search protocol.
8. Those arrested are to be concentrated in points, according to directives of superiors, which should have facilities suited for the accommodation of prisoners.
9. Those arrested will be strictly guarded. All measures should be organized to prevent their escape or other kinds of excesses.¹⁹

Simplified Procedures and Conspiracies

Operational groups had to fulfill their “limits.” If they had too much paperwork or were otherwise restricted, they could not process enemies with sufficient speed. Ezhov’s directive, at first glance, appears to impose such administrative burdens. The case file should include the arrest order, search protocol, confiscated materials, and the indictment. Ezhov’s allowance of “simplified procedures,” a code word to proceed with minimal formalities, however, provided the escape clause for harried operational groups. The work of a head of an operational group in a remote Siberian town (who had arrested one thousand locals) illustrates the flexibility of simplified procedures. Despite

complaints that he could only process three cases per day, he somehow managed to submit two hundred and sixty first-category cases in less than two weeks, most of which were approved by the troika.²⁰ The greatest simplification was the Law of December 1 (passed on the day of Kirov's assassination), which declared that confession was a substitute for objective evidence. Once a confession was extracted, the matter could go directly to the troika. Such simplified procedures allowed the NKVD's "conveyor" of repression to work at full speed.

Order 00447 also instructs that the "investigation should uncover all criminal ties of the arrested party." Isolated enemies of the Soviet regime were not dangerous; they were only dangerous as part of a larger conspiracy. The goal of the interrogation was to incriminate others. Confessions were extracted by appealing to patriotism, promising to spare loved ones, pledging prison instead of death, and, most commonly, torturing. Persons subjected to these techniques implicated friends, fellow workers, and even casual acquaintances. They dutifully confessed to improbable plots, such as Stalin's lifetime friend and fellow Georgian's (A. Enukidze) confession of a plot to assassinate Stalin and other Politburo members,²¹ as the transcript of his interrogation shows:

Q: How many persons did you need to carry out the revolt within the Kremlin.

A: Twenty to twenty-five persons.

Q: How many did you have?

A: Fifteen.

Q: Who are they?

[Enukidze gives their names].

Q: Why didn't you carry it out?

A: We had agreed with Tomsy that I would await his order.

Q: If you had received this order would you have carried it out?

A: Yes.

A low-level official signed a confession of involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate Stalin with people she had never met: "I did not have the strength to resist further. At that time, I did not care if they shot me or sentenced me, and I signed everything that they wanted." Another signed a bizarre confession when promised that life in the

camps would be easier than trying to hold out.²² Ezhov's antiseptic section on investigations conceals their extreme brutality:

IV. PROCESS OF CARRYING OUT INVESTIGATIONS

1. For every arrested party or group of arrested persons, there is to be an investigation. The investigation is to be carried out quickly and in a simplified procedure.

In the process of the investigation all criminal ties of the arrested should be uncovered.

2. Upon conclusion of the investigation the case should be submitted to the troika for examination.

In the case material should be included: the arrest order, the search protocol, material confiscated during the search, personal documents, agent-registration material, the protocol of the interrogation, and a short indictment.²³

Troikas

Another staple of simplified procedures was the troika—an extrajudicial body, comprised of three members, headed by an NKVD official. Troika members were confirmed by the Politburo (Stalin). Once the troika members themselves started being repressed, Stalin had to scramble to keep them staffed. Stalin's correspondence from this period is full of orders to replace Comrade X with Comrade Y in the troika located in region Z.

Troikas date to the first days of Bolshevik power when Lenin used them to dispense summary justice on Bolshevik enemies. Troikas were described by a justice department official (in 1927) as a cosmetic court proceeding to calm foreign critics without compromising the battle against spies and counter-revolutionaries. Troikas were used by the NKVD's predecessor (the OGPU) to sentence kulaks and others opposed to Soviet power to prison or to death in the early 1930s.

Order 00447 required the heads of the operational groups to submit their "cases" to troikas. The troika's job was to confirm the sentence and to order the sentence to be carried out. Troika decisions could not be appealed; troikas were not bound by special procedures, and their sentences were to be carried out immediately. Such a format "ensures the harshness of repression and necessary

speed.”²⁴ The cosmetic protection from arbitrary NKVD action offered by the troika was that an NKVD official was only one of three troika members. The other two positions were to be occupied by a prosecutorial official and a party official. In most cases, however, the party and prosecutorial representatives were only extras, and, as the terror proceeded, they themselves were often arrested. One troika met in full form only once,²⁵ and there were even cases of one-man troikas.

The troika procedures established by Order 00447 gave victims little chance. They were arrested and interrogated by the NKVD operational group, which recommended the sentence (death or prison) to the troika, also headed by an NKVD officer. The troika did not “try” the case; the accused did not appear before the troika and had no defender. The troika’s job was to determine that minimal procedures were followed and to confirm the recommended sentence. As the Great Terror progressed, troikas were satisfied with thinner and thinner case files. By 1938, case files listed only the name, address, and profession of the defendant, and gave a one-line indictment (“committed counter-revolutionary acts”) and the sentence. Troikas had to process large numbers of cases on a daily basis; there was no time for reviews. The Leningrad troika sentenced 658 defendants to death in a single day (October 9, 1937).²⁶ The more visible cases went to the military collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR or of the republics, but the court venue made little difference. Each case and punishment were prepared in advance by the NKVD and approved by the Politburo. Although the accused was present (unlike troikas, which never saw their victims), the typical military collegium case lasted no more than fifteen to twenty minutes, and eighty-five percent concluded with death sentences.²⁷

V. ORGANIZATION OF THE WORK OF TROIKAS

1. I confirm the following lists of persons for republican, regional, and provincial troikas [lists of names not included in the document].
2. The republican, regional, or provincial procurator may be present at meetings of the troika (if he is not already a member).
3. The troika will carry out its work or will be located in points where there are corresponding NKVD departments or will go to places where operational sectors are located.

