

The Red Army and the Terror

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds, School of History

Submitted July 2012

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Acknowledgements

In completing this thesis I owe a very large debt to Dr James Harris for his continual support and insightful criticism throughout. This PhD first developed from my MA at the University of Leeds when I took James's module on the Great Terror, and finishing the thesis would have been impossible without his careful supervision. From the Leeds School of History I also owe large thanks to Dr Mark Smith for his always helpful advice on completing the PhD itself, working in the Russian archives and on other peculiarities in studying Soviet history. The advice and comments from Dr Steven Main, Dr Stephen Brown and Professor Roger Reese have been invaluable, and made the thesis much stronger in its final stages. A special thank you goes to Steven Main for sending me so much material that I had not previously considered. I should also thank Dr Matthew Rendle who first sparked my interest in Russian history at Newcastle University where I did my undergraduate degree. From Leeds I have to thank Tom Davies, Nick Grant, Vincent Hiribarren, Julio Decker, Andrew Hogan, Catherine Coombs, Louise Seaward, Rachel Johnson and Say Burgin for making what can be a solitary research project much more enjoyable. A special thank you goes to Irina and Dmitri for their warm hospitality and opening their home to me during a few very cold months in Moscow as I did the bulk of my archival research. For this PhD even to be feasible in the first place I should thank the School of History at the University of Leeds for providing me with the financial support and also the Royal Historical Society for a travel grant for the Moscow trip. Finally, I owe a special gratitude to Carly for putting up with what became in the end long working days, time abroad and perhaps interminable conversation about this thesis.

Abstract

This thesis examines the reasons why Stalin purged his Red Army during 1937-38 at the same time as World War was looming. This gutting of the officer corps created huge turmoil inside the Red Army and affected at the very least 35,000 army leaders, resulting in thousands of discharges, arrests and executions. Previous explanations of the military purge have typically concentrated on Stalin's relationship with his military elite and how he supposedly believed they would become a block to his expanding power. Framed as the 'Tukhachevskii Affair', after its most famous victim, the military purge is most commonly depicted as merely the extension of Stalin's advancing lust for total power into the Red Army. This thesis will show that such accounts are unsupported and inadequate and will provide a new explanation of the military purge. This thesis will show that Stalin did not attack his army elite in order to increase his power, but this was a last minute action made from a position of weakness. Taking the formation of the Red Army in early 1918 as its starting point, this thesis will argue that the key to understanding Stalin's attack on the officer corps in 1937 is to understand how the military was perceived as susceptible to subversion. From its very formation the Red Army was seen as a target of 'enemies', 'counterrevolutionaries' and was regarded as vulnerable to infiltration. Over a period of twenty years the army faced an array of exaggerated and imaginary threats. Stalin was plagued by nagging doubts about the reliability of his forces, from mass instability in the lower ranks to supposed disloyalty in the military elite. By 1937 these perceived threats had culminated in a spy scare and it was this that finally forced Stalin to crack down on the Red Army.

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Abbreviations

GPU - State Political Directorate
GUGB – Main Directorate of State Security
INO - Foreign Department of the Political Police
OO - Special Department of the Political Police
OGPU - Joint State Political Directorate
OKDVA - Special Red Banner Far Eastern Army
MOTsR - Monarchist Union of Central Russia
NEP - New Economic Policy
NKO - People's Commissariat for Defence
NKVD - People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
PUR - Political Administration of the Red Army
RKKA - Workers' and Peasants' Red Army
ROVS - Russian General Military Union
RVSR - Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic
RVS - Revolutionary Military Council
STO - Council of Labour and Defence
TsK - Central Committee
UNR - Ukrainian People's Republic
VChK (Cheka) - All-Russian Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counterrevolution and Sabotage

Military Districts

BVO – Belorussian Military District
KVO – Kiev Military District
KhVO – Kharkov Military District
LVO - Leningrad Military District
MVO - Moscow Military District
PriVO – Volga Military District
SAVO – Central-Asian Military District
SKVO – North-Caucasian Military District
UVO - Urals Military District

Terminology and Transliteration

In transliterating from Russian to English this thesis uses the Library of Congress system. The only exception made is the transliteration of ‘Trotsky’, rather than ‘Trotskii’, as the former is most common. As this thesis covers a twenty-year period from 1917, rather than frequently alternate between the changing names of the Soviet political police, for example Cheka, GPU, OGPU and NKVD, for simplicity, ‘political police’ is used when possible.

Introduction

On 11 June 1937 a closed military court passed sentences of execution on several of the Red Army's most talented and experienced officers. Charged with membership of a 'military-fascist plot', working with the Nazis and planning to overthrow the Bolshevik government, all were immediately executed after the trial. The executions of Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevskii and the senior officers, Iona Iakir, Ieronim Uborevich, Boris Feldman, Robert Eideman, Avgust Kork, Vitalii Primakov and Vitovt Putna caused international scandal. Tukhachevskii in particular was world-renowned. He was a Civil-War hero and the Red Army's key strategist. The arrests did not stop at the June military trial and almost immediately a large wave of arrests expanded throughout the officer corps as more fellow 'conspirators' were drawn into the 'military-fascist plot'. This attack on the military cost it dearly. Alongside the execution of some of the Red Army's most senior officers, during the next two years over thirty thousand army leaders were discharged from the ranks, thousands arrested and many executed.¹ This decapitation of the military is still commonly pointed to by historians as contributing to its poor performance in the opening years of the Second World War.²

Yet, the reason why Stalin lashed out at his military in such an extreme manner remains a mystery. What is certain is that there was no genuine conspiracy within the Red Army. It has long been known that the basis of the 'military-fascist plot' was fabricated and crafted by the Soviet political police using forced confessions.³ Consequently, there have been numerous attempts to explain this attack on the Red Army from its very aftermath, but still no adequate or convincing explanation has been presented about why Stalin would gut his officer corps during 1937-38. The most common interpretation sees Stalin launch a pre-planned 'military purge' against his army in 1937 as part of his domination through terror.⁴ But this explanation has serious

¹ Roger Reese, 'The Impact of the Great Purge on the Red Army: Wrestling with Hard Numbers' *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 19. 1-3 (1992), 71-90 (p. 72).

² See for example, Sergei Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2005), p. 712.

³ After Stalin's death a rehabilitation process of the victims of the military purge took place. In January 1957 the Military Collegium of the Soviet Supreme Court rehabilitated the senior officers who had been named as the key conspirators in the 'military-fascist plot'. During the 1950s and 1960s hundreds of officers and soldiers were steadily rehabilitated. See 'Delo o tak nazyvaemoi "antisovetskoi trotskistskoi voennoi organizatsii" v krasnoi armii', *Izvestiia TsK*, 4 (1989), 42-73 (pp. 62-73).

⁴ From a large body of work, see for example, Erich Wollenberg, *The Red Army* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938); Leonard Shapiro, 'The Great Purge' in *The Soviet Army*, ed. by B. H. Liddell Hart (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1957); John A. Armstrong, *The Politics of Totalitarianism: The*

flaws. If the consolidation of power was the main object of such a military purge, Stalin picked a terrible time to do this. By 1937 it was clear that the Second World War was on the horizon and Soviet defence spending was rising rapidly in response. Why would Stalin build with one hand and destroy with the other? Why prepare for war but at the same time weaken the Red Army? In conducting this military purge Stalin risked undermining his army at the very moment he needed it to be powerful. This potentially put the entire Soviet Union in danger as Stalin would be forced to fight a war with a weakened military.

Thus, on the surface, this attack on the Red Army appears to be an irrational act and does not sit comfortably with an explanation focusing on Stalin's desire for greater power. As such, this thesis will offer a new interpretation of this military purge and one which seeks to explain precisely why Stalin felt that such a great risk needed to be taken. This thesis will argue that Stalin launched a wave of repression against the Red Army not to further consolidate his power, but that he did this reluctantly and from a position of weakness. By mid-1937, in conditions of looming world war, Stalin perceived the military to be unreliable and widely infiltrated by 'enemies' and foreign agents. In response, he was compelled to crack down on the army to root out the 'enemies' he believed were hidden in the ranks. Soon an expanding wave of discharges and arrests ripped through the Red Army. This quickly got out of control as the lower ranks responded to calls from the party and army leadership to help search out 'enemies' by sending in thousands of denunciations. As such, it was Stalin's false perception in 1937 that his army was unreliable that is crucial to understanding the military purge. This thesis will show how and why Stalin came to incorrectly believe his army was so heavily compromised by 1937, but before doing so, a short

Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1934 to the Present (New York: Random House, 1961); John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918-1941* (London: Macmillan, 1962); Edgar O'Ballance, *The Red Army* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964); Roman Kolkowicz, *The Soviet Military and the Communist Party* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Malcolm Mackintosh, *Juggernaut: A History of the Soviet Armed Forces* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1967); Paul W. Blackstock, 'The Tukhachevsky Affair', *Russian Review*, 28 (April, 1969), 171-190; Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (London: Macmillan, 1968); Adam Ulam, *Stalin: The Man and his Era* (New York: Viking Press, 1974); Vitaly Rapoport and Iuri Alexeev, *High Treason: Essays on the History of the Red Army, 1918-1938* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 1985); Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941* (New York: Norton, 1990); Dmitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991); Shimon Naveh, 'Tukhachesky' in *Stalin's Generals*, ed. by Harold Shukman (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993), pp. 255-274; Thomas M. Nichols, *The Sacred Cause: Civil-Military Conflict over Soviet National Security, 1917-1992* (London: Cornell University Press, 1993); Earl F. Ziemke, *The Red Army 1918-1941: From Vanguard of World Revolution to US Ally* (London, Portland, Or.: Frank Cass, 2004).

historiographical survey of previous accounts of the military purge will show why very few of these have been convincing.

The first attempts to provide a rationale for why Stalin attacked his army came from foreign observers and within the contemporary press as soon as the executions from the June 1937 military trial were announced. With little access to reliable information these immediate responses were understandably speculative. For instance, *The Manchester Guardian* speculated that Stalin had acted in response to a genuine military conspiracy within the Red Army.⁵ Other newspapers were not so definitive, but acknowledged Stalin's ambitions for power.⁶ A number of early historical works also gave similar conclusions to those of the contemporary press. Writing in the late 1930s, the writer, communist and former Red Army officer, Erich Wollenberg, saw the military purge as a part of Stalin's elimination of any possible challenge to his authority.⁷ The idea that Stalin had forestalled a genuine military plot also continued to be publicised into the 1940s. Well-known commentators such as the *New York Times* journalist Walter Duranty, who was based in Moscow for much of the 1930s, argued that there had been a genuine military conspiracy in the Red Army.⁸ In all, certain unifying themes appear in early accounts of the military purge: Stalin's desire for power, his willingness to take extreme measures to safeguard this, and speculations about a possible military conspiracy.

Early interpretations of the military purge did not alter greatly by the 1960s-70s and appeared in more developed forms in works on the Great Terror and the Red Army. During the Cold War the repression in the military during the Terror was most commonly depicted as an extension of Stalin's increasing desire for greater power and control into the Red Army. The historians John Erickson, Robert Conquest, Adam Ulam and Roman Kolkowicz saw the military purge in a similar light. This was part of Stalin's escalation of repression in order to increase his power, but also to neutralise a

⁵ 'The Purge of the Eight Russian Generals', *The Manchester Guardian*, 3 July 1937, p. 16.

⁶ See for example, 'Many Doubts Rise in Russia on Guilt of Eight Generals', *The New York Times*, 26 June 1937, p. 1. See other contemporary accounts such as from the American ambassador Joseph E. Davies who also believed that there had been a genuine coup attempt from the army officers, Joseph E. Davies, *Mission to Moscow*, 2 vols (London: Gollancz, 1942), I, p. 111.

⁷ Wollenberg, p. 224.

⁸ See Duranty's memoir, *USSR: The Story of Soviet Russia* (Melbourne: Hamish Hamilton, 1945), p. 222. Duranty is well-known as having been a Soviet sympathiser. That he explained the arrests of Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers as a response to a genuine military conspiracy, rather than suspect Stalin's own culpability, is unsurprising. See Sally J. Taylor, *Stalin's Apologist: Walter Duranty, the New York Times's Man in Moscow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

potential threat.⁹ According to these accounts, Stalin purged the military because he believed that certain members from the army leadership, primarily Tukhachevskii, would become a block to his expanding power and political hegemony. The Red Army needed to be subdued if Stalin was going to achieve total dominance. Consequently, the military purge was often linked to the growth of Stalin's cult of personality and his abuse of power.¹⁰ Alongside this common central argument, the Cold War accounts tended to examine the military purge on a very narrow basis, referring to it as the 'Tukhachevskii Affair', after its most famous victim. However, this restricted any analysis of the repression in the army to the relationship between Stalin and his military elite. A serious consideration of the experiences of the lower ranks during the purge was typically neglected.

In addition, common to nearly all Cold War accounts of the military purge is a story about a fabricated dossier of evidence which Stalin supposedly used to incriminate the senior officers. This dossier allegedly contained manufactured materials showing that some leading officers were planning a coup with German assistance. This story exists in several variations and in some cases there is no physical dossier of 'evidence' and only verbal disinformation. For example, in one common version, Stalin ordered the creation of fabricated 'evidence' to provide a credible pretext for eliminating the members of the army leadership he believed stood in the way of his goal of total power. The Soviet political police then dutifully have the necessary incriminating dossier created in 1937.¹¹ In the another version of the story, which is less common, Stalin is depicted as being duped by German intelligence agents, who fabricate the dossier and have this sent to the Soviet Union in an attempt to provoke Stalin into attacking his own military.¹² The main protagonists in most versions are the Czechoslovakian President, Eduard Benes, the head of the German intelligence agency, Reinhard Heydrich, and the Russian White émigré and Soviet double-agent, Nikolai Skoblin. Benes's role was an intermediary who was supposedly fooled into passing the disinformation about the Red Army officers to the Soviet ambassador in Prague, which was then reported to Stalin. Benes claimed in his memoirs that he found out about plans for an alleged military coup

⁹ See Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, p. 465; Conquest, pp. 201-235; Ulam, pp. 457-458; Kolkowicz, pp. 56-59. See also Shapiro, p. 71.

¹⁰ See for example, Iuri Petrov, *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo v sovetskoii armii i flote, 1918-1961* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1964), p. 298.

¹¹ See for example, Conquest, pp. 218-219.

¹² For details on this version of the dossier story, see Igor Lukes, 'The Tukhachevsky Affair and President Edvard Benes', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 7. 3 (1996), 505-529 (p. 508).

in the Soviet Union second-hand through Count Trauttmannsdorff, one of Hitler's high officials. Apparently Trauttmannsdorff had accidentally disclosed the existence of secret negotiations between Hitler and Tukhachevskii and spoken about an 'anti-Stalin clique' within the Soviet Union.¹³ Benes's account has been used as evidence showing the intrigue by either the Soviet political police or by German intelligence in duping him into delivering the disinformation against the Red Army to Stalin. Heydrich's role was supposedly working with Skoblin in fabricating the necessary documents against the members of Red Army elite. Specifically, Skoblin is often depicted as convincing Heydrich about developing plans for a military coup by some senior Red Army officers. Heydrich apparently agreed to fabricate the necessary materials for transmission to the Soviet Union having sensed an opportunity to provoke Stalin into weakening his own army.¹⁴

The dossier story is full of intrigue and conspiracy. If it had not been for Nikita Khrushchev's acknowledgment of the story in the early 1960s, it probably would not have been given much credibility by historians.¹⁵ However, despite how common the dossier story is in the literature on the military purge, whichever way it is presented, there is no reason to believe it. The story derives from unreliable memoirs, often those of political police defectors which have been long discredited.¹⁶ Other key accounts,

¹³ Eduard Benes, *Memoirs of Dr Eduard Benes: From Munich to New War and New Victory* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954), p. 47. The same version of events can be seen in Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, 6 vols (London: Cassell, 1949), I, pp. 258-259.

¹⁴ See for example, Victor Alexandrov, *The Tukhachevsky Affair* (London: Macdonald, 1963), p. 190. There are some particularly unconvincing accounts about why Stalin would purge the military which develop the dossier story even further. One particularly doubtful version is the story that some prominent officers, including Tukhachevskii, discovered that Stalin had been an Okhrana agent before the October Revolution and then planned to depose him. Apparently, in response Stalin had the dossier fabricated to incriminate the officers first. However, there is no reliable evidence that Stalin had ever been an Okhrana agent. For this version, see Roman Brackman, *The Secret File of Joseph Stalin: A Hidden Life* (London: Frank Cass, 2001).

¹⁵ *The Stalin Dictatorship: Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' and Other Documents*, ed. by T. H. Rigby (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1968), p. 99. Khrushchev's explanation of the military purge blamed German intelligence for supposedly supplying the dossier of 'evidence' against the high command. In this way Khrushchev could still lay blame with Stalin for purging the army, but responsibility was also placed on the German government. Thus, for Khrushchev, it was Stalin's suspicious personality and German intrigues against the regime that led to the execution of the Soviet Union's military heroes and neither the Soviet system nor its ideology were in any way responsible.

¹⁶ The key memoir accounts are from NKVD defectors, including Walter Krivitskii, Aleksandr Orlov, and the German intelligence agent Walter Shellenberg. For criticism of Krivitskii and Orlov see Matthew Lenoe, 'Did Stalin Kill Kirov and Does it Matter?', *The Journal of Modern History*, 74, 2 (2002), 352-380; J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 211-220. For criticism of Schellenberg and other common memoir accounts, see 'M. N. Tukhachevskii i "voenno-fashistskii zagovor"', *Voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv*, 2 (1998), 3-123 (pp. 3-6).

such Benes's memoir, have also been proved false.¹⁷ Indeed, there is nothing at all to suggest that the dossier story has any basis in reality. Aside from the problems with the existing sources, there is a complete absence of any other reliable evidence. After the opening of the Russian archives in the early 1990s, no single piece of documentary evidence has ever been found in support of the story. Furthermore, the materials that are now accessible do not point towards the existence of the fabricated dossier either. For example, just before the June 1937 military trial Stalin met with the Red Army's most senior officers to discuss the exposed 'military plot'. The transcript of this meeting is now available and throughout the entire four-day session there is not a single mention of this dossier of incriminating evidence. In addition, it was never used at the June military trial itself.¹⁸ This is remarkable if the dossier really was the key piece of evidence against Tukhachevskii and the other officers. Why would Stalin go to such lengths to have incriminating evidence fabricated with the precise aim of giving the executions credibility, if he never publicised it or seemingly even used it? The same can be said for the other variation of the story where Stalin is duped by German intelligence. If the evidence was so convincing, why were the rest of the Red Army elite not told about it? The poor source base and lack of evidence for the dossier story mean few today take it seriously.

It must also be emphasised that these Cold War accounts of the military purge are inseparable from the dominant trend in historiography of the Great Terror at this time. In the 1960s and 1970s the Great Terror was depicted by historians as little more than a brutal consolidation of power. Stalin was seen as the master planner who methodically executed all who stood in his way.¹⁹ The military purge was regarded as merely an extension of this process into the Red Army. However, as detailed above, there are immediate problems with this view of the military purge. Would Stalin really endanger his own position and the security of the Soviet Union by executing some of the most talented individuals in the military and arrest thousands of officers in conditions of looming war just to achieve personal dominance over the armed forces? A further question is how Stalin would find himself in such a position, if he was such a meticulous planner, of having promoted to the highest ranks people who he did not fully

¹⁷ See Lukes, pp. 505-529.

¹⁸ See *Voennyi soviet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR: 1-4 iunia 1937 goda: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. K. M. Anderson and others (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2008). That the dossier was not used during the military trial has been known for a long time, but strangely did not arouse many suspicions about its authenticity from some historians, see Conquest, pp. 222-223.

¹⁹ The best known example of this argument can be seen in Conquest, *The Great Terror*.

trust? If Stalin's aim was absolute control, why were the careers of Tukhachevskii and the other officers advanced to high seniority?

Serious questions were raised against previous accounts of the military purge by historians reassessing the dominant view of the Great Terror during the 1980s and early 1990s. Notably, Arch Getty viewed the military purge as a problematic historical episode with a lack of convincing evidence.²⁰ Getty questioned how pre-planned the military purge had actually been. In highlighting the series of events leading up to the June 1937 trial, Getty argued that these were not as expected if Stalin had meticulously arranged the execution of the senior officers. For example, despite suspicions that had begun to circle Tukhachevskii from early May 1937, it took a month for Stalin to decide on a course of action. In the first instance Tukhachevskii was only demoted from the deputy People's Commissar for Defence to command the less prestigious Volga Military District (PriVO).²¹ As Gábor Rittersporn commented, 'this was hardly the usual treatment of dangerous conspirators'.²² If Stalin saw Tukhachevskii as a threat to his power, if he was a marked man, and if there was accumulating incriminating 'evidence' against him, it makes little sense not to arrest him immediately.

With the release of a huge amount of previously inaccessible documents from the Russian archives in the early 1990s more focused studies on the Red Army during the Terror quickly emerged. With the declassification of internal army, party and political police materials, it was possible for the first time to gain a fuller understanding of the impact of repression in the Red Army during 1937-38. Importantly, this newer work cast further doubts over earlier accounts of the military purge and particularly how this had been framed as the 'Tukhachevskii Affair'. For example, from a perspective of political and social history Roger Reese showed that a practice of purging (*chistki*) had already been established in the army throughout the 1920s and 1930s. These purges aimed to improve ideological conformity in the ranks and remove those deemed to be 'class aliens' and 'socially-harmful elements'.²³ Reese elaborated that during the Terror, the mass denunciations so important in driving forward the search for 'enemies of the

²⁰ Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, p. 168.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

²² Gábor Rittersporn, *Stalinist Simplifications and Soviet Complications: Social Tensions and Political Conflicts in the USSR, 1933-1953* (Chur, Reading: Harwood, 1991), p. 140.

²³ Reese, 'The Red Army and the Great Purges' in *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, ed. by Getty and Roberta T. Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 198-214 (p. 203). This distinction between *chistki* and the repression in the Terror was first seen in the work of Getty, see *Origins of the Great Purges*, pp. 38-57.

people', spread quickly throughout the Red Army. Reese argued this was because, 'the rank and file were conditioned through *chistki* to see class enemies and wreckers in all walks of life'.²⁴ Thus, an established internal practice of army purging transformed into a vehicle of mass denunciation in 1937-38. In this way Reese placed an important focus on the lower ranks and how ordinary soldiers responded to the call to root out 'enemies of the people'. Reese's work took the emphasis away from viewing the military purge as the 'Tukhachevskii Affair' and showed that the response of the Red Army as a whole to the 'exposure' of a 'military conspiracy' in the army leadership is crucial to understanding why the military purge of 1937-38 reached such a large scale.

