

Screenplay for the film "1933 — Genrikh Yagoda . Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI

Screenplay Summary:

*The text centres on Genrikh Yagoda, a key figure in the Soviet security apparatus (Cheka–OGPU–NKVD), and his crucial role in building the White Sea–Baltic Canal (Belomorkanal) and the wider Gulag system. It opens with a staged scene in 1933: Stalin, Voroshilov and Kirov cruise along the newly completed canal, surrounded by famous Soviet writers such as Gorky, Alexei Tolstoy, Zoshchenko and Shklovsky. Their trip results in a collective book, *The White Sea–Baltic Canal Named After Stalin*, a carefully planned OGPU propaganda project. The book glorifies the canal as a triumph of socialism and re-education. Some writers, like Ilf and Petrov, manage to avoid contributing; others, like the returned émigré critic Svyatopolk-Mirsky, will later be arrested and perish in the camps despite their collaboration.*

Behind the scenes stands Yagoda, officially only deputy but in practice the head of the OGPU. Related by marriage to Sverdlov and bound to Gorky through a surprisingly warm correspondence, he personifies the fusion of terror, social engineering and personal ambition. He conceptualises the vast mass of prisoners — dekulakised peasants, political opponents, common criminals — as an industrial resource. The goal is not only to build the canal cheaply and quickly, but to manufacture a new type of human being, broken by hunger and fear, reduced to a simple formula: work = food = chance of survival.

*The text gives a vivid account of the Belomor construction: almost no machinery, archaic techniques with horses, nets and winches, engineers who are themselves prisoners, harsh northern climate, minimal rations. Over 20 months, some 280,000 people pass through the project; about 110,000 die. Corpses are cleared away like waste; their bones sometimes end up mixed into the concrete of the locks. Meanwhile, the official book speaks of prisoners “regaining their health,” of women in silk dresses discovering the “marvellous” Karelian wheelbarrow, mimicking the tone of the camp newspaper *Re-forging*.*

A sophisticated coercive system is described: work brigades whose food rations depend on overfulfilling the norm; “educators” (often former criminals) who promise an extra pirozhok or a ladle of porridge in exchange for 115 percent performance; an internal hierarchy that sets “socially close” common criminals above political prisoners. Striking vignettes — a geography teacher overwhelmed by receiving his first pirozhok, a peasant named Balabukha recognising his own deported blue bull in a camp farm and weeping into its horns — illustrate the moral collapse and cruelty of the system.

In parallel, the text shows how the OGPU penetrates urban and cultural life: prestige housing in central Moscow for security officials and writers; execution cellars in ordinary apartment basements; camps installed in former monasteries; beggars removed from the streets and sent to special settlements; tight control over foreign travel of artists; censorship of songs, dances and imported records. The inventory of items confiscated from Yagoda at his arrest — hundreds of foreign records, luxury clothes, furs, carpets, antique tableware — reveals the lavish lifestyle of the Stalinist elite, sharply contrasted with the starvation of prisoners and ordinary citizens.

Yagoda also plays a direct role in criminalising homosexuality: on his initiative, a new article is added to the Soviet Criminal Code in 1934 that punishes “pederasty,” equating non-heterosexual

orientation with counter-revolutionary activity. This happens at the very time Nazi Germany is sending homosexuals to concentration camps, marking a grim parallel between the two totalitarian regimes. The text notes the evolving relationship between Stalin and Hitler — from hostility to a quasi-alliance, which Stalin maintains until June 22, 1941.

Ultimately, the machinery Yagoda helped to build devours him and his circle. His dacha at Kommunarka becomes an execution and burial site for later victims of repression: Bukharin, senior Red Army commanders, people's commissars, camp bosses, writers. Yagoda is shot, the Gulag network is fully formed and ready to receive over a million additional prisoners. The text ends with the letters of Yagoda's son, little Garik, writing from a children's reception centre to his grandmother in a camp: "Once again I did not die... I die many times." The man who organised mass incarceration and death leaves behind a child trapped in the same system, closing the vicious circle of terror.

Screenplay:

1933 Genrikh Yagoda

The deck. Wicker chairs. Three members of the Politburo — Stalin, Voroshilov and Kirov — are talking together. They joke, laugh, smoke. Everything is very simple, ordinary. The steamer is simple and ordinary, the people talking on the deck are simple and ordinary — ordinary Soviet people, talking about the weather, about hunting, perhaps about how they slept.

This is a fragment from a book entitled *The White Sea–Baltic Canal Named After Stalin. A History of its Construction*. The work was written by a collective of authors.

