

Screenplay for the film "1937 — Children of Terror. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI.

Screenplay Summary:

The text places side by side two faces of the USSR in 1937: the triumphant façade of the Pushkin centenary and, behind it, the peak of Stalinist terror, whose most vulnerable victims are children.

It opens with the official "Pushkin jubilee": mass rallies, parades, decorated troikas, speeches by Party leaders. Pushkin is declared the property of socialism, turned into a symbol of Lenin and, above all, Stalin. His verses are openly rewritten into political slogans. The 100th anniversary of his death is not treated as a tragic date but as a joyous national holiday of "Soviet culture", erasing the tragedy in favour of ideological celebration.

As a dark counterpoint, the author recalls the fate of the pre-revolutionary Pushkin Lyceum Society, founded to study and popularise Pushkin's works. In the mid-1920s, the OGPU invents the "Lyceum Case"; former Lyceum students are arrested, many shot, property confiscated down to children's toys. Pushkin's poem about the "eternal union" of friends is contrasted with the grim title the secret police gave the case: "Union of the Faithful."

The core of the text, however, is about children in the 1930s. We are shown the brutal realities of Soviet orphanages: tiny bread rations, water for breakfast, almost no fuel, no proper shoes or utensils. Inspection reports, stamped "secret", describe hunger, disease, and neglect, but appeals for help are pointless. Through the story of Natasha Noskova, daughter of deported peasants, we follow the typical fate of many: parents dead in exile, children scavenging in the taiga, then dumped into freezing barracks meant as prisons, where siblings die one by one. Dekulakisation and famine have produced crowds of homeless children. The state hunts them down in "reception centres" – filthy, overcrowded places where they quickly learn to steal and fight simply to stay alive.

Because they are defenceless, these children are ideal objects of indoctrination. Homes are required to run clubs on Party history, organise mock political trials, and even reconstruct Lenin's hut at Razliv for rituals of silent veneration. All this happens amid epidemics of tuberculosis, syphilis, trachoma, severe anaemia and mental disability. Meanwhile, a second wave of orphans appears: the children of "enemies of the people" targeted during the Great Terror of 1937–38.

The text carefully details the machinery of terror: a Politburo decision, Yezhov's Order No. 00447, fixed quotas of arrests and executions, the role of troikas and "doubles", the systematic raising of "limits" demanded by local NKVD officials, who boast of "Stakhanovite methods" in killing. Mass murder is bureaucratised and treated almost like a production plan. At the same time, the economy is in crisis; the Stakhanov movement, initially presented as an economic breakthrough, becomes mainly a political tool. The search for saboteurs and enemies acts as a substitute for rational economic policy.

Another order, No. 00486, extends repression to the wives and children of those condemned. We then follow the fate of women transported with their infants in cattle cars to distant camps, and of camp nurseries that are themselves "zones" behind barbed wire. Children there do not know what

a “house” or a cat is, but they know the word “zone.” Testimonies describe mass infant mortality, the brutal “rationalisation” of feeding, the near absence of speech among these children – many can only groan or utter isolated words.

The text also explores the explosion of denunciations. The verb “to write” acquires a new meaning: to inform on someone. On average, one in five employees in an institution writes reports to the NKVD. A famous informer, Nikolaenko from Kiev, sends thousands to prison and death before Stalin finally decides she is insane.

Amid this darkness, a few courageous individuals appear, notably Mark Malyavko, director of a special home for the children of “enemies of the people.” He greets the children as human beings, feeds and clothes them, brings separated siblings back together and tells the older ones never to call themselves children of enemies, only orphans. His actions run against the logic of the system and stand out as rare moral resistance.

The text ends with the 1937 elections to the Supreme Soviet. A schoolgirl repeats teachers’ words about the need for “mass arrests” before voting. Ballot papers offer only one candidate, already ticked. Some intellectuals laugh bitterly at this parody of choice as they leave the polling booth. Thus, behind the glittering cultural and political spectacle of 1937, the text reveals a system whose most tragic “by-product” is an entire generation of children damaged by hunger, violence and the demands of ideology.

Screenplay:

1937 — Children of Terror.

On 10 February 1937, the country greeted the day with a feeling of celebration. The reason for this nationwide holiday was the 100th anniversary of the death of Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin. Already on 17 December 1935, the newspaper *Pravda* had written: “The entire country will take part in preparations for this historic holiday of Soviet culture.” In the *Chronicle of the Pushkin Commission* for 1937 we read: “Preparations for the Pushkin Days have unfolded widely in Party and Komsomol organisations, in factories, in kolkhozes, in the Red Army. Pushkin’s jubilee has taken on the character of a nationwide holiday of socialist culture.”