Oleg Suvenirov similarly traced the roots of the military purge before 1937 and looked beyond than the narrow focus of the 'Tukhachevskii Affair'. Suvenirov provided a detailed documentation of repression within the military from the early 1930s in his book, *Tragediia RKKA 1937-1938*. For example, he showed that before 1937 the Red Army experienced the arrests of political oppositionists, it faced great turmoil during the years of the collectivisation of agriculture, and there were a numerous alleged 'counterrevolutionary' groups 'revealed' by the political police before 1937. Spies had also been frequently 'exposed' in the Red Army.²⁵ Suvenirov also highlighted the impact on the Red Army of the key events which escalated the political repression inside the Bolshevik Party, such as the murder of the Leningrad party boss, Sergei Kirov, in December 1934. Suvenirov estimated that a wave of tens or hundreds of military arrests followed the murder.²⁶ In addition, Suvenirov focused on the role played in the military purge by People's Commissar for Defence, Kliment Voroshilov. Indeed, all high-ranking military arrests needed his approval from 1934, thus he was directly implicated in the repression. The military purge cannot be fully understood without a strong consideration of Voroshilov's role.²⁷ Consequently, Suvenirov demonstrated that there is an important pre-history to the military purge of 1937-38, that the Red Army was responsive to the changing political currents in the party before the outbreak of the Terror and that it faced the same types of fabricated charges as other Soviet institutions. The military purge was far more than the 'Tukhachevskii Affair' and must be seen in the context of the broader growing political repression in the 1930s.

²⁴ Reese, 'The Red Army and the Great Purges', p. 211.

²⁵ Oleg Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKA, 1937-1938* (Moscow: Terra, 1998), pp. 45-59.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 95-98.

Another major contributor to our understanding of the military purge is Sergei Minakov, who has written extensively on the subject from a perspective of civil-military relations.²⁸ Minakov examines the military purge with a broad view, taking elements of his account back to the 1917 Revolution. However, he still refocuses attention to a significant extent back towards Tukhachevskii and his allies in the army elite. Important to Minakov's interpretation of the military purge is what he sees as the encroachment into politics by an alliance of senior officers, including Tukhachevskii, who were unhappy with the direction of army modernisation and who focused their discontent on the head of the Red Army, Voroshilov. Minakov argues this alliance of senior officers wanted to remove Voroshilov, and that Stalin saw this as a serious threat. Minakov presents this as evidence of a possible 'plot' within the military elite. Thus, even though the 'military-fascist plot' which formed the basis of the 1937-38 military purge was fabricated by the political police and there were no genuine plans for a military coup, according to Minakov, there was still some conspiratorial activity from several senior officers who wanted Voroshilov out of the way.

Where this argument suffers, however, is in a weak grounding in evidence, much of which is circumstantial. There is also a big difference between an alliance of senior officers hostile to their superior, and genuine conspiratorial plans to force him out.²⁹ What Minakov does describe more successfully is how different groups saw Tukhachevskii as an object of suspicion. From the early 1920s there were numerous rumours surrounding Tukhachevskii about his supposed disloyalty. He was often perceived as a 'Russian Bonaparte' outside of the Soviet Union, an image particularly common within White émigré circles holding out hope for a future military coup. As Minakov has shown, the political police received rumours and other hearsay pointing to Tukhachevskii's alleged ambitions for power and disloyalty from a very early stage in

²⁸ Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov; Za otvorotom marshalskoi shinelii* (Orel: Orelizdat, 1999); *Sovetskaia voennaia elita 20-kh godov: sostav, evoliutsiia, sotsiokul'turnye osobennosti i politicheskaia rol'* (Orel: Orelizdat, 2000); *Stalin i ego marshal* (Moscow: Iauza; Eksmo, 2004); *1937. zagovor byl!* (Moscow: Iauza; Eksmo, 2010).

²⁹ Minakov's latest book, *1937. zagovor byl!*, has a misleading title. Minakov does not definitively argue that there was a genuine military plot and plans for a coup, and notes there is a lack of convincing evidence, see p. 289. For criticism of Minakov overestimating the significance of alliances in the army elite, see Vladimir Khaustov and Lennart Samuelson, *Stalin, NKVD i repressii 1936-1938 gg.* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010), p. 17. Much of Minakov's support for the alleged plans to remove Voroshilov include repeated references to memoirs and sources from after the 'military-fascist plot' had been 'exposed' in 1937, such as the transcript of the Military Soviet which met in early June 1937 to discuss the 'military conspiracy'. Minakov does not account for very real possibility that those present at this particular Military Soviet may have presented any informal alliances within the military elite in a more 'conspiratorial' light in view of the very recently 'exposed' 'military plot'.

his career.³⁰ Importantly, it is very likely that what were regarded as merely rumours before the mid-1930s were taken more seriously during the Terror. Minakov's work is important in demonstrating how certain senior officers were continual objects of suspicion and how rumours about their disloyalty never abated.

Other recent works of note are Aleksandr Pechenkin's study based on the Military Soviet of June 1937, a meeting which was hastily convened after the 'exposure' of the 'military-fascist plot'.³¹ What is striking about this Military Soviet is that it is clear that not all present knew the details of the 'military plot'. The exact details were disputed and some members reacted with what reads like a genuine sense of shock that some of those who were regarded as loyal officers were in reality dangerous conspirators. Nikolai Cherushev's work has also greatly contributed to our knowledge of the military purge. In working with the interrogation transcripts of arrested officers Cherushev shows how military 'conspiracy' was linked together. He closely details the alleged connections made between the arrested 'conspirators' and the common accusations. Importantly, this process was not without contradictions. Cherushev has also firmly rebutted those who still maintain that there was a genuine military plot, a view not uncommon today.³² Finally, Iuliia Kantor, while still maintaining a reasonably tight focus on Tukhachevskii, has produced important work exploring the links between the Red Army elite and the German Army.³³ This connection was particularly significant. One of the main charges against the senior officers at the closed trial in June 1937 was espionage for Germany. The 'military-fascist plot' was certainly fabricated, but the political police had material to work with.

However, despite this new level of detail about the military purge, still no credible or convincing explanation has been offered for why Stalin would attack his army at the same time as he knew war was approaching. Reese and Suvenirov explored the dynamics of the purge process in the army, showing that the tide of denunciations could not have been wholly directed by Stalin, and that there is an important pre-history

³⁰ Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov*, pp. 71-97.

³¹ Aleksandr Pechenkin, *Stalin i voennyi sovet* (Moscow: Vserossiiskii zaochnyi finansovo-ekonomicheskii institut, 2007).

³² See Cherushev, *1937 god, byl li zagovor voennykh?* (Moscow: Veche, 2007). The argument that there was a genuine military conspiracy has been surprising persistent, particularly so in Russian popular books. There are some more academic texts which also still maintain that a military plot was genuine, despite a lack of convincing evidence. See for example, Valentin Leskov, *Stalin i zagovor Tukhachevskogo* (Moscow: Veche, 2003).

³³ Iuliia Kantor, *Voina i mir Mikhaila Tukhachevskogo* (Moscow: Ogonek, 2005); *Zakliataia družba: sekretnoe sotrudnichestvo SSSR i Germanii v 1920-1930-e godi* (Saint Petersburg: Piter, 2009).

of repression in the military prior to 1937, but neither point to why such a large wave of arrests began in June 1937. Reese only speculates about Stalin's possible desire to subjugate the army and Suvenirov did not come to any firm conclusions.³⁴ Pechenkin also does not convincingly argue why the military purge was initiated and falls back to an argument focusing on Stalin's desire for loyal officers.³⁵ While Kantor has discovered many very useful archival documents and has shown the importance of the link between the German Army and the Red Army elite, she returns to the established view that Stalin closely directed the Terror and purged the military as part of a process to remove any opposition to his power. Kantor argues that Stalin 'saw Tukhachevskii as an enemy of his system', he was loyal, but not unconditionally so. According to Kantor, the connection between the Red Army and Germany was important in giving Stalin the opportunity to remove Tukhachevskii.³⁶ Cherushev agrees with Kantor's assessment in his latest work on the military purge.³⁷ Minakov does provide a different explanation of the military purge, but his argument that Stalin acted in response to the encroachment into politics by some senior officers looking to unseat Voroshilov is unconvincing. Despite Tukhachevskii being the subject of numerous rumours about his disloyalty, there is nothing to suggest that there were any organised plans to remove Voroshilov from the army leadership. In addition, Minakov's explanation certainly does not account for why the military purge later affected over 35,000 army leaders and not just the main 'conspirators' apparently plotting Voroshilov's downfall. Finally, despite arguing that members of the Red Army elite encroached into Soviet party politics, Minakov surprisingly ignores the importance of the growing political repression inside the Bolshevik Party during the 1930s to the military purge in 1937-38. He does not consider the impact of key political events such as the Kirov assassination or how the arrests of former political oppositionists and the emergence of a perceived conspiracy inside the party, a defining feature of the Great Terror, manifested inside the Red Army.

Thus no credible case has been made for why Stalin gutted the military in 1937-38. Previous accounts either make no judgment or merely allude to Stalin's drive for power and his desire to crush any possible opposition. In this respect, there has been little development from the interpretations of the 1950s-60s about why Stalin attacked

³⁴ Reese, 'The Red Army and the Great Purges', p. 212.

³⁵ For criticism of Pechenkin, see Samuelson and Khaustov, p. 17.

³⁶ Kantor, *Zakliataia družhba*, p. 295.

³⁷ Cherushev, p. 570. For further criticisms of Cherushev's earlier work, see Khaustov and Samuelson, p. 16; Aleksandr Zdanovich, *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti i krasnaia armia* (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2008), pp. 32-33, 106.

his army in such an extreme manner just before the outbreak of war. Yet, the objections against an explanation focusing on Stalin's desires for greater power remain the same and the extent to which the military purge was carefully pre-planned has already been seriously questioned.

Why there has been so little development in explaining Stalin's purge of the Red Army is partly attributable to the lack of engagement by historians writing on the subject with recent research on the Great Terror. Beyond Reese's research, accounts of the military purge rarely engage with the large body of work on the Terror published since the opening of the Russian archives. As such, a chief aim of this thesis is to set an examination of the military purge alongside new research on the Great Terror. This will not only firmly move this analysis of the military purge beyond the restrictions of the 'Tukhachevskii Affair' but will provide a much more thorough account of how the repression in the Red Army was influenced by wider political violence within the Soviet state and society. Importantly, this approach will also show how the purge of the army contributed to the momentum of the Great Terror itself. The military purge was a crucial part of the Terror and must be analysed in the context of what we now know about the phenomenon.

The debates about the origins of the Great Terror and the forces behind state violence during the Stalin period have been transformed over the past twenty years through access to previously classified archival sources. Since the opening of the archives in the early 1990s, the accounts of the Great Terror that dominated the post-war era, which, as noted above, directly influenced Cold War accounts of the military purge, have been shown to be narrow and incomplete. During the 1950s-60s post-war historians and political scientists typically examined the Great Terror from the perspective of political history. They variously depicted Stalin using state violence in order to overcome resistance to revolutionary change, as a means to increase his personal control over the Soviet Union, or simply as a consequence of his alleged paranoid personality. While some historians and political theorists saw state violence as inherent within the Soviet system, those writing during the 1950s-60s typically focused solely on Stalin's intentions and actions during the Great Terror at the expense of an analysis of wider Soviet society.³⁸

³⁸ Notable post-war scholarship on the Stalinist regime includes the work of Zbigniew Brzezinski, who saw terror as inherent in the functioning of the Stalinist system. Brzezinski argued that in the absence of any real opposition, the regime relied on a system of purging to remove opposition to its power and also

Before the archives fully opened, this dominant Cold War narrative had already been challenged by a group of historians examining previously neglected aspects of the Terror. Writing in the late 1970s, the social historian Sheila Fitzpatrick took the emphasis away from high politics and explored the role of wider society in the formation of the Stalinist system.³⁹ Later in the 1990s, and alongside several other historians, Fitzpatrick directly challenged how the Great Terror had been framed by totalitarian scholars, showing that this was a far more complex phenomenon than just state repression directed from ‘above’. Fitzpatrick highlighted a range of social tensions which led ordinary Soviet citizens to actively participate in the Terror and denounce one another to the authorities. These social tensions were so strong that once the Terror began it took on a momentum of its own. Similarly, in his study of the industrial city Magnitogorsk, Stephen Kotkin explored how the pressures of everyday life under the Stalinist regime helped engender a flurry of denunciations from ordinary people to the authorities during 1937-38.⁴⁰

Writing in the mid-1980s, Getty argued in a seminal work that internal structural pressures within the Soviet system, rather than Stalin’s desire for more power and control, were the primary cause of the Terror. Using previously underused sources, such

filter out less capable party members, see *The Permanent Purge: Politics in Soviet Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956). See also Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956). That terror was essential to sustaining a totalitarian system of rule and used to eliminate traces of real and hypothetical opposition was an argument advanced by the political theorist Hannah Arendt, see *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958) Other historians writing during the Cold War, such as Conquest, took a different view and rather than place emphasis on terror as an inherent reality in the soviet system, he placed responsibility individually on Stalin for the scale of the state violence during the 1930s and focused on supposed defects in the dictator’s personality. Conquest depicted Stalin as obsessed with gaining power no matter what the cost, see Conquest. A similar view was advanced by Ulam. The view that Stalin had supposedly been ‘sickly suspicious’, suffering from ‘mania’ and obsessed with power was popularised by Khrushchev during his Secret Speech of 1956 and greatly influenced Cold War historians such as Conquest, see *The Stalin Dictatorship*, ed. by Rigby. For a more recent work that attempts to show that Stalin’s personality and psychology was one of the prime causes of the Terror, see Tucker.

³⁹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). Fitzpatrick argued that during the 1920s high levels of social mobility enabled ordinary workers and peasants to seize senior positions in the party and government. However, according to Fitzpatrick, this new elite was resistant to further revolutionary change, providing a foundation for a conservative Stalinist system.

⁴⁰ See Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). For other recent work exploring popular responses to the Terror, see Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia: Terror, Propaganda, and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Robert Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin’s Russia, 1934-1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin’s Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

as materials from the Smolensk archive and contemporary newspapers and journals, Getty highlighted strained relations between centre and regional party bosses which he argued provided the spark for the Terror. Frustrated by their recalcitrance, the regime encouraged criticism of local leaders from lower level party members in 1937, a process that soon spiralled out of control when it became intertwined with official party rhetoric about hidden ‘enemies’ of the people. Getty presented the Great Terror as a reactive process caused by a loss of control, rather than being carefully premeditated.⁴¹

Similarly, Rittersporn also highlighted the importance of internal systemic pressures and argued that a struggle between the party and state, between the elite and the workers, prompted the regime to turn to repression to manage the system.⁴²

The work of this group of historians firmly shifted the emphasis away from Stalin the individual and towards Soviet society and the party-state system and there are several continuities in approach in this examination of the military purge. Firstly, how the Red Army rank-and-file responded to the ‘exposure’ of the ‘military-fascist plot’ will be explored below. This thesis will show that even though the military had a much stronger sense of hierarchy and discipline than wider Soviet society, the response from the troops to the urgent calls from the regime to root out hidden ‘conspirators’ and ‘enemies’ during 1937-38 created a similar level of turmoil and disorientation in the ranks. As with the rest of the Terror, the military purge took on a momentum of its own.⁴³ Secondly, tensions between the regime and the army commanders will also be examined. As will be detailed below, a number of commanders resisted the regime’s calls to ‘expose’ ‘enemies’ within their units during the 1930s. Like the party bosses, some officers had a direct interest in evading the regime’s orders.

However, a major distinction to historians such as Getty and Rittersporn is that this research demonstrates that Stalin initiated the purge of the Red Army not as means to manage a dysfunctional Soviet system, or that this was an unforeseen consequence of this attempt. It will argue that Stalin purged the army because he misperceived it as posing a serious security threat. It will explore precisely why Stalin saw a serious danger from his military and how he came to believe that there was no other option but to unleash a mass purge. Indeed, even though historians such as Getty, Rittersporn and

⁴¹ Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*. For similar arguments, see James R. Harris, *The Great Urals: Regionalism and the Evolution of the Soviet System* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999); Goldman, *Terror and Democracy*.

⁴² Rittersporn.

⁴³ Reese is alone in having studied how the Red Army rank-and-file responded to the Terror in ‘The Red Army and the Great Purges’.

Fitzpatrick demonstrated that the dominant post-war account was reductive, there is still little consensus about Stalin's motivations for initiating the Great Terror or why he used state violence so frequently. While the increasing rate in the discovery of new archival documents throughout the 1990s has allowed more nuanced accounts of the Terror, this has also created many more unanswered questions. For instance, new strands of research into Soviet culture and society, foreign policy, and the influence of ideology and intelligence on the behaviour of the regime, have created new controversies without settling the older arguments about why the Terror began and what its purpose was. This examination of the military purge has particular relevance to new debates about the influence of ideology on the use of state violence and how intelligence drove perceptions of threat. It is from this approach that this thesis will help reveal the key motivations behind the Great Terror.

The opening of the archives coincided with a growing interest in the social and cultural history of the Stalin period. This has not only enriched how we understand the dynamic between state and society in pushing forward state violence, but has demonstrated the strength of ideology in the Soviet Union during the 1920s-30s. For instance, Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin have explored the influence of ideology within Soviet society, particularly among the intelligentsia. They show how some party members actually embraced the Great Terror and rationalised the arrests occurring around them. For those most ideologically dedicated to the communist cause, the Great Terror was an essential part of the socialist experiment and necessary for remoulding society. Many sincerely believed that hidden capitalist 'enemies' in Soviet society were a very real threat.⁴⁴

Furthermore, new archival documents such as private correspondence between Stalin and members of his close circle have refocused attentions onto the Bolshevik elite and shown the strength of ideology within the upper circles of the party. Indeed, these materials have revealed that Stalin frequently used Marxist language outside of his public speeches.⁴⁵ It now appears that Stalin did not just conceal a desire for power within Marxist rhetoric, as argued by some Cold War historians.⁴⁶ He seems to have

⁴⁴ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁴⁵ See *Pis'ma I.V. Stalina V.M. Molotovu: 1925-1936 gg.: sbornik dokumentov*, ed. by L. Kosheleva and others (Moscow: Rossiia molodaia, 1995); *The Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence, 1931-36*, ed. by R. W. Davies and others (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁴⁶ See Conquest.

viewed the world through a Marxist framework and appears to have been ideologically committed.⁴⁷ Several historians have already begun to explore the influence of ideology on the regime's domestic policies. For instance, David Priestland has argued that ideology was the prime force behind state violence. According to Priestland, the regime zigzagged between different mobilising ideologies during the 1920-30s and the Great Terror was the result of the ascendancy of a destabilising populist ideology promoting revolutionary purity.⁴⁸

In contrast, rather than examine ideology as a popular mobilisation strategy, other historians have focused specifically on the regime's ideological hostility to capitalism. For instance, in his study on the Communist International, William Chase explored how the Stalinist regime endorsed various different conspiracy theories, notably those detailing that fascist agents were infiltrating into Soviet state and working alongside hidden party 'double-dealers'. As Chase demonstrates, it seems that Stalin and his close circle genuinely believed that the capitalist world was engaged in a vast conspiracy to bring down the Soviet Union. Similarly, James Harris has argued that the Bolsheviks' endorsement of the ideology of capitalist encirclement combined with a stream of inaccurate and misread intelligence left the Stalinist regime convinced that a major war was approaching for most of the interwar period. The regime was highly concerned that foreign agents were infiltrating into the country and making early preparations for an invasion. According to these historians, Stalin's consistent misperception of these threats was a primary force behind the Great Terror.⁴⁹

This thesis further explores ideology and perception through examining how Stalin perceived the security of the Red Army. As such, a large focus in this thesis is on the Bolshevik Party elite. Taking 1917 as a starting point it will show that the Bolshevik regime had an uneasy relationship with its standing army from its very formation in early 1918. Maintaining a standing army (rather than a more ideologically acceptable

⁴⁷ See Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in 20th Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (Richmond: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002). See Getty's later work which shows the strength of Marxist ideology within closed party circles, Getty and Oleg Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilisation: Ideas, Power and Terror in Inter-war Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴⁹ See Rittersporn; William Chase, *Enemies Within the Gates? The Comintern and the Stalinist Repression, 1934-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Harris, 'Encircled by Enemies: Stalin's Perceptions of the Capitalist World, 1918-1941', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30. 3 (2007), 513-545. Hiroaki Kuromiya argues differently that Stalin initiated the Great Terror in response to a genuine and serious threat from foreign agents, and as such his perception of external dangers in 1937 was not completely misguided, see *Voices of the Dead: Stalin's Great Terror in the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

people's militia) clashed with the Bolshevik's principles and many party members never fully reconciled to its existence. Alongside this ideological hostility, the Red Army was regarded as a target of foreign agents and other domestic 'counterrevolutionaries' during 1920s-30s. The military was seen as vulnerable to infiltration and displaying alarming security weaknesses that the regime believed capitalist countries would seize upon. The Red Army was regarded as a prime target for agents from a hostile capitalist coalition. However, the perception of these dangers was consistently greater than their reality and the Stalinist regime saw more 'enemies' than really existed. As shown below, as world war crept closer during the 1930s, party and political police attentions increasingly turned towards the recognised security weaknesses in the Red Army. This represented an important step towards the military purge, which was eventually sparked by a very large spy scare in 1937.

In this respect, this analysis of the military purge demonstrates that Stalin's misperception of threats and his ideological hostility to the capitalist world are crucial to understanding state violence during the Great Terror. It will argue that Stalin perceived threats within the Red Army that did not exist and that he attacked it during 1937-38 from a position of vulnerability and misperception, rather than of confidence and strength. Despite war approaching, Stalin purged the organisation he relied upon the most because he misperceived the military as posing a serious threat to his own power and to the stability of the regime. Thus, while Stalin undoubtedly wanted to preserve his power, and this remains an important motivation behind the Great Terror, it is necessary to understand what threats he believed put this at risk.

