“Chekist in essence, chekist in spirit”: regular and political police in THE 1930s

Paul M. HAGENLOH

Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/8463>

DOI : 10.4000/monderusse.8463

ISSN : 1777-5388

Éditeur

Éditions de l'EHESS

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 avril 2001

Pagination : 447-476

ISBN : 2-7132-1398-3

ISSN : 1252-6576

Référence électronique

Paul M. HAGENLOH, « “Chekist in essence, chekist in spirit”: regular and political police in THE 1930s », *Cahiers du monde russe* [En ligne], 42/2-4 | 2001, mis en ligne le 01 janvier 2007, consulté le 04 septembre 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/8463> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.8463>

Cet article est disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

http://www.cairn.info/article.php?ID_REVUE=CMR&ID_NUMPUBLIE=CMR_422&ID_ARTICLE=CMR_422_0447

“Chekist in essence, chekist in spirit” : regular and political police in THE 1930s

par Paul M. HAGENLOH

| Editions de l'EHESS | *Cahiers du monde russe*

2001/2-3-4 - Vol 42

ISSN 1252-6576 | ISBN 2713213983 | pages 447 à 476

Pour citer cet article :

—M. HAGENLOH P., “Chekist in essence, chekist in spirit” : regular and political police in THE 1930s, *Cahiers du monde russe* 2001/ 2-3-4, Vol 42, p. 447-476.

Distribution électronique Cairn pour les Editions de l'EHESS.

© Editions de l'EHESS. Tous droits réservés pour tous pays.

La reproduction ou représentation de cet article, notamment par photocopie, n'est autorisée que dans les limites des conditions générales d'utilisation du site ou, le cas échéant, des conditions générales de la licence souscrite par votre établissement. Toute autre reproduction ou représentation, en tout ou partie, sous quelque forme et de quelque manière que ce soit, est interdite sauf accord préalable et écrit de l'éditeur, en dehors des cas prévus par la législation en vigueur en France. Il est précisé que son stockage dans une base de données est également interdit.

PAUL M. HAGENLOH

“CHEKIST IN ESSENCE, CHEKIST IN SPIRIT”: REGULAR AND POLITICAL POLICE IN THE 1930s

This paper* examines the working relationship between the regular police (the *Raboche-krest'ianskaia militsiia*, hereafter the *militsiia*) and the secret police¹ from 1930 to 1937, focusing on the period between the takeover of the *militsiia* by the OGPU in late 1930 and the creation of the NKVD SSSR in July 1934. The party leadership unified regular and secret policing in the early 1930s by turning the *militsiia* over to the OGPU. The OGPU leadership, when provided with this opportunity, restructured the regular police, attempting to create an effective, modern *militsiia* that was distinct from the secret police yet was connected to OGPU administrations at operational levels. OGPU attempts to reform regular police work, however, faltered on the social and bureaucratic disarray caused by the first and second five-year plans. Failed reform attempts led central and local police officials to turn instead to ad-hoc solutions to problems of public disorder in the

* Initial versions of this paper were presented to the seventh meeting of the European Seminar on Soviet and Russian History: “The role of the political police in the Soviet Union, 1917-1956,” hosted by the Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, Paris, 25-27 May 2000; and to the Sixth World Congress of the International Council for Central and East European Studies, Tampere, Finland, 29 July to 3 August 2000. My sincere thanks for insightful comments and criticism go to all participants in the seminar, in particular to Terry Martin and David R. Shearer, and to Peter H. Solomon, Jr. and Thomas Lindenberger. Research for this work was supported by grants from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) and the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (NCEEER), with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the US Department of State.

1. The secret police was known as the OGPU between 1923 and 1934, after which it was reorganized as a subdivision of the newly created People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the USSR (NKVD SSSR) and named the GUGB NKVD SSSR (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti*—Central State Security Administration of the NKVD SSSR). Hence the term “the NKVD,” though in wide use to denote the political police, is incorrect in several ways. OGPU and GUGB refer to central administrations and will be used only when this meaning is intended, while GPU and UGB refer to local administrations or individual officers and will be used accordingly.

mid-1930s. These solutions vitiated the original intent of the OGPU reform plan, as they entailed substantial mixing of regular and secret police activity in ways that were not considered desirable by any of the leading police or party officials early in the decade. By the mid-1930s, secret police were heavily involved in policing regular crime and public disorder, while regular police participated in extra-judicial punishment in areas that were previously the prerogative of the secret police, including the cleansing cities of specific “undesirable” social groups. This blurring of lines between regular and political policing widened the scope of mass repression later in the 1930s, especially during the “mass operations of repression of anti-Soviet elements” carried out by regular and secret police alike during the Great Terror of 1937-1938.

Regular and political police were fundamentally separate for most of the early Soviet period. After the creation of the USSR in 1923, regular policing was coordinated by republican-level Commissariats of Internal Affairs (the most important of which was the NKVD RSFSR) while political policing was the responsibility of the OGPU. These two police systems were highly antagonistic bureaucracies throughout the 1920s, locked in a mortal struggle for control over Soviet policing in general. This political struggle was won in 1930 by the OGPU, resulting in the abolition of all republican-level Commissariats of Internal Affairs and the transfer of control over the regular police to the secret police at the central and local levels.

The OGPU’s victory in this struggle can be linked to the overall rise of pro-Stalin factions within the Soviet state, but it also was the result of high-level support within the party for the OGPU project of creating a new, modern, unified “Soviet” police. In support of this project, the OGPU leadership promulgated a concrete and highly utopian set of plans for restructuring the *militsiia* and for reforming the operational activities of the regular police. These reforms in some sense were an attempt to make the regular police more like the political police, but they were also an attempt by the secret police leadership to “modernize” (in their understanding of the word) the *militsiia* and bring it up to the standards of contemporary European police systems.² When the political police took over the regular police in 1930, they did not attempt to create a single hierarchical, unified Soviet policing system in which the *militsiia* formed a simple bureaucratic subdivision of the OGPU. The political police expected to set policy and control the *militsiia* on an operational level, but they also expected *militsiia* to remain a separate bureaucratic system, both in terms of local administration and in terms of self-conception. The connections between the two organizations were initially secret, and the *militsiia* continued to have nominal working contact with local soviets and social organizations such as the *Komsomol*. The new Soviet policing system, as envisioned by OGPU officials in the early 1930s, was to be comprised of parallel but separate regular and political polices

2. For more on these operational reforms and the OGPU’s attempt to create a “modern” Soviet police system, see Paul Hagenloh, “Police, crime, and public order in Stalin’s Russia, 1930-1941” (Dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, 1999), Chapters 1 and 2.

that worked in close contact with each other but fulfilled different roles and maintained distinct levels of contact with the population.

The OGPU leadership had a tremendously difficult time bringing these institutional and operational reforms to fruition. Most of the specific aspects of these reform plans failed by the mid-1930s, due in large part to the social and bureaucratic upheavals caused by the industrialization and collectivization campaigns. The entire range of modernizing, westernizing reforms promulgated by the OGPU was predicated on policing models that evolved in other European settings within situations of relatively stable contact between police and population, conditions that were notably absent in the Soviet 1930s. The OGPU leadership also found that they could do little to solve basic problems that plagued the regular police in the 1920s — low qualifications of officers, high turnover, rampant corruption, and lack of accountability to central administrations. The secret police leadership did, however, succeed in improving the institutional and bureaucratic structure of the *militsiia* by the mid-1930s — bringing local police under increasingly centralized control, decreasing labor turnover, and improving information flow between central and local police agencies. But the concrete operational reforms envisioned by the OGPU leadership in the early 1930s — the specific ways that this “new Soviet police” was expected to prevent disorder and maintain contact with society — failed completely.

The OGPU takeover of the *militsiia* did have the unintended effect of blurring the lines between political and regular policing and brought the secret police into areas of activity that were within the purview of the regular police in the 1920s. The OGPU leadership was confronted with several unexpected problems when it took over the *militsiia*. It was unprepared for the difficulties associated with controlling an under-paid, decentralized, poorly trained *militsiia* that was substantially larger than the OGPU itself and that more resembled traditional systems of local control than a modern police force. Central and local OGPU officials reacted to this combination of public disorder and bureaucratic disarray within the *militsiia* by attempting to centralize command and “Chekaize” the regular police. New policing tactics emerged in the mid-1930s that brought regular and secret police officers together on a daily basis. In particular, the tendency of central and local police alike to see the internal passport system as a way to prevent crime, rather than a method of controlling geographic mobility, expanded the extra-judicial sentencing activities of the *militsiia* and increased the extent to which the OGPU policed low-level public order crimes. Urban crime and policing most fundamentally influenced this evolution.³ The OGPU leadership concentrated most of its reform efforts on urban, rather than rural, policing in the early 1930s. The failure of these reforms led

3. Bolshevik policy regarding the countryside was crucial in shaping the overall policy approach of the regime regarding the criminal justice system, but concrete strategies directed towards controlling disorder in cities had more influence on the evolution of the specific practices employed by the Soviet police. For the effects of the collectivization and dekulakization campaigns on Soviet criminal justice, see Peter H. Solomon, Jr., *Soviet criminal justice under Stalin* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Chapters 3 and 4.

directly to the prevalence of mass checks of passport documents and expulsions as the fundamental method of dealing with all crime in urban areas by mid-decade.⁴ By the mid-1930s, the secret police were highly involved in the policing of public order, including the internal passport system, economic crime (especially speculation), violent hooliganism, and those recidivists termed “socially harmful elements.” The 1934 creation of the NKVD SSSR was in many ways the culmination of this trend as well as a curtailment of police powers by a temporarily ascendant USSR Procurator, Vyshinskii.⁵

Although the activities of regular and political police overlapped in the 1930s, the political police never managed to gain the level of direct, daily control of the regular police that they desired, especially in the countryside. OGPU control over local *militsiia* officers often relied on personal relationships, especially since local *militsiia* chiefs concurrently served as OGPU officers after 1930 (after 1934, as Assistant Chiefs of NKVD administrations (*zamnachal'niki UNKVD*)). The daily institutional control of the *militsiia* by central NKVD officials was surprisingly weak, especially in comparison to the levels of bureaucratic control over secret policemen enjoyed by central officials.⁶ The central leadership had an extremely difficult time directing, controlling, and cajoling the *militsiia* into fulfilling central directives in the years 1934-1936. Local police were able to substantially define the parameters of Soviet policing in this period. Though we still know little about the actual mechanics of the mass operations, there is no reason to believe that central police officials enjoyed a higher level of control over local police during the mass operations than they enjoyed in the preceding years.⁷ When the *Politbiuro* called for repressive campaigns against specific categories of the population, including the 1937-1938 campaign of “mass operations of repression of anti-Soviet elements,” the regular police maintained a substantial amount of bureaucratic leeway in terms of selecting targets. This is not to say that the mass operations were not carried out predominantly by *Chekisty*⁸; but the secret police leadership had to work with an extensive, decentralized police administration, both regular and political, in order to collect information, identify suspects, and select targets. Local regular police

4. For the importance of urban purges in the mid-1930s, see David R. Shearer's contribution to this volume, and Paul Hagenloh, “Socially harmful elements and the Great Terror,” in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism. New directions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

5. For Vyshinskii's position on strengthening the courts and the procuracy vis-à-vis the police in 1934 and 1935, see P. H. Solomon, Jr., *op. cit.*: 166-167.

