

Beyond the Party's Will: The Soviet Secret Police from the Russian Civil War to the Great Terror

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This paper traces the evolution of the Soviet state security apparatus from the early days of the Cheka to the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs). The Soviet secret police originated as a radical organization with a broadly defined mandate to defend the Bolshevik revolution, but its institutionalization and operational autonomy from party oversight made it acutely susceptible to manipulation by political elites. After the death of Vladimir Lenin, these features enabled it to become a major player in Soviet politics, positioning the apparatus as an active participant in the struggle for succession, rather than a neutral guarantor of party security. Exploring this will illuminate how the political function, methods, and motives of the secret police changed fundamentally after its creation, the end product being a powerful organization that transformed from a reactive instrument of oppression to a permanent institution involved in structuring social and political life.

The 1918 February Revolution ousted the Romanov Dynasty and the conservative ruling elite, paving the way for the creation of a liberal Provisional Government led by Alexander Kerensky. As the governing authority, the Kerensky government had little support from the people, who instead gravitated around a representative body known as the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.¹ The Petrograd Soviet rivalled the Provisional Government and provided socialist factions with a platform to gain access to the levers of state power. Crucially, it provided the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), Mensheviks, and Bolsheviks, a base to launch a future socialist revolution against the bourgeois-democratic regime.² The Bolshevik party, led by Vladimir Lenin, took advantage of the opportunity presented by Kerensky governments failings and general political uncertainty. By September, the party had gained a majority of the two leading Soviets in Petrograd and Moscow.³ Empowered by this, the Bolsheviks began preparing for an armed uprising to seize power, which occurred on October 24, 1917, and precipitated the Russian Civil War.

The first iteration of the secret police, the Cheka, was created on December 20, 1917, amid the turmoil of war.⁴ The state faced unprecedented challenges to its authority and stability, primarily from elements of the old regime which coalesced into the White Armies. The

¹ Rex A. Wade, *The Bolshevik Revolution and Russian Civil War* (Greenwood Press, 2001), 12–13.

² Edward Hallett Carr, *The Russian Revolution: From Lenin to Stalin*, 1st American ed. (Free Press, 1979), 2–3. The Socialist Revolutionaries were members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party.

³ Carr, *The Russian Revolution*, 5. The acronym for the Council of People's Commissars.

⁴ The acronym for the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage.

exigencies of conflict compelled the Bolshevik leadership to bolster its grip on power through the expansion and militarization of the state security apparatus. The official decree establishing the organization administratively linked it to the executive governing body of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the Sovnarkom, which Lenin chaired.⁵ This was a strategic decision that made the Cheka controlled by and accountable to solely the Sovnarkom, which was composed entirely of Bolshevik leaders. This provided the organization with the autonomy and flexibility it needed to carry out its mandate, without interference from the more pluralistic congressional body, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VtsIK).⁶

The Cheka was led by Felix Dzerzhinsky, a Bolshevik of Polish origin and veteran revolutionary who helped stage the October Revolution as part of the Military Revolutionary Committee.⁷ The Cheka was initially created to conduct investigatory duties, chiefly responsible for finding and arresting counter-revolutionary “elements.” What labelled one as a counterrevolutionary was rather vague, and very quickly encompassed other political groups that could rival Lenin and the Bolshevik party. The SRs, as early as January 1918, found themselves victims of Cheka detention after Lenin dissolved Russia’s last freely elected parliament, the All-Russian Constituent Assembly.⁸ Persecution increased rapidly following the assassination of Moisei Uritsky, the chief of the Petrograd Cheka, and the attempted assassination of Lenin on August 30, 1918. The accused were allegedly supporters of the SRs and opposed Bolshevik domination, a fact that was seemingly confirmed when Lenin’s assailant, Fania Kaplan, testified at her trial to supporting the Constituent Assembly and believing the Lenin had betrayed the socialist revolution.⁹

The events provided Lenin and the Bolshevik’s an opportunity to damage the political base of their rivals and precipitated a period of oppression known as the Red Terror. Jacob Peters, deputy head of the Cheka, publicly proclaimed the attempt on Lenin’s life as an attack on the working class and called for mass terror to “crush the hydra of counter-revolution.”¹⁰ In February 1918, the organization's administrative centre, the VCheka, announced a new mandate, which was to be broadened to the

⁵ Soviet of People's Commissars, “Decree on Establishment of the Extraordinary Commission to Fight Counter-Revolution,” in *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1918: Documents and materials*, eds., James Bunyan and H.H. Fisher (Stanford University Press; London: H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1934), 298.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/events/revolution/documents/1917/12/7.htm#01>.