New documents from the Russian archives have also allowed analysis of the mass operations, which began in the summer of 1937 and resulted in the arrests and executions of thousands of innocent civilians by list. These operations were unexamined before the opening of the archives but they were responsible for the majority of the victims of the Great Terror.⁵⁰ Indeed, a number of historians now argue that to fully

⁵⁰ For recent work covering the mass operations see Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror; Stalin's Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union*, ed. by Barry McLoughlin and Kevin McDermott (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); David R. Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924-1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926-1941* (Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009); *Stalinizm v sovetskoi provintsii: 1937-1938 gg.: massovaia operatsiia na osnove prikaz NOO447*, ed. by Marc Junge and others (Moscow: Rossiiskaia politicheskaia entsiklopedia, 2009); Oleg Khlevniuk, *Master of the House: Stalin and his Inner Circle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Khlevniuk argues that the Great Terror only be said to have started with the initiation of the mass operations, see *Master of the House*.

understand the Great Terror the main focus of any analysis should not be on how the repression unfolded within the Bolshevik Party during the mid-1930s, but instead on the links between the larger mass operations of 1937-38 and earlier large-scale policing operations, such as the collectivisation and dekulakisation drives of the late 1920s to early 1930s. These historians argue that the mass operations of the Great Terror represent a return to previous policing practices. The argument follows that Stalin deployed mass operations during the Great Terror in the belief that he needed to secure the Soviet Union in the face of approaching war and thus wanted to remove any ‘unreliable elements’ from the population. To achieve this Stalin ordered a new round of mass operations. In this sense, the mass operations of the Great Terror did not evolve from the repression in the Bolshevik Party in 1937, but had a much earlier precedent.⁵¹

Furthermore, several historians now argue that the mass operations give renewed support to the argument that the Great Terror was premeditated and carefully orchestrated by Stalin, and used primarily to secure his power and control. This represents a partial revival of the Cold War account of the Terror.⁵² Indeed, it is clear that Stalin ordered the mass operations and that these were carefully planned. A large number of new archival documents also show his close involvement during the escalation of state violence during the 1930s. If anything, declassified archival materials have reaffirmed Stalin’s decisive influence in the orchestration of the Great Terror.⁵³

Yet, even though it is now undisputed that Stalin ordered the mass operations, it is still far from clear why he did this and there is little consensus in the literature. For instance, the argument that the mass operations were launched in response to the future threat of war has been questioned, as there was no pressing international danger to the Soviet Union during summer 1937. Some historians have highlighted domestic factors to explain the mass operations. Getty argues that these were launched because the regime saw an urgent internal threat. According to Getty, the regime feared that the level of anti-soviet opposition within the countryside (broadly from ‘anti-soviet

⁵¹ See in particular, Hagenloh, Shearer and Khlevniuk. The latter argues that the Great Terror only really began with the initiation of the mass operations, see *Master of the House*.

⁵² This view is most explicit in works such as *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, ed. by Stéphane Courtois (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). Paul Gregory has recently put forward a case in a political-economic analysis that argues that Stalin initiated the Terror in order to increase and secure his power and control, see *Terror By Quota: State Security from Lenin to Stalin (An Archival Study)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). For a recent edited collection with a noticeable emphasis on the Terror as a premeditated act, see *Stalin’s Terror: Revisited*, ed. by Melanie Ilić (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁵³ For the text of order No. 00447, the mass operations against ‘Kulaks, criminals and anti-soviet elements’, see Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, pp. 473-480.

elements' and kulaks released from the labour camps) had grown significantly during 1937. Thus, Stalin used mass policing tactics in response to what he considered a genuine internal threat to the regime.⁵⁴

This thesis will both advance a new explanation of the mass operations and reconcile previous conflicting accounts. Indeed, it is a great omission that the military purge is ignored in research on the mass operations as it reveals their most likely motive. Stalin's purge of the army was launched in mid-June 1937, only weeks before the initiation of the mass operations. As detailed below, the military purge was sparked by the regime's misperception that the Red Army had been widely infiltrated by foreign agents. This research argues that following the beginning of the purge, Stalin then moved to secure wider society from the same danger of a fifth column by deploying the mass operations. As such, while the fear of a future war provided an important motivation for Stalin to conduct the mass operations, it was the more immediate threat of a perceived fifth column within the Red Army that first drove the military purge in June 1937 and had a decisive influence on the launch of the mass operations only weeks after.

In this respect, it is unlikely that the mass operations were planned long in advance. This research argues that they were launched in reaction to the regime's sudden and mistaken fear that foreign agents had infiltrated deeply into the military and Soviet society. The regime launched the mass operations from a similar position of vulnerability and misperception as it did the military purge. Even though the mass operations were clearly initiated and brought to an end by Stalin, they more reflect a deep level of insecurity rather a high level of totalitarian control.⁵⁵

Finally, the military purge also links the repression in the Bolshevik Party to the mass operations. The framing of the Terror as noted remains subject to debate in the literature, particularly after the discovery of the mass operations. This thesis argues that

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 468-481.

⁵⁵ Khlevniuk has argued that Stalin launched the mass operations proactively from a position of strength and control. He knew that war was approaching and that a potential fifth column in the population needed to be removed, but there was no element of panic in his response. According to Khlevniuk, as in the earlier repression in the party, Stalin tightly controlled the mass operations and ended these when they had achieved their goals. In this respect, Stalin showed himself to be a strong totalitarian dictator firmly in control of events, see *Master of the House*. By showing that the military purge was initiated because of a large spy scare, this thesis challenges this view of the mass operations. It will argue that the regime was caught unaware by the scale of the spy 'infiltration' in the Red Army and that the military purge was a reluctant last minute response. This was initiated from a position of vulnerability and not confidence. In this sense, while this research supports those such as Khlevniuk in showing that the foreign threat was an important motive for the mass operations and is inseparable from the perceived 'fifth column', it argues that the mass operations were primarily defensive and reactive.

the political repression in the Bolshevik Party was not an entirely discrete process from the mass operations. As shown below, the military purge was directly linked to the earlier repression in the Bolshevik Party during 1936, which then became a decisive factor in the launch of the mass operations. In this way, the military purge transformed the scale and targets of the Great Terror and pushed the repression against former oppositionists in the party towards ordinary Soviet citizens. The political repression in the Bolshevik Party thus remains central to understanding the mass operations.

But more broadly, beyond the Terror, this examination of the military purge will add to our understanding of Stalinist politics and society. Specifically, this thesis furthers our understanding of the Soviet Union as a totalitarian state. It will show how the Stalinist regime created an environment where individual pasts were never forgotten. The regime was totalitarian in its attempt to keep a very close track of those it perceived to be potential ‘enemies’ and the political police kept a large number of secret files on alleged ‘subversive’ activity. These attempts to keep track of ‘suspicious’ individuals in the Red Army can be seen immediately from 1918 as the regime reluctantly reconciled to having to maintain a standing army. Indeed, there were many officers in the Red Army who had stains on their records, whether this was previous service in the White armies during the Civil War or close contact with German officers. Importantly, these blemishes were not forgotten.

However, such surveillance could never be close to being absolute and the regime could never entirely confident that those working under it were loyal citizens or secret ‘enemies’. Because the regime endorsed conspiracy theories describing the infiltration of the Soviet Union by hidden ‘enemies’ and foreign agents, these broader uncertainties about the loyalty of certain individuals and segments of the Soviet population contributed to outbreaks of state violence during the 1920s-30s. During the Great Terror particularly, an uncertainty about who was loyal and who was an ‘enemy’ contributed to the destabilisation of the Soviet state. The regime arrested anyone with the slightest incrimination or connection to somebody already arrested. In this respect, this thesis argues that the roots of the Great Terror can be seen more clearly from the Revolution than is often given credit for in the literature.⁵⁶ This does not just apply to

⁵⁶ This is not exclusively the case, and some historians have studied the roots of Bolshevik state violence before 1917. See Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1941-1921* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

the Red Army, and the regime's anxieties about the loyalty of its military are likely to have been replicated in other spheres of the state.

The Stalinist regime was thus totalitarian in its attempt to monitor any form of perceived subversive activity in an effort to gauge the loyalty of the population, but its failure to do this comprehensively, or to a degree which gave it confidence, left it feeling vulnerable. When internal crises and spy scares erupted within the state, as happened in 1937 within the Red Army, Stalin lashed out and attacked his main power bases. Stalin came to believe that there were 'enemies' infiltrated deeply within state and society, but he could not be sure about exactly who was loyal or a 'double-dealer'. In this sense, the Stalinist state was fragile during the interwar and vulnerable to Stalin's tendency to undermine his own power.



A range of different primary sources have been used in this study on the military purge. These include archival documents, published speeches, contemporary newspapers and recently published document collections. In addition, as a central aim of this thesis is to examine the military purge in reference to recent work on the Stalin period and the Great Terror, a large secondary literature has been referred to. This includes studies on the Terror, the Stalinist political and economic systems, the political police, the intelligence services and examinations of Soviet foreign policy. The Red Army was closely integrated to the Bolshevik Party and had close links to other institutions in the Soviet state. Consequently, any analysis of the military purge must be made in reference to what we now know about these other institutions since the opening of the Russian archives.

The archival materials for this thesis are drawn primarily from the Russian State Military Archive (RGVA) and the Russian State Archive of Socio-political History (RGASPI). However, even though both archives are accessible to foreign researchers, many important documents remain classified. This is particularly the case for large parts of Stalin's personal papers and a great number of classified political police materials, both of which would help illuminate the immediate events leading up to the start of the

military purge in June 1937.⁵⁷ However, despite ongoing archival restrictions, a large body of available declassified materials (especially within the RGVA, many of which have been underused by historians) allows this thesis to advance an entirely new explanation of the military purge. Some of these underutilised sources include reports on the internal cohesion of the Red Army, stenograms of military speeches, internal army orders, crime statistics and the correspondence of the military elite.

Archival documents were selected to achieve a number of aims. Certain materials such as arrest statistics and reports on army criminality and loyalty have been used to test the extent that what we now know about the wider Great Terror holds true for the repression in the Red Army. This is particularly the case in terms of the fluctuating arrest trends at different points during the 1930s. For instance, when arrests for supposed espionage became far more widespread during late 1936, this thesis shows that this was also the case in the military. As noted, there is very little examination in the current literature on the links between the repression in the military and within other sectors of the Soviet state. The selection of archival documents in this thesis demonstrates that the repression in the Red Army frequently followed a similar path to the repression in other Soviet institutions.

However, certain collections of archival documents, particularly military intelligence reports, reports from the Political Administration of the Red Army (PUR) concerning army reliability and military orders detailing internal security questions, are used throughout this research to demonstrate that the Red Army did not just reflect broader arrest trends during the 1930s, but had its own particular internal and external threats which dated back to its formation in 1918. Through studying the personal materials and correspondence of Stalin and other senior members of the Soviet elite, particularly those of the head of the Red Army Kliment Voroshilov, this thesis will show which of these perceived threats was seen as the most dangerous for the military at different points during the 1920s-30s. In doing so, it will demonstrate, in contrast to previous accounts, that the military purge had much deeper roots than just the Terror years of the 1930s. The Bolshevik regime's longer term relationship with its standing army is central to understanding why it was purged.

⁵⁷ For discussions from the 1990s about the problems of researching in the Russian archives, many of which continue to exist today, notably secrecy, privileged access and the poor quality of some documents and facilities, see R. W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, in association with Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham, 1997), pp. 90-114. See also a similar discussion in *Slavic Review*, 52. 1 (1993), 87-106.

A greater concentration of archival documents are used in chapters three to five which cover the period from the late 1920s to the end of the Great Terror. As will be shown below, the late 1920s was the point when the regime began to have serious doubts about the reliability of the Red Army. It was subject to mass discharges and arrests for the first time. In this sense, the late 1920s to early 1930s represent a tipping point in terms of the repression in the military and the regime's growing concerns about its reliability. Therefore, a larger concentration of archival documents has been used to closely chart how these concerns about military reliability later manifested in a mass purge during the Terror. Chapters one and two are foundation chapters which show that the roots of the military purge and the Bolshevik regime's uneasy relationship with a standing army date back to the formation of the Red Army in 1918.

There are several potential problems and questions concerning the reliability of Soviet sources and their use in this thesis which must be addressed. As noted above, even though the declassification process within most of the Russian archives is continuing, there remain significant gaps. But adding to the problems of secrecy, Soviet documents can rarely be taken at face value. Indeed, the Stalinist regime kept control over its subordinates by using fear and violence, and this affected how information was collected and communicated. For example, a fear of revealing mistakes led different Soviet institutions to massage statistics and distort the conclusions of opinion surveys. How information was reported to the regime often depended on the standpoint of a particular institution and what they had to lose or gain. This thesis uses surveys of the loyalty (or the so-called 'mood') of the rank-and-file soldiers, compiled by PUR, the Political Police and Military Intelligence. It also uses crime statistics compiled by these bodies. As shown below, each organisation could produce quite divergent results. Indeed, PUR were responsible for the political education of the rank-and-file and so tended to emphasise army loyalty. PUR would not want to be seen as failing in their primary role and face a reprimand. Yet in contrast, the political police primarily searched to 'expose' 'enemies' above anything else. They were more inclined towards alarmism about the 'enemies' that had supposedly infiltrated the ranks and their estimations of army loyalty clashed with that of PUR. Fear and institutional interest

distorted reports on the perceived stability and reliability of the military and means that each organisation's statistics cannot be taken at face value.⁵⁸

To counter such problems efforts have been made to find mutually supporting reports and statistics from different organisations to limit the effect of distorted information. In addition, examining institutional reports alongside the personal correspondence of the Soviet elite demonstrates which institution, whether PUR or the political police, managed to gain the backing of the regime. Of course, the regime was not a reliable judge of the true reality of army reliability, but showing which institution Stalin sided with does help distinguish which institutions were exaggerating or downplaying problems in the ranks. Indeed, Stalin at times makes this explicitly clear. Furthermore, examining different appraisals of army reliability is not only used as a means to minimise the effect of distorted source material, but is a central aim of this thesis. Analysing conflicting estimations of army reliability takes precedence in this research over establishing the true reality of the threat to the regime from its military. It is very clear that the 'military-fascist plot' was an imagined conspiracy, thus analysing how one perception of military reliability gained currency over another is essential to understanding how and why such a conspiracy could gain traction within the Soviet regime during the 1920s-30s.

Similarly, biases are not just present from those who attempted to monitor military reliability, but also exist within the private letters written by ordinary soldiers. This thesis examines letters from the rank-and-file which were collected by PUR and the political police as one means to appraise the loyalty of the military. The late 1920s

⁵⁸ Andrea Graziosi highlights further problems with Soviet surveys of popular moods, particularly those conducted within the rural populations. Graziosi notes that these surveys often targeted crude and easily classified categories, such as the *kulak*, *seredniak* and *bedniak*, rather than engage with the real complexities of local opinion. This standardisation of categories meant that popular opinion surveys lacked nuance and leaned towards conformity. This tendency can equally be seen in surveys of army loyalty, notably during the collectivisation years. In this respect, such reports on popular opinion also reveal how different institutions tended to present popular discontent; for instance in ascribing this to the influence of kulaks, rather than attempting to understand legitimate popular grievances. This tendency in the Red Army will be discussed below. See Graziosi, 'The New Soviet Archival Sources: Hypotheses for a Critical Assessment', *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 40. 1-2 (1999), 34-36. For similar comments, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Sources on the Social History of the 1930s: Overview and Critique', in *A Researcher's Guide to Sources on Soviet Social History in the 1930s*, ed. by Sheila Fitzpatrick and Lynne Viola (London: Sharpe, 1990), pp. 1-25. For a more detailed discussion of reliability questions relating to Soviet economic statistics and reports, and the influence of institutional interest, see Stephen G. Wheatcroft and R. W. Davies, 'The Crooked Mirror of Soviet Economic Statistics' in *The Economic Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1913-1945*, ed. by R. W. Davies et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 24-37. See also Lewis H. Siegelbaum, 'Guide to Document Series on Industrialization' in *A Researcher's Guide to Sources on Soviet Social History in the 1930s*, ed. by Fitzpatrick and Viola, pp. 133-145.

and early 1930s, the time of the collectivisation and dekulakisation drives, was a period of intense interest in soldiers' letters. This thesis uses these letters in order to try and understand how the soldiers reacted to collectivisation and dekulakisation and to what extent this contributed to the military as being perceived as unstable. However, it would have been clear to most soldiers when writing their private letters that these could be intercepted and this must have influenced their content. In most cases, it is reasonable to assume that this knowledge would moderate any tone of dissent. As the regime relied upon these letters as one means to assess the 'mood' of the rank-and-file, it is unlikely that they would get an accurate picture of how the soldiers were responding to collectivisation. Equally, a historian today cannot gauge the true feeling of the soldiers towards collectivisation from reading these letters alone or uncritically. It is probable that the level of discontent in the rank-and-file was stronger than the soldiers' letters indicate. As such, other sources, such as arrest and discharge statistics have been used to provide a more complete picture of the level of turmoil in the ranks during the late 1920s-30s.

This thesis also uses another type of letter from ordinary soldiers and officers, denunciations, in order to gain a fuller picture of how the military purge spread through the Red Army after June 1937. However, these documents must too be qualified. Letters of denunciations were more often than not directly solicited by the regime and were rarely spontaneous. Thus, they cannot be judged solely as reflecting the private attitudes of the denouncer. Denunciations also reflect the pressures put on individual soldiers to search out 'enemies' and to protect their own positions by appearing 'vigilant'. In this sense, denunciations cannot be used uncritically to demonstrate the extent that ordinary soldiers sincerely believed in the 'military-fascist plot' and used on this basis to explain why it gathered such momentum over 1937-38. This thesis recognises that denunciations reveal the power dynamic between state and society and show how ordinary people could feel pressured into taking an active part in prolonging waves of state violence. Any analysis of denunciations cannot be separated from the totalitarian regime which actively encouraged them.⁵⁹

The issue of how the perceived 'conspiracy' of the 'military-fascist plot' emerged during 1936-37 and then gained traction over the next two years raises

⁵⁹ For a discussion on this theme but more specifically relating to the solicitation of letters by the regime and letter-writing to Soviet newspapers, see Matthew E. Lenoe, 'Letter-Writing and the State. Reader Correspondence with Newspapers as a Source for Early Soviet History', *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 40. 1-2 (1999), 139-169.

questions over other types of sources used in this thesis. Specifically, political police interrogation transcripts and reports on confessions are some of the sources used in this research to show at which points the Red Army was identified as compromised by ‘enemies’ and how different conspiracies mutated over time. However, the use of these sources must also be qualified. As James Harris has noted, there is a risk in assuming that such transcripts are nothing but fabrications by the political police and are useful for little more than seeing the ideas imposed on victims by their interrogators.⁶⁰

Therefore, the ‘military-fascist plot’ was nothing more than an invention of the political police. However, interrogation transcripts reveal far more than just the mindset of the political police. Undoubtedly confessions were beaten from those arrested, but when examined in conjunction with other sources, interrogation transcripts can reveal how reasonably innocuous events, such as a meeting of former oppositionists or a person having a connection to a foreign country, could be exaggerated into a ‘conspiracy’ by the political police. The charges against many senior officers in the supposed ‘military-fascist plot’ did not come from nowhere and were not merely inventions of the political police. The charges were exaggerated and inflated, but usually based on real events which were then perceived as a ‘conspiracy’. It is in this sense that interrogation transcripts must be used alongside other documents to show how the political police stitched together a ‘conspiracy’ from real events. As this thesis demonstrates, even though there was no real conspiracy in the Red Army, by 1937 the political police had a great amount of material to work with in creating the ‘military-fascist plot’.

Another type of source used in this thesis with particular reliability problems are collections of published speeches from the Soviet era. These have been used in showing the type of image of the Red Army that senior members of the military elite, such as Voroshilov, tried to present to the Soviet public. Indeed, it is almost certain that such published speeches were carefully edited for popular consumption. Military successes were exaggerated for a popular audience, while any failures were minimised or absent altogether. But this does not mean that such documents have no value as sources. It is still possible to read between the lines of published speeches, to look for absences in content and see how problems in the military were publicly ignored or downplayed. Furthermore, working with original or draft versions of speeches held in the archives, alongside those presented publicly but never published, helps to identify more carefully

⁶⁰ Harris, *The Great Urals*, pp. 217-218.

the image of the Red Army that the military elite presented to the Soviet population and reveal what elements were missing.

Finally, the use of personal correspondence between members of the Soviet elite in this thesis presents specific problems relating to reliability. As noted above, a wealth of documents from the Russian archives has refocused attentions back onto the Soviet elite, and a large focus of this thesis is on the upper party and army circles. Documents such as private correspondence are central to trying to understand the motivations of key actors in instigating the military purge. However, this approach is not without limitations. Indeed, it is impossible to know precisely what individuals like Stalin and Voroshilov were thinking at given times and their exact intentions. While sources such as Stalin's private correspondence are crucial in understanding the military purge, these documents can only ever tell one part of the story. Firstly, the personal papers of senior Bolsheviks held in the archives have been arranged by archivists. Thus, simply reading through these papers in the given order does not give a full insight into thought processes. There is no guarantee that all of the documents in an archived personal collection would have necessarily been privately archived alongside each other by the senior party figures themselves. In this respect, it is difficult accurately ascertain the importance attached to individual documents.⁶¹ In addition, the archives only hold documents that Stalin and his close circle chose not to destroy. It is impossible to know the content of the correspondence and reports that Stalin read and decided not to archive. Furthermore, senior members of the Bolshevik Party only tended to write to each other when one of them was outside of Moscow. We do not have records of telephone conversations, over which many important issues were certainly discussed. As Oleg Khlevniuk notes, an improved telephone service from 1936 is part of the reason why the amount of personal correspondence in the archives decreases at this time.⁶² In this sense, reporting the documents that are now available will never allow a full picture of Stalin's intentions or those of other senior Bolsheviks.

It is also very difficult to know whether a certain order or pronouncement made in private correspondence was sincere or made to suit a hidden agenda. The Stalinist state ruled through fear and violence and as such there was a powerful necessity to conform. By the early 1930s there were very few open political challenges to Stalin's opinion. This tendency to conform is undoubtedly reflected in personal correspondence

⁶¹ Graziosi, 'The New Soviet Archival Sources', p. 23.