More precisely, by the most famous Soviet writers of 1933, living classics. Among them: Gorky, Vsevolod Ivanov, Valentin Kataev, Alexei Tolstoy, Bruno Jasiński, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Viktor Shklovsky. In all, 36 people. The book opens with a dedication — or rather, an avowal:

"The Organizing Committee of the Union of Soviet Writers reports the readiness of Soviet writers to serve the cause of Lenin–Stalin."

The book was published under the general editorship of Semyon Firin-Pupko, then deputy head of the Main Administration of OGPU Camps.

In August 1933, Soviet writers made a steamer trip along the newly opened White Sea–Baltic Canal. Both the trip and the book based on this tourist voyage were a gigantic, carefully prepared PR campaign by the OGPU, as we would say today. Not all of the participants in the trip were admitted to work on the book. There are no traces of Ilf and Petrov in it, although they too travelled along the brand-new Belomor Canal. The artists Kukryniksy were with them. This is what they said about the OGPU:

"We are satirical artists. If your work continues at this pace, we'll soon have to change professions. We are delighted by the immense work of the OGPU."

Ilf and Petrov, together with Kukryniksy, published a humorous newspaper on the steamer called *The Cabin*. They managed to avoid taking part in writing the book. There were 120 figures of literature and art on the steamer. The writer Andrei Platonov asked to go. At that time, he was not being published. His request to join the trip was refused. He asked again, arguing that he was a specialist in hydraulic engineering structures. Shortly before this, Alexander Fadeev had passed to Stalin the manuscript of Platonov's novella *For Future Use (Vprok)*. Stalin returned the manuscript with the note "Scum." Platonov was not allowed on the Belomor trip in 1933. He would visit the place later, Medvezh'ya Gora, via the People's Commissariat for Transport. He received the Soviet writers' book on Belomor and gave it to his son with the inscription: "To my little bandit, about the big ones."

"The deck. Wicker chairs. A steamer. A canal. A wonderful country. Wonderful people! Stalin is holding a pencil. In front of him lies a map of the region. To increase ploughland. To drain the marshes."

This is a fragment from chapter 13, written by Alexei Tolstoy, Vsevolod Ivanov and Shklovsky.

On the bank, crowds run towards the steamer. They rejoice. They see the one they were expecting. They see Stalin. And for a long time they run along behind the steamer, shouting without even knowing what, and rejoicing that the orchestras thunder and the steamer hoots.

One wants to say straight away: this is a madhouse. No, it couldn't have been like that. It's impossible. It's untrue. And yet it seems that the whole point is precisely that it is true.

Three members of the Politburo are on the deck, joking, smoking, talking. Yagoda walks up to them.

It is hardly possible to call Genrikh Grigoryevich Yagoda a mere executor of Stalin's decision to build the Soviet economy on the basis of the widespread use of convict labour. A literal execution of Stalin's decision would not have produced even those, in fact very limited, results that socialist industrialisation did achieve. Criminal and political prisoners had to be mixed on the same site, sifted by natural mortal selection, smelted together in fear and hunger, and then cast in a single mould. The unknown, never-before-seen human product thus obtained was the main technological innovation of Soviet industrialisation, and would find application in various spheres of life. The author of this universal technology was Genrikh Yagoda.

In 1933, officially, he was not the head of the OGPU. The chairman of the OGPU was Vyacheslav Menzhinsky, but he was ill. Yagoda, as deputy chairman, was the de facto leader. He had become deputy chairman of the OGPU back in 1923, under Dzerzhinsky. In tsarist-era police surveillance files he appears under the aliases "The Owl" and "The Lonelier."

Yagoda was married to Sverdlov's niece, Ida Averbakh, sister of Leopold Averbakh, one of the authors of the book on the Belomor Canal. In 1936, Ida Averbakh herself would publish a work entitled *From Crime to Labour*. It would be published under the editorship of Vyshinsky and with his preface. Yagoda's wife wrote that the remaking of a hostile or unstable consciousness took place best when work was concentrated on gigantic projects that overwhelmed the imagination with their grandeur. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in *The Gulag Archipelago*, notes that Ida Averbakh intended to defend a dissertation on the problem of changing consciousness in camp conditions.

Not only Yagoda's wife but Yagoda himself, on his father's side, was also a distant relative of Sverdlov. In infancy he lived for a while with his parents in the house of Yakov Sverdlov's father in

Nizhny Novgorod. Later, in 1909, Yagoda, together with Moscow anarcho-communists, planned to rob the Nizhny Novgorod bank. He also dealt in buying and reselling weapons and dynamite. He was exiled to Simbirsk under police supervision. A year later he was amnestied on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty.

Yagoda's Nizhny Novgorod past bonded him with Maxim Gorky. Their correspondence continued up to Gorky's death. Yagoda wrote to Gorky:

“The stormy winter has passed, dear A. M. I, like a guard dog, lie at the gates of the republic and tear the throat out of anyone who raises a hand against the peace of the Union. For now I'm holding on. I sleep so little that I sometimes doze off at the table.”