6. It is quite possible that the GUGB enjoyed less control over local *Chekisty* than scholars have assumed, but in any case they exercised even less control over the daily activity of the *militsiia*. For a hint that the OGPU leadership often had difficulties controlling its own local officers, see N. V. Petrov and K. B. Skorkin, *Kto rukovodil NKVD, 1934-1941. Spravochnik* (Moscow: Obshchestvo “Memorial,” RGASPI, GARF, Zven'ia, 1999), footnote 1, p. 36.

7. Instances of “mass operations” (both planned and unplanned) in the early and mid-1930s always led to increased disorder among police at the periphery and decreased central control. Therefore, central police officials often specifically instructed local police not to resort to “methods of mass operations” in the mid-1930s when carrying out specific policy initiatives.

8. Individual political police officers of all types were referred to throughout the Soviet period as “*Chekisty*”; this article will duplicate this usage.

were highly involved in both the mass operations of 1937-1938 and in the creation and identification of categories of “undesirable” social elements in the years that preceded the Terror.

NEP policing, the *militsiia*, and the OGPU

The basic set of problems and difficulties in the relationship between regular and secret police in the early 1930s was inherited from NEP- and tsarist-era policing. Lenin, in pre-revolutionary writings on police in a communist society, argued that a professional police force would be unnecessary in a proletarian state and that armed workers would maintain public order themselves. Following this precept, the new Bolshevik regime in 1917 ordered the dispersal of municipal police administrations and called into existence volunteer workers’ militias made up of Red Guards and existing factory militias.⁹ The Bolsheviks concurrently acceded to the slightly more practical need to coordinate policing by creating the Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the Russian Republic (NKVD RSFSR) on October 28 (November 10), 1917 as one of thirteen Commissariats in the RSFSR government.¹⁰ Relations between the NKVD and the secret police were confused and unstable in the years following the Revolution, but as the initial institutional chaos of the Civil War gave way to the consolidation of NEP, the Soviet policing system quickly settled into a two-tiered pattern of separate political and regular police forces similar to the old tsarist system it replaced. The evolution of the *militsiia* in the first several years after the Revolution is fundamentally unstudied, but by the beginning of NEP, the *militsiia* had evolved into a full-time, professional administrative agency under nominal control of local soviets but only loosely tied to the center.¹¹ After the formation of the USSR, individual republics were constitutionally guaranteed the right to regulate their own regular police affairs, though this guarantee weakened in practice as the 1920s progressed.¹² The NKVD RSFSR attempted to set policy (often unsuccessfully) for the Russian republic and, in contradiction of the formal requirements of the USSR constitution, for other republics as well throughout the

9. A. V. Borisov, A. N. Dugin, A. Ia. Malygin, *et al.*, *Politsiia i militsiia Rossii: Stranitsy istorii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1995): 95-96, and Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, “Crime and police in revolutionary Petrograd, March 1917-March 1918: Social history of the Russian Revolution revisited,” *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, XIII (1995): 28-29.

10. V. F. Nekrasov, *et al.*, *Organy i voiska MVD Rossii. Kratkii istoricheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Ob’edinennaia redaktsiia MVD Rossii, 1996): 183-185.

11. Little information exists on the transition to a professional *militsiia* in the early 1920s. Given the level of opposition to centralization expressed by local workers’ militias during the Provisional Government period, one would expect similar resistance to centralization under the Bolsheviks. Whether this was the case is open to research.

12. The NKVD RSFSR was also directly involved in the creation and coordination of local soviets in the first few years after the Revolution. NKVD representatives were sent to localities with the explicit task of setting up the some 12,000 local soviets that existed in the RSFSR by July 1918. Little research has been done on this important function of the NKVD in the first few years after 1917. V. F. Nekrasov, *et al.*, *op. cit.*: 185-186.

1920s.¹³ In practice, however, the *militiia* was an extremely decentralized organization. Decentralization was only intensified by widespread budget crises in the late 1920s that forced the NKVD RSFSR to rely on local soviets for funding and that provided local police administrations with tremendous latitude in setting the parameters of police activity.¹⁴

Relations between the *militiia* leadership and the political police in the 1920s were strained at best. After the creation of the OGPU, the two police administrations (NKVD RSFSR and OGPU SSSR) were openly hostile, though the breach was held together to some extent under the influence of Feliks Dzerzhinskii, who headed both the political police and the NKVD RSFSR in the early 1920s.¹⁵ By the late 1920s, however, the two organizations had diverged fundamentally, both in terms of personnel and self-conception. After Dzerzhinskii's death in 1926, the OGPU and NKVD engaged in open conflict over competing claims to jurisdictions, authority to apprehend certain groups of criminals, and rights to set the direction of law enforcement for the nation. The Internal Affairs Commissariat was surprisingly resilient in the face of repeated calls from other bureaucracies involved in criminal justice, especially the OGPU, for its liquidation in the late 1920s.¹⁶ As Stalin consolidated power, however, the difficulties experienced by the NKVD RSFSR regarding basic policing functions made the organization increasingly vulnerable to attacks from the OGPU and the Commissariat of Justice (NKIu RSFSR). On February 12, 1930, the *Sovnarkom* RSFSR approved a draft resolution ordering the transfer of corrective-labor colonies from the NKVD to the OGPU and asking the *Sovnarkom* SSSR to approve the resolution.¹⁷ Once Stalin decided to transfer the labor colony system to the OGPU, the NKVD RSFSR lost much of its rationale for existence. After an as-yet unexplained delay of several months, Stalin acted decisively in late 1930, abolishing the NKVD of the RSFSR

13. Aleksandr Iakovlevich Malygin, "Gosudarstvenno-pravovoi status militsii RSFSR v period provedeniia Novoi Ekonomicheskoi Politiki (20-e gody)," *Doktorskaia dissertatsiia* (Moscow: Akademiia MVD RF, 1992): 295-325.

14. *2-i vserossiiskii S'ezd administrativnykh rabotnikov. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Narodnyi kommissariat vnutrennikh del, 1929): 7.

15. Dzerzhinskii, head of the Cheka, GPU, and OGPU from 1917 until his death in 1926, also headed the NKVD RSFSR from March 1919 to August 1923. Aleksandr Georgievich Beloborodov, his replacement at the NKVD, gained the position on Dzerzhinskii's personal recommendation, allowing the head of the OGPU continued to exert influence on both halves of the Soviet policing system until his death. V. F. Nekrasov, *et al.*, *op. cit.*: 229-238.

16. Surprisingly, the NKVD survived the ousting of its chairman in 1927. Beloborodov was removed as People's Commissar in November 1927 and replaced by Vladimir Nikolaevich Tolmachev. Tolmachev came to the NKVD after an undistinguished career in party service, including the position of deputy chairman of the North Caucasus *krai* Executive Committee. Beloborodov was subjected to internal exile from 1927 until 1930, after which his party membership was restored and he worked in low-level positions until he was arrested in 1936 and executed in 1938. Tolmachev was eventually purged from the party as part of the "Fractional Group of Smirnov, Tolmachev, and Eismont" and was shot in 1937. V. F. Nekrasov, *et al.*, *op. cit.*: 460-461.

17. George Lin, "Fighting in vain: NKVD RSFSR in the 1920s" (Dissertation: Stanford University, 1997): 136-137.

and of all Union republics, transferring the control of the *militsiia* and the Detective Department (*Ugolovnyi rozysk*) to the OGPU, and giving control over the NKVD's network of labor colonies and places of confinement (GUMZ) to the Justice Commissariat.¹⁸ The *Politbiuro* ordered the liquidation of the NKVD RSFSR on November 5, effective January 1, 1931.¹⁹

Although institutional competition drove much of the conflict between the NKVD RSFSR and the OGPU in the late 1920s, differences of political principles and understandings of the role of police and coercion in modern society played a central role as well. As chief of the NKVD RSFSR, Aleksandr Beloborodov had consistently championed legal systematization over extra-judicial activity and argued that "the methods of 1918" would be harmful to the evolving relationship between the population and the police. OGPU officials, for their part, advocated expanded extra-judicial activity in the late 1920s at the expense of the fledgling Soviet legal system promoted by Nikolai Krylenko and Aaron Solts, among others.²⁰ A highly prescient assessment of the change in Soviet policing that would result from the takeover came from Assistant Procurator of the RSFSR Besspalov during his service as a member of the committee charged with dismantling the Russian NKVD in 1930 and 1931:

"I find it necessary to point out in writing that I considered and continue to consider inexpedient the transfer of the *militsiia*, places of confinement, and the administration of compulsory labor to the OGPU. The OGPU is an organization [dedicated to] the battle with particularly socially dangerous elements, with specific methods of battle, while the *militsiia* and the administrations of places of confinement are organs of the widest popular activity with completely different methods of work, the fundamental element of which is wide contact with society at large (*shirokaia obshchestvennost'*). The unification [of these two organizations] will result in the transformation of the nature of the OGPU or the spread of the methods of the OGPU to the activities of the other above-named organizations, a situation that benefits neither the former organization nor the latter."²¹

Besspalov's point accurately predicted the contours of the evolution of the Soviet policing system for the rest of the 1930s.

18. Stalin expressed his annoyance with the NKVD leadership for fighting for retention of its inmates and his determination to side with the OGPU in a letter to Molotov dated September 7, 1930: "These [maneuvers of the NKVD] are the machinations of a thoroughly corrupted Tolmachev [...]. I think that it is necessary to carry out the decisions of the *Politbiuro*, and to close the NKVD." *Pis'ma I. V. Stalina V. M. Molotovu, 1925-1936 gg.* (Moscow: Rossiia molodaia, 1995): 214-215.

