**Cheka**

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*For the reggaeton artist, see* [*Cheka (artist)*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheka_%28artist%29)*.*

The sword-and-shield emblem of the Cheka-KGB.

The **Cheka** (**ЧК** - чрезвыча́йная коми́ссия *Chrezvychaynaya Komissiya*, Extraordinary Commission Russian pronunciation: [[tɕɛ.ˈka]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3AIPA_for_Russian)) was the first of a succession of [Soviet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_Union) [state security](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_security) organizations. It was created by a decree issued on December 20, 1917, by [Vladimir Lenin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Lenin%22%20%5Co%20%22Vladimir%20Lenin) and subsequently led by [aristocrat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristocracy_%28class%29%22%20%5Co%20%22Aristocracy%20%28class%29) turned [communist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist) [Felix Dzerzhinsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_Dzerzhinsky). After 1922, the Cheka underwent [a series of reorganizations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronology_of_Soviet_secret_police_agencies%22%20%5Co%20%22Chronology%20of%20Soviet%20secret%20police%20agencies).

From its founding, the Cheka was an important military and security arm of the Bolshevik communist government. In 1921 the *Troops for the Internal Defense of the Republic* (a branch of the Cheka) numbered 200,000. These troops policed [labor camps](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labor_camps%22%20%5Co%20%22Labor%20camps), ran the [Gulag](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulag%22%20%5Co%20%22Gulag) system, conducted [requisitions of food](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prodrazvyorstka%22%20%5Co%20%22Prodrazvyorstka), liquidated political opponents (on both the right and the left), put down peasant rebellions, riots by workers, and mutinies in the [Red Army](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Army%22%20%5Co%20%22Red%20Army), which was plagued by desertions.

**Name**

The name of the agency was originally *The Whole-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating [Counter-Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Soviet_agitation%22%20%5Co%20%22Anti-Soviet%20agitation) and [Sabotage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabotage%22%20%5Co%20%22Sabotage)* ([Russian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_language): Всероссийская чрезвычайная комиссия по борьбе с контрреволюцией и саботажем; *Vserossijskaya Chrezvychajnaya Komissiya po-Bor'bye s Kontr-revolyutsiye i Sabotazhem*), but was often shortened to Cheka or [VCheka](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=VCheka&action=edit&redlink=1" \o "VCheka (page does not exist)). In 1918 its name was changed, becoming *All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution, [Profiteering](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Profiteering%22%20%5Co%20%22Profiteering) and [Corruption](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_corruption%22%20%5Co%20%22Political%20corruption)*.

A member of Cheka was called a *chekist*. Chekists of the years after the [October Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_Revolution%22%20%5Co%20%22October%20Revolution) wore leather jackets creating a fashion followed by Western [communists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communism); they are pictured in several films in this apparel. Despite changes over time, Soviet secret policemen were often referred to as "Chekists" throughout the Soviet period. In *[The Gulag Archipelago](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gulag_Archipelago%22%20%5Co%20%22The%20Gulag%20Archipelago)*, [Alexander Solzhenitsyn](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Solzhenitsyn) recalls that [zeks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Sea-Baltic_Canal%22%20%5Cl%20%22Commemoration%22%20%5Co%20%22White%20Sea-Baltic%20Canal) in the [labor camps](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulag%22%20%5Co%20%22Gulag) used "old *Chekist*" as "a mark of special esteem" for particularly experienced camp administrators. The term is still found in use in [Russia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia%22%20%5Co%20%22Russia) today (for example, President [Vladimir Putin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Putin%22%20%5Co%20%22Vladimir%20Putin) has been referred to in the Russian [media](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/News_media%22%20%5Co%20%22News%20media) as a *"chekist"* due to his career in the [KGB](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/KGB)).