Gorky to Yagoda:

“I would gladly have a conversation with you, my dear countryman. I would sit with you for a couple of hours in the corner room on Nikitskaya. The inexhaustibility of your energy is astounding. You are doing an enormous work.”

Yagoda to Gorky:

“I am very tired, but my nerves are so taut that I do not notice the fatigue. The enemies seem to have crawled out of every crack at once. The front of the struggle has expanded as never before.”

Two years earlier, in 1931, the deputy head of the Gulag, Matvei Berman, was walking one summer day in Moscow towards the Lubyanka, to a meeting of the OGPU Collegium. He was 33 years old — the age of Christ. He read the Moscow street crowd in their faces. In the book on the Belomor Canal we read:

“Words carelessly dropped, unexpected intonations, gestures that suddenly broke free, constrained gaits were stored in his memory. In these particulars, the whole emerged, marked by a common trait: hostility and mendacity.”

Matvei Berman constantly felt the hidden strength of the class enemy. Berman was a Chekist. He had the unconscious professional habit of talking to people. On a train he was the passenger most inclined to conversation.

Berman walked to the Lubyanka along Okhotny Ryad, past the house of Prince Golitsyn, favourite of the disgraced sister of Peter I, the Tsarevna Sophia. The house stood on the site of what is now the State Duma building. On 2 August 1933, when a report would be delivered on the completion of the White Sea–Baltic Canal, the government would issue a decree on the construction on this site of the House of the Council of People's Commissars. The architect would be Arkady Langman. By that time the new OGPU building, which he had designed, had already been built. It was Langman's idea to take prisoners for exercise on the roof of the building. In effect, Langman was the chief architect of the OGPU, and later of the NKVD. The construction of the Sovnarkom building was overseen by OGPU deputy chairman Genrikh Yagoda.

The OGPU was actively invading civilian life in different ways — or rather, was drawing it into its orbit. In the winter of 1933, in Moscow, the Zlatoustovsky Monastery, between Myasnitkaya and Pokrovka streets, not far from the OGPU building complex, was demolished. In its place began the

construction of a departmental apartment building. Alongside Chekists, the venerable writer Alexander Fadeev also moved in there.

Soon a young 26-year-old writer, Alexander Avdeenko, would also move into that building. In 1933 he was granted the honour of visiting the Belomor Canal, and in 1935 he would be entrusted with writing a book on the construction of the Moscow–Volga Canal. Yagoda received him personally. Yagoda said: “I have an idea. You will go to collect material under cover as a Chekist.” That same day the writer Avdeenko was kitted out in uniform. Two dark-maroon general’s rhombuses were screwed onto his crimson collar tabs. It was one of Yagoda’s amusements. For himself, in November 1935, a special rank would be introduced: General Commissar of State Security — in other words, the first Chekist marshal. Before Avdeenko left for the Moscow–Volga Canal, Yagoda gave him an invented surname — Rybalko. That same day, the half-writer, half-Chekist Avdeenko-Rybalko received an order for an apartment in the OGPU house on Bolshoy Komsomolsky Lane.

The centre of Moscow had long been favoured by Yagoda’s department. In houses nos. 13 and 14 on Sretenka Street, since the 1920s, the basements had been fitted out for executions. Each had a throughput of 80–100 people per day. The premises were equipped with drainage channels and soundproofing.

At this time Yagoda was already deputy chairman of the OGPU. Not far away, in the Solyanka district, there was a concentration camp in the Ivanovsky Monastery. There was also a camp in the Andronikov Monastery, where the Andrei Rublev Museum now stands. A women’s camp on Bolshaya Ordynka, 18, a camp on Rozhdestvenka, the Kozhukhovo and Vladykino camps. Executions were carried out in Varsonofyevsky Lane in a bunker under the garages of NKVD motor depot no. 1. Nine hundred sixty-nine executed people were buried on the territory of what is now hospital no. 23, not far from the skyscraper on Kotelnicheskaya Embankment. Since 1918 this had been an institution belonging to the Cheka–OGPU–NKVD.

Prisoners from the Butyrka, Taganka and Sretensky prisons were shot at Butovo. From the Lubyanka and Lefortovo they were taken for execution to the settlement of Kommunarka. In the 1920s, in Kommunarka, which belonged to the OGPU, a dacha had been built for Yagoda.