⁶² Oleg Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, p. xxv.

and any examination of such sources must take into account how letters were carefully crafted and phrased not to raise Stalin's ire. Furthermore, even party members corresponding among themselves had to be careful about the language they used. Denunciations of party members for displaying alleged dissenting ideas were common. As such, such letters cannot be read at face value and a certain speculation about the subtext or hidden intentions is necessary.⁶³ Similarly, this thesis also uses stenograms of military meetings such as the Military Soviet which suffer from the same problems of cloaked language. As in private correspondence, within a public meeting there would have been a strong pressure to conform and phrase speeches very carefully. Again, it is necessary to try and read between the lines of such documents and at times speculate on certain individuals' true feelings and opinions. However, it is just as important to understand the type of image one speaker was trying to present to another within both personal correspondence and during meetings.⁶⁴

These problems with using sources such as private letters and transcripts of meetings are related to the difficulties associated with studying political history more broadly. When senior figures in a government are the object of historical analysis, an attempt must be made to determine their private thoughts, intentions and motivations as much as possible. As archival documents will never provide a complete account of a person's private thoughts, some level of speculation is necessary. Without doing so, political history would remain flat and one-dimensional. Soviet political history presents additional challenges as many archival documents are written in a way to mask true intent or to conform to the majority. However, such an event as the military purge can only be explained through attempting to understand the motivations of senior actors in the Soviet regime, particularly Stalin's. The thesis thus acknowledges that a certain level of speculation is necessary and has attempted to put forward a view of the mindsets of key political figures that fits best with the available documentary record.

This thesis is structured in the following way. Chapter one examines the formation of the Red Army in early 1918 and its performance during the Civil War. This chapter will show that the Red Army was immediately identified as a perceived target of

⁶³ For a brief discussion of the impulse to conform see Grasiozi, 'The New Soviet Archival Sources', 36-37.

⁶⁴ For a related brief discussion about Soviet sources and studying the Bolsheviks' perception of the world, rather than its true reality, see Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, pp. 26-27. Getty notes that it is less important to ascertain whether a Stalinist sincerely believed what they said or wrote, but the impression they wanted to give to others.

‘counterrevolutionaries’ and ‘enemies’ by the Bolshevik Party leadership and the political police. It was also plagued by frequent uprisings and rebellions in the lower ranks. Chapter two will focus on the post-Civil War period until the early 1930s, showing that even though the conflict was now concluded, the perceived threats to the Red Army continued to cause serious concerns about its reliability. However, the perceptions of these threats could be larger than their reality. Chapter three will examine a tipping point for Red Army, when a large alleged military conspiracy was ‘exposed’ in the higher ranks in the early 1930s at the same time as the rank-and-file was in turmoil due to hostility towards collectivisation. This was a period of crisis in the army which reinforced its perceived vulnerability to subversion. Chapter four will explore the early to mid-1930s, a period which is seen as a lull in repression in the Red Army. However, this chapter will show that from the early 1930s to the summer of 1936 the Red Army experienced several serious underlying problems with its political reliability and continued to be perceived as a vulnerable target. Lastly, chapter five will detail the long chain of events from the summer of 1936 to the initiation of the military purge in mid-1937 and its chaotic aftermath. This chapter will show how a perception that the Red Army was unreliable came to a head, and why this finally compelled Stalin to enact a purge.

Chapter One: The Red Army in Civil War

During the Russian Revolution the Bolsheviks brought an end to the old Imperial Army, finally dismantling the power base that had been instrumental in keeping the Romanov Dynasty in power. After a long decline, the demobilisation of the Imperial Army was symbolic of how the Bolsheviks were attempting to reorganise Russia on revolutionary lines. Standing armies were not necessary in the new communist Russia. However, soon Lenin was confronted with the need to form his own army to defend the revolution. As this chapter will show, Lenin was forced into maintaining a large regular army, as not only was the First World War still ongoing, but a new approaching Civil War demanded this. Lenin and the Bolsheviks were quickly given an important formative lesson about the need to protect their fragile revolution from serious threats. Lenin soon realised that a regular army was indispensable if the revolution was going to survive and any hopes of forming a military on utopian lines were overridden. However, the formation of a new 'socialist' army was not easy. The Bolsheviks lacked the basic military experience necessary to create a serious force and relied on ex-officers from the demobilised Imperial Army. As War Commissar Leon Trotsky was forced to staff the new officer corps with potentially unreliable former Imperial officers, many in the party, and particularly the Soviet political police, were concerned that these so-called 'military specialists' could be used as agents by the hostile White forces. High-profile military specialist betrayals did not help inspire trust in the recruited ex-Imperial officers. In this respect, this chapter will also show that the Civil War gave the Bolsheviks their first experience of how their new Red Army could be subverted. The conflict marked the beginning of a long history of the Red Army as a perceived target of 'enemies' and 'counterrevolutionaries'. In addition, this chapter will demonstrate that concerns about reliability were not confined to the officer corps, but applied to the broader rank-and-file. The new Red Army was largely a peasant force and frequent mutinies and rebellions had an adverse effect on its stability. Lastly, this chapter will argue that the newly formed political police and the party members who fought in the Civil War took lasting lessons from the conflict. For the political police, the Civil War marked the point when its leadership realised that protecting the Red Army from 'enemies' would become a permanent task. For the party members involved in combat and who later

became the Bolshevik elite, the Civil War was a time when alliances were made and nascent power groups formed. The alliances forged between Stalin and his Civil War comrades on the battlefield only strengthened after the close of the conflict.

The Creation of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army

Following the collapse of the Provisional Government and the seizure of power by Lenin and the Bolshevik Party in October 1917, the new regime could not afford to be complacent. The revolution faced serious and immediate challenges to its survival. The most pressing was the continued war with Germany which had not been brought to an end with the revolution, despite the Bolsheviks' declaration of peace as soon as they attained power. An armistice was signed in December 1917 and peace negotiations were initiated with German representatives at Brest-Litovsk in Belorussia, but these proved disastrous for Lenin. The Germans put forward enormous territorial demands, so large that they were initially rejected. Trotsky attempted to remove Russia from the conflict with the unusual formulation of 'no war, no peace', but this proved unacceptable to the German government and its forces renewed their advance on 18 February 1918. Lenin now had no choice but to accept the German terms and he urged his party to do so, even at the large territorial cost.¹ The renewed German offensive forced the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty only weeks later on 3 March and the Bolsheviks conceded a huge amount of territory, including Finland, Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic states. The Brest-Litovsk Treaty caused uproar from certain sections of the party, but there really had been no choice but to concede.² Lenin did not have a suitably powerful army to defend the revolution. In the face of renewed German aggression he was powerless. The Bolsheviks were a revolutionary party and had not planned on needing a regular standing army. This had not figured in their plans before the revolution. Instead, Lenin had expected the Bolshevik seizure of power to spark world revolution which would not only provide security, but bring the war to a close. When this world revolution did not happen, and after negotiations with Germany broke down, Lenin knew he was in a tight

¹ David Stone, 'The Russian Civil War, 1917-1921' in *The Military History of the Soviet Union*, ed. by R. Higham and F. W. Kagan (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 13-34 (p. 16).

² Some of the most vocal hostility to Brest-Litovsk came from the 'left communists', who believed that whatever the consequences were from the Central Powers, world revolution must be promoted. A peace treaty could not be signed, see Ziemke, p. 30.

spot. He was entangled in war without an adequate means of defence. Indeed, during 1917 the Imperial Army had been in turmoil. It was slowly dismantled throughout that year and heavily weakened through mutinies. The last draft of the Imperial Army was in February 1917 and in the summer units began to rebel. The response at the time from the then Minister of War, General A. P. Verkhovskii, was to shrink the army. Furthermore, following the October Revolution there was also a revolution within the army. Systems of command and discipline were abolished and soldiers' committees were formed.³ In November the Bolsheviks published the 'Declaration of the Rights of Soldiers' which democratised command positions and a gradual demobilisation decree was promulgated.⁴

Admittedly, the Bolsheviks were not without some form of defence even after dismantling the Imperial Army, but this was no match for the German Army. Groups of 'Red Guard' detachments had spontaneously formed throughout 1917, composed of worker volunteers committed to defending the revolution. But the Red Guards not only lacked military skill and training, but were numerically very small. Their first test against the German Army at the battle of Narva in February 1918 proved a disaster.⁵ In addition, following the revolution Lenin had realised that some form of military defence was necessary, having been conscious of the danger of a break-down in armistice negotiations.⁶ As such, beyond the Red Guards detachments, from December 1917 the Bolsheviks began to examine more substantial forms of military organisation, but those deemed appropriate for a new revolutionary regime. In the first instance, they considered using remnants of the Imperial Army while a territorial militia was brought up to strength.⁷ Many party members regarded a people's militia as the ideal means of defence, with citizens completing military training around their normal everyday work. But the very high levels of desertion from the Imperial Army necessitated moving towards creating wholly new volunteer units from the dwindling Imperial Army, and

³ Joshua Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905-1925* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), pp. 38-39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40; Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, p. 16.

⁵ Reese, *Red Commanders: A Social History of the Soviet Army Officer Corps, 1918-1991* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2005), p. 18.

⁶ Erickson, 'Origins of the Red Army' in *Revolutionary Russia*, ed. by Richard Pipes (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 224-259 (p. 232).

⁷ Francesco Benvenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 17.

thus, a new socialist army would be established.⁸ The most important characteristic of this new socialist army was that it would be a ‘people’s army’. A draft decree from early December 1917 from the new Military Affairs Commissariat described the features of the Bolsheviks’ preferred type of force: ‘a free army of armed citizens, an army of workers and peasants with broad self-government of elected soldiers’ organisations’.⁹ Any new army would be based on class principles and reject hierarchy, a democratisation seen as a way of ensuring the promotion of those deemed reliable into command positions and a rejection of the old Tsarist officer caste.¹⁰ From early January 1918 preliminary moves were made towards forming this new ‘socialist’ army, taking as its basis the existing Red Guard detachments and soldiers’ committees. On 15 January the establishment of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army (RKKA) was announced by a decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee.¹¹ This was a military based on the principles of voluntarism and ‘comradely respect’.¹² However, even with the founding of this new socialist army, its collated volunteer forces were still very weak in comparison to the power of the German Army. The resulting units were small and irregularly organised.¹³ On 1 April the Red Army only numbered 153,679 soldiers.¹⁴ Thus, as soon as the Germans had renewed their offensive the Bolsheviks were forced to sign the Brest-Litovsk Treaty.

The failure at Brest-Litovsk was a lesson in realism. It showed that without a strong regular standing army the Bolshevik regime would not survive. In response, the new socialist Red Army would have to undergo a transformation. The strengthening of the Red Army and its evolution into a traditional standing force during the early stages of the Civil War was the first step in the Bolshevik Party’s reluctant dependence on a large military. But the German offensive was not the only threat to the fragile Bolshevik government. Even with a heavy peace now agreed with Germany, the survival of the revolution faced further challenges. Civil War was now upon Russia. Shortly after

⁸ Another problem of creating a people’s militia was that peasants formed the majority of the population. Critics of the plan argued that a militia would only work with an urban industrial population, see Mark Von Hagen, ‘Civil-Military Relations and the Evolution of the Soviet Socialist State’, *Slavic Review*, 50. 2 (1991), 268-276 (p. 271).

⁹ Erickson, ‘Origins of the Red Army’, pp. 230-231.

¹⁰ Neil Harvey Croll, ‘Mikhail Tukhachevsky in the Russian Civil War’ (unpublished PhD thesis: University of Glasgow, 2002), p. 59.

¹¹ Benvenuti, p. 17.

¹² Erickson, ‘Origins of the Red Army’, p. 235.

¹³ Orlando Figes, ‘The Red Army and Mass Mobilisation during the Russian Civil War 1918-1920’, *Past & Present*, 129 (1990), 168-211 (p. 303).

¹⁴ Erickson, ‘Origins of the Red Army’, p. 241.

signing the Brest-Litovsk Treaty a new danger emerged from southern Russia, the ‘Volunteer Army’.¹⁵ This was the first of several arrangements of reactionary military forces of Imperial officers determined to fight what they regarded as an illegitimate seizure of power. Known collectively as the ‘Whites’, these forces were the chief threat during the Civil War.

Civil War and the ‘Military Specialists’

The danger from the newly assembled White forces further pushed the transformation of the new Red Army into a regular standing army. The first White threat came from the south with the mobilisation of forces in Kuban in southern Russia by the White Generals Piotr Krasnov and Anton Denikin. This formed the Volunteer Army, the first anti-Bolshevik force.¹⁶ Subsequent White leaders included Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak, who mustered forces from Siberia, General Nikolai Iudenich who attacked from the northeast, and lastly Baron Piotr Wrangel, again from the south. The threat from the remnants of the Imperial forces was not new. Before the revolution, General Lavr Kornilov (at the time the Supreme Commander of the Russian Army), had led a failed coup attempt in August 1917. But the threat from the newly assembled White forces was more dangerous, even though they were fragmented. The Whites dwarfed the new Red Army in terms of military skill as they included large numbers of former Imperial officers. In addition, during the early stages of the Civil War the Bolsheviks’ disorganised forces suffered heavy defeats in May and June 1918 against Cossack and Czech units which pressed the urgency for serious military reform.¹⁷ The approaching Civil War required that the Red Army be reorganised and strengthened to counter the numerous threats arrayed against the Bolsheviks, but solutions to army weaknesses proved to be controversial.

One of the main problems with maintaining a regular standing army was how this clashed with the Bolsheviks’ revolutionary ideals. Standing armies were seen as an anathema. They were regarded as the key supports of capitalist powers and the Imperial Army was seen as a holdover from the capitalist era. From Peter the Great, the Russian

¹⁵ Benvenuti, p. 24.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Figes, ‘The Red Army and Mass Mobilisation during the Russian Civil War 1918-1920’, p. 303.

Army had a long history of interfering in politics and assisting domestic coups.¹⁸ For the Bolsheviks a standing army posed the risk of counterrevolution, a danger recently made clear by Kornilov's attempted coup. Furthermore, the Bolsheviks viewed their revolution in the context of other revolutions and were particularly conscious of the fate of the French Revolution and the dangers of dictatorship. If a powerful standing army was created, would the October Revolution eventually meet the same fate? All these concerns pointed to the risks of relying too heavily on a regular army and the proposal faced stern criticism. But any fears needed to be compromised if the revolution was going to survive. Lenin knew that a traditional army was indispensable. At the Fifth Congress of Soviets on 5 July 1918 he remarked about the impossibility of a regular Imperialist force being beaten by 'guerrilla detachments'. Lenin described this suggestion as laughable.¹⁹

There were further challenges in strengthening the Red Army aside from overcoming matters of principle. As War Commissar, Leon Trotsky faced a series of practical difficulties in creating a powerful force.²⁰ Trotsky knew that for the Red Army to be successful in combat only very recently abandoned practices would need to be reinstated. Thus hierarchy, discipline and conscription, the latter introduced in mid-1918, now became key features of the Red Army.²¹ The practice of electing officers was officially abolished in March and April.²² By May 1918 Soviet territory was being carved up into military districts. At the same time, the Bolsheviks suffered another defeat in summer 1918 when Kazan' fell to the Whites who were now closing in on Moscow. Strengthening the Red Army could be the only response and reforms needed to be implemented quickly. By July 1918, the creation of regular army units was sanctioned by Fifth Congress of Soviets.²³ On 1 March military leadership was centralised under a new Supreme Military Soviet, which gave way on 2 September to the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic (RVSR). The RVSR took over

¹⁸ For an excellent study of Russian civil-military relations from Peter the Great, see Brian D. Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 38-63.

¹⁹ Benvenuti, p. 38; Vladimir Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 55 vols (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1941-68), XXXVI (1963), pp. 514-515.

²⁰ Trotsky became War Commissar in March 1918 replacing N. I. Podvoiskii.

²¹ Reese notes that in the beginning recruitment focused on the working class alone, but was quickly opened up to all who were willing to serve, see *The Soviet Military Experience: A History of the Soviet Army, 1917-1991* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 3; Benvenuti, p. 24.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 38; Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, pp. 34-36.

direction of the Red Army and exercised centralised control and executive power.²⁴ This centralisation of power was far removed from how many in the Bolshevik Party had viewed a workers' army. The initial volunteer Red Army was founded on the principle of political class discipline, rather than traditional military discipline.²⁵ But it was now military discipline which would come to define the Red Army.²⁶

The most serious practical problem Trotsky faced was the lack of military experience in the army. The great wealth of military knowledge lay with the White forces and the new Red Army was poorly trained and ill disciplined. Yet, the only way to improve the level of military experience was to enlist former Imperial officers. Not all had gone over to the Whites and many Imperial officers were willing to work with the Bolsheviks, even if only to defend Russia from the German Army. The policy of using these officers, who became known as 'military specialists', was one of Trotsky's most important legacies to the Red Army. It affected how its reliability was later perceived far more than Trotsky could have anticipated at the time. Military specialists were quickly enlisted with an agreement made on their service on 31 March 1918.²⁷ Due to their military experience they came to dominate the higher ranks and this was partly why they were so controversial. During 1918, seventy-five percent of all Red Army officers were from the Imperial Army, and of the twenty officers on the key fronts during 1918-20, sixteen were military specialists.²⁸ By the end of the Civil War military specialists accounted for over thirty percent of the officer corps with many occupying the highest positions.²⁹ Indeed, the position of Commander-in-Chief was first given to a military specialist, Mikhail Murav'ev, who had been a Lieutenant Colonel in the Imperial Army.³⁰ Nothing could have been more indicative of the brisk return to hierarchy and discipline in the military than Murav'ev's appointment. But the Bolsheviks did not have a choice. Referring to military specialists on 18 November

²⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

²⁵ Benvenuti, p. 19.

²⁶ Trotsky did actually prefer a militia system in the long term, but the immediate Civil War dictated a standing army.

²⁷ Benvenuti, p. 25.

²⁸ Von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 40; R. W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1940* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 2001), p. 83. For corroborating figures, Steven Main places the percentage of former Imperial officers serving in the Red Army at seventy-six for 1918, fifty-three in 1919 and 42.5 in 1920. Main notes, however, that these figures are not complete, see 'The Red Army during the Russian Civil War, 1918-1920: The Main Results of the August 1920 Military Census', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 7. 4 (1994), 800-808 (p. 806).

²⁹ A. G. Kavtaradze, *Voennye spetsialisty na sluzhbe respublikii sovetov, 1917-1920 gg.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1988), p. 224.

³⁰ Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience*, p. 10.

1919, Lenin remarked: ‘If we do not take them into service and they were not forced to serve us, we would not be able to create an army.’³¹

Lenin’s comment about ‘forcing’ military specialists into service demonstrates why their use was so controversial. The recruitment of military specialists may have begun quickly, but it was not easy. In general terms, mobilising ordinary soldiers for the new Red Army proved very difficult. There was little enthusiasm in the wider population for signing-up to defend the revolution. Recruiting military specialists was just as discouraging. Initially, relatively few military specialists voluntarily came forward to serve. Only 8000 enlisted in the early months of 1918. In response, during the summer the Bolsheviks requisitioned all former officers living in Bolshevik controlled territory.³² Understandably, many of these conscripts were hardly enthusiastic supporters of the new regime. Only a minority of military specialists sided with the Bolsheviks immediately by joining the party. The majority became members only after the Civil War, indicating that many were not ready to side with the Bolsheviks until there was absolutely no other choice.³³ Indeed, much of the hostility towards military specialists stemmed from a view that they were outsiders and not committed to the revolution. Trotsky himself was aware that military specialists were potentially unreliable. In 1923 he wrote:

Of the old officer corps there remained with us either the more idealistic men, who understood or at least sensed the meaning of the new epoch (these were, of course, a very small minority), or the pen-pushers, inert, without initiative, men who lacked the energy to go over to the Whites: finally, there were not a few active counter-revolutionaries, whom events had caught unawares.³⁴

Trotsky wrote earlier in July 1918 that this latter group needed to be ‘combated and exterminated’.³⁵

In order to prevent betrayals by military specialists Trotsky arranged certain safeguards. Attempts were made to register all military specialists from mid-1918 and in December Trotsky ordered that only those who had families within Soviet territory were

³¹ Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, xxxix (1963), p. 313.

³² Reese, *Red Commanders*, p. 19.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁴ Leon Trotsky, *The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky. Vol. 1: 1918. How the Revolution Armed* (London: New Park Publications, 1979), p. 10.

³⁵ Trotsky, *The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky*, p. 188.

permitted to hold important army positions.³⁶ If a military specialist did betray the Bolsheviks, their family would also be the target of reprisal.³⁷ In addition, each military specialist was flanked by a political commissar. Normally this was a member of the party who counter-signed every order given out by the military specialist officer, thus establishing a system of dual-command. The political commissars were coordinated by the Political Administration of the Red Army (PUR), created in May 1919. The commissars watched the specialists for signs of betrayal and were responsible for political reliability, while the military specialists controlled military affairs.³⁸ However, this policy was not without problems. There were not enough political commissars in 1918 and the policy of dual-command was unpopular with the military specialists who tried to have it abolished on the grounds that it was impractical.³⁹ But as much as Trotsky appreciated the potential danger from military specialists, he also defended them from what he saw as unjustified persecution. For instance, in an article from December 1918 Trotsky wrote:

Rejecting the services of military specialists on the grounds that individual officers have played the traitor would be like driving out all the engineers and all the higher technicians from the railways on the grounds that there are not a few artful saboteurs among them.⁴⁰

While Trotsky acknowledged that some military specialists would betray the Bolsheviks, and that many were less than enthusiastic about joining the Red Army, like Lenin, he understood that the army would not succeed without their assistance.

It must be emphasised that military specialists themselves were not a uniform group. A number were drawn from the upper ranks of the former Imperial Army, from the old General Staff, but there were also junior and non-commissioned officers. Many of the latter developed successful military careers following the Civil War and were often more receptive to the new Bolshevik regime. Mikhail Tukhachevskii is a good example. He joined the Red Army in early 1918 having previously served in the

³⁶ S. S. Voitikov, *Otechestvennye spetssluzhby i krasnaia armia, 1917-1921* (Moscow: Veche, 2010), p. 307.

³⁷ Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience*, p. 22.

³⁸ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, p. 41.

³⁹ Von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, p. 40; Benvenuti points to some feeling within the party that military specialists were sabotaging the influence of the political commissars, see Benvenuti, p. 68.

⁴⁰ Trotsky, *The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky*, p. 207.