From all this it follows that we are not dealing at all with one of the most tragic events in Russian culture. On the contrary, the 100th anniversary of the death of the great Russian poet is called Pushkin’s jubilee. And therefore there is a reason for celebration, a sense of unexpected victory and a cause for merriment.

At Pushkin’s grave in the Svyatogorsk Monastery a rally of five thousand people was held. The chairman of the kolkhoz named after A. S. Pushkin, Comrade Andreyev, spoke. He said: “Pushkin’s poems help us to live and to work joyfully. And all this is because we have our Soviet power, because we live under the leadership of our beloved Comrade Stalin.”

Guests from other places – academicians, writers, representatives of Party and Soviet organisations – visited the museum and the park. The holiday ended with a performance of amateur art by the kolkhoz peasants.

The writer Viktor Shklovsky recalls:

“The kolkhoz peasants organised a masquerade on the ice. Tatiana Larina walked by, wearing an Empire-style dress over a sheepskin coat. Bogatyrs went by, the Swan Princess, and in a kibitka rode a bearded peasant with a blue ribbon across his shoulder – Yemelyan Pugachev, and next to him Masha Mironova, the captain’s daughter. And behind them, on a tachanka with Petka, rode Chapayev.

I asked the organiser of the procession: ‘But Pushkin never wrote about Chapayev, did he?’ ‘It’s all the same to us,’ the kolkhoznik answered me.”

More than three hundred troikas (three-horse sledges) swept past the guests, decorated with portraits of Stalin, Gorky and Pushkin, with greenery and little flags.

The poet Bezymensky wrote in the visitors’ book:

“What happened today is a grandiose holiday of Soviet culture. Its name is Leninism, its heart and its banner is Stalin.”

Before arriving at the celebration in Mikhailovskoye, the poet Bezymensky spoke at a ceremonial session in the Bolshoi Theatre of the USSR. Bezymensky is on “familiar terms” with Pushkin. He rewrites Pushkin. From the stage of the Bolshoi Theatre he reads:

“Long live Lenin!

Long live Stalin!

Long live the sun!

Let the darkness vanish!”

The president of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, the botanist, academician Komarov, says: “Poet Bezymensky is right when he turns a Pushkin quotation into a battle cry of our time.”

The ceremonial session in the Bolshoi Theatre is opened by the People’s Commissar of Education, Bubnov. He says:

“One hundred years ago our country sustained a loss whose importance and weight can be appreciated only by us, people of the Stalin era. Pushkin is ours! Pushkin belongs to those who, under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin, have built a socialist society.”

In February 1921 the poet Vladislav Khodasevich had given his own, very gloomy explanation of why the day of Pushkin’s death should be marked. Khodasevich said:

“In this way we agree among ourselves by what name we will answer, how we will call to one another in the darkness that is drawing near.”

In 1937 Khodasevich’s premonition turned out not dark enough. No one calls out by Pushkin’s name. Towards the end of his speech, the Commissar of Education Bubnov quotes from a letter by an anonymous kolkhoz woman from the Azov–Black Sea region:

“Pushkin’s books heat white-hot our love for the great Stalin.”

In pre-revolutionary Russia, in 1899, in the year of the 100th anniversary of Pushkin’s birth, the Pushkin Lyceum Society was established at the Alexander Lyceum, which Pushkin had attended. Its charter stated:

“The Society aims at a comprehensive study of Pushkin’s works and their explanation among all strata of the Russian people.”

Members of the Pushkin Society were Lyceum students of different generations, well-known public figures – the famous lawyer Koni, the academician Veselovsky – and Pushkin’s relatives. The Pushkin Lyceum Society existed for about twenty years. In 1925 the OGPU fabricated the so-called “Lyceum Case”, in which 81 people were convicted. The charges were of every kind: “monarchist conspiracy”, “assistance to international bourgeoisie”, “attempts to kill Stalin and Trotsky”.

The art critic Nikolai Punin, husband of Akhmatova, writes in his diary:

“The Lyceum students have been shot. They say 52 people, the rest exiled, property confiscated down to the children’s toys and winter clothes.”

Among those sentenced to death was the former director of the Lyceum, seventy-year-old Vladimir Alexandrovich Schilder. He died in prison before the execution, having learned that a death sentence had also been handed down to his wife and son.

The executions in the Lyceum Case took place exactly one hundred years after Pushkin wrote his famous poem “19 October”:

My friends, our union is wonderful!
Like the soul, it is indivisible and eternal.

In the OGPU archives the “Lyceum Case” appears under the name “Union of the Faithful”.

On 10 February 1937, Stalin is in the Bolshoi Theatre. On stage are the members of the Pushkin Committee, headed by Voroshilov and Zhdanov. The session in the Bolshoi is broadcast to the entire country by radio.