⁶ George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police* (Clarendon Press, 1986), 21–22.

⁷ Ronald Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police: Muscovite, Imperial Russian, and Soviet Political Security Operations 1565–1970* (Routledge, 2021), 119.

⁸ Leggett, *The Cheka*, 44.

⁹ Leggett, *The Cheka*, 107.

¹⁰ Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* (Jonathan Cape, 1997), 630.

“merciless annihilation” of counterrevolutionaries and other dissenters.¹¹ Immediately, the Cheka began to conduct more punitive actions, taking on the role of judge, jury, and executioner against any declared enemy of the state. Based on Bolshevik records covering twenty provinces in European Russia during 1918 and early 1919, the Cheka executed at least 8,389 individuals without trial, while an additional 89,000 were subjected to arrest.¹² The oppressive arm of the Cheka reached into nearly every facet of society, and few were spared regardless of position or occupation. Many of the Cheka’s “bourgeois hostages” were often arrested randomly with no explicit justification, and it was not unusual for people to be arrested for merely being near the scene of a “bourgeois” crime or being acquainted with suspects.¹³

Under Dzerzhinsky, the Cheka evolved into a formidable and ruthless organization, wielding virtually unchecked authority in enforcing Bolshevik rule. Its modus operandi epitomized state terror, employing brutal tactics to suppress dissent and eliminate threats to the revolution. Torture was regularly used on inmates held in Cheka prisons and a prisoner’s sentence often ended in summary execution.¹⁴ The work of “merciless annihilation” facilitated a rapid increase of the organization’s size. By March 1918, the Cheka was headquartered in the Lubianka Building in Moscow and boasted a workforce of over 600 personnel, which swelled to 1,000 by June 1918. Provincial Cheka branches also began to emerge, with nearly all provinces and the majority of districts having established a branch by September 1918.¹⁵ By the final years of the Civil War, principally 1919–1921, the organization had effectively formed into a state within a state. This was most evident in the great expansion of the administrative side of the two main Cheka’s, the VCheka and MCheka, the Moscow branch. The organization established its presence in overseeing security across various sectors of Soviet society. It had its own courts called the “Special Revolutionary Tribunal,” which Dzerzhinsky chaired. Moreover, the organization began to extend its reach into military affairs, attaching contingents of Cheka troops to the Red Army. Other separate, specialized military units were raised to protect railways and Russia’s frontier.¹⁶

Faced with the aftermath of the Civil War, Bolshevik officials found themselves governing a state in disarray. The chaos on the home front was characterized by banditry, famine, and widespread suffering, notwithstanding the millions dead from the war. The state they inherited lacked strong public institutions and mechanisms capable of addressing

¹¹ Simon Wolin and Robert M. Slusser, *The Soviet Secret Police*, 1st ed. (F. A. Praeger, 1957), 5.

¹² Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russia Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2001), 76.

¹³ Figses, *A People’s Tragedy*, 643.

¹⁴ Figses, *A People’s Tragedy*, 647.

¹⁵ Figses, *A People’s Tragedy*, 651.

¹⁶ Leggett, *The Cheka*, 225.

these challenges. Thus, the Soviet leaders turned to and came to rely on the secret police as a tool to maintain control and impose order. Therefore, the mandate of the security apparatus, once again, needed to be reworked. The Cheka was established with a very specific mission: to aid the revolution and safeguard its ideals by employing “extraordinary” measures against internal and external threats. Since the revolution had seemingly been won, the need arose to transform the Cheka into a permanent state institution with a legal basis. The decentralized nature of the Cheka and its violent activities became untenable for a state seeking stability and legitimacy. Reports of mass killings, concentration camps, and forced disappearances attracted global skepticism of the new regime, even from fellow revolutionaries.¹⁷

The early post-war years saw a process of building legitimate political institutions, and the security apparatus was no exception. In February 1922, the Cheka was dissolved and replaced with the GPU.¹⁸ The reorganization aimed to establish a clear line of authority, delineate specific responsibilities, such as domestic security and intelligence collection, and subject operations to legal oversight. In March 1922, drafts of the GPU charter submitted to the Politburo stipulated the organization would now be subjected to oversight by the Sovnarkom and VtsIK.¹⁹ Moreover, the charter classified the GPU as an institution with “strictly centralized management.”²⁰ Both statutes are note-worthy as they indicated a departure from the decentralized structure of the Cheka. While the Extraordinary Commissions operated with considerable autonomy and overlapping jurisdictions among its regional branches, the GPU sought to centralize control and standardize operations under a unified leadership. It also sought to correct the jurisdictional flaws of the Cheka by making the GPU answerable to multiple executive bodies, including the People’s Commissariat of Justice.²¹ Nevertheless, the GPU inherited many of the extrajudicial functions and methodologies of the Cheka.