**History**

The Cheka was created in December 1917, over a month after the [October Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_Revolution%22%20%5Co%20%22October%20Revolution) and the formation of the [Bolshevik](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolshevik%22%20%5Co%20%22Bolshevik) government. Its immediate precursor was the *Extraordinary Commission to Fight Counter-revolution*, established on December 7 [[O.S.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Style_and_New_Style_dates) November 21] 1917, by the Milrevkom (the [Military Revolutionary Committee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_Revolutionary_Committee%22%20%5Co%20%22Military%20Revolutionary%20Committee) of the [Petrograd Soviet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrograd_Soviet%22%20%5Co%20%22Petrograd%20Soviet)) on the proposal of Dzerzhinsky. Its members were the Bolsheviks [Mykola Skrypnyk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mykola_Skrypnyk%22%20%5Co%20%22Mykola%20Skrypnyk), Flerovski, Galkin, [Valentin Trifonov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valentin_Trifonov) and presided by George Blagonravov.

The Cheka was established on December 20 [[O.S.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Style_and_New_Style_dates) December 7] 1917, by a decision of the [Sovnarkom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sovnarkom%22%20%5Co%20%22Sovnarkom). It was subordinated to the Sovnarkom and its functions were, "to liquidate counter-revolution and sabotage, to hand over counter-revolutionaries and saboteurs to the [revolutionary tribunals](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary_tribunal_%28Russia%29%22%20%5Co%20%22Revolutionary%20tribunal%20%28Russia%29), and to apply such measures of repression as 'confiscation, deprivation of ration cards, publication of lists of enemies of the people etc.'". The original members of the VCheka were [Peters](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yakov_Peters%22%20%5Co%20%22Yakov%20Peters), Ksenofontov, Averin, [Ordzhonikidze](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grigoriy_Ordzhonikidze%22%20%5Co%20%22Grigoriy%20Ordzhonikidze), Peterson, Evseev, and Trifonov, but the next day Averin, Ordzhonikidze, and Trifonov were replaced by Fomin, Shchukin, Ilyin, and Chernov. A circular published on December 28 [[O.S.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Style_and_New_Style_dates) December 15] 1917, gave the address of VCheka's first headquarters as "Petrograd, Gorokhovaya 2, 4th floor".

Originally, the members of the Cheka were exclusively [Bolshevik](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolshevik); however, in January 1918, [left SRs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_Socialist-Revolutionaries) also joined the organization The Left SRs were expelled or arrested later in 1918 following an attempted assassination against Lenin.

In 1922, the Cheka was transformed into the [State Political Administration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_Political_Administration) or [GPU](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gosudarstvennoye_Politicheskoye_Upravlenie), a section of the [NKVD](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NKVD) of the [Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Soviet_Federative_Socialist_Republic) (RSFSR).

**Operations**

**Suppression of political opposition**

At the direction of Lenin, the Cheka performed mass arrests, imprisonments, and executions of "[enemies of the people](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enemies_of_the_people)". In this, the Cheka said that they targeted "class enemies" such as the [bourgeoisie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bourgeoisie), and members of the [clergy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clergy); the first organized mass repression began against the libertarian Socialists of Petrograd in April 1918. Over the next few months 800 were arrested and shot without trial.

However, within a month the Cheka had extended its repression to all political opponents of the communist government, including anarchists and others on the left. On May 1, 1918, a pitched battle took place in Moscow between the anarchists and the police. ( P.Avrich. G Maximoff) In response, the Cheka orchestrated a massive retaliatory campaign of repression, executions, and arrests against all opponents of the Bolshevik government that came to be known as [*Red Terror*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Terror). The *Red Terror*, implemented by Dzerzhinsky on September 5, 1918, was vividly described by the [Red Army](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Army) journal *Krasnaya Gazeta*:

Without mercy, without sparing, we will kill our enemies in scores of hundreds. Let them be thousands, let them drown themselves in their own blood. For the blood of Lenin and [Uritsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moisei_Uritsky) … let there be floods of blood of the bourgeoisie – more blood, as much as possible…

In an attack on twenty-six anarchist political centres, forty anarchists were killed by Cheka forces, and 500 arrested and jailed. At the direction of Lenin and Trotsky, the Cheka and Red Army state security forces (later renamed the [OGPU](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OGPU)), shot, arrested, imprisoned, and executed thousands of persons, regardless of whether or not they had actually planned rebellion against the communist government. Most of the survivors were later deported to Siberian labor camps.

An early Bolshevik [Victor Serge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_Serge) described in his book *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*:

Since the first massacres of Red prisoners by the Whites, the murders of Volodarsky and Uritsky and the attempt against Lenin (in the summer of 1918), the custom of arresting and, often, executing hostages had become generalized and legal. Already the Cheka, which made mass arrests of suspects, was tending to settle their fate independently, under formal control of the Party, but in reality without anybody's knowledge.