19. A. V. Borisov, *et al.*, *op. cit.*: 140-141.

20. A. I. Malygin, *op. cit.*: 273-294. For the positions of the leading criminal justice officials in the late 1920s, see P. H. Solomon, Jr., *op. cit.*: 60-65.

21. Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter GARF), f. 374 (Narodnyi Komissariat Raboche-Krest'ianskoi Inspekttsii (NK RKI)), op. 27, d. 1923, l. 40.

New working relations between the regular and secret police

The OGPU leadership, upon taking over the direction of *militsiia* activity, promoted a wide-ranging set of reforms in almost every area of policing practice. The OGPU attempted to change methods of patrolling city streets, to reorganize local *militsiia* administrations, to strengthen connections between police and soviet institutions and between police and Soviet citizens, and to restructure police use of informants to uncover and prevent crime. The secret police leadership based this set of reform efforts both on their own operative experience and on their understandings of contemporary European methods of policing. The bureaucratic restructuring that accompanied these reforms corresponded with the centralization occurring in other spheres of Soviet administration in the early 1930s. The OGPU leadership attempted to carefully define the hierarchical relations between the two police organizations, to prevent overlap between the investigative tasks of OGPU and the *militsiia*, and to increase the qualifications of several subdivisions of the *militsiia* to equal those of the OGPU. The goal of this set of bureaucratic reforms was to create two separate, parallel policing structures. The *militsiia* would mirror the OGPU in terms of operational methods but would concentrate on a fundamentally separate area of competence — that of non-political crime. These reforms were not initially designed to unify the duties or the bureaucracies of the regular and political police but were an attempt to carefully delineate the connections and differences between the two organizations. None of the central police or party officials involved in the dismantling of the NKVD RSFSR in late 1930 foresaw an operational unification of the *militsiia* and the OGPU, and none promoted a complete obliteration of the differences between the two in terms of status, tasks, self-conception, and duties.

On December 15, 1930, the Soviet government approved the abolishment of the NKVD RSFSR, although it made no public announcement about the future of the *militsiia*. The Central Executive Committee and *Sovnarkom* SSSR, however, issued a secret order on December 21, 1930 that outlined an outward institutional structure of the new police system while secretly defining the real terms of the relationship between the *militsiia* and the OGPU. Officially, each republican *Sovnarkom* was put in charge of a “Central Administration of the Workers’ and Peasants’ *Militsiia*” that formulated policy and directed lower-level police administrations. Local *militsiia* administration continued to be nominally subordinate both to local soviets and to higher-level police administrations.²² In a strictly legal sense, this hierarchy was the only arrangement possible, since the

22. GARF, f. 1235 (Vserossiiskii Tsentral’nyi Ispolnitel’nyi Komitet (VTsIK) RSFSR), op. 141, d. 418, ll. 1-3. The resolution also attempted to solve some of the funding and staffing problems of the old *militsiia* by requiring that high-level officers of the *militsiia* and the Detective Department be paid at the same level as corresponding OGPU officials.

USSR Constitution explicitly gave republics the right to control regular police activity within their borders.²³

However, the *Sovnarkom* resolution also outlined the direct and secret subordination of the *militsiia* to the OGPU. The instructions created a Central Inspectorate of the *militsiia* under the OGPU SSSR to set policy for the nation. It also created Special Inspectorates (*Osobyie inspektsii*) within local OGPU police administrations, which were charged with directing the corresponding local regular police administrations. The instructions only vaguely defined the working relations between the OGPU and the *militsiia*: "Local administrations of the *militsiia* and the Detective Department, which are subordinate on a general basis to corresponding [local] executive committees and city soviets, are to carry out their work under the control of corresponding local organs of the OGPU." The exact details of the relationship were to be worked out in practice. The OGPU also gained the crucial right to hire and fire *militsiia* officials.²⁴ Although this situation resembled the "dual subordination" of the *militsiia* in the 1920s, in which the police were subordinate to both local soviets and to the NKVD RSFSR, the true lines of authority were unambiguous. The OGPU set policy and directed local police, while the Central *Militsiia* Administrations (subordinate to republican *Sovnarkom* hierarchies) maintained an appearance of local soviet control to the population and formed a legal bureaucratic hierarchy for the *militsiia*.²⁵

In the areas of provisioning, labor regulations, and disciplinary codes, the OGPU promulgated a series of regulations designed to bring the *militsiia* in line with OGPU practices and to solve personnel problems that had plagued the NKVD throughout the 1920s.²⁶ Crimes of office and refusal to serve out the full two-year contract signed by all policemen became punishable by a military tribunal. The OGPU ordered a series of financial changes intended to reduce labor turnover, including standardization of pay between different localities and increased

23. Control of the *militsiia* by the OGPU, which was an all-Union organization, would absolutely contradict the USSR constitution. There is some indication that the *Politbiuro* consciously considered this problem when it created the republican-level *militsiia* administrations, and that it consciously attempted to maintain a facade of constitutionality for both domestic and international appearances. A. V. Borisov, *et al.*, *op. cit.*: 140-142.

24. The relationship between the state (*Sovnarkom*) and OGPU central *militsiia* administrations was one of policy making versus simple publication and distribution of the policy. The state *militsiia* administrations were also charged with planning, funding, making sure that provisioning ran smoothly, and other mundane aspects of police administration.

25. The reasons for the center's reluctance to turn over control of the police outright to the OGPU are unclear. Beyond the need to maintain some appearance of constitutionality, the party hierarchy may have understood that the population perceived the OGPU as more repressive than the *militsiia*. The NKVD RSFSR leadership in the 1920s argued that the population respected the *militsiia* but saw the OGPU as an instrument of oppression, though the high levels of corruption evident in the *militsiia* might temper that claim.

26. New official instructions for the *militsiia* were published on May 25, 1931 in "Instructions regarding the workers' and peasants' *militsiia*" (*Polozhenie o RKM*). *Sobranie zakonov i rasporiazhenii raboche-krest'ianskogo pravitel'stva SSSR* (hereafter *SZ*), 33 (31 May 1931), article 247, pp. 429-437.

provisioning of *militsiia* officers to match that of the military.²⁷ The OGPU leadership carried out a purge of the *militsiia* immediately after its takeover, charging that the police apparatus was infiltrated with “anti-Soviet, free-loading, trouble-making” elements with past criminal sentences and “kulak ideologies.”²⁸ Although the total number of officers expelled during the purge, which continued through the end of 1931, is unavailable, dismissals were substantial: 300 policemen were purged from the *militsiia* of Bashkiria, or 10% of the total staff; 830 policemen were purged from the Lower Volga region, including ten chiefs of *raion*-level administrations; 40 more *raion* chiefs were demoted but allowed to keep their jobs. In the Urals, 1,233 policemen were purged, including 220 members of the officer corps. The OGPU leadership actively recruited officers from OGPU border guards and internal OGPU troops to replace these “socially alien and criminal elements” that had managed to work as NEP-era policemen.²⁹ By the end of 1931, the OGPU was, in theory at least, firmly in charge of *militsiia* activity.

Structural divisions: investigation and policing

The operational reforms promulgated by the OGPU leadership after it took over the *militsiia* were united by one overarching goal: the OGPU planned to create a policing system that would prevent crime by connecting the daily policing practices of the regular police, the Detective Department, and the OGPU. In particular, the new leadership believed that undercover policing tactics were the key to making the *militsiia* into a modernized and effective police force. OGPU officials based their ideas for preventative undercover policing on their own activities against political opponents and the organized criminal underworld in the 1920s, and they consciously attempted to transfer many of their own methods to the regular police, especially the Detective Department. Surprisingly, although OGPU officials carefully defined the spheres of activity of both police services, they did not always retain more prestigious duties for themselves. While they never entertained the idea that the regular police would investigate political crimes, they did attempt to extend “Chekist” methods to regular policing. What the OGPU leadership found, to its surprise, was that the *militsiia*, even the more elite Detective Department, was in no way capable of carrying out the reform programs to the satisfaction of central police officials.

27. For information on the implementation of the instructions, see GARF, f. 9415 (Glavnoe upravlenie Militsii MVD SSSR), op. 5, d. 476, ll. 248-250.

28. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 474, ll. 1-2. Local *militsiia* administrations began the purge beginning on January 18, 1931, which was to be carried out in complete secrecy so it would not weaken police morale.

29. GARF, f. 1235, op. 141, d. 910, ll. 22-21. Although transfers from the OGPU generally took place to the highest leadership positions of the *militsiia*, OGPU officers understandably tended to see the move as a step down the career ladder.

The Detective Department was the most important branch of the regular police in this reform program, both in terms of its mediation between regular policing and the OGPU and in terms of its centrality to the idea of the “new” Soviet police. Relations between the Detective Department, the rest of the *militsiia*, and the OGPU had been confused and contentious during NEP. Categories of crime handled by the Detective Department, such as armed banditry that lacked an overtly anti-Soviet political stance, often mixed with crimes that were the responsibility of the OGPU. Immediately after it took over the *militsiia*, the OGPU leadership attempted to sort out the connections between the Detective Department and the remainder of the police system. The OGPU leadership abolished the Detective Department as a separate organization and subordinated it to local police administrations, returning to the situation that existed in the initial years after the October Revolution.³⁰ The Detective Department was expected to work closely with the patrolling police to unify the tasks of investigation and policing of public order.³¹ OGPU officials hoped to turn the Detective Department into a highly specialized, “Chekaized” undercover regular police force that used the methods of the secret police to deal with threatening regular crimes not under the purview of the OGPU.³² This goal was in many ways the culmination of Dzerzhinskii’s attempts to “Chekaize” the Detective Department early in the 1920s, but it was also

30. Detective Departments occupied an unstable bureaucratic position within local NKVD and soviet administrations throughout the early Soviet period. Like *militsiia* administrations in general, they were completely decentralized in the months following the Revolution. NKVD regulations in October 1918 attempted to normalize bureaucratic structures across the RSFSR, creating Detective Departments with the *militsiia* administrations at the *guberniia* level and in towns of over 40-45,000 residents. These local departments were, like the *militsiia* itself, nominally under control of local soviets but loosely directed from the center by a corresponding Department of the NKVD RSFSR. A. V. Borisov, *et al.*, *op. cit.*: 101-102. In 1922 and 1923, as the result of direct pressure from Dzerzhinskii, Detective Departments were promoted to free-standing subdivisions at central and local levels, hierarchically equal to the regular *militsiia* instead of subordinate to it. This move was part of Dzerzhinskii’s longstanding attempts to subsume all police functions under the OGPU; he viewed it as a first step towards including local Detective Departments under local GPU administrations. A. I. Malygin, *op. cit.*: 282-285. Although after the reorganization in 1930-1931 the *Ugolovnyi rozysk* was re-named the *Operativnyi otdel* of local *militsiia* administrations to reflect its subordinate status, I will continue to call it the Detective Department in English, both for the sake of consistency and because the attempt to reintegrate it into the regular policing hierarchy failed quickly.