Officially, gone were the days of war-time arbitrary arrest and extra-judicial killings, as the GPU now had state-authorized objectives and

¹⁷ This brutality was documented by the anarchist Emma Goldman, whose account of her time in Russia between 1919 and 1921 describes the Cheka’s methods and the climate of fear it created in Soviet society, see Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (Doubleday, Page & Company, 1923), 33, 107, 124.

¹⁸ Acronym for the State Political Directorate.

¹⁹ The Political Bureau acted as the executive body of the Russian Communist Party. The first Politburo was formed in March 1919 and consisted of Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Nikolai Krestinsky, Leon Kamenev, and Stalin. For more information see, “Glossary of Organizations: Po,” Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/glossary/orgs/p/o.htm>.

²⁰ “Note from I.S. Unshlikht to V. M. Molotov on delivery to the Politburo of statutes of the GPU, its province-level and transport departments, and its district-level plenipotentiaries,” in David R. Shearer and Vladimir Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubyanka: A Documentary History of the Political Police and Security Organs in the Soviet Union, 1922-1953* (Yale University Press, 2015), 19–20.

²¹ Shearer and Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubyanka*, 21.

duties. These included combating counter-revolutionary activity, protecting state infrastructure, safeguarding borders, and ensuring internal security.²² However, the new organization still faced challenges, largely in the form of criticism from party members who no longer saw a use for it. Major figures like finance commissar Georgii Sokol'nikov, justice commissar Dmitrii Kursky, and even Nikolai Bukharin, one of the original revolutionary leaders.²³ Nevertheless, Lenin, Dzerzhinsky and future general secretary Joseph Stalin, saw the necessity of maintaining a strong domestic security service that, having made the revolution successful, would keep it thriving. Very quickly, they found reasons for ensuring the security service remained a relevant and integral part of the new state.

Of particular concern to the Politburo was the Russian intelligentsia which was experiencing a small renaissance in the aftermath of the repressive civil war years. Consequences of the NEP such as the relaxation of censorship, relative freedom of intellectual and cultural expression, and increased economic pluralism, were seen as threats to the ideological discipline and class consciousness that the Bolshevik regime aimed to instill.²⁴ It is no coincidence then, that a June 1922 GPU report circulated to the Politburo by Dzerzhinsky, cautioned that the “weakening of repression” had strengthened the efforts of the anti-Soviet intelligentsia in educational institutions, unions, the press, and other areas of society.²⁵ The presence of Menshevik and SR supporters in trade unions and intellectual circles prompted the Politburo to utilize the GPU in a campaign of ideological cleansing.²⁶ In these cases, the GPU would take on the duty of “Sovietizing” public life, which included eliminating other political elements that had embedded themselves in these organizations.

The security operations against Lenin's political enemies required the authority and powers of the GPU to undergo further expansion. A decree from the VTsIK on August 10, 1922, equipped the GPU with the ability to exile individuals involved in “counter-revolutionary activity” either abroad or to specified areas within Russia for a duration of up to three years.²⁷ Furthermore, a decree in October 1922 allowed the GPU to swiftly administer punishment, including execution, to individuals

²² Shearer and Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 21.

²³ Shearer and Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 18.

²⁴ The New Economic Policy was an initiative proposed by Lenin in 1921 to solve the economic issues caused by the Russian Civil War and a previous economic policy, War Communism. For more on the NEP and its goals, see Vladimir Lenin, “The New Economic Policy and the Tasks of the Political Education Departments,” in *Lenin's Collections Works*, 2nd English ed. (Progress Publishers, 1965), 60–79.

²⁵ “Notes from F.E. Dzerzhinsky to the Politburo of TsK RKP(b), with attachment of the GPU report about anti-Soviet groupings among the intelligentsia,” in *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 30.

²⁶ “Appendix to Politburo session No. 59, 29.III.23. Protocol of meeting, 23.III.23, on the question of measures to struggle against Mensheviks, in accordance with instructions from the chairman of the GPU, c. Dzerzhinsky,” in *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 33.

²⁷ Leggett, *The Cheka*, 347–348.

apprehended in the act of banditry.²⁸ Although the GPU was formally subject to legal and administrative oversight, broad exceptions allowed these constraints to be circumvented. For example, suspects could be held indefinitely by securing approval from the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets.²⁹ The Soviet leadership regarded the GPU as a political necessity that would preserve the new communist ruling elite, permitting the organization to operate with considerable flexibility. However, in addition to the struggle for state and society at large, there was parallel struggle happening within the party.