After the execution of Yagoda himself, the grounds of his dacha became a place of executions and burials of victims of subsequent repressions. Here ended Bukharin, most of the highest command of the Red Army, the tribe of Stalin’s people’s commissars and their deputies, the husband of Marina Tsvetaeva, Sergei Efron, who in emigration had gone into the service of the GPU. Here too the writer Boris Pilnyak and Artyom Vesely. Here also the heads of NKVD camps. The transformation of Yagoda’s dacha into a place of executions was a manifestation of Stalin’s peculiar sense of humour. People’s commissars come and go, but their cause lives on. During the slightly more than two years that Genrikh Yagoda served as People’s Commissar of the newly united OGPU–NKVD — from 10 July 1934 to 26 September 1936 — 529,424 people were arrested. And yet the years of Yagoda’s tenure as commissar are not called the “Great Terror.” One must also remember that the main bulk of Yagoda’s activity fell in the period when he held the modest post of OGPU deputy chairman.

In the summer of 1931, deputy chairman Genrikh Yagoda, at a meeting of the Collegium, said to the deputy head of the Gulag, Matvei Berman:

“The Party has set a major economic task — to master new regions of the country. The only organisation in the USSR that can solve such economic tasks is the OGPU. We

have enormous labour resources in our camps. We can re-educate them, we can restore these socially sick people to health. We have already used our system of 're-forging' in labour colonies, but now for the first time we want to use it more boldly than ever, on a scale never seen before. This will be a battle for human souls which do not yet belong to us."

Yagoda was setting tasks of a cosmic order. As is known, human souls are contested only by two: the Creator and the Enemy of mankind.

The main construction project of the near future was the White Sea–Baltic Canal. Matvei Berman went off to review the labour force in the camps of the USSR, to which hundreds of thousands of peasant families had been exiled. In the book on the Belomor Canal, Soviet writers describe Berman's journey across the country:

"Berman drove around the camps. It seemed that all the pus that the country had drained off had been concentrated here. Counter-revolution had been collected here as in a good museum."

In reality, these peasants torn from their land were the main construction resource of the country. In the same book we read:

"Soon Berman began to receive reports from the settlement hospitals that the deported women had begun to fall pregnant."

That meant everything was in order. The labour force was multiplying.

"Berman wanted to absorb into himself knowledge of all the camps. You cannot work in the camps without studying matters. Never before had he learnt so much and so continuously."

So writes the brilliant literary critic, former prince Dmitry Svyatopolk-Mirsky, recently returned from emigration.

Dmitry Svyatopolk-Mirsky's contributions to the book on the Belomor Canal did not save him. In 1937 he would be arrested. He would die in Magadan in 1939. In emigration, Svyatopolk-Mirsky was published in the same journals as Khodasevich, Tsvetaeva, Remizov, Bunin. In 1933, when Svyatopolk-Mirsky was helping to write the book commissioned by Yagoda, Bunin was receiving the Nobel Prize.

At the end of 1932, OGPU deputy chairman Yagoda, during a trip to the Kuban, inspected the completion of the operation to deport peasant families that had begun at the end of 1929. Yagoda reported to Stalin:

"The transportation of the indicated contingent took place without incidents."

Dekulakisation, collectivisation, combined with the total export of grain, brought about a terrible famine. Yagoda personally went to the main famine regions. Following him went a directive from the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the Council of People's Commissars to prevent the mass exodus of starving peasants. On 2 February 1933, Yagoda wrote a memorandum to Stalin and Molotov:

“In order to stop the mass departure from Ukraine and the North Caucasus, the transport organs of the OGPU have organised cordons and operational search groups on the roads.”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes in *The Archipelago*:

“People fled from Ukraine, came to Medvezhegorsk, to the centre of the White Sea–Baltic Camp, and tried to get jobs somewhere near the camp and thus save themselves from starvation. Prisoners carried food out of the zone to their own.”

The situation was pathological: people from one of the richest countries in the world, living in freedom, were of their own will drawn towards a concentration camp in order to survive.

In a sense, Mikhail Zoshchenko was lucky in how he took part in writing the collective work on the Belomor Canal. He was entrusted with the literary treatment of the autobiography of a thief. He wrote it in his own, well-known style. Under cover of this style, he gives us information that is sparse but reliable.

Mikhail Zoshchenko testifies:

“I really saw a restructuring of consciousness and remarkable changes in the psyche among the prisoners.”

Zoshchenko, writing in the voice of his thief, says:

“Our brigade began to give more than a hundred percent. And we were happy when this happened. We walked around feeling pleased. And they gave me clothes and boots. Seeing such a pleasant, caring attitude towards me, I was ready to break myself into a pancake for them.”

That is, Zoshchenko is telling us between the lines: “Newly arrived prisoners transported in stages are not given clothes or boots. They wear out their own clothing, regardless of the season. They are brought in whatever they were wearing when they were arrested.”