In the orphanage, the radio works constantly, almost never falling silent. The black “plate” is switched on from early morning. In the morning the children are given water and 100 grams of bread for breakfast. For lunch – potato soup. In the evening – 100 grams of bread. There are no dishes, no spoons; they drink water in turn. Sometimes for supper, to the 100 grams of bread are added 100 grams of salt cucumber. Not a single cubic metre of fuel has been delivered. There is not a single pair of shoes fit to wear. The leather allocated for making shoes was used for a jacket for the director and his wife, and for boots for the staff.

This information comes from inspection reports on children’s homes. Very rarely does such information, marked “secret”, reach Party and Soviet bodies, and only in cases where one of the inspectors has dared to ask for help. That happens very rarely, because asking for help is useless.

In those same inspection reports we read:

“The night nurse conducts counterrevolutionary agitation among the children, talking about how badly the children live and recalling her family.”

By 1937, thirteen-year-old Natasha Noskova has no one left alive in her family. She comes from a deported peasant family. Her father was buried under a cave-in in a mine. They lived on her mother’s single ration. The four children moved over to living on what they could gather in the taiga around the special settlement. The mother, who worked clearing the forest, went to the hospital seven kilometres away, fell on the way and died. The children learned about her death a week later. Two weeks later they were sent to an orphanage. That was in 1933.

The orphanage was housed in a pre-revolutionary barracks originally intended as a local unheated prison. Everyone huddled around the only iron stove. On it they baked pieces of frozen potatoes.

Session in the Bolshoi Theatre dedicated to the centenary of A. S. Pushkin's death

The eldest girl in the Noskov family, Anya, had her only dress – brought from home – catch fire from the stove and burn up completely. She had no other and wasn't given one. She now sat constantly on the bunk, wrapped in sacking. By spring, she died.

Natasha was ill for six months. She remembers the moment she regained consciousness. A face bent over her, a strange voice said:

"This one will probably pull through, and the one next to her – God has taken her at last, she's finished suffering."

Natasha turned her head and saw that her little sister Manya was lying dead next to her. Manya was five. Her weak will to live broke through when she would plead: "Nanny, don't beat me, I don't eat much bread anyway."

Her little brother Lyonya was three. He died one winter night, quietly, without disturbing anyone. He was wrapped in a rag and buried somewhere in the snow.

The children in the orphanage beg to survive. People give little. Because hunger is everywhere. Besides, by the early 1930s street children no longer arouse much pity among the population. Crowds of ragged children, whose parents have already died in exile, roam the country, trying to reach their native places. Theft is the only source of life for these former peasant children whom the authorities have turned into orphans. A country with a camp economy devours the lives of adults and reproduces ever new and new orphans.

Raids are organised to catch children who have escaped from exile; they are convoyed to reception centres for children, also called "collectors". Children are supposed to be kept in these collectors for two months. In practice, this period stretches to half a year or more. A reception centre is a barracks or a half-ruined building standing on the outskirts.

From the everyday life of the Lunacharsky Children's Reception Centre in Sverdlovsk:

"Children sit on dirty bunks. Seven bunks for 38 children. They play cards cut from portraits of leaders, they fight, they smoke, they break the bars on the windows."

These are children from strong peasant families who were very small at the time of dekulakisation. They have no skills of normal life; they simply did not have time to acquire them in the family. Under normal circumstances they would have grown up to be healthy providers for their country.

Endless pleas for help go to Party and Soviet bodies: "Send money for the reception centre!" Most of the children are naked and barefoot. There are no funds. Orphanages refuse to take children from reception centres. Orphanages are overcrowded.

Natasha Noskova's first orphanage is in Bogoslovsk. Once the older boys climbed into a warehouse by the station and opened a barrel of pickles. They were caught. The director of the orphanage appeared instantly. The reprisal was terrible. He knocked the boys to the ground, kicked them, pulled their hair, beat their heads against the rail. Sasha Laptev soon died from the beatings. Volodya Komarovsky's legs were paralysed. He and Natasha Noskova would later move from the Bogoslovsk orphanage to the Irbit orphanage. He walked on homemade crutches. In 1940 he would be sent to the Tagil orphanage for invalids and the mentally retarded. On the way, out of "mercy", he was given a lethal injection so that he would not suffer any more.