4. Troikas will examine materials for each arrested person or for groups of arrested persons and also for every family subject to exile.

Troikas may transfer persons arrested as category 1 to category 2 depending upon the character of the material and the degree of social threat and vice versa.

5. Troikas must maintain protocols of their meetings in which are registered the sentence of each person convicted.

The protocol of the meeting of the troika is to be sent to the head of the operational group for carrying out the sentence. Excerpts from the protocol are to be attached to the investigatory materials for each convicted party.²⁸

Carrying out Sentences

The final stage for the victims of the Great Terror was the execution of the sentence approved by the troika. Order 00447 was simple and clear. The troika chairman was to designate the person to carry out the sentence (usually the head of the operational group) and the paperwork was kept to a short excerpt from the meeting of the troika setting the sentence. Executions were to be carried out under conditions of strict secrecy as to time and place. The execution order was to be kept in a separate file, making it more difficult for relatives to learn that their loved one had been executed. Those sentenced to prison were to be dispatched according to instructions from the Gulag administration. Many executions were carried out in killing fields near major urban centers, such as the Butyrskii Poligon near Moscow, but others were carried out in remote locations.

VI. PROCEDURE FOR CARRYING OUT SENTENCES

1. Sentences are carried out by persons according to the directives of the chairman of the troika.

The materials required for the carrying out of sentences are: certified excerpts from the protocol of the meeting of the troika appended by the sentences for every convicted person and a special order signed by the chairman of the troika to the person assigned to carry out the sentence.

2. Sentences of the first category are to be carried out in places and according to the procedures established by directives of the

commissars of republican NKVDs, heads of administrations and heads of provincial departments of the NKVD with the obligation to maintain full secrecy of the times and places of carrying out the sentence.

Documents concerning the carrying out of the sentence are to be attached in a separate envelope to the investigatory material of every convicted person.

3. The dispatch of persons of the second category to camps is carried out on the basis of assignments from the Gulag administration of the NKVD.

Management of Operations and Records

Ezhov's decree ends with housekeeping matters, such as reporting requirements and the obvious need to prevent escapes. It was clear that Ezhov wished to have an accurate record of executions. It was only later, when relatives clamored for answers, that Ezhov's successors seemed to have difficulty determining the fate of loved ones.

VII. ORGANIZATION OF MANAGEMENT OF OPERATIONS AND RECORDS

1. The general management of operations is placed on the deputy commissar of the NKVD—the head of the main Administration of State Security—Commander Frinovskii.

A special group is to be formed to manage the operation.

2. Protocols of troikas concerning the execution of sentences are to be immediately dispatched to the head of the eighth department of Administration of State Security with the attachment of the inventory card according to form number 1.

For those sentenced to category 1 include with the protocol and inventory card also the investigatory material.

3. Report the course and results of operations in 15-day reports on the 1st, 5th, 10th, 15th, 20th, and 25th days of every month by telegram or in more detail by post.
4. Report immediately by telegraph all newly uncovered counter-revolutionary formations, the appearance of excesses, escapes, the formation of bandit or pillaging groups or other extraordinary events.

Some Thoughts on the Great Terror

The complete openness of written instructions to murder or imprison hundreds of thousands of people, such as Operational Decree No. 00447, tells us that the executioners either believed that what they were doing was right or, if not, that there would be no adverse consequences. Hitler's executioners were more cautious.

Although some fanatics, such as Ezhov and a few of his associates, may have believed the myths of super-human class enemies organizing massive and intricate plots, regular NKVD officials would have known the truth. They knew that confessions were forced by torture or by false promises of leniency. Therefore, the most likely explanation is that most understood that what they were doing was wrong but that they would not be punished, or that they had no choice in the matter anyway.

The absence of caution appears justified. Despite more than a million unwarranted executions and premature deaths, few of those responsible were punished. As Stalin turned off the Great Terror and the search for scapegoats began in November of 1938, only 937 NKVD employees were arrested (91 from the central office), and 99 were reported as deceased, with no information given on the cause of death.²⁹ They were punished less for their deeds than for their association with discredited superiors who had fallen out of favor with Stalin. They also needed to be liquidated to make room for the new boss's underlings.

As the Gulag began to empty of prisoners after Stalin's death, a number of NKVD officers, interrogators, and informants panicked and a few committed suicide. One interrogator fell to his knees and begged forgiveness. Former inmates, in rare cases, took vengeance into their own hands, such as a former officer who shot his interrogator to death in Kiev. A female informant responsible for the imprisonment of many colleagues was fired from her party job, went insane, and continued to come to work every day to be turned away at the front entrance.³⁰ In the vast majority of cases, however, those responsible for the imprisonment of millions of persons lived out their lives with no visible repercussions.

Low-level administrators could justify their actions with the claim that they were only following orders—a claim less easily exercised

by Politburo members, such as Khrushchev. After addressing an open meeting after he had exposed Stalin's crimes (in 1956), Khrushchev purportedly received a written question asking why he allowed such things to happen. Khrushchev asked the audience who wrote the question and, upon receiving no answer, responded: "He who wrote this question is afraid, just like we were all afraid to act against Stalin."³¹