In chapter 4 of the book on Belomor, in the section by Vera Inber, Shklovsky and Vsevolod Ivanov, we read:

“The women are wearing silk dresses, coats with sagging flared skirts, jumpers and berets.”

And also, about the women at the Belomor Canal:

“Their little shoes creak on the snow. Frost. The great Karelian frost. The women see the White Sea wheelbarrow for the first time. The local wheelbarrow is extraordinarily hardy. Adapting, it has acquired a distinctive spread of its handles and ‘wings’, that is, low, broad sides. The women do not yet understand all the advantages of this wheelbarrow. Their thin fingers must take hold of a pick, of a shovel. All this is hard at first.”

Such is how Soviet writers describe women at hard labour. Their tone is the same as that of the Gulag newspaper *Re-forging*:

“The work of a navy requires a great deal of strength and skill to cut a channel in the earth for the great waterway. In the first days, earthwork is carried out by the women’s brigade with extreme difficulty.”

Zoshchenko, when he writes of the joy of his thief receiving boots, naturally does not indicate how soon this happiness came. To obtain boots, one had to survive at least six months.

The excavation for the canal had only just begun. At the bottom of the depression, covered in snow, there were people and stones everywhere. Two or three people bent down and, embracing a boulder, tried to lift it. The boulder did not move. Then they called a fourth, a fifth. And then someone had the idea that the boulder could be pulled out of the pit with a net. The net would be pulled by a rope, and the rope — by a “drum turned by a horse.” A similar technology was used in building the Egyptian pyramids. It corresponded perfectly to Stalin’s directive: “The canal must be built in a short time and at low cost.”

The canal project was drawn up by prisoner-engineers in a special OGPU design bureau in Furkasovsky Lane in Moscow. It fully complied with Stalin’s directive. No machinery was to be used. No materials were to be brought from other regions. Wherever possible, iron was to be replaced with wood.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes:

“No, it is unfair to compare this wildest construction site of the twentieth century with the pyramids of Egypt: the pyramids were built using the modern techniques of their own time. We, however, used techniques forty centuries old! Prisoner-engineers design earth dams, wooden lock gates. There is no concrete for the lock walls. They recall the old Russian cribwork — wooden frames 15 metres high, filled with earth. Yagoda says: ‘This is not Dneprostroi, which was given a long period of construction and foreign currency. It has been said: not a kopeck of currency. We have an enormous reserve of labour power.’”

In the Belomor book we read:

“The construction management made the greatest gift to the engineers: it freed them from worry about the labour force.”

The engineers to whom the OGPU made such a generous gift were themselves all prisoners. They were transported to Medvezhegorsk. With small suitcases in their hands, they settled into the barracks. But the Chekists did not rest. To every corner of the Union rushed representatives empowered to pick new cadres from other camps.

The writers would write:

“The Chekists know not only how to arrest and interrogate, they know how to organise. That is why the Chekists are the masters.”

Yagoda said:

“The canal is not a madcap scheme but a real enterprise, though no one has done such a thing in the world before. You will see — the work will move. People will become enthusiastic.”

Echoing OGPU deputy chairman Yagoda, the head of Belomorstroi, Lazar Kogan, said:

“Locks, dams, dikes must be built by thousands of hands. But as of now these hands are alien, cold, indifferent. I’m probably sentimental, but I will teach these people to love the future.”

One cannot doubt the effectiveness of the recipe for love developed by these sentimental men on the canal. The Panama Canal, 80 kilometres long, was built in 28 years; the Suez Canal, 160 kilometres long, in 10 years. The White Sea–Baltic Canal, or BBK as it was called, 227 kilometres long, was built in 20 months. The fact of super-intensive work on the BBK is therefore beyond question. The mere use of a huge mass of people — at any one time about 100,000 people were working on the canal line — explains nothing. This mass had to be forced to work as shock labour.

The food norm for a Gulag prisoner was 2,000 calories. That is the physiological minimum for a person sitting in prison and not working. Two thousand calories is ten potatoes. On the Belomor Canal this norm was issued at 60–70 percent, and on such a ration they worked a full working day of physical labour like nothing else: in the frost or up to the neck in water, in wet felt boots or bast shoes. Crowbars and shovels were in limited supply. The canal was dug quite literally with bare hands. Dmitry Petrovich Vitkovsky, who worked as a foreman, recalls:

“After the working day there were always corpses left. The snow would cover their faces. Someone had curled up under an overturned wheelbarrow, hidden his hands in his sleeves and frozen that way. Someone had frozen sitting up, head drawn into his knees. Two peasant lads, used to giving all their strength to work, quickly weakened here — and there they were, frozen to death, backs leaning against each other. At night sledges came, the drivers tossed the corpses on the sledges with a wooden thud. And in summer, the bones left from uncollected bodies would, together with stones, get into the concrete mixer and then into the concrete of the locks, and stay there forever.”