Orphanage children are completely defenceless. Therefore, they are the most suitable material for ideological processing. The hungrier the children, the less resistance they have. Orphanages are required to organise clubs on the history of the Party and the revolution, political “trials” of the Pope of Rome, political “battles” between children. The director of an orphanage shares his experience at a methodological conference. By efforts of the children and teachers, Lenin’s hut in Razliv has been recreated. The charred logs in the fire by the hut are real. Every evening the children sit for half an hour in silence in front of the hut. In the medical and sanitary inspection reports for this same orphanage it is noted: among the children there are two cases of bone tuberculosis, two cases of tertiary syphilis, four cases of profound mental retardation, ten children with trachoma, six with tuberculosis, all are anaemic.

Conversations are regularly held with the children about the life of children before and now, here and abroad.

Natasha Noskova is placed in the second orphanage of her life in 1937, just before the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Pushkin’s death. The anti-peasant campaign of 1929–1931, called dekulakisation and which destroyed Natasha’s life, granted the children of exiled peasants a certain freedom of movement in that the authorities did not tie the children of deceased exiles to the places of settlement. They could run away, and those who were lucky might make it back to their native places, or simply die on the road. In reality, the authorities already regretted having let the children of exiles run free. In exile they would have died unnoticed.

In 1936, for lack of resources, some easing is introduced: it is permitted to mix orphans of exiles with “ordinary” orphans in common children’s homes. Children who survived dekulakisation and its consequences, by 1937, at the age of ten to thirteen, have enormous experience in survival. But there are very few such surviving children. In 1937 a second generation appears – children whom Soviet power is deliberately and technologically turning into orphans. They still have no life experience.

The former orphanage child Vladimir Blok recalls:

“My mother was taken to the Butyrki prison at night on 5 September 1937. An hour after her arrest, the same NKVD people came for me. I was not yet twelve; I cried, shouted, they smiled and said: ‘Now we’re going to see your mother.’

They took me to the Danilov Children’s Reception Centre. It was a children’s transit prison in a monastery. In the cell they pushed me into, I saw well-dressed children. Many were crying.

Soon the head of the reception centre came in and announced: ‘You are all children of enemies of the people.’

Two months later they woke me up at night and took me to the office of a man who suggested that I renounce my parents in writing. I started screaming that I wouldn’t write anything. Later I learned that such a suggestion had been made to many children and that some had agreed.”

Svetlana Obolenskaya, daughter of the first chairman of the Supreme Council of the National Economy (VSNKh), economist and candidate member of the Central Committee, Valerian Osinsky-Obolensky, also passes through the Danilov reception centre. Before the reception centre she lives with her parents in the Kremlin. In the summer of 1937 her father is removed from the list of candidate members of the Central Committee and evicted from the Kremlin. They move to the House of Government, to apartment no. 389. This is the former apartment of the army commander

August Cork, who has just been arrested in the Tukhachevsky case. Svetlana Obolenskaya sleeps in the bed of the arrested commander Cork.

Soon they move again. This time into the apartment of the recently arrested Alexei Rykov, former head of the Soviet government. When Svetlana enters the kitchen, there are still dirty dishes on the table. On the teapot is written: "To dear Alexei Ivanovich Rykov from the workers of Lysva." Rykov's study in the Osinsky apartment is sealed. It is in this apartment that Svetlana's parents and elder brother will be arrested. The father and brother will be shot. The mother will be sent to a camp. Svetlana is twelve.

In the House of Government, where the Osinsky-Obolensky family had recently lived in the apartment of Commander Cork, lives in 1937 Alexei Stakhanov, whose name Stalin gave to the shock-worker movement. The Stakhanovite movement, which arose in 1935, in reality has little to do with economics. Shock work, in essence, is a political phenomenon. Depending on output, workers are guaranteed a progressive increase in wages. In 1936, Stakhanovites make up 20–30 percent of the workforce at many enterprises. Amid failures in agriculture and another introduction of bread ration cards, this part of the workers remains loyal to the authorities.

The candidate member of the Politburo, Postyshev, calls the Stakhanovites "the most crushing force in the struggle against counterrevolution" and places them alongside the army and the NKVD. In fact, shock work means the transition, sanctioned by the authorities, to a permanent emergency regime of work, which previously had been allowed only in exceptional cases. Technical standards, industrial safety, and product quality do not interest anyone. Stakhanovism thereby provokes inevitable production conflicts between Stakhanovite workers striving for high wages, on the one hand, and qualified engineers on the other. The Stakhanovites feel Stalin's support in these conflicts. At the Stakhanovites' congress, back in 1935, Stalin said that if engineers and managers did not want to learn from Stakhanovites, then, "in the last resort, the Stakhanovites will have to give these respectable gentlemen a little knock in the teeth."

By 1937 enterprises become an arena of political struggle. On one side – engineers of all levels, scientists, skilled workers. On the other – Stakhanovites. One of them says directly: "Now the masses themselves are eager to fight. People are ready to use their fists."

