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The attempt to portray the founder of the Soviet secret police, Felix Djerzhinsky, as a "great humanist" in two recent Pravda articles is an element in the current campaign to overcome the lack of popular respect for the Soviet police, a factor which apparently is impeding the exercise of normal police functions.

Djerzhinsky, of Polish gentry origin, was appointed chief of the first Soviet secret police organization, the Chekha, on 20 December 1917 and headed the successor organizations (GPU, OGPU) until his death from a heart attack in 1926.¹ Whether the resurrection of Djerzhinsky will contribute to changing the current public image of the police in the USSR remains questionable, but it is certain that none of his successors can be used to the same purpose. Although Djerzhinsky built the secret police organization and supervised its expansion into all spheres of Soviet life, and although he was the overseer of the mass terror following an attempt on Lenin's life in 1918, his efforts were directed primarily against the opponents or "suspected" opponents of the Bolshevik regime.

The use of the secret police to crush opposition to Stalin within the Party began only in 1923, at a time when Djerzhinsky, jointly serving as Commissar of Ways of Communication since April 1921, was entrusting the actual administration of police affairs to his deputy, Yagoda.

Djerzhinsky has been described by his contemporaries as a cold-blooded, sentimental, uncorruptable Bolshevik fanatic who did not exhibit the sadistic traits of some of his underlings.

¹Information taken from The Soviet Secret Police, Wolin and Slusser, Frederick A. Praeger Inc., New York, 1957.

That there were sadistic, criminal and degenerate elements under Djerzhinsky in the Chekha was admitted in the organization's publication Yezhedel'nik (Weekly) in the early autumn of 1918. The issue of 13 October 1918 noted that "reports are coming in from all sides that not only unworthy, but also outright criminal individuals are trying to penetrate the...Chekha". The Chekha soon attracted criticism for its methods even from supporters of the regime. In reply to these criticisms, Lenin, at a November 1918 Chekha conference, said that in spite of the "strange elements" in the Chekha, it was "putting into practice the dictatorship of the proletariat" and "there is no other path to the freeing of the masses than the suppression of the exploiters by force."

Although criticism increased, the law of 17 February 1919, which took away the Chekha's right to impose sentences, did not change the situation in practice. This was also the case following the abolition of the Chekha on 6 February 1922, a move which was supposed to reflect the increased liberalism of Lenin's New Economic Policy.

Djerzhinsky did not take vigorous action against the "criminal elements" in his organization, and all the later features of the Soviet secret police are recognizable in embryonic form during his reign. The organization created by Lenin and Djerzhinsky proved to be tailor-made to assist Stalin's accession to power, and these two founders of the secret police must share a large part of the responsibility for the subsequent gross abuses now attributed euphemistically to the "cult of personality".

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