Lenin, the de-facto leader of the Soviet Union by 1922, suffered a series of strokes which left him incapable of performing his political duties and created a vacuum in the party hierarchy. His death in 1924 accelerated the power struggle principally between Stalin and Leon Trotsky, the architect of the Red Army and an influential politician in his own right. This struggle would come to reshape the relationship between the security service and the Communist Party, embedding repression within the emerging Soviet bureaucratic order, in which Stalin would occupy a central role. In this sense, the instrument of coercion that had secured revolutionary victory and safeguarded Party rule was increasingly redirected inward.

During the Civil War, Stalin had proved himself to be a capable war-time leader. One of his first and most important tasks was freeing up Southern Russia and the North Caucasus of White Armies and other armed groups in order to restore the flow of food to Bolshevik territories.³⁰ In 1919, the Central Committee appointed him to the Revolutionary Military Council and stationed him on several fronts throughout the war.³¹ It was during the war that Stalin personally used the security service for the first time. A notable incident took place in the summer of 1918 in the city of Tsaritsyn, where Stalin had been appointed the government's special plenipotentiary for the acquisition of food. There, he had been opposed to Trotsky's wartime doctrine of conscripting former Tsarist military officers. Instead, Stalin decided to cleanse the military forces stationed in the city through a ruthless purge. Using the local Cheka, he went after "bourgeois military specialists," arresting and executing numerous officers.³²

Observing the Cheka's ruthless efficiency, Stalin grasped its potential for his own power struggles, a realization that underpinned his close relationship with Dzerzhinsky. Although the secret police chief held a powerful position, he was not a member of the Politburo. Thus, Stalin became a natural ally of Dzerzhinsky's due to his support of the Cheka and his contempt for Trotsky. The Stalin-Trotsky feud was also characterized by personal animosity but above all ideological differences, with Trotsky advocating for international revolution and Stalin, along with Lenin,

²⁸ Leggett, *The Cheka*, 348.

²⁹ Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police*, 135.

³⁰ Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police*, 165–166.

³¹ Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police*, 173.

³² Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin*, 1st ed (Taylor and Francis, 2015), 39–40.

prioritizing building communism in Russia exclusively. In the early stages of the revolution, Dzerzhinsky had at times sided with Trotsky, particularly regarding the Brest-Litovsk Treaty that saw Lenin give in to German demands.³³ However as the Civil War raged on, Dzerzhinsky increasingly diverged from Trotsky, the latter's use of Tsarist officers in the Red Army being a contributing factor. Like Stalin, Dzerzhinsky distrusted these men, refusing to recruit them into the Cheka, and often took Stalin's side in arguments with Trotsky over their deployment.³⁴

As Stalin's feud with Trotsky intensified, he began to use any means to undermine the Red Army chief, including through his influence over the GPU. This is evident in a 1922 investigation conducted by the GPU on anti-Soviet sentiment within the Baltic Fleet. A letter between Trotsky and his deputy, V. I. Zof, on this investigation highlighted a deliberate lack of transparency between the GPU and People's Commissariat of Naval Affairs. Zof noted that none of the armed forces bodies were informed of the GPU's intelligence activities and that neither Genrikh Yagoda, deputy head of the GPU, nor C. Messing, another GPU official, gave "a direct answer" regarding these concerns.³⁵ Trotsky corresponded with Dzerzhinsky to shed light on the matter but was told to correspond with Stalin, who Dzerzhinsky stated, "can best say why the case was directed in one way as opposed to another."³⁶

While seemingly minor, this incident carries significant implications. Firstly, it emphasized Stalin's influence within the party hierarchy. He clearly exerted a degree of control over the operational aspects of the GPU, dictating the conduct and personnel involved in the investigation, and held significant sway over decision-making processes within the organization. Moreover, this incident highlights the depth of his political manoeuvring. Following his ascent to General Secretary in April 1922, Stalin increasingly used his control over party appointments to cultivate a growing network of supporters. In the Central Committee, he had his loyal deputy secretary Vyacheslav Molotov. He also placed Lazar Kaganovich in the party's organizing and distributing section, responsible for assigning members to positions and determining attendance at party congresses.³⁷

Stalin's political manipulation was complemented by the strong relationship he had cultivated with the security service, which by the end of 1923, had been reorganized into the OGPU.³⁸ After Dzerzhinsky's death

³³ Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen: The Tyrant and Those Who Killed for Him*, EPUB (Random House, 2004), 114.