The writer Kataev asked the deputy head of the Gulag, Firin-Pupko:

- Tell me, did the canal soldiers often fall ill?
- Of course, it happened, man isn’t made of iron.
- And they died as well, — Kataev clarified.
- It happened. We are all mortal.
- But why didn’t we see a single cemetery along the banks?
- Because they have no place here.

In chapter 13 of the Belomor book, Soviet writers Alexei Tolstoy, Vsevolod Ivanov and Viktor Shklovsky would write:

“Many builders of the White Sea–Baltic Canal regained their health here.”

The actor Vaclav Dvorzhetsky recalls. Belomor was not his first camp.

“People are sawing, chopping, scurrying around. You have to move, you have to survive. You sleep right there, on spruce branches, by the fire. There’s no hot food. They give a mug of millet or a mug of flour. Take it in whatever you can. If you don’t have a container, then in your cap. Sometimes the thin soup was poured into your cap. There’s almost no crockery. The owner of a mess-tin or a kettle makes money off it. He won’t lend it for free; you have to bargain and wait till you can cook your own millet a little. Everyone steals everything from everyone. Hide whatever food is left in your trousers overnight. Otherwise you’ll sleep like a log, they’ll search you and take it.”

And at the moment when you have nowhere and nothing in which to boil your millet, when you already have one foot in the grave and know it, but have not yet reconciled yourself to the thought, at that very moment, next to you, the half-dead, appears a man who here is called an “educator.” At Belomor the educator might be a Chekist, but more often he was a former criminal who had shown pedagogical inclinations. Of such people, the writers would say: “Educators work like artists.”

The educator tells the half-dead man: “Tomorrow you still won’t be dead, you still won’t have finished suffering, which means you will be obliged to work. I can’t promise luxurious conditions, but if you give 115 percent of the norm, I promise an extra ration.”

The next day a cart covered with tarpaulin arrives at the logging site. A man with a sheet of paper in his hand throws back the tarpaulin and starts reading out surnames. Underneath the tarpaulin, in a box, hot pirozhki are steaming. Someone in the crowd around the cart says: “It’s not for everyone. Only for those who have exceeded the norm.” The lucky ones shove one pirozhok straight into their mouth, and hold the second in their hands as long as they can, first eating it with their eyes. The half-dead man the educator spoke with suddenly, to his astonishment, hears his own name. An intelligent man, a geography teacher, he has never in his life experienced such complex feelings. A former priest, who has been receiving pirozhki for three days in a row, stops chewing for a second and says to the geography teacher: “With potatoes! And sometimes with cabbage.”

The human body, on the brink of suddenly delayed death and given the slightest intervention by the educator, behaves unpredictably. The hierarchy of values collapses unexpectedly and instantly. There is a reaction to the fodder. You can do nothing about it, because it is a reaction to life.

If, nevertheless, the educational work fails — that is, if the “pupil” dies anyway — it is no tragedy: trains constantly bring new prisoners. The man reading out the names suddenly notices a peasant in a fur hat standing nearby, looks him up and down and says to the distributor: “This one — tonight you give him a kilo of kasha.”

He is a criminal. At Belomor the Chekists call them “socially close.” Such a man is good to put at the head of a brigade. He will form the brigade himself. Criminals will be the minority; the majority will be politicals sentenced under Article 58, like the geography teacher. The brigade system is a great invention. In a brigade you cannot afford not to want to work; you cannot proudly choose a hunger death over camp labour. Because if you do not work, the brigade’s production percentage falls. And the whole brigade loses its bread and millet. And so your comrades in the brigade will monitor you better than any guard.

Reducing human relations to the simplest, most elementary language — work–food–chance to survive — that is the main achievement of the OGPU and personally of Genrikh Yagoda on the Belomor Canal.

Soviet writers record:

“A group of prisoners was sent on survey work to determine the flooding zone. On the way back they lost their way. Finally they saw a watchtower in the forest. On the tower was a sentry. And they rejoiced. It meant they had come home.”

At the end of the writers’ trip, Gorky spoke at a rally of shock workers. He said: “I congratulate the workers of the OGPU on their remarkable work.” When the curtain fell, Gorky went backstage. “You cloth devils, you don’t yourselves know what you have done,” Gorky told the Chekists. The Chekists smiled. They knew very well what they had done.

In 20 months some 280,000 people passed through the construction site. About 110,000 died.