The Party endeavoured to head it with incorruptible men like the former convict Dzerzhinsky, a sincere idealist, ruthless but chivalrous, with the emaciated profile of an [Inquisitor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inquisitor): tall forehead, bony nose, untidy goatee, and an expression of weariness and austerity. But the Party had few men of this stamp and many Chekas.

I believe that the formation of the Chekas was one of the gravest and most impermissible errors that the Bolshevik leaders committed in 1918 when plots, blockades, and interventions made them lose their heads. All evidence indicates that [revolutionary tribunals](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary_tribunal_%28Russia%29), functioning in the light of day and admitting the right of defence, would have attained the same efficiency with far less abuse and depravity. Was it necessary to revert to the procedures of the Inquisition?"

The Cheka was also used against the armed anarchist [Black Army](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary_Insurrectionary_Army_of_Ukraine) of [Nestor Makhno](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nestor_Makhno) in Ukraine. After the Black Army had served its purpose in aiding the [Red Army](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Army) to stop the [Whites](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Army) under [Denikin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denikin), the Soviet communist government decided it must eliminate the anarchist forces. In May 1919, two Cheka agents sent to assassinate Makhno were caught and executed.

Many victims of Cheka repression were 'bourgeois hostages' rounded up and held in readiness for [summary execution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summary_execution) in reprisal for any alleged counter-revolutionary act. Lenin's dictum that it is better to arrest 100 innocent people than to risk one enemy going free ensured that wholesale, indiscriminate arrests became an integral part of the system.

It was during the [Red Terror](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Terror) that the Cheka, hoping to avoid the bloody aftermath of having half-dead victims writhing on the floor, developed a technique for execution known as the *Nackenschuss*, a shot to the nape of the neck, which caused minimal blood loss and instant death. The victim's head was bent forward and the executioner fired slightly downward at point blank range. This had become the standard method used later by the [NKVD](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NKVD) to liquidate [Stalin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stalin)'s [purge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Purge) victims and others.

**Persecution of deserters**

It is believed that more than 3 million [deserters](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deserter) escaped from Red Army in 1919 and 1920. Around 500,000 deserters were arrested in 1919 and close to 800,000 in 1920 by troops of the dreaded 'Special Punitive Department' of the Cheka created to punish desertions. This force was used to forcefully repatriate deserters back into the Red Army, taking and shooting hostages to force compliance or to set an example. Throughout the course of the civil war, several thousand deserters were shot - a number comparable to that of belligerents during [World War I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I).

In September 1918, according to [*The Black Book of Communism*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Black_Book_of_Communism) in only twelve provinces of Russia, 48,735 deserters and 7,325 "bandits" were arrested, 1,826 were killed and 2,230 were executed. The exact identity of these individuals is confused by the fact that the Soviet Bolshevik government used the term 'bandit' to cover ordinary criminals as well as armed and unarmed political opponents, such as the anarchists.

The Cheka later played a major role in the putting down the [Kronstadt Rebellion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kronstadt_Rebellion) by Soviet sailors in 1921.

**Number of victims**

Estimates on Cheka executions vary widely. The lowest figures are provided by Dzerzhinsky’s lieutenant [Martyn Latsis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Latsis), limited to RSFSR over the period 1918–1920:

* *For the period 1918-July 1919, covering only twenty provinces of central Russia:*

1918: 6,300; 1919 (up to July): 2,089; Total: 8,389

* *For the whole period 1918-19:*

1918: 6,185; 1919: 3,456; Total: 9,641

* *For the whole period 1918-20:*

January-June 1918: 22; July-December 1918: more than 6,000; 1918-20: 12,733

Experts generally agree these semi-official figures are vastly understated. W. H. Chamberlin, for example, claims “it is simply impossible to believe that the Cheka only put to death 12,733 people in all of Russia up to the end of the civil war.” He provides the "reasonable and probably moderate" estimate of 50,000, while others provide estimates ranging up to 500,000. Several scholars put the number of executions at about 250,000. One difficulty is that the Cheka sometimes recorded the deaths of executed anarchists and other political dissidents as criminals, 'armed bandits', or 'armed gangsters'. Some believe it is possible more people were murdered by the Cheka than died in battle.