³⁴ Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen*, 114.

³⁵ "Memorandum from V. I. Zof to L. D. Trotsky," *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 51.

³⁶ "Memorandum from F. Dzerzhinsky to L. D. Trotsky," *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 52.

³⁷ Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen*, 159.

³⁸ Before the creation of the Soviet Union in December 1922, each republic had an interior ministry, known as the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), with its own GPU branch. Post-union, the GPU was administratively reformed into the Joint State Political Directorate, a unified agency that had authority across all republics of the

in 1926, the organization's reigns were passed on to the veteran Chekist Vyacheslav Menzhinsky, and his deputy, Genrikh Yagoda. The OGPU sought closer connections to Stalin because of the continued political pressure it was receiving from skeptical government officials, such as the Commissar of Foreign Affairs Georgy Chicherin, Commissar for Justice Nikola Krylenko, and Bukharin.³⁹ An alliance with Stalin secured a future role in the government for OGPU officials, and with them on his side, Stalin became more confident in taking action against his rivals in the party.

The general secretary's organizational skills had paid off. His meticulous planning ensured that his loyalists attended every significant party meeting, making it possible to influence policy. Over time, policymaking became centralized and alternative views were met with opposition from Stalin and his camp. Disputes came to a head in the mid-1920s over Stalin and Bukharin's economic plan which was met with criticism from two old Bolsheviks, Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev. By 1925, the two oppositionists had switched to support Trotsky's approach to accelerate the New Economic Policy and divert resources from the peasantry to fuel mass industrialization in the urban centres.

In a desperate attempt to oppose the General Secretary, Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev joined forces, trying to gain influence and sway public opinion. However, this proved futile as the OGPU penetrated their organization and began disrupting its activities. An illegal press used to print their programme was seized and its operators arrested. On November 7, 1927 the secret police broke up a demonstration by the opposition leaders in Moscow and Leningrad.⁴⁰ By 1928, Stalin had successfully rid himself of the three. Zinoviev left politics and became the rector of Kazan University and Kamenev moved to the scientific and technical directorate of the Commissariat for the Economy.⁴¹ Trotsky was dealt the harshest punishment out of the three, having been thrown out of the party in 1927 and, in January 1928, exiled within the Soviet Union along with thirty leading oppositionists.⁴²

By the early 1930s, Stalin practically had de facto control over the government. Having expelled key opponents, he emerged as the unrivalled leader of the Communist Party. With his grip on power secure, Stalin embarked on ambitious programs aimed at transforming the Soviet economy and society. Central to this agenda were the policies of collectivization and industrialization. Collectivization sought to consolidate small, largely private peasant farms into massive state-controlled collective farms, while industrialization aimed to rapidly modernize the Soviet Union through the construction of factories and infrastructure. These initiatives were driven by Stalin's vision of creating a

Soviet Union. For more on the GPU to OGPU transition see, Leggett, *The Cheka*, 351-352.

³⁹ Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen*, 164.

⁴⁰ Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police*, 143.

⁴¹ Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen*, 170.

⁴² Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police*, 143.

socialist utopia and ensuring the Soviet Union's status as a great power. However, the implementation of collectivization and industrialization resulted in widespread hardship, including famine, economic disruption, and forced relocation.

Amidst this backdrop, the OGPU played a crucial role in maintaining control and suppressing dissent, tasked with enforcing Stalin's policies and rooting out enemies of the state. Under the leadership of Menzhinsky and Yagoda, the OGPU conducted mass arrests, executions, and forced labour campaigns to eliminate opposition and ensure compliance with Stalin's directives. In 1929, 162,726 persons were arrested for "counter-revolutionary activity," 2,109 were shot, and another 25,000 were sent to labour camps. In 1930, arrests doubled to 300,000 and executions increased tenfold to 20,000.⁴³ This escalation was no coincidence as it was the consequence of peasant resistance to Stalin's collectivization drive, which was stated in a March 1930 note to Yagoda. In it, the OGPU official Stanislav Redens outlined the proliferation of anti-Soviet forces, principally in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The note outlined how the local OGPU was utilizing its own units, the militia, and Red Army troops to quell the uprisings.⁴⁴ The resistance to the state's economic policies spanned from Ukraine to Siberia. The protests grew large enough that the party significantly expanded the OGPU, increasing its staff by several thousand and boosting its budget from 56.5 million rubles in 1925 to 88.014 million in 1931.⁴⁵ This period of intense social and economic upheaval laid the groundwork for the next phase of Stalin's reign: the Great Purge.