By 1937 the complete economic incompetence and danger of the Stakhanov movement become obvious. Engineering thought and technology are ruthlessly destroyed. Records cannot raise industry – such is the view of specialists. The People's Commissar of Heavy Industry, Ordzhonikidze, notes: "On the path of the Stakhanov movement stand bureaucrats. Such people must be swept from the path of the heroic Stakhanov movement."

Even before 1937, in the Donbass alone, 131 engineering and technical workers were convicted in one year of Stakhanovism for alleged sabotage.

Isolated records, achieved under crash conditions, are taken as the basis for the plan for the next year. In the coal industry, as in others, shock-work norms of output are everywhere introduced as the basic standard. Enterprises with these fantastic plans cannot cope and cannot possibly cope. In 1937, out of 292 mines in the Donbass, only 33 barely fulfil the plan. The first secretary of the Donetsk regional Party committee, Sargis Sarkisov, a propagandist of the Stakhanov movement, for failure to fulfil the plan, is labelled "a vile spy and traitor". The newspaper *Pravda* writes: "The fascist agents shrink from nothing." Sarkisov is shot.

Stalin's search for wreckers, spies, enemies of the people cannot be separated from his own ignorance and inability to know what to do with the economy.

From an essay written by a thirteen-year-old pupil of a Moscow school on Prechistenka Street.

Topic: "How I spent my winter holidays."

"I spent the winter holidays very joylessly. During the holidays I lost all my strength. I had to get up at three in the morning and go for bread. And I would arrive around twentieth or thirtieth in line. And they brought the bread at 9–10 in the morning. I had to stand freezing outside for 5–6 hours. They brought little bread: you stand, you freeze and freeze, and then you go home empty-handed. I, a Pioneer, do not want to lie; I am writing what I saw and did."

This essay was written in the winter of 1937, a time of peace. It is kept in the FSB archive.

Twenty years after the October coup of 1917, the most severe crisis of that whole period comes in the governance of the state. The absence and impossibility of new ideas, economic and managerial incompetence at the very top are the main causes of the terrible terror. By 1937 it becomes finally clear that Stalin's power simply does not know how to do anything other than terror.

The newspaper *Light Industry* wrote in 1935 about the Stakhanovites:

"We are now witnessing the most significant phenomenon of our epoch – the birth of the new man."

By 1937 rank-and-file Stakhanovite workers are already being deprived of their high wages because of the general crisis in the wage system and in production as a whole. The first political trials are taken by Stakhanovites as a signal for revenge on all those who, in their view, deceived them and robbed them of their bright hopes for a secure future.

Cooperation between Stakhanovites and the NKVD is established immediately. This is serious: there are several million Stakhanovites. There are even some among dentists. Now this is an army engaged in the search for and exposure of enemies of the people. Reasons for exposing them are anything – faulty equipment, the need to work overtime, inedible food in the canteens, appalling housing conditions. The year 1937 is the second birth of the Stakhanov movement.

Alexei Stakhanov himself says in 1937:

"If it weren't for the wreckers, the Stakhanov movement would develop even better. Party organisations must protect Stakhanovites from wreckers. If these bastards fell into our hands, each of us would tear them to pieces."

From the House of Government where Stakhanov lives, tenants are already being taken away in droves and at night. Whole families. In this building, 700 people are arrested.

The victims from the House of Government are a special case. The heads of these families are convinced and, until 1937, successful Party, Soviet and economic officials of high rank. They are the flesh and blood of the regime; they have worked for it. Until the last, they are sure that the regime reciprocates, because it has given them material privileges.

In 1937 a conversation takes place in the Ulanovsky family. These are professional revolutionaries, participants in the Civil War, Soviet residents in America. The conversation is between husband and wife. Nadezhda Ulanovskaya recalls:

"During yet another arrest I was perplexed: 'What is happening? Why? For what?'

My husband calmly replied: 'Why are you so upset? When I told you how we shot White officers in

Crimea – you weren't upset. When the kulaks were being destroyed – you justified it. But now that it's our turn, you say "How? Why?"

And so we began to look back into the past – when did it all begin? And we unravelled our lives further and further back and reached the October Revolution.

We were left alone. Everyone around had been taken."

A decision is taken by the Politburo with the subheading "On Anti-Soviet Elements." On 2 July it is sent out as telegrams: "To the Secretaries of Regional Committees, Territorial Committees and Central Committees of Communist Parties." The telegrams end with:

"The Central Committee of the VKP(b) proposes that within five days you present to the Central Committee the number of persons to be shot, as well as the number to be exiled."