Imperial Army as a junior officer.⁴¹ Tukhachevskii was born into a line of nobility in Smolensk and his father was a landlord, but despite this black mark he rose to prominence during the Civil War. Tukhachevskii also gained notoriety through his frequent escapes from German prisoner of war camps during the First World War.⁴² After returning to his regiment in October 1917 Tukhachevskii was elected a company commander in December, but his unit was later disbanded. He joined the Red Army in April 1918 and quickly gained a reputation as a successful military leader, proving his ability on the eastern front as 1st Army commander.⁴³ He joined the Bolshevik Party relatively early on in April 1918. Tukhachevskii represented the ideal military specialist in that he was willing to break with the past. Indeed, he had no admiration for the skills of the older military specialists in the new conditions of a civil war. For instance, in a report sent to Trotsky's deputy, Efraim Sklianskii, Tukhachevskii offered a very negative opinion of the old officer corps: 'In its large part it was created from people who had received limited military training, completely cowed and devoid of any initiative.'⁴⁴ Tukhachevskii argued that the younger officers were actually better prepared to understand modern military science and doctrine, and that the older military specialists' knowledge was outdated to the demands of civil war combat.⁴⁵ Tukhachevskii also saw the older generation as ideologically unsuitable for the Red Army, writing that: 'Our old officers are completely ignorant of the bases of Marxism, cannot and do not want to understand the class struggle and the need and inevitability of the dictatorship of the proletariat.'⁴⁶ Tukhachevskii wanted young and revolutionary-minded officers more suited to serving the Bolshevik dictatorship to be advanced through the army. Tukhachevskii was a critic of the system of dual command and wanted instead unified command (*edinonachalie*), with officers being trained to conduct political work in the place of the political commissar. But despite this, he was a very good asset for the Bolsheviks. Tukhachevskii was young, energetic, talented, and had no desire to maintain what he saw as outdated military strategies and conventions.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Reese, *Red Commanders*, p. 81.

⁴² Ziemke, p. 36.

⁴³ Croll, pp. 7-8, 137.

⁴⁴ Mikhail Tukhachevskii, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, 2 vols, ed. by G. I. Oskin and P. P. Chernushkov (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1964), 1, p. 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98. Tukhachevskii published an article in 1920 questioning whether political commissars were necessary, see Zdanovich, p. 283.

Such qualities made certain that Tukhachevskii would quickly advance through the army hierarchy.⁴⁸

Yet, there were few military specialists like Tukhachevskii. Trotsky believed that the majority were either unenthusiastic about the new regime, or more seriously, there were some genuine ‘counterrevolutionaries’. Indeed, throughout the Civil War there were numerous mutinies by military specialists and desertions to the Whites. One of the most high-profile betrayals was the mutiny of Murav’ev, the Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army and commander of the eastern front. Murav’ev led a mutiny against the Bolsheviks in July 1918 when he refused to fight the Czechoslovakian Legion after they themselves had mutinied. The Czech Legion had sided with the Bolsheviks during the revolution but rebelled in May 1918 when the Bolsheviks tried to disarm them as they were travelling on the Trans-Siberian Railway. A subsequent revolt set off of a much wider uprising.⁴⁹ Murav’ev was killed the day after his mutiny, and so it was hardly a success, but his defection was very high-profile and demonstrated the dangers of using military specialists at the apex of the Red Army. The revolt also contributed to the loss of the Volga city of Simbirsk to the Komuch, the Socialist-Revolutionaries’ democratic counterrevolutionary government.⁵⁰ Murav’ev’s revolt thus had a significant impact. Betrayals and mutinies by military specialists would continue throughout the Civil War, never giving the opportunity for those loyal military specialists such as Tukhachevskii to lose the stigma attached to the pre-revolutionary officers.⁵¹

Fear and Prejudices of Military Specialists

Betrayals by military specialists were obviously very serious, primarily as the mutineers usually held command positions. In addition, a former Imperial officer was more likely

⁴⁸ In April 1920, at only twenty-seven, Tukhachevskii took command of the entire western front, see Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 408.

⁴⁹ As Ziemke notes the Czech soldiers did not want to join the Bolsheviks, but instead continue the war against the Central Powers, for more see Ziemke, pp. 38-39; Sanborn, p. 44.

⁵⁰ Figes, *A People’s Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), p. 592.

⁵¹ For examples of military specialist betrayals, see, Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, p. 33; Iuri Petrov, p. 68; Benvenuti, p. 31. Voitkov, *Otechestvennye spetssluzhby i krasnaia armia*, pp. 4, 346-47.

to have the resources, ability and opportunities to organise espionage networks in the Red Army which could feed information to the White forces.⁵² However, despite this, there is much to suggest that the perception of the danger to the Red Army from treasonous military specialists was greater than its reality. This was for a number of reasons. Betrayals by military specialists had more impact than those of ordinary soldiers, primarily as they occupied the higher ranks. But the former Imperial officers were already the objects of suspicion and seen as outsiders. When a military specialist did commit treason, this would reinforce and confirm previously held suspicions about the military specialists' disloyalty as an entire group. Such prejudices and suspicions about military specialists can be seen in a complaint made by Ioakhim Vatsetis to Lenin in April 1919. Vatsetis himself was an ex-Imperial Colonel who became the Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army after Murav'ev's death. In his letter to Lenin, Vatsetis complained about the hostility towards members of the General Staff from some political commissars:

Both in print, and in the speeches of demagogues speaking to a huge concourse of people, phrases still appear persistently which are insulting for those working on the General Staff. From all sides accusations pour out that they have their price, that they are counterrevolutionaries or saboteurs. Former officers who are serving on our General Staff do not deserve this unjust attitude... Every commissar had his secret desire to catch our staff officers out in some counterrevolutionary attitude or treachery.

Vatsetis argued that such working conditions provided no protections against 'unfounded arrest'.⁵³ In this respect, he was remarkably prescient. Only three months later Vatsetis was incriminated as a 'counterrevolutionary'. Thus, it seems that military specialists were often unjustly labelled as disloyal, even though they were not the only people in the army to mutiny or desert. General desertion levels from the Red Army were extremely high during the Civil War and ordinary rank-and-file soldiers can hardly be described as reliable.⁵⁴ In addition, as Orlando Figes has shown, from 3 August to 12 November 1919 there were sixty military specialist deserters from the Red Army to the enemy and another sixty who deserted from combat. However, the same period saw 373

⁵² Reese, *Red Commanders*, p. 33.

⁵³ *The Russian Civil War: Documents from the Soviet Archives*, ed. by V. P. Butt (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 104-106.

⁵⁴ To give an impression of the huge number of desertions, Figes notes that from June 1919 to June 1920 the Central Committee recorded 2,638,000 deserters, see 'The Red Army and Mass Mobilisation during the Russian Civil War 1918-1920', p. 328.

non-specialist officers desert to the enemy and 416 flee from battle.⁵⁵ This is a significant difference and suggests that military specialists were less prone to desertion than the communist ‘red commanders’, and perhaps more reliable. However, as the impact of military specialist betrayals and desertions was so much more than that of ordinary soldiers, and combined with already existing class prejudices, irrespective of the comparable figures, military specialists would always be regarded with greater suspicion. For many they represented the class enemy working within the Red Army and this was a difficult perception to shift. Indeed, the military specialists’ case was not helped by very high-profile nature of some of the incriminations. The accusation that Vatsetis was a ‘counterrevolutionary’ is a good example. Like Murav’ev, Vatsetis was very senior in the Red Army. From July 1918, he commanded the troops on the eastern front and was named first Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army in September. In July 1919 Vatsetis was incriminated as a member of a military conspiracy with alleged links to Denikin and Kolchak.⁵⁶ However, the case quickly collapsed when a subsequent investigation found no link between Vatsetis and the White forces.⁵⁷ Despite this, the case provided another reminder that military specialists at the apex of the Red Army could potentially betray the Bolsheviks. This would reinforce suspicions against them as an entire group. Importantly, the Vatsetis case also shows the ease that accusations of treachery could be levelled at senior officers in the Red Army. No military specialist was safe from false incrimination, not even the most senior officers.

How military specialists were perceived is also inseparable from attitudes towards Trotsky as War Commissar. Trotsky was a leading member of the Bolshevik Party, but he was not without his critics. As War Commissar, he drew specific criticisms over his leadership of the Red Army in its crucial period of transformation. Indeed, Trotsky was a dominating presence in military affairs. He held the post of War Commissar while other key positions in the RVSR were filled with his supporters.⁵⁸ Consequently, any criticisms about the Red Army tended to be levelled at Trotsky directly. The Red Army’s transformation into a regular standing army provoked particular hostility. It was seen as a move backwards. For instance, Trotsky’s advocacy of strict discipline and his notorious order of execution for desertions were regarded as

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

⁵⁶ *F.E. Dzerzhinskii – predsedatel’ VChK - OGPU, 1917-1926*, ed. by A. A. Plekhanov and A. M. Plekhanov (Moscow: MFD: Materik, 2007), pp. 130-132.

⁵⁷ For an overview of the Vatsetis case, see Voitikov, *Trotskii i zagovor v krasnoi stavke* (Moscow: Veche, 2009), pp. 4-7.

⁵⁸ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, p. 56.

characteristic of the Tsarist era and were deeply unpopular for many in the party. Some made clear their refusal to carry out executions for desertions.⁵⁹ One of the most cited episodes that drew widespread criticism of Trotsky was the execution of a political commissar, a certain Pantelev, for the desertion of his regiment from the battle of Kazan' in August 1918.⁶⁰ To his critics the Pantelev case represented Trotsky's push for discipline at any cost and was used to defend the political commissars from what were seen as overbearing military specialist officers.⁶¹ In this respect, the Pantelev case once again fed into the perceived uneven influence between military specialists and political commissars. The latter being seen as dispensable, whereas the outsider military specialists were dominating the upper ranks.⁶² The Pantelev case caused Trotsky significant political damage. He acquired a reputation for harsh punishments and further doubts were raised about the direction that the new Red Army was heading.⁶³ This was despite the fact that execution for desertion was actually very rare (the huge numbers of desertions from the army made this punishment impossible to consistently apply). But Trotsky's opponents seized on the opportunity the case provided and used it to launch an attack on military specialists.⁶⁴

In a similar sense, how military specialists were perceived was also influenced by power politics within the Bolshevik Party. Despite having Lenin's support, the use of military specialists in the Red Army was firmly identified as Trotsky's policy. This provided his political opponents the opportunity to channel wider hostilities towards military specialists when challenging him. This happened during the 'Tsaritsyn Affair' in mid-1918. Tsaritsyn was on the western bank of the Volga on the southern front, and here a group of party members, including Stalin, forced out their military specialist commander, Pavel Sytin, an ex-General from the Imperial Army. Stalin arrived in Tsaritsyn in June 1918 on business unrelated to the military. His role was to improve

⁵⁹ *Bol'shevistskoe rukovodstvo. perepiska: 1912-1927*, ed. by A. V. Kvashonkin and others (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1996), p. 58.

⁶⁰ Robert Service, *Trotsky: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 221.

⁶¹ Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p. 592.

⁶² Bevenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army*, p. 80.

⁶³ Service, pp. 221-224.

⁶⁴ Sanborn, pp. 50-51. Figes highlights articles in *Pravda* from November and December 1918 written by two commissars hostile to Trotsky, describing military specialists as 'autocrats' who make commissars 'answer with their lives' if they disobey orders, see Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p. 592. Ian Thatcher notes that Trotsky introduced the practice of decimation, executing every tenth soldier in units refusing to fight, *Trotsky* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 101. Again, as with executions for desertion, it is unlikely this was strictly adhered to and was more than likely used as a threat.

food supplies and manage grain shipments from the North Caucasus to Moscow.⁶⁵ However, Stalin quickly acquired full military and civilian powers and arrested the commander of the North Caucasus Military District, the military specialist, A. E. Snesev, on charges of treason.⁶⁶ Stalin also joined the Revolutionary Military Council (RVS), which included Sytin, and Stalin's close allies Kliment Voroshilov and S. K. Minin.⁶⁷ Stalin then took over military affairs at Tsaritsyn and in September he convinced the RVSR to name him the commander of the southern front RVS with Sytin as his military specialist.⁶⁸ None of this pleased Sytin, but he was absent from events and headquartered in Kozlov 350 miles away.⁶⁹ Sytin arrived in Tsaritsyn in September to reassert his authority, but Stalin, Minin and Voroshilov dismissed him and requested to Moscow that Voroshilov be put in charge.⁷⁰ The removal of Sytin undoubtedly suited Stalin, who was confident in his and Voroshilov's abilities to take control of the front, but he also had an aversion to military specialists. This hostility can be seen in a telegram he sent to Lenin in July relating to supply problems in the area. Stalin described:

The railway south of Tsaritsyn had not yet been restored. I am firing or telling off all who deserve it, and I hope that we shall have it restored soon...If our military "experts" (bunglers!) had not been asleep or loafing about the line would not have been cut, and if the line is restored it will not be thanks to, but in spite of, the military.⁷¹

Yet, Stalin often had harsher words to say about military specialists and his criticisms were inseparable from his rivalry with Trotsky. In a separate letter to Lenin, he wrote:

...I ask now, before it is too late, to relieve Trotsky and give him limits, for I fear that Trotsky's erratic commands, if they were repeated would give the whole front into the hands those deserving full distrust, the so-called military specialists from the bourgeoisie, who will cause a rift between the army and the officers and ruin the front completely.⁷²

⁶⁵ Arthur Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine: The Second Campaign, 1918-1919* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 46.

⁶⁶ Benvenuti, p. 43; R. W. Harrison, p. 78.

⁶⁷ Stalin first met Voroshilov in Stockholm at the fourth Social Democratic Party Congress in 1906, see Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and his Hangmen* (London: Viking, 2004), pp. 29, 39. The head of the Cavalry Army (*konarmii*) and close ally of Voroshilov, Semen Budennyi, was also at Tsaritsyn.

⁶⁸ Reese, *Red Commanders*, p. 34.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Iosif Stalin, *Works*, 13 vols (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1952-1955), IV (1953), p. 120.

⁷² *Bol'shevistskoe rukovodstvo. perepiska*, ed. by Kvashonkin and others, p. 53.

For Stalin, not only were military specialists incompetent, but they were untrustworthy and Trotsky was at fault. Stalin's behaviour did not please Trotsky and in early October the Central Committee finally took action. It ordered Stalin, Voroshilov and Minin, to subordinate themselves to the centre's orders and abide by the decisions of the RVSR.⁷³ Stalin's 'insubordination' was noted specifically, though the Central Committee did agree to look at the Sytin appointment again.⁷⁴ However, this did little to assuage Stalin and his supporters who launched another attack on Trotsky's military policies. On 3 October Stalin and Voroshilov sent letter to Lenin criticising Sytin as: 'a man who not only is unneeded at the front, but who does not even merit confidence and is therefore damaging. We certainly cannot approve of the front going to ruin as a result of an untrustworthy general'.⁷⁵ This letter also reveals how strongly the conflict at Tsaritsyn was not only about military specialists, but was closely tied to Stalin's animosity towards Trotsky personally. Stalin and Voroshilov also wrote: 'we, as members of the party, categorically declare that we consider the execution of Trotsky's orders to be criminal, and his threats unworthy.'⁷⁶ Following this letter Trotsky requested that Stalin be recalled to Moscow. Trotsky appointed a new command to the southern front and Sytin remained.⁷⁷ After Stalin was recalled he was given a position on the RVSR, which would only ensure further conflict with Trotsky.

As such, Stalin and Voroshilov's hostility towards the military specialists is visible at Tsaritsyn, but also their hostility to the central line of command. The system that Trotsky had established allowed little room for the type of local leadership Stalin and Voroshilov wanted to introduce. The two issues are closely related. Stalin did not like having to take orders from his political rival and support policies he did not agree with, nor did he want to take orders from the 'untrustworthy' military specialist Sytin. For Stalin, attacking the employment of military specialists in the army was an easy way to draw criticisms towards Trotsky. In a letter to Lenin in January 1919, Trotsky wrote: 'I consider the protection given by Stalin to the Tsaritsyn trend the most dangerous sort of ulcer, worse than any act of perfidy or treachery on the part of military specialists.'⁷⁸ For Trotsky, treachery by military specialist officers was

⁷³ Benvenuti, p. 46.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 47

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Trotsky, *The Trotsky Papers, 1917-1922*, 2 vols, ed. by Jan Meijer (The Hague: Mouton, 1964-71), I (1964), p. 249.

dangerous, but the type of challenge to the central military leadership, embodied in the ‘Tsaritsyn trend’ was also damaging. Indeed, Francesco Benvenuti argues: ‘The Tsaritsyn dispute was the first signal that an opposition to official military policy could be set in motion and that it might find benevolent and authoritative listeners at the party centre.’⁷⁹

Consequently, Stalin’s true attitude towards military specialists was ambiguous. This is not to say that he had no real suspicions about military specialists and was using his opposition purely as a political weapon, but it seems that he took any opportunity he could to try and weaken his political rival. Indeed, in other cases, Stalin was happy to have those of questionable reliability serve in the Red Army. For instance, in mid-1920 Stalin encouraged Trotsky to promote the Ukrainian Nationalist-turned-supporter of the Bolsheviks, Vladimir Vinnichenko, to the RVS of Ukraine. Vinnichenko was to assist in the struggle against the Ukrainian Nationalist leader Simon Petliura, despite the fact that both men had been allies only a few years earlier.⁸⁰ Vinnichenko would surely be as untrustworthy as any military specialist serving in the Red Army. If Stalin’s chief concern was the political reliability of the officers in the military, it is difficult to see how he could have been an advocate of Vinnichenko and request for him to be given such a responsible position. Stalin could clearly make some compromises on the type of people serving in the army. Evidently Stalin was not a purist about the composition of the command. He did not line up with the ‘left communists’ who wanted a purely workers’ army.⁸¹ Perhaps as military specialists were from the bourgeoisie and represented the ‘class enemy’ Stalin held a lower opinion of their loyalty. But his advocacy of a former Ukrainian nationalist who had fought alongside groups hostile to the Bolsheviks suggests that as much as Stalin distrusted military specialists, he focused on them specifically as a way to draw more hostility towards Trotsky. In this respect, Stalin’s negative opinions of military specialists, while genuine, were certainly pragmatically deployed.⁸²

⁷⁹ Benvenuti, p. 49.

⁸⁰ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter RGASPI), f. 17, op. 109, d. 84, l. 36.

⁸¹ Benvenuti, p. 33.

⁸² Benvenuti points to an interview with Stalin in *Izvestia* where he gave the impression he was enthusiastic about the military specialists, commenting: ‘the appearance of a new corps of commanders consisting of officers promoted from the ranks who have practical experience in the imperialist war, and also enjoy the full confidence of the Red Army men.’ Yet, as this was a public interview Stalin would not want to be seen as dissenting from the official line, see *ibid.*, p. 50.

A final point on the ‘Tsaritsyn Affair’ is to look more closely at Voroshilov, who led the Red Army from the mid-1920s and during the military purge of 1937-38. For someone who would very soon be given such great responsibility, Voroshilov was poorly regarded by Trotsky. For example, in a letter to Lenin at the end of 1918 which criticised Voroshilov and Stalin’s conduct at Tsaritsyn, Trotsky cuttingly remarked, ‘Voroshilov is able to command a regiment, but not an army of fifty thousand soldiers.’⁸³ On 7 January 1919 in another letter to Lenin, Trotsky again criticised Voroshilov’s military skill and made known that he was set against a proposed promotion of him to command the Ukrainian front. Citing Voroshilov’s behaviour at Tsaritsyn again, Trotsky wrote: ‘Repeating the Tsaritsyn experiment in Ukrainian territory in view of a clash with serious enemies – on this course we will not go.’⁸⁴ Trotsky had good reason to doubt Voroshilov’s military skill. He had very little of this. Voroshilov had no pre-Revolutionary military background and was primarily a party man. His first real military experience was heading a detachment of Red Guards in early 1918. Of course, Trotsky also had a weak military background, having only been a war correspondent in the Balkans in 1912-1913, but the Civil War required experienced officers to take command positions if the Bolsheviks were going to survive. Trotsky believed, correctly, that Voroshilov was not up to the job. Interestingly, there are indications that Voroshilov himself agreed with this assessment and in the early 1920s he had little appetite for future military career. On 2 November 1921 Voroshilov wrote to Stalin and complained about his current role:

I am sick of working in the war department... I suppose I would be more useful in a civilian field. I expect approval and friendly support from you before the Central Committee about my new posting. I want to work in the Don Basin, where I will ask the Central Committee to send me. I will take any sort of work and I hope to shake out of it, but I have started to become ill mentally.⁸⁵

The contrast to someone such as Tukhachevskii is clear. Tukhachevskii hungered for responsibility in the army and in moments of inactivity he was eager to return to the front.⁸⁶ Voroshilov doubted whether he was actually suitable for a military career. But, what he did have was Stalin’s support. When in power Stalin would place Voroshilov at the head of the Red Army shortly after Lenin’s death. Yet it is questionable whether

⁸³ A. G. Latyshev, *Rassekrechennyi Lenin* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo MART, 1996), p. 277.

⁸⁴ *Bol’shevistskoe rukovodstvo. perepiska*, ed. by Kvashonkin and others, p. 76.

⁸⁵ Latyshev, p. 282.

⁸⁶ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 109, d. 84, l. 1.

Voroshilov felt he was suitable for the role, especially after seeming so negative about his military career only a few years earlier. As detailed in chapter four, there is much to suggest that Voroshilov was out of his depth as the head of the Red Army.

Opposition to the use of military specialists came to a head at the Eighth Party Congress in Moscow that opened on 18 March 1919 at the same time as Kolchak was on the Volga.⁸⁷ During the Congress Lenin reaffirmed the need for a powerful army to defend the revolution and the need for military specialists. He attacked as ‘childish’ those who questioned the use any specialists in the construction of communism.⁸⁸ But the employment of military specialists came under pressure at the Congress from a group of party members known as the ‘Military Opposition’. This group included left communists and other members angry at the continued use of military specialists. The Military Opposition was led by the left communist, V. M. Smirnov, and was supported by Voroshilov. Specifically, Smirnov wanted more power and responsibility given to political commissars and local party organisations, and he also criticised the return to discipline. Yet, Smirnov did not completely reject the use of military specialists. He did concede that they were ‘undoubtedly necessary’, but pressed the point that the former Imperial officers were closer to the Whites than the Bolsheviks.⁸⁹ This was a question of loyalties and whether the individuals in command positions could be trusted. It did not help Trotsky’s case that he was absent from the Congress (Kolchak’s offensive had forced him to travel to the eastern front), but in his place his ally Grigorii Sokol’nikov spoke in defence of military specialists. Sokol’nikov argued:

Practically in the entire army we came to use military specialists, and in practice, it has been revealed that if there were cases of treachery and betrayal from the side of the military specialists, then from the other side, quite often military specialists selflessly died at their posts.⁹⁰

While not denying that military specialists could betray the Bolsheviks, Sokol’nikov wanted to highlight that many fought bravely and many died to defend the revolution. Sokol’nikov added further:

The facts show that in a period of several months our army has fought successfully. The army, in which there are tens of thousands of old specialists, has shown in practice that

⁸⁷ Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, p. 594.