The early 1930s saw a faction of "Rightist" opposition emerge within the Communist Party, expressing growing discontent with Stalin's leadership and policies. This group, led largely by Bukharin, opposed Stalin's aggressive push for rapid industrialization and collectivization, which he viewed as clearly catastrophic.⁴⁶ This rhetoric was conveyed in a scathing speech Bukharin made to the joint plenum of the Central Committee, plainly addressing his discontent with the poor economic state of the Soviet Union and making overt jabs on the efficacy of the five-year plan.⁴⁷ Some of the main issues of the Rightist movement were the unrelenting pressure collectivization put on the Russian peasantry and Ukrainians. Moreover, the criticism stemmed from the ineffectiveness of

⁴³ Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen*, 215.

⁴⁴ "Note telegraphed from Tiflis, from S. F. Redens to G. G. Yagoda, with TsK cover letter to members and candidate members of the Politburo of TsK VKP(b) and of the Presidium of TsKK," *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 92–93.

⁴⁵ "Decision of the Politburo of Tsk RKP(b). On increasing the number of OGPU employees. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 9, ll. 16, 20," *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 99–100.

⁴⁶ Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (Hutchinson, 1990), 19.

⁴⁷ "N. I. Bukharin's speech to a joint plenum of the CC and CCC of the VKP(b), 19 December 1930," in John Archibald Getty III and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (Yale University Press, 1999), 45–46.

Stalin's rapid industrialization plan, which created large factories manned by poorly fed workers.⁴⁸ These issues were compounded by Stalin's increasing aggression towards dissent. In 1931, legislation was enacted to impose prison terms for breaches of labour discipline. The following year, the death penalty was instituted for the theft of state or collective property, a measure that was implemented quite extensively.⁴⁹ Amidst this chaos, Bukharin and his followers increasingly became disillusioned with the Communist Party and hoped for Stalin's downfall.

A significant case of public discontent towards Stalin, which was later used to lay charges against defendants during the Great Purge, was the Ryutin Affair of 1932. Martemyan Ryutin, a veteran Bolshevik, along with other minor officials published a report that entailed a scathing critique of Stalin's policies and the authoritarian nature of his regime. The document asserted that Stalin and his loyalists were unwilling to relinquish power voluntarily, necessitating the use of force to remove them. When Stalin got hold of the document, he perceived it as a call for his assassination. In response, Ryutin was expelled from the Party and arrested.⁵⁰

Cases of dissent, such as the Rightist opposition and the Ryutin Affair, are crucial factors in Stalin's decision to engage in the Great Purge. Both incidents posed a significant ideological challenge to Stalin's leadership, as they deviated from the party line and questioned his authority. The criticism of his policies and methods not only undermined his control within the party but also threatened the ideological conformity and loyalty that Stalin sought to enforce throughout the Soviet Union. These challenges to Stalin's leadership, coupled with his paranoia and desire for absolute control, fueled his determination to eliminate political enemies and consolidate his power through the Great Purge. To do this, he heavily relied on the secret police, which in 1934 had been again reorganized into the NKVD and retained Yagoda as chief.

The mass repression was triggered by the killing of Sergei Kirov, head of the Leningrad Party organization, in December 1934. Following Kirov's death, Stalin immediately travelled to Leningrad and assumed direct oversight of the investigation. He issued a decree mandating the expedited prosecution of political offenders and authorized their immediate execution without the opportunity for appeal.⁵¹ The assassination was met with swift reprisals which unfolded in the days that followed. Leningrad witnessed scores of executions while thousands faced deportation to concentration camps. Leonid Nikolaev, the assailant and a disillusioned ex-party member, along with thirteen supposed accomplices, underwent trial and were subsequently executed on December 29, 1934.⁵²

⁴⁸ Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 20.

⁴⁹ Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 21.

⁵⁰ Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 24.

⁵¹ Hingley, *The Soviet Secret Police*, 158.

⁵² Hingley, *The Soviet Secret Police*, 158.