This Politburo decision is the main document on the beginning of the Great Terror. It contains the demand to present within five days the composition of the troikas. The troika includes: a representative of the NKVD, the first or second secretary of the republican or regional Party organisation, and the prosecutor of the corresponding level. The troika is the main combat unit in Stalin's war against the country.

The Great Terror, which began in 1937, is not the loud political trials and the shooting of former Party comrades; it is not even the execution of marshals, which has remained in memory. The Great Terror is a carefully planned operation on a nationwide scale. This operation has a starting date.

"I order that from 5 August 1937 in all republics, territories and regions an operation be launched to repress former kulaks, active anti-Soviet elements and criminals."

This is a quotation from Order No. 00447 of the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs, Yezhov, dated 30 July 1937, marked "Top Secret". In point II of the order we read:

"All those subject to repression are divided into two categories.

A) The first category includes the most hostile elements. They are subject to immediate arrest, and after consideration of their cases by the troikas – execution by shooting.

B) The second category includes all other less active but still hostile elements. They are subject to arrest and confinement in camps for a period of 8 to 10 years. Sentences are carried out according to the instructions of the chairmen of the troikas, that is, the People's Commissars of the Republican NKVDs or the heads of regional NKVD administrations."

The draft of Yezhov's operational order is examined by the Politburo the day after it is submitted and is approved practically without amendment.

From Protocol No. 51 of the session of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the VKP(b), 31 July 1937:

"To allocate to the NKVD from the reserve fund of the Council of People's Commissars 75 million roubles for operational expenses connected with the conduct of the operation.

Signed: Secretary of the Central Committee, Stalin."

Stalin allocated 75 million roubles for terror.

In accordance with Order No. 00447, the operation begun on 5 August 1937 was supposed to end within four months.

The order sets a ready-made quota: how many people must be shot and how many sent to camps. Into the first, i.e. execution, category, the order puts 75,950 people. The figures are broken down by

region in proportion to the population. All the figures are huge. This means that they are not based on any real operational intelligence. These numbers are purely political.

In the second category, those to be sent to camps number 193,000. That is according to Order No. 00447. After it comes a series of orders aimed at people of particular nationalities living on Soviet territory. They cover Germans, Poles, Harbin residents (“Harbintsy”), Greeks, Chinese, Afghans, Latvians, Iranians and Iranian Armenians. A separate category is foreigners in the USSR, listed as citizens of hostile states. For these “national” orders there are no quotas for arrests and executions. Full freedom of action is allowed.

Representatives of Soviet ethnic minorities and foreigners are judged by “doubles” (dyvoiki). A double is the same as a troika, but without a Party representative. Also passing through doubles are arrested qualified specialists, Party workers and old Bolsheviks who do not belong to the top elite of the country. Files are collected in so-called “albums” and sent to the Supreme Double, consisting of the Prosecutor of the USSR, Vyshinsky, and the People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs, Yezhov.

Cases of top Soviet, Party, Komsomol and trade union officials, as well as People’s Commissars and their deputies, senior military officers, cultural and artistic figures are considered by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court.

Cases of ordinary Soviet citizens go through the troikas.

The system for issuing sentences is clear, simple to operate and not burdened with procedural complications.

Under Order No. 00447, the ratio of execution to camp is 1 to 2.5. In reality, the troikas hand down about 50 percent death sentences.

The Supreme Double gives 73 percent death sentences.

The Military Collegium of the Supreme Court – 85 percent.

The higher the instance, the greater the responsibility, the more blood.

The four-month plan of repression in 1937 cannot be met. It cannot possibly be met. In 1937 NKVD officers from below demand an increase in the plan. The Party leadership meets these demands with understanding. The key technological term of 1937 is “limit”. The limit is the number of people to be repressed – shot or sent to camps – authorised from above. Two regions – Omsk and Smolensk – ask for an increased limit even before the official start of the terror. According to the quota in Order No. 00447, the Omsk region is allowed 1000 people in the execution category. Even before the start of the operation, 3000 have been arrested. The chairman of the Omsk troika, Grigory Gorbach, reports to Moscow that the Omsk NKVD is working “by Stakhanovite methods”. Two weeks later, 5000 people are already awaiting execution. Gorbach asks Moscow to increase the limit to 8000. On Gorbach’s letter Stalin writes a resolution:

“To Comrade Yezhov. For raising the limit to 9000. J. Stalin.”

In the Krasnoyarsk Territory, the execution limit is increased 8.8 times on instructions from Stalin and Molotov.

By New Year 1938, the shock work of the NKVD reaches record tempo. NKVD officers do not yet know that the operation will be extended until January 1938 and then for the whole of 1938. They

are in a hurry; they want maximum results. They work even on 20 December, a holiday – the Day of the Chekist. By New Year, the interval between sentence and execution is reduced to a minimum.