31. In a meeting of the heads of republican-level Detective Departments in late May 1931, Usov, the new Assistant Chief of the Central Inspectorate of the *militsiia* within the OGPU, compared the situation to that in the OGPU. No internal functional division existed with the OGPU between “outward order and operative questions,” he argued, and hence the *militsiia* should not have one either. Usov referred to the reorganization that was taking place as “operativization” and he argued for the need to thoroughly “operativize” the *militsiia*. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 475, ll. 3-5.

32. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 475, ll. 12, 21-23. Another participant in the 1931 Conference of Detective Department Chiefs carried the idea further, arguing that the precinct inspectors were purely operative functionaries and hence should be subsumed under the Detective Department of the *militsiia*. The *militsiia*, he argued, would then be divided into two main sections: a Detective Department, dealing with all investigation, and an outward department or “beat” department (*Stroevoi otdel*), which would be responsible for strictly overt functions like posts, guards, plus open surveillance and training of police. *Ibid.*, ll. 30-31.

an attempt to bring the *militsiia*, or at least part of it, up to the standards of the OGPU.

Attempts to reintegrate the Detective Department with the *militsiia* and to delineate the duties of the regular and political police faltered immediately, especially in the countryside. Central police officials openly admitted that the Detective Department did not serve rural areas at all. One official referred to the single category of policeman that served in the countryside — the rural precinct inspector — as the “homeless children” (*besprizorniki*) of police work, noting that the only difference was that “the *besprizornik* is served and nurtured by a whole range of party-social organizations, and our precinct inspector isn’t helped by anyone.”³³ Although the *militsiia*, including the Detective Department, was not supposed to take over any overtly political functions, *militsiia* officials in the countryside usually were the first Soviet organs to come into contact with certain types of anti-Soviet activity that fell under the jurisdiction of the OGPU. At a 1931 meeting of Detective Department chiefs, the head of the Central *Militsiia* Administration, Usov, expressed this distinction with regard to banditry:

“[W]e, as the Operative Department [Detective Department] of the *Militsiia*, will not specifically deal with questions related to the struggle with political banditry. We know that in the countryside we will take part in this matter on an everyday basis, because our apparatus is much more developed in the periphery [than that of the GPU], and it is completely obvious that very often in the countryside officers of the *militsiia* will be the first to react when certain sorts of crimes are committed, like a murder carried out by a kulak for purely class goals (*na klassovoi pochve*). This sort of crime is the business of the GPU, and the *militsiia* in this case is only that initial force that will begin to investigate the situation. The OGPU does not have that sort of well-developed network [in the periphery] and some cases will therefore without question be investigated initially by the *militsiia*. Our general task in this matter is to make the organs of the *militsiia* into Chekist organs in essence, Chekist in spirit, in methods of work, in forms of work, but not in any sense to replace the organs of the GPU with the *militsiia*.”³⁴

Although central officials were willing to allow some overlap between regular and secret police in the countryside, they were adamant about not allowing it in the cities, where the OGPU had a highly developed set of institutions. Even in urban areas, however, OGPU authorities could not immediately reform relations between the OGPU and the detectives along the lines they desired. Many local OGPU officials took the political victory over the NKVD as a sign that they should simply take over the *militsiia* wholesale, especially in the case of the Detective Department, notwithstanding repeated instructions from central officials to the contrary. The fact that the new *oblast*-level Detective Department chiefs were OGPU officers transferred to the *militsiia* after December 1930 only strengthened

33. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 475, l. 56.

34. *Ibid.*, l. 7.

this trend. Central police authorities noted with alarm that the new OGPU officers reorganized the local Detective Departments to duplicate their experiences in the OGPU, often treating the detectives as lower-level functionaries to help deal with the immense work load of the secret police.³⁵ OGPU officials also used *militsiia* officers to conduct technical work such as bookkeeping or guarding prison cells in secret police administrations, usually without the approval or sometimes even the knowledge of higher-level *militsiia* officials.³⁶

For the most part, though, local OGPU administrations ignored the *militsiia* altogether. Even as late as 1932 *oblast'*-level OGPU administrations made little effort to supervise *militsiia* operations; lower-level officials were even more remiss. Supervision of lower-level *militsiia* bodies by the *Sovnarkom* police hierarchy, furthermore, generally consisted of occasional visits to localities by touring inspectors or higher-level police chiefs. *Oblast'* police chiefs, one report stated, simply arrived in localities, looked around for a bit, and then left.³⁷ Detectives, for their part, continued to see themselves as separate from and superior to the rest of the *militsiia*. Although the restructuring specifically intended to eliminate this duality of local policing, local detectives often did not play along, preferring to see themselves as closer to the better-respected OGPU.³⁸ By mid-decade the Detective Department was insulated from the daily activity of the rest of the *militsiia*, and it again became more prestigious and better paid than the regular police. Local OGPU administrations paid little attention to the Detective Department and were uninterested in supervising and training the *militsiia* as a whole.

Policing, social disorder, and administrative collapse

As the OGPU attempted to transform the Soviet policing system, the *militsiia* faced problems of public disorder that were several orders of magnitude greater than those that existed during NEP. Collectivization, resumed in mid-1930, strained the Soviet administrative system beyond its limits, as did rapid urbanization and the resettlement of several hundreds thousand peasant families as part of the

35. *Ibid.*, 1. 12.

36. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, ll. 60b-9.

37. The author of this particular report suggested that *nachal'niki* of *oblast'*-level administrations should spend no less than four months each year touring the periphery. This suggestion was rather impractical, both because of the incredibly high level of "touring" that would be required to maintain any sort of useful contact between localities and the center, and because it was completely impossible for the center to release top officials to tour the countryside for lengthy periods of time due to the manpower shortage facing the police as a whole. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, ll. 80b-9.

38. No uniform division of authority existed within local police forces regarding investigation practices throughout the early 1930s. In some areas, the Detective Department carried out all investigations without exception, while in others it investigated only certain crimes, leaving others to the police patrols themselves (*otdely sluzhby*). GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 474, l. 76.

dekulakization campaign. All of these processes were extraordinarily taxing for the administrations charged with carrying them out.³⁹ The expectation of the OGPU leadership that local police could reform their entire bureaucratic system and methods of policing in the midst of this chaos and disorder was highly misplaced. The carefully delineated system of parallel police forces promoted by the OGPU leadership proved unworkable almost immediately, leaving the OGPU, both at the center and in localities, with little daily control over *militsiia* activities. The OGPU takeover compounded problems of bureaucratic decentralization and induced a complete collapse of the modest hierarchies of command that existed before 1930. As the OGPU dismantled the centralized bureaucratic structure of the NKVD RSFSR in 1930, local police administrations gained a tremendous amount of latitude in policy creation and implementation. Local soviets in remote areas often continued to direct local police, making use of the still official (if disingenuous) laws about the rights of local soviets and the leadership of the Central Police Administration under *Sovnarkom* RSFSR. Even though secret instructions made the relationship between the OGPU and the *militsiia* clear, published laws gave Administrative Departments of local soviets nominal control over the activities of the *militsiia* as late as 1932. Although part of the rationale of abolishing the NKVD RSFSR had been to centralize funding of police activities, funding still took place at the local level until 1932 (in many areas until 1934). Even those administrations in which police were paid from the central budget often had to rely on local soviets for funding for operational matters. The OGPU, for its part, had little permanent representation in most localities in the early 1930s, and was unable to closely monitor regular police activity for most of the early 1930s.⁴⁰

The criminal justice system as a whole was consumed by the task of supporting the party's rural and industrial campaigns between 1929 and 1933. Soviet criminal justice, as Peter H. Solomon, Jr. has shown, largely collapsed during the first five-year plan. Justice officials ignored basic legal functions like trials, investigations, and supervision of the police, and concentrated instead on prosecution of property crimes related to collectivization, grain requisitioning, and theft of industrial property. Judges and investigators also participated directly in brigades sent to the countryside to assist in collectivization and dekulakization campaigns.⁴¹ The *militsiia* performed many of the same functions. Urban policemen were requisitioned for detachments sent to the countryside to quell peasant unrest, while

39. See V. P. Danilov, ed., *et al.*, *Spetspereselentsy v Zapadnoi Sibiri, 1930-vesna 1931 g.* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1992), and N. A. Ivinskii, "Kollektivizatsiia i raskulachivanie v nachale 30-kh godov," in Iu. N. Afanas'ev, ed., *Sud'by rossiiskogo krest'ianstva* (Moscow: RGGU, 1996): 249-295.

40. One of the most daunting tasks facing the OGPU when it took over the *militsiia* was simply gathering information about realities of policing in local areas. OGPU officials found that central knowledge was less complete than they expected. They had to request information on policing techniques, staff levels, and leadership structure from local police administrations themselves. See, for example, GARF, f. 9415 (Glavnoe upravlenie Militsii MVD SSSR, 1930-), op. 5. d. 474, l. 38 for a request for information on rural policemen.

41. P. H. Solomon, *op. cit.*: 81-110.

rural *militsiia* officers were usually the first contact between the state and rebellious peasants. Local police were on the front lines of the collectivization campaign in 1930 and 1931 and spent most of their time responding to disturbances in the countryside. Although the regime set up mobile detachments of activists to assist in the mechanics of collectivization, the regular police were often the first Soviet administrative officials to confront insurrections once the detachments had left.⁴² Central police officials strongly condemned the tendency of local party and government authorities to requisition local police for collectivization and dekulakization campaigns.⁴³ In reality, however, police at all levels could do little to halt this trend. Although the OGPU continued to press its plans to reform the police system after 1930, in practice the need to support the collectivization campaign was paramount. Police turned to other tasks when time permitted.