A former peasant worked on the canal. His name was Balabukha. He cast wheels for wheelbarrows and later parts for lock gates. He did this in a primitive way and was considered a shock worker. He even received the right to leave the camp. Near Medvezh'ya Gora there was a farm attached to the camp. Balabukha once went there. He saw a herd that had been brought by train from dekulakised regions. Cows too were deported in those days. In that herd there was a blue bull. He had had exactly the same rare blue bull on his own farm at home. The bull came up to him, lowed and began to lick his hands. Balabukha took the bull by the horns, laid his head between the horns and began to cry.

He returned to the camp, went to the commander and asked to be given work on the farm.

The commander said: "Why do you need that? You know how to make wheelbarrow wheels." Balabukha thought and said: "All right. On my day off, I'll go and visit the bull."

The book *The White Sea–Baltic Canal Named After Stalin* ought to have provoked extreme bewilderment and irritation in Stalin. In spite of the title, there is incomparably less Stalin in the book than Yagoda. Moreover, on its more than six hundred pages, Yagoda is not often mentioned by name. When it is a question of him, he is usually referred to simply as "the deputy chairman." But this deliberate simplicity and the frequency of his appearance should have alarmed Stalin more than anything. Yagoda's latest self-promotion exercise around the construction of the canal predetermined the decline of his career. There was no practical necessity to replace Yagoda with Yezhov. Yagoda, just like Yezhov, was completely ready to carry out the Great Terror in all directions.

When Yagoda is shot, there will be, in Moscow and the Moscow region alone, 30 prisons, 8 corrective labour colonies, 9 agricultural corrective zones. In Moscow there will be 4 colonies for juveniles. Across the country, the coherent system of camps will have been completed. Places will already be prepared for the additional reception of more than a million new prisoners.

In the summer of 1933, in Gagra, the musical comedy *Merry Fellows* was being filmed, starring Utyosov and Lyubov Orlova. The script was by Vladimir Mass and Nikolai Erdman. On 11 October a car from the local GPU turned up in Gagra for Mass and Erdman. From Gagra they were sent straight to the Lubyanka. The grounds for arrest: Erdman and Mass were the authors and disseminators of counter-revolutionary fables. As early as July 1933 Yagoda had written to Stalin about these fables:

"I think that the above-mentioned writers should either be arrested or removed from Moscow and exiled to different places."

In October Erdman was exiled to Yeniseysk and Mass to Tobolsk. Both their names were immediately removed from the credits of *Merry Fellows*. They would only return to Moscow after the war.

Yagoda personally controlled, for the most part, the foreign travel of Soviet intellectuals. The famous opera singer Nezhdanova and the conductor Golovanov wrote to Yagoda:

"We undertake not to tour anywhere in Europe and to return on time. Our families remain in Moscow."

Once upon a time Yagoda had dealt with the case of Alexei Lopukhin, former pre-revolutionary head of the Police Department and the man who most thoroughly exposed the police agent and Socialist-Revolutionary terrorist Evno Azev. At that time Yagoda had signed Lopukhin a temporary exit permit to go abroad. Lopukhin did not return. Yagoda did not forget his blunder. In future, the families of those leaving would stay behind as hostages.

Yagoda cleared beggars out of Moscow. They were sent to special settlements in Kazakhstan.

In 1933, on Yagoda's orders, large quantities of bugging equipment were purchased in Germany. But it was not only conversations that would be listened to. In Yagoda's department they listened to gramophone records as well. After musical censorship by the OGPU, songs such as "Yablochko", "Bubliki", "Yellow Gloves", "Little Boots" were banned. A separate matter was dancing. A secret telegram reads:

"To the heads of provincial GPU departments: do not allow public performance, either on stage or in clubs, of dances such as foxtrot, shimmy, two-step and others. Signed: Yagoda."

It is difficult to say what predominates in this telegram: a passion for censorship or Yagoda's personal taste. And he undoubtedly had taste. This is testified by the inventory drawn up at his arrest:

Foreign records — 399 pieces.

Men's coats of various foreign makes — 21.

Fur coats on squirrel fur — 4.

Foreign leather and suede jackets — 11.

Men's suits of various foreign makes — 22.

Various pairs of trousers — 29.

Military-style shirts of covert cloth, of foreign material, khaki and other colours — 29.

Boots of chevro, chrome leather, etc. — 19 pairs.

Various men's footwear (boots, shoes), mainly foreign — 23 pairs.

Fur hats — 10.

Foreign caps — 19.

Foreign socks, mainly silk — 112 pairs.

Foreign cloth — 23 bolts.

Suede skins — 14.

Squirrel skins — 50.

Karakul skins — 43.

Swan skins — 3.

Large carpets — 17.

Various carpets — leopard, polar bear, wolf skins — 5.

Men's silk shirts, foreign — 50.

Men's silk long johns, foreign — 43 pairs.

Men's outer shirts of silk cloth, foreign — 29.

Foreign handkerchiefs — 46.