Moscow. Leontyevsky Lane. A short street. In 1937 people are taken from every house in turn. From house no. 2, apartments 2, 7, 8, 10, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23. From house no. 9, apartments 2, 4, 5, 7, 9.

From house no. 11, apartments 4, 11, 23, 27. And from house no. 14, from no. 15, from no. 16.

From all of them. People of different nationalities, different occupations are arrested. A bookkeeper at a weaving and sewing factory of the district industrial council. A teacher at the Energy Institute.

An employee of the passenger service of the Kazan Railway. An academician, secretary of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Head of the installation and repair office “Diesel-montage”. In this little lane, in four months of 1937, 50 people are arrested. All are shot.

From August 1937 to November 1938, when this well-organised mass operation was completed, 1,575,259 people were arrested. 681,692 people were shot. Stalin’s personal signature stands on 40,000 death sentences.

Terror, as a technological process, leaves waste. The waste of terror is children.

On 15 August 1937, Yezhov’s Order No. 00486 is issued. It covers the wives and children of enemies of the people. Subject to arrest are wives legally married to or in de facto union with the condemned. Also subject to arrest are wives who are divorced from the condemned but did not inform the authorities about the condemned man’s counterrevolutionary activities. Wives of traitors to the Motherland who have infants, after sentencing, are sent directly to camps without being placed in prison. Infants are sent to camps together with their convicted mothers. When they reach one year, the children are handed over to children’s homes. Children aged 3 to 15 are to be kept in children’s homes outside Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Tbilisi, Minsk and the seaports and border cities. Children over 15 are to be sent to camps or labour colonies of the NKVD.

From Leningrad Freight Station a large train of 45 cattle cars loaded with arrested women leaves. Two cars hold mothers with infants. They are being taken to the Tomsk camp. The journey takes eighteen days. One iron stove cannot heat the whole car. Many infants have pneumonia. Their temperature is over 40. Maria Karlovna Sandratskaya recalls:

“Two mothers, in despair, slit their throats with glass. They bled to death. They could not be saved. One mother went insane. She kept screaming, sobbing, laughing, howling, biting those who tried to restrain her.

We had very little water. There was no way to properly wash the babies’ clothes. What we did manage to wash, we dried by a method we had invented. We wrapped the babies’ little shirts, nappies, stockings around our legs, arms, backs, chests, and dried them like that.

In Tomsk they brought us to the ‘Dead House’, as the pre-revolutionary transit prison was called. Sixty-three mothers with swaddled infants went along the corridor.

In the cell we lay day and night on wooden platforms. Our children lay next to us. The bugs were biting them. In the daytime water dripped from the iced-over windows, at night it froze. We had one dream: that in accordance with the sentence everyone would be sent out of the prison to the camp, where the children were entitled to some sort of nursery.

The mothers with their children were transferred to the camp only two years later.”

The mother of the writer Vasily Aksyonov, Evgenia Ginzburg, spent ten years in a camp in Kolyma. Later she wrote the book *Journey into the Whirlwind*. Evgenia Ginzburg recalls:

“The children’s home in the camp was also THE ZONE. On the doors of ordinary camp barracks there were unexpected signs: ‘Infants’ Group’, ‘Crawlers’ Group’, ‘Older Group’. In the older group only two, Stasik and Verochka, knew the mysterious word ‘Mama’.

I drew a little house and asked Stasik: what is this? ‘A barrack,’ the boy answered clearly.

Around the house I drew a cat. But no one recognised it. They had never seen a cat. Then I drew a fence around the house: ‘And what is this?’ ‘The Zone! The Zone!’ Verochka shouted joyfully, clapping her hands.”

Children were also born in the camp. Despite the ban on relations between women and men, despite punishment, humiliation and solitary confinement. Khava Vladimirovna Volovich recalls:

“You wanted love, tenderness, caresses to the point of madness, of banging your head against the wall, of death. And you wanted a child. I held out comparatively long. After three years in camp, I gave birth to a daughter and named her Eleonora.”

Mothers were allowed to stay with their children for one year. She remembers:

“At night I stood by her bed, picked off bugs and prayed to God not to separate me from my daughter. When the girl had just begun to walk and to say ‘Mama’, they took her away from me.”

The mother – to the logging site, the child – to state care. Meetings were rare. Khava Volovich writes:

“The children who were supposed to sit, crawl and walk lay on their backs, legs drawn up to their bellies, emitting strange sounds like some kind of dove-like moaning. They didn’t even cry. They cooed and grunted like old people.”