In some areas, especially major cities, the OGPU did manage to remove the *militsiia* from the purview of local soviets and strengthen vertical hierarchies of control. Police chiefs retained their positions as members of the soviet Executive Committees, but local soviets no longer had any right to direct personnel decisions or influence the daily activities of the police.⁴⁴ However, lines of command from central OGPU officials to local police administrations, though carefully defined in numerous circulars, were largely non-existent in reality. Poor communications, lack of paper, and bureaucratic chaos at the center meant that directives often failed to reach localities at all. A Detective Department officer from the Georgian SSR, for example, complained that central leadership was completely absent:

42. In a typical example, a rural precinct inspector in Moscow *oblast'* responded in March 1930 to a group attack on a newly formed collective farm. Some 100 women gathered at the central barn of the new *kolkhoz* to demand the return of their cattle, which they claimed were poorly treated by the *kolkhoz* members in charge of them. Local *Komsomol* activists attempted to prevent the seizure of the cattle but were forcibly removed by the group of protesters. The local precinct inspector solved the situation by instructing the women to create a five-person delegation to discuss the problem with the Executive Committee of the *raion* soviet. Five women eventually did appear before the soviet, but once the potentially explosive situation had been defused, local authorities declined to acquiesce to their demands and transferred the matter to the OGPU for investigation. Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Moskovskoi Oblasti (TsGAMO), f. 267 (Administrativnyi otdel Moskovskogo okruzhnogo ispolkoma, 1929-1930), op. 1, d. 1, l. 477.

43. In March 1931 Kashirin, the head of the Central Administration of the *militsiia* under Sovnarkom RSFSR, wrote to local party and police officials requesting that local party organizations refrain from mobilizing policemen until the ongoing reorganization of the *militsiia* was complete and the organization was strengthened enough to withstand the use of higher-ranking officers for local campaigns. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 474, l. 16.

44. A final important structural change that happened in 1930-1931 was the decision to abolish all city-level police administrations in major *oblast'* centers and to unify the *oblast'* and city administrations. This decision was initially taken to reduce costs and staffing redundancy and to make city police directly responsible to the *oblast'* leadership. An additional consideration, according to one report, was the "bolstering of *militsiia* authority vis-à-vis city organizations and the prevention of the situation which existed in the past of the transformation of the city *militsiia* into a technical assistant to local city, party, and soviet organizations." The change only enhanced the independence of police administration in major cities. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, ll. 6-6ob.

“Up to this point [May of 1931, five months after the OGPU takeover] we have not received any sort of directives [from the central leadership in Moscow]. We have received no instructions, no textbooks [...]. In general, guidance from the center for the *krai* and *okrug* has been very weak.”⁴⁵

The OGPU leadership had little previous practice trying to direct and control local policemen with less experience, training and discipline than their own political policemen. As a result, they were unable to create a functional nation-wide police administration for several years after the takeover.

At the same time, bureaucratic centralization also faltered on poor information flow from local police to central authorities. Central officials complained bitterly and repeatedly in the early 1930s about their inability to obtain information from localities regarding crime trends, police work, and the make-up of local forces. A typical circular sent from the Central *Militsiia* Administration (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Raboche-Krest'ianskoi Militsii—GURKM pri Sovnarkom*) to local police in August 1931 lamented that, despite specific orders sent to localities in May of that year requesting statistical summaries of operative work by August 1, not a single police administration had fulfilled the directive and sent the requested information to the center.⁴⁶ Many local *militsiia* administrations failed to send required reports to the center for several months at a time.⁴⁷ Central police officials could force compliance only through threats to fire local officials, a step they were reluctant to take because of the severe shortages of officers that plagued the *militsiia* throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Central officials also complained that local police, even in areas that were not particularly remote, ignored their instructions and continued to work in ways to which they were accustomed before the OGPU takeover. In particular, local officials failed to devote much energy to reforms that required them to maintain close contact with social or government organizations. One of the OGPU's goals was to promote close contact between police and state or social groups. Police administrations, however, remained cut off from local soviet and trade-union bodies after 1930, and connections with local *Komsomol* cells or rural executors (*sel'skie ispolniteli*) were largely non-existent. Local police chiefs and precinct inspectors in Moscow *oblast'*, for example, completely ignored requirements to report to workers' meetings and plenums of village soviets:

“Cases even exist where some *Raion Militsiia* Administrations have failed to deliver reports to the Presidiums of *Raion* Executive Committees [of the soviets] for a year or more, for example the chief of Communist *Raion Militsiia* Administration has not delivered a report [to the soviet] for over a year and a half.”⁴⁸

45. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 475, l. 95.

46. The circular called the situation “impermissible” and ordered immediate forwarding of the requested information. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 474, l. 69.

47. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, l. 49.

48. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 491, ll. 6-8.

This total lack of police contact with local soviets was apparent in all localities, including central locations in which the central police administration in Moscow exercised some amount of direct control. Rural precinct inspectors, in particular, were completely independent after the OGPU takeover obliterated what little nominal control local soviets had over them during NEP. Precinct inspectors remained itinerant policemen, touring large areas of the countryside and meting out justice to their own standards.⁴⁹

In addition to the obstacles to reshaping the structure of police administration, OGPU officials found it difficult to reshape the staff of the *militsiia* itself. The OGPU almost immediately ran into nearly insurmountable problems of funding and provisioning. These difficulties were endemic to the Soviet administrative system in the 1930s, but the OGPU leadership was surprisingly and somewhat naively unprepared to face shortages of material and manpower in the regular police system. Though financing was supposed to be centralized, the OGPU leadership quickly realized that they had little chance of successfully providing even the most basic provisions to local police — uniforms, shoes, and even firearms. In 1931 some *oblast'* and *krai* police administrations were so underfunded that they could provide arms to only 50 to 60% of their policemen.⁵⁰ As early as February 1931, financial planners in Moscow noted that the central *militsiia* hierarchy made no provisions for supplying local police with automobiles, leaving local police to search for funding from local soviets.⁵¹ Funding for the finer points of police work was almost non-existent. One officer of the Criminal Investigations Department complained that the organization's meager budget did not allow for purchasing the imported microscopes necessary to investigate crime scenes.⁵² Uniforms were in short supply, a problem only exacerbated by the new OGPU leadership's immediate and rather inexplicable decision to order a change of uniforms in May 1931.⁵³ By September 1931 central police authorities realized that new uniforms were in extremely short supply and postponed the exchange until January 1, 1933. New uniforms, however, were distributed to urban police first, while rural police were instructed to continue using their old uniforms.⁵⁴

49. GARF, f. 1235, op. 72, d. 340, ll. 1-6.

50. GARF, f. 1235, op. 141, d. 910, l. 15. Another report on provisioning of the *militsiia* stated that the task had been fulfilled extremely poorly after the OGPU takeover. Control and inventory of weapons was reportedly weak, and in many locales the weapons themselves were in poor condition. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, ll. 78-79.

51. GARF, f. 9415, op. 1, d. 2, l. 11.

52. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 475, ll. 84-100, esp. 85.

53. The order for new uniforms can be found in GARF, f. 9415, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 51-55ob, complete with a description of the uniforms and the rules for wearing them. The order, dated April 29, 1931, calls for new uniforms to be distributed beginning May 1, 1931. It is not surprising that outfitting all policemen in the USSR with new uniforms would be a problem in an economic system notorious for lack of light industrial goods.

54. GARF, f. 9415, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 149-150. One can only guess that the uniforms worn by rural police were in the poorest possible condition.

Difficulties in recruitment and training also hampered the creation of a new Soviet police.⁵⁵ The incoming *militsiia* chief, Usov, described the dire problem of finding qualified personnel in 1931 as follows:

“Recruits for the *militsiia* predominantly come from the countryside, individuals who have neither qualifications nor any military background, who are not particularly valuable for industry or construction trades; and furthermore such people often join the *militsiia* while they are waiting for better work to appear.”⁵⁶

The *militsiia* accepted recruits without any qualifications, yet remained chronically understaffed. At the beginning of 1931 in seven central regions of the RSFSR, for example, 2,650 positions remained vacant, positions for which police had funding but could hire no officers. Of the recruits that could be found, many were said to be “class-alien, decaying, unfit-for-work elements.”⁵⁷ Shortage of cadres early in the decade was such a problem that police academies regularly graduated their students well before their already brief training schedule was complete.⁵⁸

Labor turnover also compounded staffing difficulties. The OGPU found, to its surprise, it initially could do little to solve the problem. In 1929, yearly turnover rates for police in the RSFSR were 64% for the regular *militsiia* and 53% for the industrial (*vedomstvennaia*) *militsiia*. In 1930, rates were 64% and almost 80%, respectively. Turnover in certain areas was higher, often up to 100%, meaning that a given police position was occupied by a different officer every year. Policemen often treated the position as seasonal labor, taking the job to bridge slow periods between planting and harvest in the countryside.⁵⁹ Turnover remained a problem throughout the early 1930s, reaching levels as high as 50% per year even in major cities like Moscow through 1935.⁶⁰

High turnover rates wrought havoc with the modest system of training maintained by central officials. Policemen often changed jobs once they received training because their bureaucratic experience made them prime candidates for better positions in the economic or state bureaucracies. In 1930, for example, in five *kraii* and *oblasti* of the RSFSR 1,015 policemen began work after receiving formal training while 899 policemen with previous training left for other jobs. Police

55. OGPU officials generally were satisfied with the social composition of the *militsiia*. One report noted that as of July 1, 1932, 23.3% of policemen were party members, 6.2% were *Komsomol* members, and 70.5% were non-party. Most of the party members were the commanding officers, while very few rank-and-file police officers were party members. The report also outlined the social composition of the *militsiia*: 21.2% workers, 64.9% peasants of various social-economic categories, and 13.9% white-collar workers (*sluzhashchie*). The worker contingent was relatively stable, having grown 1.5% in 1931. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, ll. 26-27.

56. GARF, f. 1235, op. 141, d. 910, l. 40.

57. *Ibid.*, ll. 40-39.

