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Yezhov: The Rise of Stalin's "Iron Fist." By *J. Arch Getty* and *Oleg V. Naumov*.

With the assistance of *Nadezhda V. Muraveva*.

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. Pp. xxvi+283. \$35.00.

Nikolai Ivanovich Ezhov (Yezhov) was Lavrentii Beria's predecessor as Stalin's people's commissar of Internal Affairs (NKVD). Ezhov headed the security services and the Gulag during the so-called Great Terror and was responsible for the execution of approximately 700,000 people. Stalin did not give the "iron commissar" much time to deploy his strength. Ezhov was appointed to the elevated position in September 1936 and in February 1940 was unceremoniously shot, coming to his end in the same way most of his own victims had.

Arch Getty and Oleg Naumov's well-written and fascinating book is the second serious Ezhov biography in the English language, after Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov's *Stalin's Loyal Executioner* (Stanford, CA, 2002). In some way these two books complement each other: whereas Jansen and Petrov's work treats Ezhov's whole life, focusing on his final years as commissar, this new study pays most attention to the period between 1912 and 1936, when the hero received his education as a political activist and Communist official. Ezhov's final years in office, as well as his youth, receive only cursory treatment. More important, *Yezhov* can be read as a contribution

to an ongoing debate among academic students of Stalinism about the limits of Stalin's personal power. Whereas Jansen and Petrov see Ezhov as the dictator's loyal henchman with only a little space for independent maneuver, Getty and Naumov's Ezhov is much more his own man, a shrewd and capable bureaucrat who independently fought his way up, a man who knew how to play the game, and who was finally defeated only by Stalin's more formidable powers.

In treating the stages of Ezhov's active life, Getty and Naumov sketch the main formative influences on him. At times the book reads more like an analysis of the Stalinist system than a biography. The authors use their hero as a case study to illustrate their interpretation of the Soviet system as a network of patrons and clients. Nonetheless, despite—or, perhaps, even thanks to—this strong sociological focus, Ezhov comes out credibly, with a personality of his own.

Nikolai was born in 1895 in a working-class family and received only one year of primary education. He remained small in stature, under five feet tall. He was employed as a worker in the "Red" Putilov plant, the largest factory in Saint Petersburg, and in 1912, at the age of seventeen, participated in his first strike. This was a period of upsurge in workers' radicalism. In Getty and Naumov's words, Nikolai absorbed the "us versus them" mentality of irreconcilable, violent class conflict, which remained characteristic of his thinking. He joined the Bolshevik Party at some undetermined moment during 1917 and met the October Revolution in Vitebsk, where he worked in the artillery works. After the revolution, Ezhov, now a Red Guard organizer, helped turn back troops on their way to Petrograd hostile to the Bolsheviks.

His civil war years were mostly spent in Kazan at a radiotelegraph base. As a young soldier, Ezhov never saw combat, but according to Getty and Naumov the civil war militarized Bolshevism and strengthened Ezhov's own conviction that politics equaled a relentless struggle to the death with the class enemy. He was one of the "simple people" who grabbed with both hands the opportunity to make a career afforded by the revolution's turbulent process of social mobility. After demobilization in 1921, the party assigned him to various civilian jobs, first as agitprop chief in the Tatar Republic, then as responsible secretary in the Mari region and Kirgizia. Although he did not always cope successfully with these assignments, he was a good learner and, in the course of the years, turned into an energetic administrator who knew how to get the job done, to act as referee among disputing agencies, and to kick and lick in the advantageous way.

In Getty and Naumov's analysis, Bolshevik Russia lacked strong and stable institutions. Power tended to get concentrated in cliques of friends led by strong personalities. Ezhov was the sort of person to flourish in this environment. In the late 1920s he was assigned to the apparatus of the Central Committee, which remained his main occupation until Stalin added the NKVD to his responsibilities. His qualities as a personnel specialist now came to full bloom.

Ezhov was not especially associated with repressive or police activities, but in December 1934 Stalin gave him supervision of the investigation of the murder of the Leningrad party secretary Sergei Kirov. In this new capacity, Ezhov entered into conflict with the commissar of Internal Affairs, Genrikh Iagoda, whom Ezhov accused of insufficient zeal in persecuting former oppositionists suspected of terrorist inclinations. The conflict ended with Stalin's decision to let Ezhov have Iagoda's job—and, eventually, his head.

Getty and Naumov convincingly argue that Ezhov truly believed that the USSR was threatened by a gigantic terrorist conspiracy that it was his task to uproot. This was, then, a mass murderer but no cynic. Like Adolf Eichmann—the authors refer to Hannah Arendt—Ezhov believed he was fighting evil and doing a nasty but necessary job. It is thus

more fruitful to see him as a product of his environment, an ordinary man completely enveloped in an abnormal, criminal political milieu, than as simply a monster.

The book further argues that Ezhov was not cultivated by his superiors but, rather, had largely himself to thank for his rise through the hierarchy and that, in his capacity as NKVD chief, he continued to act to some degree independently of Stalin. These claims remain problematic. To begin, an odd inconsistency inheres in the argument: the authors seem to assume that in this personalistic system based on patronage, Ezhov was something of an exception, rising as he did without high-placed protectors. Furthermore, it remains unclear to what degree Ezhov really influenced the directions Stalin took during the Great Terror and whether or not Ezhov was simply “working toward the Führer” (in this case, Stalin). I believe we do not yet have sufficient evidence to answer this important question satisfactorily.

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