Lenin himself seemed unfazed by the killings. On 12 January 1920, while addressing trade union leaders, he said:

"We did not hesitate to shoot thousands of people, and we shall not hesitate, and we shall save the country."

On 14 May 1921, the [Politburo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politburo), chaired by Lenin, passed a motion "broadening the rights of the [Cheka] in relation to the use of the [death penalty]."

**Atrocities**

The Cheka is reported to have practiced [torture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torture). Victims were reportedly skinned alive, scalped, "crowned" with barbed wire, impaled, crucified, hanged, stoned to death, tied to planks and pushed slowly into furnaces or tanks of boiling water, and rolled around naked in internally nail-studded barrels. Chekists reportedly poured water on naked prisoners in the winter-bound streets until they became living ice statues. Others reportedly beheaded their victims by twisting their necks until their heads could be torn off. The [Chinese Cheka detachments](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_in_Russian_Revolution) stationed in [Kiev](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiev) reportedly would attach an iron tube to the torso of a bound victim and insert a rat into the other end which was then closed off with wire netting. The tube was then held over a flame until the rat began gnawing through the victim's guts in an effort to escape. [Anton Denikin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Denikin)'s investigation discovered corpses whose lungs, throats, and mouths had been packed with earth.

Women and children were also victims of Cheka terror. Women would sometimes be tortured and raped before being shot. Children between the ages of 8 and 16 were imprisoned and occasionally executed.

As a result of this relentless violence more than a few Chekists ended up with psychopathic disorders, which [Nikolai Bukharin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolai_Bukharin) said were "an occupational hazard of the Chekist profession." Many hardened themselves to the executions by heavy drinking and drug use. Some developed a gangster-like slang for the verb to kill in an attempt to distance themselves from the killings, such as 'shooting partridges', of 'sealing' a victim, or giving him a *natsokal* (onomatopoeia of the trigger action).

**In popular culture**

* The Cheka were popular staples in Soviet film and literature. This was partly due to a romanticization of the organisation in the post-Stalin period, and also because they provided a useful action/detection template. Films featuring the Cheka include [Osterns](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostern) [*Miles of Fire*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miles_of_Fire), [Nikita Mikhalkov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikita_Mikhalkov)'s [*At Home among Strangers*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/At_Home_among_Strangers), the miniseries [*The Adjutant of His Excellency*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Adjutant_of_His_Excellency), and also [*Dead Season*](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dead_Season&action=edit&redlink=1) starring [Donatas Banionis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donatas_Banionis) and the 1992 [Soviet Union](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_of_the_Soviet_Union) film [*Chekist*](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Chekist_(film)&action=edit&redlink=1).
* In [Spain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spain), during the [Spanish Civil War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Civil_War), the detention and torture centers operated by the Communists were named *checas* after the Soviet organization.

**See also**

* [Russian Revolution of 1917](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Revolution_of_1917)
* [Chronology of Soviet secret police agencies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronology_of_Soviet_secret_police_agencies)
* [State Political Directorate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_Political_Directorate)
* [People's Commissariat for State Security (Soviet Union)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s_Commissariat_for_State_Security_%28Soviet_Union%29)
* [NKVD](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NKVD)
* [Ministry for State Security (Soviet Union)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_for_State_Security_%28Soviet_Union%29)
* [KGB](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/KGB)
* [Lubyanka (KGB)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lubyanka_%28KGB%29)
* [Felix Dzerzhinsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_Dzerzhinsky)
* [Vyacheslav Menzhinsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vyacheslav_Menzhinsky)
* [Yakov Peters](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yakov_Peters)
* [Józef Unszlicht](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%B3zef_Unszlicht)
* [Genrikh Yagoda](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genrikh_Yagoda)
* [Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lavrenty_Pavlovich_Beria)
* [Russian Civil War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Civil_War)
* [Red terror](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_terror)
* [Mensheviks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mensheviks)
* [Bolsheviks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolsheviks)
* [Decossackization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decossackization)
* [Lenin's Hanging Order](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lenin%27s_Hanging_Order)
* [Great Purge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Purge)