58. GARF, f. 9415, op. 1, d. 1, l. 55.

59. GARF, f. 1235, op. 141, d. 910, ll. 39-37.

60. GARF, f. 9401 (OGPU-NKVD-MVD SSSR), f. 12, op. 135, d. 26.

officers often left the *militsiia* to work as security guards or consultants for the very same organizations, factories, or department stores at which they had been stationed as police officers. State and industrial organizations simply offered better pay for the same position.⁶¹ In a final affront, police who quit for better work usually took their precious uniforms with them, especially in the countryside.⁶²

The *militsiia* under the OGPU also continued to suffer from the same disciplinary difficulties that plagued the NEP-era police. Police officers were often removed from their assigned guard posts for other administrative duties; sometimes they left of their own accord or simply fell asleep. Central authorities complained that the majority of regular policemen did not know how to use the weapons issued to them. Many knew neither their specific duties nor the basic characteristics of the city around them.⁶³

Central officials were particularly concerned about crime and disciplinary infractions within the *militsiia* and with an overall lack of “Chekist” spirit.⁶⁴ Drunkenness, sleeping on the job, and rude behavior towards the population were widespread. One 1932 report from Moscow *oblastʹ* maintained that “anti-Soviet moods” had become commonplace within the *militsiia* and that the *militsiia* was “infiltrated to a significant extent by class-alien and unfit elements.” The report provided a litany of examples. In Reutovskii *raion* ten former kulaks, traders, and other class-alien elements worked in the *militsiia*, including the position of *politruk* of the industrial *militsiia*. Local administration was characterized by nepotism, while police misappropriated public and private property for “mercenary-minded” purposes. Drunken policemen fired indiscriminately on workers, raped arrested women, and murdered drunks in local jails. In Ramenskii *raion* a “Trotskyite group” controlled the *militsiia*, openly promoting anti-Soviet agitation at rural meetings.⁶⁵

In all areas, policemen abused their positions with impunity, seizing property from arrested individuals for their personal use and accepting bribes. As a result, many *raiony* witnessed extraordinarily high levels of administrative sanctions for crimes on duty. In Kuznetskii *raion*, 48% of the entire *militsiia* staff was charged with some sort of malfeasance during 1932; in Esenovskii *raion*, 70%; in Pushkin

61. Usov, the police chief, was particularly bitter about the practice of inter-bureaucratic “headhunting” that drained the *militsiia* of the few qualified officers it had. See GARF, f. 1235, op. 141, d. 910, ll. 39-37.

62. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, ll. 66-77.

63. One 1932 circular chided local officers for their habit of working “by the book”: police failed to see themselves as a “master (*khoziain*) of the street” and instead resembled “passive watch-guards (*budochniki*) of the old times or, at best, blind executors of policy.” *Ibid.*, l. 83.

64. Central officials were well aware of the tendency of local police to use physical force and violate norms of procedure when arresting citizens. A September 1931 *Prikaz* from Usov complained that local policemen often beat people they arrested to loss of consciousness, especially drunks. Usov strongly condemned such behavior, saying that those policemen who use physical methods during interrogation were “class-alien elements” and “holdovers from the tsarist period.” GARF, f. 9415, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 134-135.

65. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 491, ll. 8-9.

raion — 80%; in Shelkovskii *raion* — 85%; and in Kommunist *raion* - 96%.⁶⁶ Disciplinary infractions were often attributed to alcohol consumption on the job. One 1932 report noted that “drunkenness in the *militsiia*, notwithstanding a series of measures [against it], remains at a very high level — 890 policemen disciplined [for drunkenness in Moscow in] April 1932, 1,131 in May, 1,041 in July 1932.”⁶⁷

Poor performance of duties and disciplinary infractions were particularly pronounced in the industrial *militsiia*. The most common complaints were that the industrial *militsiia*, like the police in general, constantly left their guard posts, fell asleep, or failed to show up for work at all. An August 1931 circular from Moscow noted that such low-level performance problems made up 90% of the total infractions committed by both the industrial and the regular *militsiia*. The 7,631 industrial police in Moscow *oblast'* (with eighteen *raiony* not reporting)⁶⁸ committed 7,804 disciplinary infractions in 1931 that resulted in some form of punishment; 4,714 (60.3%) were relatively minor infractions on duty, such as sleeping or leaving without authorization.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, statistically every industrial policeman violated work-related ordinances at least once per year. Industrial police were particularly prone to leave their jobs without returning their official police identification, which they then used to commit crimes and pass themselves off as police officers.⁷⁰

The lack of coordination and bureaucratic flux within the police system as a whole provided numerous possibilities for flagrant abuse of the system. The following example is somewhat unrepresentative due to the extended nature of the crime but not at all unique in the chaotic context of the early 1930s. In Moscow in 1931 the Detective Department reported that they had arrested a twenty-year old professional criminal from Kiev who made a living impersonating a member of the Moscow Soviet and an OGPU officer. The impostor appeared at marketplaces and, presenting his forged credentials, collected “special taxes” from private traders of up to 100 rubles. The impostor provided receipts for his “special taxes” complete with official-looking stamps from the Moscow Soviet and the local administration of the Commissariat of Finance. Local traders, accustomed to these sorts of shakedowns from real police officers and themselves often living at the border

66. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

67. This report, however, stated that overall levels of anti-Soviet opinion in the *militsiia* were acceptable and were the result of poor working and living conditions and low pay. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, ll. 26-28.

68. The fact that several areas would simply not report information to the center, even in Moscow, was a ubiquitous feature of police reports in the early 1930s. To some extent, the police leadership accepted this reality and drew conclusions based on the data that was in fact sent in.

69. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 474, ll. 79a-80.

70. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 9, l. 48. OGPU officials deemed the industrial *militsiia* more prone to graft and theft than the regular *militsiia*, both because industrial policemen tended not to be career police officers and because they had close contact with valuable goods. The OGPU carried out a general purge of the membership of the industrial *militsiia* in October 1931. I have no information regarding the results of the purge. GARF, f. 9415, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 173-173ob.

between legality and illegality, had little to gain by not paying. This “officer” threatened to arrest individuals in the name of the OGPU if they did not pay their “taxes” on the spot, and in several cases, according to the police report, actually “carried out arrests, escorting the “arrested” individuals to local police stations.”⁷¹ Even in Moscow, coordination between regular and secret police activity proved surprisingly weak.

At a very basic level, the OGPU’s attempt to restructure the regular police was derailed in the first years of the 1930s by problems of staffing, funding, and lack of local enthusiasm for the project. The administrative chaos of the first five-year plan made bureaucratic restructuring difficult if not impossible. The OGPU leadership, however, was unprepared for the extent to which the regular police was disorganized and unprofessional. As a result, the set of reforms promoted by the OGPU that were intended to create a new preventative police failed within the first few years of OGPU control over the *militsiia*. The unification of regular and political police that took place across the rest of the decade occurred in spite of these initial plans, and it occurred in ways neither planned nor expected by the central leadership.

The passport system and the OGPU/*militsiia* relationship

The abject failure of the OGPU to reform the *militsiia* in the first several years of the 1930s fundamentally shaped the evolution of Soviet policing for the rest of the decade. The failure of the police leadership to create a well-organized, hierarchical, “modern” policing system opened space for the promotion by local and central officials alike of other methods of policing in the mid-1930s. These methods differed substantially from those promoted by the OGPU when it took over the *militsiia*. The failure also drove the regular and secret police together in terms of everyday practice in ways that were not initially intended by the OGPU leadership. One of the most important outcomes of this co-mingling of regular and political policing was the general tendency of the police, both regular and secret, to view the internal passport system as a policing tactic by the mid-1930s rather than as a way to regulate population movements or as a way to strengthen the collective farm system (both of which were originally important issues in the creation of the passport system in 1932).⁷² Use of the passport system as a policing tactic increased the tendency of the OGPU to treat the *militsiia* as subordinate forces that could be called upon to carry out specific pressing tasks. It also increased the extent to which the OGPU was involved in issues of policing public disorder and social control.⁷³

71. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 476, l. 126.

72. The idea that the passport system became a policing system is becoming an accepted position among specialists. See Gijs Kessler’s contribution to this volume.

73. Since Kessler’s article examines the passport system in detail, I will only outline in general terms the effects of the passport system on OGPU/NKVD relations.

In 1932, the *Politbiuro* used the announcement of the new nation-wide internal passport system as an opportune moment to create an all-Union Central Inspectorate of the *Militsiia* under the OGPU's overt jurisdiction. The regime abolished the Administrative Departments of local soviets, announced publicly that the OGPU had controlled the *militsiia* since 1930, and eliminated the façade of local soviet control over police completely.⁷⁴ Police chiefs, who were now openly cross-appointed as OGPU assistants, continued to sit on the Executive Committee of local soviets and often had a spot on the local party Bureau as well. In bureaucratic terms, the passport system represented the first instance of OGPU officers directing the daily operations of the regular police. Chiefs of Passport Departments (*stoly*) in individual police stations were appointed directly from members of the Operative Department of the OGPU. While the *militsiia* carried out the outward work of passportization, the Operative Department of the OGPU coordinated the operations and processed the cases of individuals to be expelled from major cities. The instructions to OGPU officials regarding targets of the passport system mixed categories of regular and political criminals and were strikingly similar to those issued during the mass operations in 1937. In Moscow, local OGPU administrations compiled lists of "counter-revolutionary, kulak, criminal, and other anti-Soviet elements" that had come to the attention of the OGPU in previous work and forwarded the lists to the Operative Department of the Moscow *oblast'* OGPU administration for further action. The Operative Department then instructed local *militsiia* officials to expel these individuals from the city.⁷⁵

Sentencing procedure regarding the passport system also brought the *militsiia* and the GPU together in practical terms. The Special Board (*Osoboe soveshchanie*) of the OGPU had, since 1924, retained the right to sentence "socially harmful elements" to five years in a labor camp, but the passport system substantially extended the arena of routine extra-judicial sentencing by the OGPU. Local OGPU administrations were authorized to create "passport *troiki*" with the right to sentence offenders to up to three years in a labor camp.⁷⁶ These *troiki* processed cases (within 48 hours in major cities) that were drawn up and sent to them in lists by the Passport Departments of local *militsiia* administrations. Punishments meted out by these *troiki* ranged from "Minus 30" (deprivation of the right to live in 30 major cities of the USSR) for first-time offenders who were unemployed or labor shirkers, to three years in a resettlement camp (*spetsposelki*) for "*lishentsy*, kulaks, and dekulakized peasants," to three years in labor camp for "criminals and other anti-social elements."⁷⁷

74. SZ, 84 (31 December 1932), articles 518-519, pp. 824-825.

75. GARF, f. 9401, op. 12, d. 137, ll. 1-2.

76. These *troiki* consisted of the *pomoshchnik PP OGPU po Militsii*, the *nachal'nik* of the *Passportnyi otdel*, and the *nachal'nik* of the *Operativnyi otdel* of the given OGPU administration.

