

Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky Biography

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Biography

The Soviet politician Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky (1877-1926) participated in the Polish and Russian revolutionary movements. He was the organizer and first administrator of the Soviet internal security apparatus.

Felix Dzerzhinsky was born in Poland of a landholding family. While still a student, he became involved in antigovernment politics, and on completion of his secondary education he embarked upon a career as a revolutionary political leader. Between 1897 and 1917 he was arrested and imprisoned or exiled five times. Although most of his actual political work was in Poland, he became more deeply involved with the Russian Social Democratic party than with the Social Democratic party of Poland and Lithuania; he was ultimately identified with the Leninist (Bolshevik) faction of the Russian revolutionary movement.

It was only after the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 that Dzerzhinsky's talents began to be fully exploited. In December 1917 he accepted appointment as chairman of the All Russian Extraordinary Commission, subsequently known by its Russian initials, Cheka. This organization was responsible for enforcing obedience to party and state decisions during the early days of the Revolution. The Cheka is generally regarded as the principal instrument of "Red terror" during the course of the civil war.

Although his opinions on policy frequently varied from those of Lenin, Dzerzhinsky's obedience to established policy seems to have been complete, and he held a large number and range of offices during the unsettled postrevolutionary days. In the summer of 1920 he was appointed head of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD); the following spring he became commissar of the Peoples' Commissariat of Ways and Communications; and in February 1924 he was named president of the Supreme Council of National Economy (Vesenkha).

Throughout this period Dzerzhinsky supported the stated policy of the party with increasing vigor, while rejecting all alternative views. In particular he stood on the side of centralization as the Central Control Commission, originally founded to ensure that the center reflected the wishes of the party rank and file, became an agency for placing supporters of Stalin's policies in positions of power.

After the death of Lenin in 1924, the struggle for power between Stalin and his opponents sharpened, and Dzerzhinsky increasingly played the role of an apologist of both party unity and Stalin. During a particularly acute Central Committee confrontation in 1926 Dzerzhinsky, vigorously defending Stalin, suffered a fatal heart attack.