⁸⁸ *Vos’moi s’ezd RKP(b), mart 1919 goda: protokoly*, (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1919), pp. 19-20.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

it is an army of the proletarian revolution. The working class has managed to use military specialists not for the resurrection of the old army, but for the creation of a new Red Army.⁹¹

Sokol'nikov's appeals, however, had little effect. During a closed session on military affairs, the majority of Congress attendees voted in support of the line of the Military Opposition. Importantly, from those registered to speak during the military section of the Congress who had voting rights, the Military Opposition had a majority.⁹² The Military Opposition's thesis was popular within the party, largely due to the unpopularity of the renewed emphasis on army hierarchy and discipline.⁹³ However, following the initial victory of the Military Opposition at the Congress another committee was formed to resolve outstanding issues, including three representatives for the Central Committee and two from the Military Opposition. A compromise resolution was created, which in the end, represented a victory for Trotsky by a very slim majority. The principles of centralisation and the use of professional soldiers were agreed upon.⁹⁴ However, promises were made to correct the practices which had provoked the most dissatisfaction from the party and assurances given that political commissars would have more authority and that power would not solely lie with the military specialists.⁹⁵

It is doubtful that the Military Opposition or other party members unhappy with Trotsky's policies and the use of military specialists would be content with the outcome of the Congress.⁹⁶ It certainly would not end the suspicions which continued to surround the former Imperial officers. Interestingly, Stalin's behaviour at the Congress displayed the same ambiguity noted above. He did not take a hard line towards military specialists, indeed he was one of the representatives for the Central Committee line who met with representatives of the Military Opposition to hammer out the compromise resolution.⁹⁷ Stalin's position at was in fact very similar to Sokol'nikov's. In his speech on 21 March, Stalin criticised the previous volunteer Red Army, noting its lack of discipline and disorganisation.⁹⁸ Stalin argued that discipline was necessary for the

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 147.

⁹² Ziemke, p. 84.

⁹³ Benvenuti, p. 101.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

⁹⁵ Von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, p. 59.

⁹⁶ Ziemke, p. 84.

⁹⁷ Von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, p. 59 (footnote).

⁹⁸ Stalin, *Sochineniia*, 13 vols (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1947-51), IV (1947), p. 249.

army to be strong, and criticised the thesis of the Military Opposition.⁹⁹ As Benvenuti argues, it seems that Stalin worked to distance himself from the Military Opposition in public and wanted to be seen as a centrist, to draw supporters away from Trotsky.¹⁰⁰ Whatever Stalin's exact motivation for coming out against the Military Opposition at the Congress, it is another reminder that Stalin's behaviour towards military affairs was informed by political calculation. It is unlikely that Stalin had suddenly become genuinely enthusiastic about the continued employment of military specialists, but he did not want to side with the Military Opposition. Perhaps Stalin saw no benefit in challenging the Central Committee's line towards military specialists, which was supported by Lenin. Stalin was pragmatic about military affairs and about who served in the army. His ability to make such compromises did not alter in the 1920s and 1930s.

Consequently, the true threat posed by military specialists is difficult to disentangle from how it was perceived by different individuals and groups. Opposition to military specialists could be heightened by a number of factors including class prejudices, the impact of betrayals by military specialists, political disputes and broader hostilities towards Trotsky as War Commissar. Stalin wanted to weaken Trotsky and the Military Opposition wanted to reduce the reliance on military specialists. Both played upon fears about military specialists to achieve these ends. This helped military specialists be seen as a disloyal cohort inside the Red Army, even if there is evidence to suggest that they were in fact more loyal than their non-specialist counterparts. Importantly, the difference between how threats to the army were presented by certain groups and their true reality is crucial in not only understanding the party elite's relationship with the Red Army during the Civil War and in later years, but is vital to understanding the military purge of 1937-38.

The Cheka and the Struggle for the Security of the Red Army

It was not only members of the Bolshevik Party who were concerned about the security of the Red Army and the use of military specialists in combat. The Soviet political police were the main line of defence against the subversion of the military during the

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Benvenuti, pp. 106-107.

Civil War. They had a particular perception of army vulnerability, informed by their own institutional interests, and saw it as highly susceptible to infiltration. The Civil War was the starting point of a long history of the political police closely monitoring the army for any signs that it had been compromised. From here on, the political police were consistently the one institution most concerned about threats to the military.

Lenin created the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counterrevolution and Sabotage (Cheka) in December 1917 to defend the fragile Bolshevik regime from these precise threats. Led by Feliks Dzerzhinskii the Cheka was notorious in employing tactics of extra-judicial terror in safeguarding Bolshevik power. The Cheka not only focused its attention on political opponents but also acted as an internal security service, guarding against uprisings and carrying out summary executions.¹⁰¹ A chief task during the Civil War was guarding against White subversive groups. For example, twenty-two White organisations were apparently ‘exposed’ in Moscow alone during 1918-20.¹⁰² Monitoring the Red Army soon came under the political police’s remit when it was quickly established that the military was a key target of White agents. For example, at the first conference of the Extraordinary Commission in June 1918, I. N. Polukarov, the head of the counterrevolution department, spoke about the dangers of subversion of the Red Army in general terms:

The aim of the bourgeoisie is to break down our army, to use it for their own aims, but we as an organ of political struggle need to take on surveillance of the army. The uprising of Czechoslovakians is well known, we know what happened there. We should have in mind that the newly formed units are able to go over to the other side. Means of terror are necessary to force the counterrevolutionaries to leave the ranks of our army.¹⁰³

Thus, the Red Army was seen as a potential target, its reliability was under question and ‘terror’ had to be employed. The mutiny of the Czech Legion had also left a lasting impression. From mid-1918 the Cheka went through organisational changes to accommodate a closer involvement with the military. So-called Special Departments, *Osobyie otdeley* (OO), were established on the southern and eastern fronts to monitor the army specifically. These grew in number throughout the Civil War to aid observation of the army. In early December 1918 a military department was formed, attached to the

¹⁰¹ Hagenloh, p. 26.

¹⁰² N. S. Kirmel’, *Belogvardeiskie spetssluzhby v grazhdanskoi voine, 1918-1922 gg.* (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2008), p. 198.

¹⁰³ *Arkhiv VChK: sbornik dokumentov*, ed. by V. Vinogradov and others (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2007), p. 87.

Cheka, to lead what was seen as a struggle against ‘counterrevolution’ inside the Red Army.¹⁰⁴

The need for such specific organisations for fighting perceived subversion in the army demonstrates how seriously the Cheka estimated the various threats to the military. Indeed, the threat from White agents to the military specifically was perceived as considerable. In December 1919, at the first congress of the Special Departments, I. P. Pavlunovskii, the deputy head of the OO, reported on White agents operating not only in the Red Army, but on the railways, supply and transport and a range of other institutions.¹⁰⁵ According to the historian Nikolai Kirmel’, from spring 1918 to autumn 1919, White agents were able to gain high-ranking positions in the Red Army in Ukraine and conducted espionage.¹⁰⁶ In February 1919, a report by Genrikh Iagoda, who would later head the political police, described the extent the military was perceived to have been compromised:

The exposure of large White guard organisations – a national centre and others, shows to what degree counterrevolution has penetrated our military apparatus...An investigation opened during the last period of 1919 about White Guard organisations showed that counterrevolution has transferred from the stage of a conspiratorial struggle with Soviet power to a system of using our military apparatus for their purposes and thus enjoyed fully legal means found available in each specialist working in a particular institution of the military department.

The report noted how these White counterrevolutionaries were apparently working from the inside to harm supplies to the fronts and to the troops.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, in July 1919 Dzerzhinskii reported on White guards having supposedly infiltrated the Red Army and gained command positions.¹⁰⁸ Thus, for the political police the perceived danger of the ‘enemy’ within was seen as considerable and they perceived the Red Army as vulnerable to infiltration. As Iagoda’s report demonstrates, military specialists were specifically pointed to as providing the means for the army to be internally

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 156; A. I. Kolpakidi and D. P. Prokorov, *Vneshniaia razvedka Rossii*, (Saint Petersburg: Olma-Press, 2001), p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ *Arkhiv VChK*, ed. by Vinogradov and others, p. 128.

¹⁰⁶ Kirmel’, p. 202.

¹⁰⁷ *Arkhiv VChK*, ed. by Vinogradov and others, pp. 131-133. Iaroslav Tynchenko notes that in autumn of 1919 there were mass arrests of military specialists at the time of the White offensive on Petrograd, see *Golgofa russkogo ofitserstva v SSSR, 1930-1931 gody* (Moscow: Moskovskii obshchestvennyi nauchnyi fond, 2000), p. 71.

¹⁰⁸ *F.E. Dzerzhinskii – predsedatel’ VChK-OGPU, 1917-1926*, ed. by Plekhanov and Plekhanov, p. 133.

compromised.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, when the Whites went on the offensive the political police stepped up their countermeasures.¹¹⁰

Alongside concerns about the loyalty of the military specialists, the political police were very concerned about the use of former White officers within the military. Trotsky needed all the experienced officers he could get and another solution to the skills shortage was to use former Whites as military specialists. However, this posed obvious additional security risks as these individuals had only recently come from the White forces. The political police were very alarmed. For example, in February 1920 the head of the Special Department, Viacheslav Menzhinskii, and his deputy, Iagoda, sent a telegram to the Secretary of the Central Committee, Nikolai Krestinskii, about the admittance of former Whites into the Red Army and made their concerns clear: ‘The Special Department of the VChK (Cheka) considers the mass admittance of Kolchak officers into command positions as impermissible, especially in those places where Soviet power has not yet had time to grow strong enough.’¹¹¹ In protecting the Red Army from any danger, Iagoda and Menzhinskii suggested imprisoning all such officers in concentration camps and to individually check them.¹¹² They also suggested that the position a former White should receive in the army should depend on the level of their past opposition to the Bolsheviks and their loyalty to the state.¹¹³ Later in October 1920 a department was created within the Cheka specifically for the observation and management of the White officers.¹¹⁴

The employment of former White officers in the Red Army demonstrates an important point about the existence of differing narratives of perceived threats to the military and how these were informed by different priorities. The role of the Cheka was the expose ‘enemies’ within and using former Whites in the Red Army made this task far more difficult. The Cheka had to make specific accommodations for these former

¹⁰⁹ For more on the Cheka’s concerns about military specialists during the spring and summer of 1919 in reaction to Denikin’s advance on Moscow, see Voitikov, *Otechestvennye spetssluzhby i krasnaia armia* p. 173. Voitikov notes that at the end of May 1919 Lenin and Dzerzhinskii published an appeal in *Pravda* about the presence of White espionage organisations on the front-line engaged in sabotage and subversion. The article called for vigilance to be doubled, see p. 176.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

¹¹¹ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 109, d. 90, l. 1.

¹¹² *Ibid.* In this case, as the men were former Kolchak officers, Menzhinskii also wanted to check whether they were natives of Siberia. As Kolchak had gathered his forces in Siberia, if a former White officer was a native then they would be regarded with more suspicion.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* For more on the use of former Whites in the Red Army, see l. 2, and for concerns over using former Kolchak officers in Siberia, see l. 3.

¹¹⁴ Zdanovich notes that at the end of 1920 the Special Departments arrested eighty-nine former White officers with the large majority on charges of ‘counterrevolutionary’ activity, see Zdanovich, p. 341.

White officers and establish a practice of closely observing the Red Army. From the political police's point of view, the military was sabotaging itself by employing these potential unreliable officers. But Trotsky had different priorities, and consequently, a different appraisal of threats to the army. His primary role was to make sure that the Red Army won the Civil War, and he needed to make compromises and use former Whites to achieve this. While the Cheka certainly supported victory in the Civil War, their fixation on the exposure of 'enemies' clashed with Trotsky's willingness to make compromises over who served in the Red Army. This difference in priorities gave rise to competing narratives about the danger of the perceived threats to the military. The different conceptions of perceived threats to the Red Army, which fell broadly between the party leadership, political police and army elite, persisted after the Civil War. But it was the political police's conception of threats to the military that eventually achieved dominance in 1937.¹¹⁵

Finally, alongside mutinies by military specialists and White counterrevolutionaries the political police were also battling foreign agents supposedly working inside the army. Soviet counter-intelligence services were vital during the Civil War. Their role included the study of the systems and methods of foreign intelligence agents, investigating the activity of alleged spies and preventing harm to Russia's military interests.¹¹⁶ The political police 'exposed' foreign agents and intelligence networks within Soviet institutions and inside the Red Army.¹¹⁷ Again, much of the problem, as far as the Cheka were concerned, was the perceived 'enemy' within. In this case, this was seen as from both military specialists and foreign nationalities serving in the military.¹¹⁸ For example, in November 1920 the deputy head of the Special Department, Iagoda, sent a telegram to the commissar of the Field Staff of the RVSR requesting that all non-party Estonians, Latvians, Finns and Poles be dismissed from their positions if they have access to secret materials.¹¹⁹ Alleged foreign espionage networks allegedly involving military specialists were also 'exposed' during the Civil War.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ See Chapter Five.

¹¹⁶ Voitikov, *Otechestvennye spetssluzhby i krasnaia armia*, pp. 293-295.

¹¹⁷ See for example see *ibid.*, pp. 71-77, 164, 289, 313, 362; N. N. Luzan, *Voennaia kontrrazvedka: tainaia voina* (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2010), p. 6.

¹¹⁸ Sanborn, p. 130; N. Makarov, 'Stroitel'stvo mnogonatsional'nykh vooruzhennykh sil SSSR v 1920-1939 gg.', *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal*, 10 (1982), 39-43 (p. 39).

¹¹⁹ Zdanovich, p. 535.

¹²⁰ See Luzan, p. 18. For alleged cases of military specialists involved with foreign espionage and giving secret documents to Poland, see Zdanovich, pp. 510-511. In mid-1919 the Cheka 'exposed' an alleged

It must be emphasised that not all the foreign agents ‘exposed’ by the Cheka were genuine. The Cheka’s role was to actively search for ‘enemies’ and it did not matter by what means these were found. Foreign agents could be ‘exposed’ by beating confessions from those arrested. Many arrested ‘spies’ would actually be completely innocent, and of course, foreign nationalities were singled out alongside other ‘suspicious’ groups, such as the military specialists. But at the same time, it is well known that during the Civil War numerous countries including Britain, France, Poland, Japan, Italy, and Finland gave assistance to the White movement and acted on Russian soil.¹²¹ During 1920-21 the Cheka ‘exposed’ alleged foreign intelligence networks apparently financing the Whites.¹²² Such discoveries would only reinforce a view that hostile capitalist states were trying to undermine the revolution. Thus, it is easy to see why Lenin and the rest of the Bolshevik Party felt they were under siege and why they may not have had much difficulty in accepting the cases of ‘foreign espionage’ ‘discovered’ by the political police. In addition, unfounded arrests exaggerated the scale of the perceived threats to the army. They made the Red Army appear more vulnerable than it was in reality. This equally applied to military specialists falsely ‘exposed’ as ‘counterrevolutionaries’. As long as ‘enemies’ were ‘discovered’ in this way by the political police, they, as an institution, could continue to make the case that the Red Army was in danger of infiltration and vulnerable to subversive threats.

Peasant Rebellion and the War with Poland

The Civil War was not just a clash between the Red and White forces but was complicated by the activity of rebellious peasants. Led by individuals such as the Ukrainian anarchist Nestor Makhno, these rebel groups, the so-called ‘Greens’, created numerous problems for the Red Army. Indeed, the military may have been officially

espionage organisation in the 1st Army, including Nikolai Tukhachevskii, the brother of Mikhail, see Kantor, *Voina i mir Mikhaila Tukhachevskogo*, pp. 147-149. There appears not to have been any consequences for Mikhail, but this case represented an early brush with ‘counterrevolution’. Mikhail Tukhachevskii would be indirectly linked to various different ‘counterrevolutionary’ groups in the 1920s and 1930s.

¹²¹ R. Craig Nation, *Black Earth, Red Star: A History of Soviet Security Policy, 1917-1991* (Ithaca [N.Y.]: Cornell University Press, 1992) p. 32. Nation puts the number of foreign troops on Russian soil during the Civil War at one quarter of a million.

¹²² Voitikov, *Otechestvennye spetssluzhby i krasnaia armia*, p. 396.

titled the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, but the balance was in favour of the peasants. Indeed, by the autumn 1920 seventy-five percent of the army were peasants. During the Civil War a great deal hinged on which side could control the vast peasant population.¹²³ Consequently, peasant mutinies and rebellions in the rank-and-file during the conflict directly undermined army stability. Such upheaval in the lower ranks showed that problems with reliability existed in all levels of the army and only further reinforced perceptions of army vulnerability.

Peasant soldiers rebelled for numerous reasons, but often this was in response to social and political grievances. Army performance was closely tied to central policy. Peasant soldiers rebelled over poor conditions, inadequate supplies and in protest of being drafted into the Red Army in the first place.¹²⁴ Some rebellions were particularly serious, and rebellious units murdering communists were not uncommon.¹²⁵ Mutinies were often put down harshly, such as the rebellion led by an officer, a certain peasant rebel Sapozhkov, in Samara in mid-1920. Sapozhkov had been removed from his command because of drunkenness and in response he raised a revolt. This attracted support from sections of the army.¹²⁶ Trotsky took a hard line against Sapozhkov's revolt, writing to the command in Samara that the guilty should be 'mercilessly punished'. Trotsky was concerned about the possibility of a widespread kulak uprising.¹²⁷ Indeed, peasant uprisings were particularly dangerous as they could spread throughout the rank-and-file. In a similar manner, the Greens played an additional destabilising role in the rank-and-file, attracting large numbers of deserters from the Red Army who joined the partisan units. These later turned to fight against the Bolsheviks.¹²⁸ The problem was so serious that additional resources were given to the political police so they could keep a closer observation of the troops serving at the front and rear in case of desertion.¹²⁹ Indeed, the Greens could potentially infiltrate the troops and establish intelligence networks.¹³⁰ Thus, the concerns that the military could be internally subverted did not only come from foreign agents, military specialists or

¹²³ Figes, 'The Red Army and Mass Mobilisation during the Russian Civil War 1918-1920', pp. 302-303.

¹²⁴ Vladimir Brovkin, *Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War: Political Parties and Social Movements in Russia, 1918-1922* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 56, 72-81, 322. Brovkin highlights a mutiny at Nizhny Novgorod in October 1920 involving seven thousand soldiers. See also, Figes 'The Red Army and Mass Mobilisation during the Russian Civil War 1918-1920', pp. 308-326.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 326; Brovkin, p. 81.

¹²⁶ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 109, d. 117, l. 2.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 4.

¹²⁸ Brovkin, pp. 56, 127. On Red Army deserters forming peasant bands see, pp. 336-337.

¹²⁹ Von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, p. 76.

¹³⁰ Voitikov, *Otechestvennye spetssluzhby i krasnaia armia*, p. 357.

Whites, but applied to ordinary soldiers within the rank-and-file. Furthermore, such problems with reliability were not confined to the disaffected rank-and-file peasant soldiers. Even the most elite units could succumb. For instance, one of the elite Red Army units, the First Cavalry Army (*konarmii*), rebelled for three weeks in September 1920. Approximately half of the *konarmii* mutinied, murdered their commissar and went on a looting spree before being brought under control by their commander, Semen Budennyi.¹³¹ That the unit regarded as one of the most elite in the Red Army could mutiny in such a manner, demonstrates the extent that military was riddled with problems with reliability and stability at all levels.

Despite this level of turmoil, the Red Army also played a key role in crushing mutinies and successful operations enhanced the profile of those in command. One of the most well-known peasant uprisings crushed by the Red Army occurred in Tambov in September 1920. This uprising was led by the rebel Aleksandr Antonov and was put down by Tukhachevskii, who arrived in May 1921. Tukhachevskii displayed not only unwavering loyalty, but also brutality.¹³² He described the peasant rebels as an ‘epidemic’ and made use of poison gas and chemical weapons.¹³³ Thus, as much as the Red Army was weakened through desertion and mutiny, it still had the ability to mercilessly execute those who did betray the Bolsheviks. Following the suppressing of the Tambov rebellion similar brutal methods were repeated to put down bandits on the Don in 1921.¹³⁴ Of similar notoriety was the reaction to the mutiny at the Kronstadt naval fortress during February and March 1921. At Kronstadt mutinous soldiers and sailors joined with Petrograd workers in protest over widespread hunger, the lack of democracy and the repression of strikers. The mutiny was brutally suppressed by Red Army units, again led by Tukhachevskii. Many of the rebels were executed.¹³⁵ Kronstadt, however, had special significance. Even though the mutiny was easily overcome, it was undoubtedly alarming. One of the key support groups for the

¹³¹ Budennyi was one of Stalin’s closest allies in the Red Army. The first RVS of the *konarmii* included Voroshilov, Budennyi and Efim Shchadenko and Stalin was even made a honorary cavalryman, see Stephen Brown, ‘Communists and the Red Cavalry: The Political Education of the Konarmii in the Russian Civil War, 1918-1920’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 74. 1 (1995), 82-99 (pp. 85-86).

¹³² Tukhachevskii was also accompanied by his close associate Uborevich at Tambov, see Nazym Iakupov, *Tragediia polkovodtsev*, (Moscow: Mysl’, 1992), p. 176.

¹³³ Peter Holquist, ‘To Count, to Extract, and to Exterminate: Populations Statistics and Population Politics in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia’ in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. by Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 111-144 (p. 131).

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹³⁵ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, p. 122.

Bolsheviks during the revolution had been these very sailors who rebelled at Kronstadt. The mutiny was a clear demonstration about how key support groups could turn against the Bolsheviks and this would raise questions about whether the Red Army could be completely relied upon, particularly in times of social strain. Of course, the Red Army did retain enough strength to win the Civil War and put down its own numerous rebellions, but as will be detailed in chapter three, problems with reliability in the lower ranks appeared again in a much sharper form at the end of 1920s during a more intense period of social transformation.

The Civil War was a formative experience for the Red Army, in that almost immediately it was perceived as target of subversives and ‘counterrevolutionaries’, and instability was widespread in the lower ranks. However, on a personal level, the Civil War was a formative experience for those party members and army officers who served side by side in combat and who continued to work together after the conflict. Stalin spent a great deal of time at the front and his Civil War experiences had consequences for his later working relationship with the Red Army leadership. Specifically, within the literature much is made of an alleged dispute between Stalin and Tukhachevskii over the failed war against Poland, a conflict which began during the closing years of the Civil War. This dispute has been commonly been depicted as becoming a near feud between the two and is pointed to as contributing to Stalin’s later alleged hostility towards Tukhachevskii.¹³⁶ Yet, how long-lasting this particular dispute was and its impact on Stalin’s later relationship with Tukhachevskii is questionable. Much more important for Tukhachevskii was how a visible power group, comprising of Stalin and his close military colleagues, Voroshilov and Budennyi, was cemented during the Civil and Polish War. Professional officers, such as Tukhachevskii, were excluded from this close circle.