77. GARF, f. 9401, op. 12, d. 137, ll. 202-204. The fact that criminals and other anti-socials, along with repeat offenders, were singled out for the harshest punishment is consistent with the general trend of repression in conjunction with the passport system.

By 1935 purges of cities, carried out increasingly by both *militsiia* and secret police officers under the auspices of the passport system, had become the basic method of Soviet policing. The police increasingly dealt with specific categories of crime, especially speculation and hooliganism, via the passport system rather than sending offenders through the court system. This mixing of regular and political police activity intensified the trend towards viewing public-order crimes such as hooliganism and speculation in terms of their “threat” to the Soviet system. It also increased the tendency of central and local officials alike to turn to purges of specific categories of criminals in order to address recurring problems of criminal activity and weak police administration. In the early 1930s, the police leadership did not expect to control crime through urban purges carried out by a unified regular and political police. The idea of two separate policing hierarchies proved unworkable by mid-decade, however, while at the same time the central party leadership began to increase pressure on the OGPU/NKVD to reduce social disorder, especially in urban areas. The result was an increasing tendency among top police officials, especially Iagoda, to promote coordinated efforts by the OGPU and the *militsiia* to purge urban areas of all “criminal elements.”

Policing and political debates, 1934-1936

The 1934 creation of the Union-level NKVD represented a major step in the centralization of police bureaucracies. The creation of the NKVD is often seen as a point of moderation in Soviet criminal justice, especially regarding the restriction of the extra-judicial sentencing powers of the OGPU that accompanied the reorganization. Peter H. Solomon, Jr. has shown convincingly that the creation of the NKVD SSSR was connected to Vyshinskii’s attempt to increase the authority of the judicial system and reel in the bureaucratic disorder that permeated the activities of the secret police during the early 1930s.⁷⁸ But the creation of the NKVD also completed several trends towards centralization within the policing system that had accelerated after 1932. Since the restrictions of the OGPU/NKVD sentencing powers were temporary at best, the more lasting effect of the creation of the NKVD SSSR was the centralization of the police and of the prison and colony systems.

The NKVD SSSR was created in the context of a series of commissions and debates about public order and the police that took place from early 1934 to mid-1935 and from which several major initiatives eventually emerged, including the 1935 laws on hooliganism and juvenile delinquency. These debates began in late 1933 at the center, although many of the issues discussed in them had been important parts of conflicts about policing in localities for several years. *Politbiuro* materials suggest that Stalin in particular was unhappy with the ability of the *militsiia* and the OGPU to maintain order in Moscow itself in late 1933 and early 1934. In December 1933, the *Politbiuro*, on Stalin’s request, demanded a concrete

78. P. H. Solomon, *op. cit.*: 153-173, especially 166-167.

report from the OGPU regarding the tasks and responsibilities of the *militsiia*. At the same time the *Politbiuro* ordered the OGPU, on the personal responsibility of the head of the Moscow police, to “establish order in the streets of Moscow and purge them of filth.”⁷⁹ This censure was followed by orders later in December to the OGPU to execute participants in armed robbery in Moscow, to exile individuals from Moscow and its *oblast’* who had two or more sentences for theft or two or more arrests (*privody*) for hooliganism in the previous year, and to exile beggars and “declassed elements” to their former places of residence, to special resettlements, or to labor camps.⁸⁰ Shortly afterwards, on January 3, 1934, Stalin removed Prokof’ev from the position of *nachal’nik* of the Central OGPU Inspectorate of the *Militsiia* (GURKM pri OGPU), replaced him with L. N. Bel’skii, and again ordered the OGPU to “present the Central Committee with a concrete program of activity for the GU *Militsii* and [its] Passport Departments for the year 1934.”⁸¹ The report prepared for the *Politbiuro*, signed by Iagoda and Bel’skii, was radical, even for Iagoda. It contained a range of recommendations regarding the *militsiia*, most of which centered on the idea of further use of the passport system as a policing tactic and further connections between the work of the *militsiia* and the OGPU. The report stressed the need to continue sentencing passport violators extra-judicially to labor camps, and suggested increasing punishments for certain violators, such as hooligans and “proprietors of and visitors to criminal dens (*pritony*)” to ten years of hard labor. Iagoda’s response to the *Politbiuro* censure also included a request to strengthen the *militsiia* by sending an additional 500 Chekists to work as *militsiia* functionaries in localities.⁸²

The question of the plan of work for the *militsiia* (and, ultimately, the OGPU) was a major issue at the center in 1934 and 1935, and it spawned at least four sets of *Sovnarkom* SSSR commissions and debates dedicated to public order problems. One commission met under V. Chubar’, which was concerned primarily with the question of juvenile delinquency, while another met under Ia. Rudzutak and was concerned with the *militsiia* and in particular policies regarding hooliganism, speculation, and juvenile delinquency. In addition, vigorous debate continued throughout 1934 about penal populations and the relative proper distribution of inmates between labor camps of the OGPU and the colonies of the Commissariat of Justice. In 1933, Iagoda requested and was given the right to transfer to OGPU camps all inmates in the Soviet penal system sentenced to two years or more of

79. Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial’no-Politicheskoi Istorii (RGASPI), f. 17, op. 3, d. 937, l. 1.

80. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 15, l. 161. In the same spirit, the *Politbiuro* on January 7, 1934, authorized the OGPU to expel 2,000 “declassed elements” from Kharkov to labor colonies and camps, noting specifically that this expulsion should take place in small groups of 80-100 individuals rather than as a large-scale operation. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 15, l. 164.

81. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 937, l. 28. For the *Sovnarkom* SSSR version of this *Postanovlenie*, see GARF, f. 5446 (Sovet narodnykh komissarov SSSR), op. 15a, d. 1130, l. 11.

82. GARF, f. 5446, op. 15a, d. 1130, l. 1-10. The overall impression provided by this report is that Iagoda considered problems of hooliganism, child homelessness, and speculation the responsibility of both the *militsiia* and the OGPU.

deprivation of freedom.⁸³ Top justice officials considered this policy a one-time transfer, while Iagoda argued that it was a permanent change. The acrimonious battle over this issue trailed on throughout 1934 without direct resolution. Within months, however, Iagoda and the OGPU/NKVD decisively won this conflict. All corrective labor institutions under the control of the Commissariat of Justice, including prisons, labor colonies, and compulsory labor bureaus, were transferred to the newly formed NKVD, making the question mute. The transfer took place in October 1934, after the creation of the NKVD SSSR but well before the Kirov murder, which is often seen as the turning point away from moderation in NKVD activity in the mid-1930s.⁸⁴ The creation of the NKVD was thus not only a curtailment of police powers but, in this instance, a bureaucratic consolidation of its position in the Soviet penal system which effectively cemented its victory in an on-going conflict with other justice and police organizations.⁸⁵

Finally, it is worth noting that the *Politbiuro* commission that considered the question of reformulating the NKVD, formed in February 1934, took place simultaneously with the above debates and shared members with all of them.⁸⁶ The materials of this commission are not publicly available to researchers, but the timetable of deliberations alone is instructive. The original decision to consider reorganization of the NKVD took place in February 1934; on March 8, 1934, the commission charged with discussing the matter was widened to include sixteen of the leading figures in the criminal justice system; Stalin and Ezhov were added to the committee on April 1; and in July 1934 the NKVD SSSR was formed, with substantial but not complete limitations on extra-judicial sentencing.⁸⁷ These deliberations took place at the same time that the other commissions met to discuss

83. GARF, f. 5446, op. 15a, d. 1172, ll. 1-4. OGPU camps, from their creation in mid-1929, had exercised the right to detain all individuals sentenced to three or more years of deprivation of freedom; the lowering of this limit to two years was a major blow to NKIu. Iagoda initially requested in April 1934 that all penal populations be transferred to OGPU camps, and that NKIu bodies retain only individuals under investigation, cassation, or sentenced to resettlement. This proposal was rejected by Molotov (and presumably Stalin), but the two-year limit did gain the support of Molotov (and Stalin) and was *de facto* put into effect. This change entailed and was perceived as a major bureaucratic victory for the secret police in the long-standing inter-bureaucratic conflict over the right to administer Soviet penal populations. The *Politbiuro* authorized a commission consisting of Iagoda, Krylenko, and Akulov to be set up to discuss the matter and make a recommendation for legislative action. GARF, f. 5446, op. 15a, d. 1172, ll. 5-6. Akulov and Krylenko agreed with this proposal in principle, though they both resisted the idea of making it a permanent policy change, and Akulov requested that the issue be settled in conjunction with the impending reformulation of the NKVD. *Ibid.*, l. 7.

84. RGASPI, f. 17 (Tsentrál'nyi komitet), op. 3, d. 953, l. 100.

85. For a detailed examination of the 1934 reorganization of the NKVD SSSR, see Francesco Benvenuti, "The 'Reform' of the NKVD, 1934," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 49, 6 (1997): 1037-1056.

86. Participants in the debate understood specifically that the question of the reorganization of the NKVD SSSR was directly related to Iagoda's report and the work of the *militsiia* and the OGPU regarding crime. Akulov, for instance, in his response to Iagoda's suggestions noted that at least one of them, the suggestion that the NKVD be accorded the right to sentence policemen internally who were accused of crimes of office, should be discussed and decided within the framework of the new law on the NKVD. GARF, f. 5446, op. 15a, d. 1130, ll. 12-12ob.

87. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 939, l. 2; d. 941, l. 12; d. 943, l. 10; d. 948, ll. 33, 92-94.

issues of public order, policing, and the proper activities of the *militsiia* and OGPU. Although all of these commissions were concerned with improving policing practice and reducing social disorder, in none of them did the participants argue for serious reduction in the vigor of policing activity, the number of policemen, or the number of individuals arrested in general in the USSR. None of the top-level participants in these debates, furthermore, posited a strict division between “political” and “regular” crime, or between the overall tasks of the OGPU/UGB NKVD and the *militsiia*. The series of well-known laws and campaigns against hooliganism, speculation, and juvenile delinquency that appeared in 1935 were the product of this extended and often self-contradictory set of debates in 1934 and 1935. When those campaigns were launched, both the *militsiia* and the UGB were thoroughly implicated in the solutions favored by top-level police and party officials.