The camp nurses have a lot of work. They have no time. They rationalise their labour. They bring boiling hot porridge. They bend the child’s arms back, tie them to the body with a towel and stuff the hot porridge into the child. Quickly, spoonful after spoonful. The child can neither swallow nor breathe. They do this even in front of the mothers. The rationalisation is officially approved. It yields three hundred child deaths a year. Khava Volovich writes:

“This is the House of the Death of the Infant.”

Those children who survived despite everything, by the age of six or seven, had the cunning and sneakiness of adult criminal camp inmates.

Evgenia Ginzburg, Vasily Aksyonov’s mother, writes:

“Externally these children painfully reminded me of Vaska. But only externally. Vaska, at four years old, rattled off huge chunks of Chukovsky and Marshak by heart, while these children, at four, uttered a few disconnected words. What predominated were inarticulate screams, facial expressions, fights. How could they have learned to speak? Who taught them? Whom did they hear? It was even forbidden to take them in your arms.”

In the isolation ward a five-month-old girl lay dying for a long time. Her face was such that they nicknamed her the Queen of Spades. An eighty-year-old face, clever, mocking, ironic. When she died, she became a baby again. Her mother was not there. She had been driven off in a transport.

The poet Mandelstam’s widow testifies:

“The verb ‘to write’ acquired a new meaning. To write now meant ‘to denounce, to inform’.”

On average, in each institution, every fifth employee writes denunciations of his colleagues. To have someone arrested, it is not even necessary to sign the denunciation. One of the most notorious informers is the Kiev graduate student (aspirant) Nikolaenko. Her presence at any meeting already in 1936 inspires horror in those present. Things reach the point where the second secretary of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party, Postyshev, expels her from the Party.

However, in 1937 Stalin says:

“In Kiev they wanted to brush Nikolaenko off like a bothersome fly. They dared to expel her from the Party. And only the intervention of the Central Committee of our Party made it possible to untie this knot. And what did the investigation show? It showed that it was Nikolaenko who was right, not the Kiev city Party committee.”

Postyshev is transferred to Kuibyshev, where he unleashes the most savage repressions. He himself is shot in 1938.

Nikolaenko writes a denunciation against Khrushchev, who has been sent to Kiev as first secretary. Stalin finally comes to the conclusion that Nikolaenko is mentally ill. Before that, 8000 people had been destroyed on the basis of her denunciations.

Normal, decent and very brave people do exist even in the worst of times. In 1937, Mark Romanovich Malyavko, at Kardymovo station near Smolensk, meets “children of enemies of the people” from the city of Stalino. That was the name of today’s Donetsk. These children have already passed through a reception centre, where brothers and sisters are separated, where they are simply sorted by age, where they already cry without tears: “Give back my sister! Bring back my brother!”

Mark Romanovich Malyavko’s voice on the platform at Kardymovo was the first human voice they had heard for a long time. He loaded all the children into the truck, climbed in last, peered into their faces, asked who came from where and whether any were ill. At the children’s home they were all given bread and fresh milk and put to sleep in the club, on straw. In the morning they were taken to the baths, dressed in old but clean and ironed clothes. And they were told: tomorrow everyone will go to school.

A. Semyonova, who was fourteen at the time, recalls:

“In the evening, Mark Romanovich gathered the older children and said: ‘From this day on, do not say out loud where you are from and who your parents are. You are orphans. That’s all. And throw those words – enemies of the people – out of your heads.’”

In this special children’s home there soon were children of fourteen nationalities: Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews, Germans, Latvians, Khakass, Udmurts, Koreans, Chinese...

The 55-year-old director of the special children’s home, Mark Malyavko, was a desperately brave man. He began to petition for the reunification of brothers and sisters scattered across the country according to Yezhov’s order. In defiance of the harshest regulations, little children were soon arriving at the children’s home to join their older brothers and sisters.

Mark Romanovich Malyavko was not a Party member, but he attended the children’s Pioneer and Komsomol meetings. At one such meeting he said:

“I do not believe that children like you could have had bad parents!”

He died in 1950. Forty years later, a boarding school was named after him.

On 12 December 1937 the first elections to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR were held. A month before the elections, a seventh-grade girl comes home from school and says:

“The teachers say that we must carry out mass arrests right now. We must purify ourselves of undesirable elements on the eve of the elections.”

Lyubov Shaporina, the composer’s wife, recalls the elections:

“I went into the booth where I was supposed to read the ballot and choose a candidate. After all, ‘elections’ means that we have a choice. But on the ballot there was only one name, and it was already marked. I involuntarily burst out laughing right there in the booth, like a child.

Outside, we met the painter Petrov-Vodkin. We started talking about the same subject, laughing loudly. Shame on those who put people in such a ridiculous and stupid position. Why do they think we are fools?”