A low-level conflict with Poland had begun during the main fighting of the Civil War in 1919. In December 1919 the Allied Supreme Council had marked a line running from Brest-Litovsk recognising Poland and Russia’s claims on territory, with Poland having any to the west of the line.¹³⁷ But in April 1920 Polish forces attacked the south-western front in an invasion of Ukraine.¹³⁸ The Red Army was mobilised to repulse the Polish offensive, but a hapless performance at the battle for Warsaw in August 1920

¹³⁶ See for example see Tucker, p. 241.

¹³⁷ Ziemke, p. 118.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

heavily undermined the Soviet offensive and resulted in the loss of the conflict. The chief reason for the defeat was the division of the Red Army forces. In repelling the Polish forces, the Red Army had been divided into two fronts, a western and south-western. Tukhachevskii, who headed the western front, had advanced towards Warsaw but he did not have sufficient forces to overcome Polish resistance. Indeed, the south-western front had initially supposed to have travelled northwards in support. However, under Stalin's, Voroshilov's and Aleksandr Egorov's direction, and after receiving permission from the Commander-in-Chief, S. S. Kamenev, the *konarmii* was ordered to attack Lwów, the Polish stronghold in Galicia. The 12th Red Army was also delayed in marshy terrain.¹³⁹ It looked like Tukhachevskii would not receive his support. However, the strategy quickly changed again and on 11 August Kamenev ordered that the forces of the south-western front should travel northwards to support Tukhachevskii, but this time Stalin refused.¹⁴⁰ Stalin wanted to concentrate instead on the defence of Russia from Wrangel's forces in the Crimea, rather than despatch troops to support Tukhachevskii's march to Warsaw.¹⁴¹ Tukhachevskii's support never arrived. Pilsudski then launched a counterattack on 16 August, the battle for Warsaw was lost and the entire conflict with Poland became a stalemate. An armistice was signed in October 1920, and the Treaty of Riga was signed on 18 March 1921 which transferred part of Ukraine and Belorussia to Poland.¹⁴²

Who carries the most blame for the failure of the Polish campaign is more complex than it first seems. Stalin and his allies' refusal to transfer their forces was only part of the problem. As Robert Ponichtera and David Stone note, the war with Poland was confused from the very beginning. There was little clarity over whether the war was defensive, offensive, to capture Warsaw or to act as a means to spread European revolution.¹⁴³ Furthermore, as the Red forces had been divided from the start, by the time the order came through in August to send Stalin's forces northwards, it was very difficult to disengage these from combat with Wrangel's forces in the Crimea. In addition, the distance needed to be covered to join Tukhachevskii was considerable.

¹³⁹ Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience*, p. 47.

¹⁴⁰ Stephen Brown, 'Lenin, Stalin and the Failure of the Red Army in the Soviet-Polish War of 1920', *War & Society*, 14. 2 (1996), 35-47 (p. 35).

¹⁴¹ Norman Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War, 1919-1920* (London: Macdonald & Co., 1972), p. 212.

¹⁴² Donald J. Raleigh, 'Russian Civil War, 1917-1922' in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. by Ronald Grigor Suny, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), III, p. 146.

¹⁴³ David Stone and Robert Ponichtera, 'The Russo-Polish War' in *The Military History of the Soviet Union*, ed. by Higham and Kagan, pp. 35-50 (p. 41).

Lenin also sent very conflicting signals at crucial points in the conflict. On 11 August, the very day Kamenev ordered that the *konarmia* and the 12th Red Army should join Tukhachevskii's western front, Lenin urged Stalin to concentrate on defeating Wrangel instead. Lenin incorrectly believed that Tukhachevskii did not need any reinforcements and victory had nearly been achieved.¹⁴⁴ When Lenin was better informed about the need for reinforcements on 12 August he ordered Trotsky to create reinforcements from conscripted Belorussian peasants. As Stephen Brown notes, to think that this would be sufficient was very naïve.¹⁴⁵ Further difficulties were met when Tukhachevskii sent an order to Budennyi, the commander of the *konarmia*, to coordinate both their troops, but this was queried by the latter as the order had only Tukhachevskii's signature and had not been counter-signed. By the time a new order arrived, Budennyi, Stalin and Egorov were already heavily engaged in Lwów. Stalin used this as an excuse for a delayed response to Kamenev's order of 11 August, but the delay probably suited his own purposes.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, Stalin made no efforts find out the truth between the conflicting orders of Lenin and Kamenev, and it appears that the confusion allowed him to concentrate on Lwów, which was his preferred choice.¹⁴⁷ In all, the war with Poland was badly planned, had confused outcomes and contradictory orders were made at crucial moments. Yet, it is not so important who specifically was the most responsible for the defeat, but more that in the aftermath, everyone blamed the failure on everyone else.

The alleged ill-feeling between Stalin and Tukhachevskii from the failure of the Polish War has been a persistent theme in the literature, and it does have some level of substance. Firstly, both Stalin and Tukhachevskii share some blame. Stalin clearly disobeyed an order. Lenin criticised him at the Ninth Party Conference in September 1920, accusing Stalin of being 'biased' against the western front.¹⁴⁸ Yet, Tukhachevskii was criticised for too hastily setting off towards Warsaw to try and ignite European revolution. Tukhachevskii took risks in how he conducted the drive to Warsaw with

¹⁴⁴ Stephen Brown, 'Lenin, Stalin and the Failure of the Red Army in the Soviet-Polish War of 1920', p. 45.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, p. 97.

¹⁴⁷ Stephen Brown, 'Lenin, Stalin and the Failure of the Red Army in the Soviet-Polish War of 1920', p. 46.

¹⁴⁸ 'M. N. Tukhachevskii i "voenno-fashistskii zagovor"', *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, 1 (1993), 149-255 (p. 219). Stalin did not accept this, and blamed the command and the poor condition of the forces attacking Warsaw, see Minakov, *1937. zagovor byl!*, pp. 46-47.

stretched forces.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, at the Ninth Party Conference Stalin blamed poor organisation and his ally Minin blamed the western front for hastily attacking Warsaw.¹⁵⁰ This was a reference to Tukhachevskii. In addition, in 1920 the Politburo produced a resolution which criticised Tukhachevskii's actions during the campaign for undermining the party and Government.¹⁵¹ Thus, Lenin believed Tukhachevskii shared some of the blame for acting impulsively. But it seems that Tukhachevskii did not accept this. Later in a lecture in February 1923 he argued that the main reason for the failure of the Polish campaign was strategy, and that there would have been a different outcome if the two fronts had been coordinated. Tukhachevskii did not name anyone specifically, but it is very likely he had the leaders of the south-western front in mind, namely Stalin, Egorov, Budennyi and Voroshilov.¹⁵²

Yet, it would be going too far to suggest that Stalin and Tukhachevskii were hostile to each other from this point on, or that Stalin felt he had a score to settle. This defeat against Poland would certainly not be forgotten and it is likely that both continued to blame each other, but this issue did not define Stalin's later relationship with Tukhachevskii. Before the defeat against Poland Stalin displayed great confidence in Tukhachevskii's military skill and his ability to achieve results. For example, in February 1920 Stalin sent a telegram to Voroshilov and Budennyi describing Tukhachevskii as, 'the conqueror of Siberia and victor over Kolchak'.¹⁵³ In addition, Stalin may have blamed Tukhachevskii for the defeat against Poland, but this did not stop him working closely with Tukhachevskii after the Civil War. As shown below, Stalin later expressed similar sentiments praising Tukhachevskii's talent and abilities.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps, it would be most accurate to say that even though Stalin and Tukhachevskii had clashed during the conflict, this did not destroy their working relationship. Stalin continued to respect the ability of the young officer and perhaps even considered him loyal. However, what mattered more than any possible feud or tensions about the failed Polish War was that Tukhachevskii was not one of Stalin's close allies. Stalin formed a

¹⁴⁹ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, p. 100. In March 1928 a critical article appeared in *Krasnaia zvezda* which questioned Tukhachevskii's leadership abilities and accused him of acting impulsively during the conflict, see Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov*, pp. 595, 611.

¹⁵⁰ Ziemke, p. 129.

¹⁵¹ Zdanovich, p. 284.

¹⁵² Tukhachevskii, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, I, p. 167.

¹⁵³ Croll, p. 229.

¹⁵⁴ Samuelson has highlighted that Stalin and Tukhachevskii went on to work together productively after the Polish War, see *Plans for Stalin's War Machine: Tukhachevskii and Military Economic Planning, 1925-1941* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 208.

tight group with Voroshilov and Budennyi during the Civil War and this was further cemented in the Polish War. Tukhachevskii was not part of this close circle and this particular grouping proved to be long lasting. Indeed, Voroshilov and Budennyi were some of the very few senior military figures to survive the military purge of 1937-38. That Tukhachevskii was not one of Stalin's close allies in the army, and that Voroshilov and Budennyi were also promoted after the Civil War, would have far greater consequences for Tukhachevskii's later career than any alleged feud with Stalin over the failed war with Poland. The army leadership became an awkward mixture of professional talented officers like Tukhachevskii alongside inexperienced Stalin loyalists such as Voroshilov and Budennyi. These were the conditions for conflict.

Both the Civil War and Polish War were formative experiences for both the Bolshevik Party, the political police, and for those who would shortly become members of the Red Army elite. From the renewed German offensive in 1918 to the fierce combat against the White forces, Lenin and the party leadership were given a lesson in realism. In order for the revolution to survive any ideological principles against the use of standing armies had to be put aside and fears about betrayals by military specialists overcome. None of this was without resistance. The Military Opposition opposed the move to transform the initial volunteer Red Army into a regular standing force and the distrust of military specialists was widespread. Indeed, when a military specialist betrayed the Bolsheviks the impact was much larger than a mutiny of an ordinary rank-and-file soldier or red commander. Reinforced by persistent class prejudices, military specialists were permanently seen as the enemies within. Furthermore, the pragmatic use of opposition to military specialists from party members such as Stalin, alongside the political police's use of forced confessions in search of 'enemies', helped increase the perceived scale of the threat from military specialists and former White officers. Importantly, there was no agreed single view about the threat posed by the military specialists. Different groups and institutions viewed them differently and these perceptions were informed by institutional interests and priorities. This created competing narratives about perceived threats to the army. However, the use of former officers was not the only problem for the new Red Army. The lower ranks experienced widespread discontent during the Civil War and peasant rebellions were very regular. During periods of social strain the rank-and-file proved to be unstable and unreliable. Finally, this chapter has shown that the experience of combat in the Civil War was a

formative experience not only in terms of army organisation, but for those party members who had a direct combat role. Importantly, what became a long-term alliance between Stalin, Voroshilov and Budennyi had a profound affect on the dynamic within the later military elite. This was more influential than any alleged grudge between Stalin and Tukhachevskii about the failed war against Poland. Indeed, Tukhachevskii would rapidly rise through the army hierarchy after the Civil War, but so would Voroshilov and Budennyi. Both would display hostility to Tukhachevskii. Yet, for now, the conduct of the new Red Army in the Civil War and during the Polish War had proved to be disorganised, chaotic, rebellious and not at all confident. The Red Army displayed a lack of professionalism and all agreed it was a target of various ‘counterrevolutionaries’ and ‘enemies’ on some level. But as the next chapter will show, even with victory in the Civil War, fears about betrayal in the Red Army and perceived problems with its political reliability and stability did not subside. The military was only at the very beginning of a long process of reform and consolidation. The 1920s were equally fraught with accusations of army betrayal and new fears about a military coup. But most importantly, the gulf between the perception and the reality of threats to the army began to grow wider.

Chapter Two: The Red Army in Consolidation

With the end of the Civil War the Red Army had passed its first serious test. The conflict was hard fought and serious concerns were raised about the reliability of the army, stemming from the perceived 'untrustworthy' military specialist officers in the upper ranks to the upheavals in the rank-and-file. Even though the Bolsheviks emerged from the Civil War as victors, the perceived threat level did not subside. As this chapter will show, though the White movement had been driven beyond the borders, it was still active and seen as dangerous. After the Civil War the Whites changed their tactics to carry on the struggle for the homeland and espionage became more widely deployed. The Red Army remained a target of White subversion and the Soviet political police continued to watch this very closely. The political police also continued to make arrests in the army of those deemed to be foreign agents. Thus, the Bolsheviks and the political police still saw an army vulnerable to subversion. In addition, this chapter will show that notions of betrayal in the military elite were increasingly common at this time and fuelled by rumours of a 'Russian Bonaparte' emerging from the high command. The 1920s were awash with variations of this rumour, particularly outside the Soviet Union. Rumours about disloyalty permanently trailed several senior members of the army elite. But these perceived external threats to the army were not the only cause for alarm. The Trotskyist political 'opposition' found some support within the ranks in the 1920s which led to fears within the Politburo about military support for a coup. Finally, this chapter will argue that the gulf between the perception and reality of threats began to grow wider during the 1920s. Since the Civil War the real and immediate danger to the new Bolshevik regime and the Red Army had subsided, but the Bolsheviks saw the world differently. For Stalin, the political police and the army leadership, the threats to Soviet Union and the military had not dissipated, but only evolved and taken new forms. Yet, at the same time, how perceived dangers to the army were defined continued to be influenced by institutional interests, which maintained competing appraisals of threats to the Red Army.

Fears of Subversion and the Military Specialists

Bolshevik victory in the Civil War brought large-scale demobilisation to the Red Army. At the end of 1920 the army numbered 5.3 million and by 1924 it had been reduced to 562,000. The War had not only ravaged the country but led to an economic crisis and maintaining a very large standing army became impossible.¹ Demobilisation also signalled the end of service for many military specialists. The conclusion of war marked the beginning of their discharge and the promotion of the academy-trained communist red commanders. However, many military specialists remained in the ranks because of a widespread skills shortage. At the end of 1922 only half of Red Army officers had a sufficient level of training and there were shortages in trained officers for the infantry and artillery.² Thus out of necessity, the replacement of military specialists was a drawn-out process. For those pre-revolutionary officers who had proven themselves heroes in the Civil War, such as Tukhachevskii, the 1920s was a period of rapid career rise.

The continued use of military specialists in the Red Army was complicated by the still present threat from the White forces. This did not dampen concerns about possible treachery by some military specialists and the perceived 'enemy' within. Indeed, the White movement may have lost the Civil War, but this did not bring an end to their struggle against the Bolshevik regime. On being driven from Russia by the Red forces the Whites had been exiled throughout Europe and largely congregated in Berlin, Paris, and Istanbul and in the Far East. As Lenin noted in 1921:

Now, after we have repulsed the attack of international counter-revolution, there has been formed abroad an organisation of these Russian bourgeoisie and of all the Russian counter-revolutionary parties. The number of Russian émigrés who are scattered through all foreign countries, might be counted at from one and a half to two million.³

But Lenin did not adequately grasp that the White movement in exile was even less unified than during the Civil War. The White forces were now fragmented in terms of both geographic location and internal cohesion, and remained organised only in small

¹ R. W. Harrison, p. 124.

² Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, p. 191. Reese notes that in an autumn 1921, 43.4% of officers had no military education, see *Red Commanders*, p. 62.

³ Quoted in Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story of its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), p. 68.

military associations and units. It was not until Wrangel founded the Russian General Military Union (ROVS) in 1924 that greater cohesiveness was achieved.⁴ ROVS was to act as both a new centre in the prolonged struggle against the Bolshevik regime and as an instrument to maintain the White identity. It shortly became the largest centre of the movement.⁵ However, ROVS was hampered by organisational chaos, funding problems and a lack of commitment from its membership.⁶ It would be a mistake to overemphasise the Whites' ability to undertake a new military campaign against the Bolsheviks. Yet, despite these problems, Wrangel intended to fight and claim victory, though he knew a change of tactics would be necessary.

From the early 1920s the Whites began to place greater emphasis on covert operations and attempted to make contacts with Red Army officers.⁷ A successful overthrow of the Soviet regime would require groups from Red Army to turn against the Bolsheviks and the Whites were optimistic this was possible. The counterintelligence department of ROVS kept the Red Army command under close observation.⁸ Aside from the common soldier bond, the Red Army officer corps was targeted as it continued to employ a large number of military specialists who could be potentially recruited. With so many still serving in the Red Army, the Soviet political police put many officers under surveillance. Indeed, with the end of the Civil War the importance of the political police to the army had not diminished, but only its tactics changed. Their methods were altered to suit the post-Civil War period and became, according to one historian, far more conspiratorial.⁹ Observing and monitoring the reliability of the military remained a vital task, but espionage and counterintelligence also took on a far larger role.¹⁰

The Whites' greater focus on covert operations against the Red Army is visible within Soviet political police intelligence materials. For example, a report from the Cheka's foreign department (INO) from September 1921 detailed a meeting of former

⁴ Recent research has argued that ROVS numbered approximately 60,000-80,000, see 'Ofitsery i komanduiushchie' in *Russkie bez otechestva: ocherki antibol'shevistskoi emigratsii 20-40-kh godov*, ed. by S. V. Karpenko and others (Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 2000), p. 74.

⁵ Not all chose to join ROVS and there were a number of competing unaligned organisations, such as the Brotherhood of Russian Truth, see Paul Robinson, *The White Russian Army in Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 132-133.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁸ 'Ofitsery i komanduiushchie' in *Russkie bez otechestva*, p. 83.

⁹ Zdanovich, p. 62.

¹⁰ Vladislav Goldin, *Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i sovetskie spetssluzhby v 20-e godu XX veka* (Saint Petersburg: Poltorak, 2010), p. 45.

Imperial officers in Petrograd and the subject of conversation was described as: ‘the organisation of an “expedition” to Moscow with the aim of the possible activation of old Wrangel cells and the creation of new ones for infiltration into the ranks of the Red army, the VChK (Cheka) and other Soviet institutions’.¹¹ A GPU order on the struggle with counterrevolution from March 1922 noted the intentions of monarchist and Kadet émigrés to unite their efforts in trying to win over the Red Army and Navy elite and their plans to use military specialists for espionage.¹² Persistent concerns about the loyalty of military specialists were not confined solely to the political police but can also be seen from the Red Army officer corps. For example, fourteen officers, including Pavel Dibenko and Ivan Fedko, both of whom later became senior officers in the military elite, sent a letter to the Central Committee in February 1924 which alleged that some military specialists maintained links to counterrevolutionaries and leaders of the White movement.¹³ Thus, the view that military specialists were unreliable and could easily turn against the Bolsheviks had not subsided after the Civil War. This had been further reinforced by intelligence reporting that the Whites were on a covert offensive and looking to military specialists for recruitment.

Yet, the Whites had a more effective method of getting agents inside the Red Army than recruiting serving military specialists. They could use their own men. In a continuation of the Civil War practice, former White officers were still permitted to serve in the Red Army. The Whites could send agents into the Red Army under the guise of returning soldiers.¹⁴ The return of White officers from exile had been sanctioned through a series of amnesties from 1920 to 1923.¹⁵ It seems at first a strange decision to employ people who previously had fought so vigorously against what they saw as an illegitimate seizure of power. But such amnesties did serve a purpose, even if they appeared to invite subversion.¹⁶ Firstly, the Red Army still desperately needed

¹¹ *Russkaia voennaia emigratsiia 20-kh-40-kh godov: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. by V. A. Zolotarev and others, 5 vols (Moscow: Geia, 1998), I, book II, pp. 87-89.

¹² Zdanovich, p. 377. The Cheka became the ‘State Political Directorate’ *Gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie* (GPU) in 1922.

¹³ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv (hereafter RGVA), f. 33987, op. 3, d. 186, ll. 34-35. On reading this letter Stalin requested that it be sent to all members of the Central Committee. Clearly he believed the contents were important, see *Krasnaia armiiia v 1920-e*, ed. by Sergei Kudriashov (Moscow: Vestnik arkhiva Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2007), p. 86.

¹⁴ According to Tynchenko at the beginning of 1921, 14, 390 former Whites were serving in the Red Army, see Tynchenko, p. 109.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁶ Former Whites who had worked for counter-intelligence or other punitive institutions were excluded from the amnesties, see Zdanovich, pp. 344-345.

qualified officers and the use of former Whites could not be abandoned.¹⁷ However, a June 1921 letter from GPU deputy, Iosif Unshlikht, to the close Stalin ally, Viacheslav Molotov, reveals a second motivation. In his letter Unshlikht noted that the White threat was still very real and that the large numbers of Whites abroad provided a power base for the defeated White Generals. Amnesties provided a way to disarm this foreign power base by draining the White support from abroad to the Soviet Union. Unshlikht did point out, however, that this was a potentially dangerous tactic as among the returning Whites there would be agents: ‘I understand that to allow onto the territory of Soviet Russia so many soldiers, among whom undoubtedly will be a significant percentage of counterrevolutionaries and spies, is a dangerous thing.’¹⁸ Indeed, this danger was recognised by the political police. A GPU circular from 1923 regarding increasing the filtration of repatriates highlighted that: ‘Return to the homeland, undoubtedly, was used by Wrangel’s counterintelligence for sending agents, organisers and spies to Russia’. The circular called for observation to be moved towards revealing White agents among the re-emigrants and to monitor their associations with the local population, bandits, the rural intelligentsia, kulaks and the Red Army.¹⁹ Similarly, a GPU order from 24 March 1923 stated that:

the activity of Wrangel’s intelligence and counterintelligence organs has increased on a large scale. A number of new intelligence institutions have opened, whose main aim is – the collection of information about the Red army’s condition and armament and also breaking down of morale (*moral’noe razlozhenie*) of the latter by way of planting agents in command positions of units of the Red army.

The GPU order noted that White agents were entering the Red Army under the cover of returning soldiers and called for a greater observation of former Whites serving in the military.²⁰

Clearly the policy of disarming the White movement by amnesty had many attached difficulties and new obligations. Voroshilov, who became People’s Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs in 1925, admitted that former White officers were more

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 347. As late as February 1931 1537 former White officers were still serving in the Red Army and 122 serving in the Red Army command, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 10, l. 1; f. 9, op. 29, d. 10, ll. 208-210.

¹⁸ *Russkaia voennaia emigratsiia 20-kh-40-kh godov: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. by V. A. Zolotarev and others (Moscow: Triada-f, 2002), III, p. 69.