If, at the center, policy makers tended to mix their conceptions of political and regular policing by the mid-1930s, the tendency in local practice was even more pronounced, especially in the area of economic crime. Speculation became once again an increasingly important issue in late 1936 and early 1937, when difficulties associated with the abolishment of the rationing system drove a series of campaigns and structural changes in policing that continued the process of mixing of *militsiia* and UGB duties. A substantial portion of the duties of the Economic Department (EKO) NKVD at the *oblast'* level was transferred to the Detective Department in 1935, after which Detectives were responsible for undercover surveillance of markets and bazaars to prevent theft and speculation. The heads of the EKO were instructed to coordinate the work of the Detective Department, while the detectives were to report on their work directly to the head of the EKO in their *oblast'*.⁸⁸ This trend culminated in the creation of the Department for Battle with Theft of Socialist Property and Speculation (*Otdel po Bor'be s Khishcheniiami Sotsialisticheskoi Osobennosti i Spekuliatsiei* — OBKhSS) in March 1937, which united parts of the Economic Department of the GUGB NKVD and parts of local Detective Department administrations that dealt with economic crime. The duties of OBKhSS, as defined in the circular that created it, mixed both the personnel of the regular and political police and categories of regular and political crime. It was charged with not only undercover surveillance of speculation and related crimes but also surveillance of “petty wrecking” (*melkoe vreditel'stvo*), a category that by nature upsets divisions between political and regular crime.⁸⁹

88. GARF, f. 9401, op. 12, d. 126, ll. 304-305.

89. In localities the OBKhSS was initially an *otdelenie* of the URKM, subordinate in turn to the UNKVD — in other words, the OBKhSS was initially set up as a *militsiia* sub-department rather than a department of the NKVD. The subordination of OBKhSS to the *militsiia* must have seemed quite a step down the career ladder for those officers of the Economic Department (EKO) of the NKVD, Chekisty in their own rights, who had to transfer down the ranks from the old Economic Department to the new OBKhSS and hence lost effective rank (even though the initial instructions regarding the creation of OBKhSS state specifically that such officers would retain all their perks). Perhaps for this reason, the NKVD issued a second circular two months later, which made the OBKhSS into a free-standing *Otdel* of local UNKVD administrations, hierarchically equal to the *militsiia* administrations instead of subordinate to them. GARF, f. 9401, op. 12, d. 126, ll. 23-26, 28.

The period from 1935 to 1937 saw further centralization of police activity, increasing control of the *militsiia* by the central leadership, and a large degree of success in terms of bureaucratic restructuring that had eluded the OGPU before 1935. The creation of the NKVD resulted in stricter formal subjugation of the *militsiia* to local NKVD administrations. The instructions issued by Iagoda outlining the new structure of the NKVD SSSR made the *militsiia* into a free-standing Administration (*Upravlenie*) of each *oblast'*- or *krai*-level NKVD administration and specifically stated that the *nachal'nik* of each local *militsiia* administration was directly subordinate to the *nachal'nik* of the NKVD of the corresponding city or *raion*.⁹⁰ This centralization did not progress without difficulty; central authorities did continue to report problems in 1935-1936 in forcing local police to work in the manner demanded of them. Local NKVD administrations were often quite unscrupulous about the extent to which they sent in false reports to the center about their activities and about staffing levels. In particular, local police continued to pay little attention to certain aspects of policing that were important to central officials but not so important in many localities, such as proper supervision of fining procedures and especially the maintenance of extensive lists and card catalogs associated with the passport system. Central officials also continued to complain in 1934 and 1935 that local NKVD chiefs undervalued the work of the *militsiia* and did little to control and direct its work. Overall, however, central authorities were relatively satisfied with the progress of centralization of the *militsiia* by roughly 1936 and early 1937, especially in comparison to the situation in the early 1930s. Of course, the exact implementation of central directives was always in question in the 1930s, and central police officials could never be sure if the campaigns they ordered into action would be carried out in the exact way they expected. However, although substantial deficiencies still existed, central police officials could expect by this point that local police would carry out central directives more or less within the parameters set by the center.

By 1936 and 1937, the UGB and the *militsiia* were firmly ensconced in areas of competence that had been separate at the beginning of the 1930s. One cause of this intermingling of tasks is undoubtedly the fact that Chekisty were increasingly busy in 1936-1937 with matters related to the hunt for internal political enemies, especially within the party but also in the population at large.⁹¹ As the UGB concentrated less on issues of public-order policing in 1936 and 1937 under direct pressure from Ezhov to turn to "enemies of the people," the *militsiia*, already accustomed to working with Chekisty in many areas, filled the breach. By the time that the mass operations took place, the *militsiia* had expanded their activity to many areas that easily shaded over into "counter-revolutionary activity," while the

90. GARF, f. 9401, op. 1a, d. 5, ll. 1-3.

91. See, for example, V. Khaustov on the increasing tendency of the UGB after 1935 to focus on searching for spies within German populations. V. Khaustov, "Repressii protiv sovetskikh nemtsev do nachala massovoi operatsii 1937 gg.," in I. L. Shcherbakova, ed., *Nakazannyi narod. Repressii protiv rossiiskikh nemtsev* (Moscow: Zven'ia, 1999).

rest of the NKVD apparatus had substantial experience with policing public-order crimes like hooliganism, banditry, passport violations, and speculation. Thus, when the *Politbiuro* began ordering mass arrests of “kulak, criminal, and other active anti-social elements” in August 1937, both the UGB and the *militsiia* were poised to fulfill the quotas.⁹²

Conclusions

The failure of the reform program promoted by the OGPU in the early 1930s had two major consequences for the evolution of Soviet policing in the 1930s. First, it led to increasing unification of the regular and political police in terms of local structures and operational activity. The political police leadership in the mid-1930s centralized regular policing, subsumed the *militsiia* under local UGB administrations, and became involved in policing low-level manifestations of public disorder that were not seen as “political” in the 1920s. The *militsiia* and the OGPU/UGB also increasingly collaborated in identifying and expelling several crucial categories of “undesirable” urban residents, including speculators, violators of the internal passport system, and hooligans (a category that became closely connected with labor violations in the mid-1930s). The mixing of secret and regular

92. The mass operations themselves are outside the scope of this paper. I will only note that evidence suggests that, though they varied from locality to locality, the entire police system, including the *militsiia*, was involved in the selection of targets. In the case of the *militsiia*, especially the OBKhSS and the passport *otdely* continued to be closely connected to the work of the UGB during these operations. One set of such examples comes from Mikhail Shreider’s memoirs. Even before the mass operations took place, the NKVD *nachal’nik* in Ivanovo pressured him to transfer serious criminal cases to the UGB. “You’ve got many bandits and murders to deal with [in the *militsiia*], Mikhail Pavlovich [Shreider] — you must impart a political hue to important cases. I’m sure that there are many spies and terrorists among them who have been thrown at us [from abroad].” Shreider’s answer was negative (“Don’t say stupid things,” he retorts, “I don’t have any spies or terrorists [among *militsiia* arrestees]. All of our prisoners are gangsters and recidivists.” Mikhail Shreider, *NKVD iznutri. Zapiski chekista* (Moscow: Vozvrashchenie, 1995): 46. When the mass operations began in Ivanovo *oblast’*, the NKVD chief personally told him, as the *militsiia oblast’ nachal’nik*, to select serious criminal cases for consideration by the special *troiki* — “repeat offenders guilty of banditism, murder, robbery, escape from places of confinement, etc.” (*Ibid.*: 71) Shreider also notes that he was personally drafted into the work of interrogation of one *oblast’*-level party official, even though he complained that such work distracted him from attention to *militsiia* affairs. (*Ibid.*: 73-74) Finally, Shreider stresses that his “real” work during the mass operations continued to be investigation and sentencing of “criminal elements” through the police (*militsiiskie*) *troiki*, and he notes with some amount of regret that the maximum sentence these *troiki* could hand down was five years, the result of which was that “many dangerous criminals received punishment that was too mild.” (*Ibid.*: 74, fn. 1). Shreider throughout his memoir attempts to separate his work from that of the UGB (and, in the same way, the Ezhov period from the Iagoda period), but his narrative makes clear that, at the very least, the UNKVD chief in Ivanovo pressured him to transfer criminals to the “political” sentencing process and that, in 1937-1938, this in fact did happen. Shreider’s narrative is full of inconsistencies and mistakes, and one is struck by his repeated insistence that he kept his work in the *militsiia* separate from that of the UGB when, at the same time, the text relates many instances where he in fact did participate in such work. Shreider was somewhat unrepresentative in the extent to which he defended his *militsiia* work from incursions from the UGB, and he is somewhat inconsistent in his telling of this part of his past.

policing was largely ad-hoc and did not correspond to any overall plan on the part of the police or party leadership. Rather, it was the result of a combination of local bureaucratic realities and increasing central concern with the effects of crime and public disorder on the emerging Stalinist economic and social systems. Second, this failure led to new set of policing tactics by 1934-1935, including passport checks and purges of cities, which contradicted the overtly systematized plans that the OGPU leadership had championed in the early 1930s. These massive and rather indiscriminate purges of urban areas in the mid-1930s compounded problems of marginal populations and administrative disorder, and they eventually formed a substantial part of the practices employed in the mass operations of 1937-1938.

The attempt to create a new Soviet policing system through introduction of policing practices understood as highly modern aspects of all European policing systems had little chance to succeed in the early 1930s for a range of reasons that were not unique to the sphere of policing. These “modern” policing innovations tend to require a reasonably stable population, not to mention a stable police force itself — police work with informants, or daily contact between population and constables, require long-term cultivation of personal relationships between state and social actors rather than reliance on purely bureaucratic or structural relationships. Such policing reforms became most effective in modern European countries precisely when police officers became a stable and somewhat predictable part of the milieu that they were policing. This outcome was largely impossible in the USSR during a period of mass collectivization and forced industrialization in which both police and people were in complete flux. Instead, the failure to create a modern *militsiia* in the early 1930s increased the reliance of the regular police on extra-judicial repression as a policing tactic. Ultimately, the blurring of regular and political policing that emerged from the bureaucratic confusion of the early 1930s intensified and expanded the scope of Stalinist mass repression in the pre-war years.

*Department of History
University of Alabama
202 Ten Hoor Hall
Box 870212
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487*

e-mail: phagenlo@tenhoor.as.ua.edu