Foreign gloves — 37 pairs.

Various pyjamas, foreign — 17.

Various scarves, mufflers and little scarves, foreign — 53.

Various antique tableware — 1,008 items.

This is only a small part of what was seized in Yagoda's flat in Milyutinsky Lane, house no. 9, as well as in the Kremlin and at his dacha near Moscow, from 28 March to 5 April 1937. In fact, the list is typical of the high Stalinist bureaucracy — both those who were shot and those who survived. To be fair, one should say that money from the Administrative and Economic Directorate of the NKVD also trickled down to the Soviet intelligentsia. The first section of this directorate paid the rent for a mansion at 16 Malaya Pirogovka Street for the painter Pavel Korin. The NKVD paid for heating, cleaning and other services at the house. Gorky's houses in Moscow, at Gorki-10 and in Crimea were also maintained at the expense of Yagoda's department.

At the Butyrka prison, furniture was made and supplied to certain writers' houses — including to writers Kirshon and Afinogenov, who took part in the trip along the White Sea–Baltic Canal.

And how Yagoda fed the writers on that trip! First they ate on the Moscow–Leningrad train. It was a special train made up of soft-seat carriages. Avdeenko recalls:

“From the moment we became the guests of the Chekists, communism began for us. We didn't pay for anything. Smoked sausages. Cheeses. Caviar. Fruit. Wine. Cognac. I ate, I drank and I remembered how I had made my way to Moscow. Everywhere along the tracks stood ragged, barefoot children and old men. Skin and bones. All stretching out their hands towards the passing wagons. One word on all their lips: bread, bread, bread.”

Gulag deputy chief Firin-Pupko would look in, first in one compartment of writers, then in another, asking if they needed anything. He would take a sip of “Tsinandali” wine, tell a little about the canal construction, smile and move on.

Then, in Leningrad, there was a banquet at the Astoria. Avdeenko remembers:

“I was simply stunned by the abundance. It was as if the still lifes from the Hermitage had come to life. Whatever one wanted, the waiters brought. Borscht, bouillon, noodles, bloody chunks of meat, country-style steaks, roast chickens, shashlik, sprats in amber oil, suckling pigs, jellied sturgeon, peaches without stones and peel. I gorged myself and got drunk.”

Inventive and efficient, Genrikh Yagoda worked for the benefit of socialist construction. You cannot deny his department its inventiveness. The head of operations on the canal, Frenkel, sent a telegram to Moscow:

“The best shock worker should also be a speed skater. Send 2,000 pairs of skates.”

In the autumn of 1933, Yagoda turned his attention to Soviet citizens of non-traditional sexual orientation. The organs had uncovered, as it was put, numerous organisations of homosexuals, accused of espionage. In December 1933, in a memo to Stalin, Yagoda wrote:

“We have no law under which they could be prosecuted criminally. I would consider it necessary to issue the corresponding law on criminal liability for pederasty.”

Within three days the OGPU prepared a draft. The Politburo approved it in December. On 7 March 1934, the relevant article of the Criminal Code came into effect. From then on, non-traditional

sexual orientation was equated with counter-revolutionary and anti-Soviet activity. It was under this article that the popular singer Vadim Kozin would be convicted. He survived, lived to an advanced age and would never agree, on principle, to return from Magadan. Gorky wrote: “Destroy homosexuality — and fascism will disappear!” Gorky was not up to date. In 1933 fascism came to power in Germany. Hitler won the elections on 5 March. Immediately after Hitler came to power, the first group of citizens of non-traditional orientation was sent to concentration camps. Homosexuals, alongside Jews, would be physically exterminated throughout the years of Nazi rule. The only difference between them in Nazi Germany would be the colour of the obligatory patches on their clothing.

In 1933 the era of rivalry between Stalin and Hitler began, the leaders of two classic totalitarian regimes. Their relations would go through stages — from hatred to an almost familial alliance, which Stalin would maintain right up to 22 June 1941.

In 1938, a seven-year-old boy wrote a letter:

“Dear Grandma, my dear Grandma! Once again I did not die. You are the only one I have left in the world, and I am the only one you have. If I don’t die, when I grow big and you are very old, I will work and feed you. Your Garik.”

Garik was the son of Genrikh Yagoda, who all his Soviet life, under Lenin and under Stalin, served in leadership positions in the Cheka, OGPU, NKVD. Yagoda’s son, little Garik, was the grand-nephew of Yakov Sverdlov, who together with Lenin had given the order to shoot the tsar’s family.

Garik wrote from a children’s reception centre to his grandmother, Sverdlov’s sister, in the Tomsk camp:

“Dear Grandma, again I didn’t die. This isn’t the time I already wrote you about. I die many times. Your grandson.”