Stalin exploited Kirov's death by fabricating a counter-revolutionary conspiracy involving old Stalinist rivals Zinoviev and Trotsky.⁵³ Stalin tasked Yagoda with rooting out this subversive element, and his investigation quickly expanded to multiple levels of the Soviet government. Throughout early 1935, the Kremlin was subjected to an investigation, and its progress was sent to Stalin via special reports drafted by Yagoda outlining interrogations of suspects and details of anti-Soviet behaviour.⁵⁴ In addition to government bodies, the party itself was subjected to investigation by the NKVD. The organization conducted a large-scale screening of party cadres in the middle of 1935. While officially a routine check, the operation was clearly intended to root out opposition or perceived enemies of the party.⁵⁵ An NKVD memo by the head of the secret political section of the NKVD in the Ukrainian SSR highlighted this by stating that the "[NKVD] organs have shown and continue to show maximum assistance to party organizations in unmasking anti-Soviet, class-alien, criminal, and suspicious elements."⁵⁶

Central to the Great Purge was the deliberate targeting of individuals who still held significant political influence. This included Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Trotsky, all of whom, despite being ousted from the political scene, remained alive and posed, in Stalin's mind, a potential threat to his authority. While Trotsky was largely unreachable, as he had been exiled from the Soviet Union entirely in 1929, Kamenev and Zinoviev were vulnerable targets. In 1936, Stalin had them arrested and ordered the first of the three "Show Trials." Set up as kangaroo courts characterized by a lack of due process, fairness, and judicial independence, the trials were ultimately another means for Stalin to eliminate his political rivals. The trials provided him with a platform to propagate his narrative of a vast counter-revolutionary conspiracy orchestrated by his opponents. Through forced confessions and fabricated evidence, Stalin sought to justify the purges and discredit his adversaries both domestically and internationally.

Kamenev and Zinoviev's trial took place from August 19 to 24, 1936. They were tried for treason alongside fourteen former oppositionists. A second trial took place in January 1937 that "uncovered" a second Trotskyite terrorist cell, which led to the execution of more revolutionary figures such as Grigori Sokol'nikov and Karl Radek. The final major show trial occurred in March 1938 and swept up the remaining politicians that opposed Stalin, including Nikolai Bukharin and his compatriot Aleksei Rykov.⁵⁷

Even the secret police, an institution that aided Stalin in his ascension to power, could not escape the purges. Stalin eventually turned

⁵³ "From a circular letter of the NKVD USSR to all local organs of the Commissariat. January 1935," *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 172.

⁵⁴ Shearer and Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 174–178.

⁵⁵ Arch J. Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, 197.

⁵⁶ "NKVD memo on assisting party organs in the verification of party documents," *The Road to Terror*, 198.

⁵⁷ Shearer and Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 188.

on his own enforcers, with Yagoda falling victim to the Soviet leader's paranoia. In 1936, he was removed from his position and subsequently arrested, tried in the final show trial alongside Bukharin, and later executed as a co-conspirator with the very individuals he had been instructed to root out.⁵⁸ Yagoda was not only physically eliminated but also subjected to a thorough erasure of his image, particularly the removal of his medals and honours.⁵⁹

The secret police chief ultimately found himself on the losing end of a power struggle with Nikolai Yezhov, a Central Committee secretary whom Stalin increasingly relied upon to assess the NKVD's effectiveness. Acting as an external evaluator, Yezhov portrayed the NKVD under Yagoda as deeply incompetent and politically unreliable. He went even further, depicting the security organ itself as a haven for spies, saboteurs, and anti-Soviet elements. By framing the NKVD in this way, Yezhov justified Stalin's growing paranoia about internal enemies. In September 1936, Stalin personally informed the Politburo of Yezhov's appointment as chief of the NKVD.⁶⁰ What followed as Yezhov took the reins was a mass cleansing of the old regime in the NKVD from departmental heads to Yagoda's close cadres. In total, about 20,000 NKVD personnel were targeted by Yezhov in 1937, either through arrest or execution.⁶¹

Between 1937 and 1938, Yezhov presided over the NKVD during the most intense phase of the Great Terror. Having systematically removed most of the old guard from the Party, NKVD, and Red Army, security operations were expanded, on Stalin's orders, into broader campaigns targeting specific social and ethnic groups. A Politburo decision in July 1937 identified former Kulaks and other "criminals" who had been exiled and later returned to their home oblasts as the primary instigators of anti-Soviet activity across various sectors of society.⁶² Operating in a manner reminiscent of the Cheka, NKVD arrests were frequently arbitrary, based on vague or unsubstantiated accusations, and processed through mass sentencing's that resulted in either incarceration or execution. This approach was most clearly articulated in Yezhov's NKVD Operation Order No. 00447, submitted to the Politburo in July 1937. The directive outlined both the ideological justification and administrative mechanisms required for mass repression. In this order, Yezhov portrayed Soviet society as saturated with "anti-Soviet elements," including Kulaks, members of

⁵⁸ Shearer and Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 188.

⁵⁹ "Decision of the Politburo of TsK VKP(b). On deprivation of decorations of former executives of the Narkomat of Internal Affairs of the USSR," *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 188–189.

⁶⁰ "Coded telegram from I. V. Stalin to members of the Politburo of TsK of VKP(b) on appointment of N. Yezhov as Commissar of Internal Affairs," *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 187.

⁶¹ Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 196–197.

⁶² "Decision of the Politburo of the TsK VKP(b). On anti-Soviet elements. AP RF, f. 3, op. 58, d. 212, l. 32," *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 195.

former opposition parties, such as the SRs and Mensheviks, and other so-called socially dangerous groups.⁶³

Yezhov's order is not only historically significant but incredibly revealing as it represents the culmination of years spent constructing a repressive security apparatus that was intensely bureaucratic, obedient, and efficient. Yezhov was continuing a process initiated by Dzerzhinsky, whereby the security organ was deemed indispensable in preserving the integrity of both the state and the Party. The elastic definition of "state enemies" created actionable targets, allowing NKVD units to fulfill arrests and execution quotas through broad interpretation, thereby justifying its very existence as an institution. Moreover, by extending punishment to family members, the regime perpetuated a core revolutionary practise of treating entire social milieus as inherently suspect and in need of "Sovietization." Rather than an aberration, therefore, the Great Terror was the logical outcome of long-standing Bolshevik methods, applied on an unprecedented scale.

However, despite Yezhov's loyalty to Stalin, he rapidly fell out of favour with him as the latter began to curtail the purges in 1938. Trying to distance the communist leadership from the excesses of mass repression and to reassert a degree of legal order, Stalin increasingly attributed responsibility for the violence to the NKVD leadership. This political shift was accompanied by an internal power struggle within the security apparatus, as Lavrenty Beria emerged as a rival and eventual successor to Yezhov. By late 1938, the first indications of Yezhov's downfall were evident. In November, the Politburo acknowledged that although the NKVD had succeeded in eliminating political and social enemies, it had done so in a manner that produced "serious deficiencies and distortions," which, in the leaderships view, had undermined investigative and intelligence work. The Politburo's decision concluded with a warning to NKVD officials that even minor violations of Soviet law would be subject to judicial penalties.⁶⁴ In the weeks that followed, Yezhov's close associates were removed from their positions, and in December 1938 he was replaced as head of the NKVD by Beria.⁶⁵ Yezhov was arrested in April 1939 and, in early 1940, was charged with espionage and other crimes, which were later confirmed through a coerced confession.⁶⁶

During his trial, Yezhov's statement to the USSR Supreme Court captured a sense of bitter irony, reflecting a man who believed he was being punished for faithfully executing his assigned duties. His words conveyed frustration and disbelief at being held personally accountable for actions

⁶³ "Memorandum from M. I. Frinovsky to the Politburo TsK VKP(b) with appended Operational Order NKVD USSR No. 00447. AP RF, f. 3, op. 58, d. 212, ll. 55, 59–78," *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 199–205.

⁶⁴ "Decision of the Politburo of the Tsk VKP(b). On arrests, procuratorial supervision, and the conduct of investigations. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 1003, ll. 85–87," *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 221–224.

⁶⁵ Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 481.

⁶⁶ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, 555.

carried out in strict adherence to Party directives.⁶⁷ This irony is particularly striking given that Yezhov, who was executed in February 1940, ultimately suffered the same fate he had overseen for countless others, including his predecessor as head of the NKVD. The transformation of the chief enforcer into a victim serves as a powerful symbol of the self-consuming nature of the Great Terror, where even the secret police were never fully secure from its violence.

The fate of Yezhov also points toward a broader conclusion about the role of the Soviet secret police. Originating as a revolutionary instrument designed to defend Bolshevik rule in conditions of civil war, the security apparatus evolved into a permanent and intensely bureaucratic organization. Over time, it acquired a degree of political autonomy that positioned it as an executor of Party will and an integral part of the Party itself. Through its capacity to define enemies, generate actionable findings, and enforce ideological conformity, the secret police actively shaped the contours of Soviet society in the post-Civil War years. While under Stalin, it simultaneously influenced internal party dynamics by determining who belonged within its ranks and who did not. As demonstrated throughout the paper, repression was not simply imposed from above. It was often mediated, carried out, and expanded by the security organ itself. In this sense, the secret police did more than safeguard the regime; it helped constitute it, embedding fear and obedience at the heart of Soviet society and the Communist Party. The system did not purge Yezhov despite its nature, but because of it. His fate demonstrates that the apparatus, once set in motion, developed an internal logic that could consume even its architects, ensuring that terror became not a temporary measure, but a feature of Soviet power.

⁶⁷ “Yezhov’s statement before the USSR Supreme Court,” *The Road to Terror*, 560–562.

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