¹⁹ *Russkaia voennaia emigratsiia 20-kh-40-kh godov: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. by A. A. Kol’tiukov and others (Moscow: RGGU, 2007), IV, pp. 803-804.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 815-817. For similar material about Wrangel’s espionage activity, see ibid. pp. 803-804.

likely to betray the army than military specialists.²¹ There was a difficult balancing act in using former Whites and strict controls were put in place mandating the regions they could be stationed, the numbers permitted in each region and clearance from the political police was needed before any could serve in the military.²² In any case, the policy would remain concerning for both the political police and some army officers.²³ The use of former White officers in the Red Army was not a short-term measure and even though their numbers were relatively small, they constituted an additional perceived subversive threat.

However, the White movement took a more direct approach in its continued struggle against the Soviet Union and conducted a terrorist campaign. Even though this did not target the army exclusively, it certainly gave further credibility to the continued White threat. For example, the Soviet representative to the Lausanne conference in 1923 was assassinated by a White émigré. Later, in early 1924, Dzerzhinskii corresponded with Trotsky about his concerns of a possible assassination attempt on the latter from intelligence received from Berlin.²⁴ A key figure in the organisation of this White terrorism was General Alexander Kutepov, a member of ROVS, who headed the organisation after Wrangel's death in 1928. Kutepov coordinated underground operations against the Soviet Union from 1924 and the political police had intelligence of this.²⁵ From 1927 Kutepov launched a more direct terrorist campaign, operating under the name of the 'Union of National Terrorists'.²⁶ However, Kutepov faced a number of difficulties. He lacked sufficient funding and numbers, and the counter-intelligence of the political police proved to be very effective.²⁷ Yet, despite this, the terrorist acts the Whites did enact had visible impact. In 1927 a bomb was successfully exploded at a party club in Leningrad, injuring twenty-six. In July 1927 the Soviet diplomat in Poland, Petr Voikov, was assassinated by a White monarchist, an event

²¹ RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 49, l. 54.

²² Zdanovich, pp. 343, 347.

²³ Using former Whites continued to cause concerns into the late 1920s. In 1929 Budennyi wrote to Voroshilov complaining that too many White officers were serving together in the Siberian Military District, including former Kolchak officers. Those who had fought alongside Kolchak in Siberia in the Civil War were now serving in the Red Army in the very same place. Budennyi regarded this as impermissible, see RGVA, f. 33987, op. 2, d. 174, l. 40.

²⁴ Goldin, *Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i sovetskie spetssluzhby*, pp. 212-213.

²⁵ *Russkaia voennaia emigratsiia 20-kh-40-kh godov: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. by Kol'tiukov and others (Moscow: RGGU, 2010), v, p. 80. See also Goldin, *Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i sovetskie spetssluzhby*, p. 430.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

²⁷ Robinson, p. 137; Goldin, *Armiiia v izgnanii stranitsy istorii russkogo obshche-voinskogo soiuzu* (Arkhangelsk: Solti, 2002), p. 59.

which contributed to the Soviet ‘war scare’ of that year.²⁸ In July 1928 two of Kutepov’s men bombed the political police headquarters in Moscow, thus accomplishing a direct attack on their longstanding enemy.²⁹ The combination of high-impact terrorism with the already perceived subversive threat meant that the Whites occupied primary place for the Soviet political police during the 1920s.³⁰

Concerns about military specialists and the Whites did not just come from the political police. In the 1920s, class prejudices and hostility from the red commanders did not abate. As such, the difficulty is the same in disentangling the reality of the threat posed by military specialists from how it was perceived. During the 1920s, military specialists continued to be routinely criticised for their alien ‘bourgeois’ values and attracted discontent for still clustering in the higher ranks. For example, in a report sent to the Central Committee from a Military Academy party cell on 19 February 1924, it was noted that:

...in the army command there is no unity in political goals or tasks. The class point of view of the red command runs up against the ‘a-politicalness’ (*apolitichnost*) of the military specialists....alongside this, there is a completely incomprehensible proliferation of specialists in all main sections of the army hierarchy...The quantity of former officers in the General Staff in comparison with their quantity in the army at the time of the Civil War has significantly increased.³¹

Relations remained tense in particular over was seen as the greater influence of military specialists in comparison with the red commanders. For instance, a thesis prepared by the head of the mobilisation department, N. L. Shpektorov, in January 1924 noted the disadvantages of red commanders in comparison with military specialists. Shpektorov highlighted that qualifications and military knowledge were at unequal levels and that a large number of former Imperial officers who had never served in the Red Army before were employed in the central army apparatus. He remarked that pre-revolutionary methods of ordering the rank-and-file were still being employed and the military specialists were trying to instil one-man command at the expense of the political

²⁸ For the 1927 war scare see Anna Di Biagio, ‘Moscow, the Comintern and the War Scare, 1926-28’ in *Russia in the Age of Wars, 1914-1945*, ed. by Silvio Pons and Andrea Romano (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2000), pp. 83-103.

²⁹ V. F. Ershchov and I. S. Shinkaruk, ‘Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i ee pechat’ v 1920-1939 gg.’ in *Ocherki antibol’shevistskoi emigratsii, 1920-1940-kh gg.*, ed. by S. S. Ippolitov, 4 vols (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo ippolitova, 2002), II (pp. 96-166), p. 109.

³⁰ Goldin, *Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i sovetskie spetssluzhby*, p. 187, p. 432; Ershchov and Shinkaruk, ‘Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i ee pechat’ v 1920-1939 gg.’, p. 110.

³¹ RGVA, f. 33988, op. 3c, d. 69, l. 16.

commissars' power.³² Similar reports about the 'old habits' of military specialists are detailed in political police reports. Some of the more extreme cases described red commanders planning to murder military specialists.³³

Complaints about the domination of military specialists in the central army apparatus and the slow pace of their replacement with red commanders were also heard in upper party circles. For example, at a Plenum of the Central Committee in February 1924, Sergei Gusev, a Secretary of the Central Control Commission, accused the Revolutionary Military Council of not adequately replacing the military specialists with new cohorts of red commanders from the Academy of the General Staff. Gusev argued that the majority of new graduates were simply being, 'demobilised from the Red Army'. Gusev also quoted a letter from Ieronim Uborevich, the commander of the 5th Red Banner Army, who had apparently complained that the army centre was saturated with the 'customs' (*dukhe*) of the military specialists. Sergo Ordzhonikidze, Stalin's ally and the First Secretary of Transcaucasian Regional Committee, remarked that Uborevich was not alone and that both Tukhachevskii and Egorov had raised similar concerns. Gusev's Civil War comrade, M. M. Lashevich, a senior political commissar, also complained that the officer corps was dominated by military specialists who did not understand the 'psychology of the Red Army', and that the political commissars lacked support.³⁴ In defence, the deputy Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council, Sklianskii, rejected Gusev's accusations and pointed out that pay was far better in industry than in the army, a factor attracting the graduates away.³⁵ Sklianskii may have been correct here, but clearly the use of military specialists remained controversial for many in the party and attitudes were hostile. This combination of class prejudices and what was seen as a preferential treatment of military specialists continued to make it easier to accept allegations of betrayal and treachery against them.

³² *Reforma v krasnoi armii: dokumenty i materialy 1923-1928 gg.*, 2 vols, ed. by K. M. Anderson and others (Moscow: letnii sad, 2006), 1, p. 69.

³³ Zdanovich, p. 334.

³⁴ Gusev was one of the party's most virulent critics of military specialists. He repeated many of his criticisms from the Plenum in a book published in 1925. In 1921, as head of PUR, Gusev had believed that the organisation was the main bulwark against 'Bonapartism'. See Dmitri Fedotoff-White, *The Growth of the Red Army* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 305; Ziemke, p. 133; Benvenuti, p. 180.

³⁵ *Krasnaia armia v 1920-e*, ed. by Kudriashov, pp. 57, 68. Following the Plenum Gusev was criticised for his comments about the demobilisation of the red commanders, and was accused of using anecdotal evidence. Gusev, despite acknowledging this error, still maintained that the command was dominated by military specialists and that the RVS was doing nothing about it, see RGASPI, f. 82, op. 2, d. 799, ll. 15-29.

Some of these criticisms of military specialists were no doubt still politicised and partly aimed at weakening Trotsky. Indeed, Gusev had allied himself with Stalin after the Civil War. Yet, the criticisms from other officers and red commanders do seem to stem from a genuine dissatisfaction with military specialists. Indeed, Gusev's criticisms at the Plenum were not entirely unfounded. Even though numbers of military specialists had been in decline since the Civil War, from occupying thirty percent of command positions following the Civil War and dropping to 10.6% in 1928, they remained a visible cohort.³⁶ In addition, the communist presence in the army was gaining ground. This was 10.5% in 1920, and by the time of Gusev's complaints at the Plenum in 1924 it had reached 31.8%, but there was still a long way to go.³⁷ There were moves made to increase the proportion of communist officers, such as the 1924 *chistka* (purge) of the Personal Staff, which gave a boost to the number of communists in comparison to military specialists.³⁸ However, while such discharges certainly altered the ratio of red commanders to military specialists, they still remained in the higher ranks. This continued to be a flashpoint.³⁹

Attacks on the perceived disloyalty of military specialists continued into the late 1920s and the strongest came from the fringes of the party. For example, V. M. Smirnov, the spokesman for the Military Opposition at the Eighth Party Congress, remained a stern critic of military specialists. His group's criticisms forced Voroshilov on the defensive and he was required to defend the speed at which military specialists were being replaced by red commanders and the stability and reliability of the Red Army as a whole. In a speech given at the *Krasnopresnensk raion* Party Conference on 2 November 1927 Voroshilov used the opportunity to reply to the Military Opposition's accusations, specifically, that the employment of military specialists had created conditions under which: 'the Red Army is threatened to become a loyal instrument in a Bonapartist coup...for currently the proletariat is deprived of the chance to influence the

³⁶ Kavtaradze, p. 224; Tynchenko, p. 44; R. W. Harrison, p. 122.

³⁷ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 186, l. 71.

³⁸ *Krasnaia armiiia v 1920-e*, ed. by Kudriashov, p. 149. Zdanovich has shown that one of the main motives for discharges in the *chistka* was political unreliability and that the military specialists were not seen to share the 'spirit' (*dukhe*) of the Red Army, see Zdanovich, p. 348.

³⁹ Military specialists were to remain under a cloud of suspicion even into the late 1920s. A telling example is in a letter sent to Voroshilov from Uborevich in Germany in January 1929. In his letter Uborevich wrote about the possibility of using German specialists within Soviet industry and pointed out that they would no less dangerous or politically unreliable than the Russian military specialists, see *Fashistskii mekh kovalsia v SSSR: krasnaia armiiia i reikhsver: tainoe sotrudnichestvo, 1922-1933: neizvestnye dokumenty*, ed. by Iu. L. Diakov and T. S. Bushueva (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1992), p. 258.

education, studies, preparation, organisation, all the life of the Red army'.⁴⁰ Voroshilov also addressed a similar attack from the political oppositionist Grigory Zinoviev, who had argued earlier in the year that:

There is no doubt that in the period of the NEP, in link with the growth of the kulak and the new bourgeoisie in general, there has grown and is still growing people among the military specialists who are dreaming about the role of a Russian Chiang Kai-shek.⁴¹

Voroshilov was defensive and did not accept this argument. He labelled it 'slander' and lacking in evidence, and he pressed the point that the army and navy were fully reliable.⁴² Voroshilov presented statistics showing apparent improvements in army reliability. For instance, in 1927 workers in the army had grown to a total of sixteen percent and the number of peasants had fallen to fifty-nine percent. Perhaps more importantly the command was now fifty-four percent party members.⁴³ Voroshilov, however, did not completely deny that within the army there were no unreliable elements and traitors whatsoever.⁴⁴ But it is difficult to gauge his genuine level of concern about military specialists from his public speeches. It is unlikely Voroshilov had suddenly become an advocate of military specialists. Voroshilov was the head of the Red Army and it is natural that he would downplay problems of stability or reliability. He had an interest in doing so. During the Civil War Voroshilov had been happy to side with the Military Opposition and criticise 'suspicious' military specialists, but as head of the Red Army, he was now directly accountable for its reliability. Voroshilov would want to avoid criticisms or doubts about his leadership. As such, in public, Voroshilov repeatedly asserted the strength of ideological unity in the Red Army. Yet, as shown below, Voroshilov's private opinions of army reliability were more complicated.

The important question is how successful was the White movement at subverting the Red Army? Was the army overrun with military specialists who were working on the behalf of the Whites or was this a case of class prejudices and suspicions heightening perceptions of threat? These questions are difficult to answer

⁴⁰ K. E. Voroshilov, *Stat'i i rechi* (Moscow: Partizdat, 1937), p. 152.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁴³ Soviet statistics are notoriously unreliable, however, the point Voroshilov was defending does stand. There was a concerted effort in the mid-1920s to promote red commanders in place of military specialists.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 154. For similar optimistic appraisal of the Red Army by Voroshilov, see *Stat'i i rechi*, pp. 15-16, 41, 57, 144; Zdanovich, p. 332.

definitively as relevant archival documents largely remain classified. However, a few historians with access to political police materials in the archives of the FSB Academy have noted that the political police did not arrest large numbers of military specialists or former White officers until the late 1920s. For example, from his examination of documents in FSB archives Aleksandr Zdanovich argues that during 1924-30 there were no mass arrests of military specialists. Zdanovich notes some police reports which show an absence of any suspicious activity by military specialists.⁴⁵ The political police certainly received intelligence materials about the White threat to the Red Army and they saw a danger of using military specialists and former Whites in the ranks. Some arrests were made to counter this threat which used a great deal of time and resources. For example, in 1924 the political police were convinced that a group of former officers serving in the navy were active counterrevolutionaries when alleged links were 'revealed' between sailors in both Kronstadt and Leningrad and the White movement. Several arrests followed.⁴⁶ 1926 also saw a number of pre-emptive arrests of returning Whites and suspected White groups.⁴⁷ But none of these arrests reached a mass scale. There was never an immediate and pressing danger from the military specialists. There is little doubt that many military specialists did hold negative, and some even openly hostile, opinions of the Bolsheviks. There were probably military specialists with links to the Whites, and some genuine counterrevolutionaries. But at the same time, many would have no suspicious associations or any strong animosity towards the Bolsheviks. Indeed, it is difficult to appreciate the scale of the threat from military specialists and former Whites accurately. Fears about the subversion of the army by the Whites and military specialists remained heightened by continuing class prejudices and the impact of White terrorism. Thus, the perceived threat from military specialists could be exaggerated. However, opinions of army reliability also depended a great deal on institutional interest. As much as Voroshilov publicly downplayed subversive dangers to the army, the political police could overplay them. Not only did the political police's primary goal remain the 'exposure' of 'enemies' but in the absence of an immediate danger to the Bolshevik regime after the Civil War, in terms of lobbying for funding and proving their value, 'enemies' needed to be continually 'exposed'. For the political police, this applied to the Red Army as much as it did throughout the Soviet Union. In

⁴⁵ Zdanovich points a report from the end of 1927, see *ibid.*, p. 383.

⁴⁶ Goldin, *Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i sovetskie spetssluzhby*, pp. 192-193.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

this respect, it is likely that the political police exaggerated the dangers from hidden ‘enemies’ and ‘suspicious’ military specialists in order to justify how they remained an indispensable institution to a still fragile Bolshevik regime. They would look to ‘expose’ as many military specialist ‘counterrevolutionaries’ as possible. Even though the numbers of arrests in fact appear relatively low, and the continued use of the former Imperial officers in the army did not create a crisis in the 1920s, this does not mean that the political police did not remain very suspicious about military specialists or that they lost sight of what they saw as a serious danger. Close surveillance was maintained. As detailed below, the political police’s tendency to overplay threats to the army and Voroshilov’s bias to downplay these created a tension between the two.

Soviet Counterintelligence and the Myth of the ‘Soviet Thermidor’

The Whites wanted to infiltrate the Red Army not only because of its importance as a support of the new Bolshevik regime. Some Whites were optimistic that certain individuals from the Red Army command could actually be recruited and that a successful military coup was not entirely unrealistic. Alongside noting the pre-revolutionary ties that existed between some officers in the Red Army with the Whites, it is important to appreciate that both White espionage and the corresponding Soviet countermeasures operated in an atmosphere of persistent rumours about Red Army betrayal. At the same time as the political police were receiving information about White espionage attempts, they were also receiving reports and rumours about a ‘Russian Bonaparte’ emerging from within the Red Army high command and an approaching ‘Soviet Thermidor’.

The idea that some senior officers would betray the Soviet regime was widespread in the 1920s, and particularly so outside of the Soviet Union. These rumours were concentrated around the military elite, though some individuals received more attention than others. Tukhachevskii attracted a great deal of this hearsay. Tukhachevskii was a hero of the Civil War, he was intelligent and ambitious, and the Whites rightfully regarded him as a strong voice in the Red Army.⁴⁸ Following the Civil War, Tukhachevskii was a rising star. He became deputy Chief of Staff in July 1924 and

⁴⁸ Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov*, p. 71.

Chief of Staff in November 1925. Tukhachevskii was in a position of responsibility and power. Indeed, some White publications portrayed him as a careerist obsessed with power.⁴⁹ Tukhachevskii had lost none of the ambition or drive he displayed in the Civil War and it would be difficult to find a better candidate for the role of the ‘Russian Bonaparte’. It did not take long for the rumour mills to set to work.⁵⁰

Minakov has extensively detailed the numerous channels by which the rumours about army betrayal gained a wide audience. For instance, White publications, such as *Voina i mir*, published stories from 1922 about approaching ‘Bonapartism’ in the Red Army.⁵¹ In addition, through examining the diary of the White General Aleksandr Von Lampe, a prominent Wrangel aid and head of ROVS 2nd Department, Minakov has shown that the ‘Russian Bonaparte’ was an idea entertained at the apex of the White movement. Von Lampe made regular references to Bonapartism and frequent diary comparisons between Tukhachevskii and Napoleon.⁵² But more importantly, these rumours also manifested in White intelligence reports, and presumably were given some credibility. For example, a report from 15 February 1922 detailed that:

A person, closely acquainted with Tukhachevskii, has indicated that he is a person of outstanding ability and with great administrative and military talents. But he is not without ambition, and having recognised his own strength and authority, imagines himself as a Russian Napoleon.⁵³

These were not simply idle rumours and the Soviet political police also received intelligence describing Bonapartism in the Red Army. Some of this intelligence suggested alleged plans for a military coup. For example, a report from the INO OGPU from March 1924 detailed how a White officer, a certain Samoilov, an aide of General Kutepov, intended to make contact with Tukhachevskii to offer him a role in a military

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 77.

⁵⁰ There were other candidates for the role of ‘Russian Bonaparte’. For instance, S. S. Kamenev, Budennyi and Trotsky were also rumoured to be untrustworthy, though to a lesser degree and at a lower exposure than Tukhachevskii, see *ibid.*, pp. 82-85. Budennyi seems a curious figure to be included in this list. He was the archetypal peasant commander, and not a military specialist. However, there were still some concerns about Budennyi’s loyalty. For instance, in a letter to Stalin in February 1923 Voroshilov raised Budennyi’s popularity with the peasants, and whether during a peasant uprising he would join their side. Thus, his loyalty was also under question, but for different reasons. It seems that even those who were Stalin’s close allies in the Red Army could also be regarded with suspicion, see *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 408.

⁵¹ Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov*, pp. 89, 93.

⁵² For more about the growth of the ‘Russian Bonaparte’ rumours and Von Lampe, see *ibid.*, pp. 71-98.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

coup and to help establish a military dictatorship.⁵⁴ Thus rumours about Tukhachevskii and his ‘Bonapartism’ could cross over into direct attempts by Whites to make contact. It is unlikely that Samoilov would have wanted to contact Tukhachevskii if his public reputation was one of a dedicated and loyal Bolshevik. Later in December 1925 a political police agent reported that among the officers in the Red Army there were two currents, one monarchist and the other Bonapartist, which were concentrated around Tukhachevskii.⁵⁵ These reports were sent directly to the Bolshevik leadership.

Yet, there is little evidence to suggest that Stalin or the political police were convinced that members of the Red Army elite were plotting a coup or imagined themselves as a Russian Napoleon during the 1920s. The political police certainly kept Tukhachevskii under close observation. They would have a file on Tukhachevskii that would grow thicker with every new piece of hearsay or rumour about him. However, not all this was directly related to ‘Bonapartism’. As Zdanovich has pointed out, in 1922 the GPU Special Department collected compromising materials on Tukhachevskii and kept him under observation, but their motive was not to watch for any anti-soviet activity. This was related to accusations about the misuse of state funds and bribery. Even though this is reasonably uncontroversial, the Special Department also compiled character assessments which are more telling. These assessments (*kharakteristika*) described Tukhachevskii as a highly capable military leader, but someone who was less capable in party life, arrogant, who underestimates enemies and can act impulsively.⁵⁶ Tukhachevskii may have been appraised as arrogant, incautious and impulsive, but he was not a ‘Russian Bonaparte’.⁵⁷ In this respect, there is a level of overlap between the White and Soviet character assessments of Tukhachevskii, but their conclusions differ. Whereas the Whites would believe that such impulsiveness suggested an independence from the Bolsheviks and a desire for real power, and would only fuel rumours about Tukhachevskii’s ‘Bonapartism’ outside the Soviet Union, the political police interpreted these traits simply as a man prone to risk-taking. They kept a level of observation over Tukhachevskii primarily to avoid any impulsive risk-taking following a damaging Civil War and within a tense post-war international climate. But importantly, any piece of

⁵⁴ *Russkaia voennaia emigratsiia 20-kh-40-kh godov*, ed. by A. A. Kol’tiukov and others, v, pp. 421-422. The GPU became the ‘Joint State Political Directorate’, *Ob’edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie* (OGPU) in 1923.

⁵⁵ *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 244.

⁵⁶ Zdanovich, pp. 282-283.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 285. For more on political police attempts to find out more about Tukhachevskii’s views, see *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 244.

compromising information about Tukhachevskii would certainly be kept 'on file'. Even if at this time Tukhachevskii was not considered a threat, such files only ever got thicker.

A further and telling indication that neither Bolshevik Party nor the political police were taken in by the rumours of a Russian Bonaparte is the fact that they capitalised upon these themselves. The political police enacted a number of counterintelligence entrapment operations using the rumours surrounding the Red Army elite. They knew these could be turned to their advantage. While not only showing the potency of the rumours, this strongly suggests that the political police appreciated they were false. The political police knowingly promoted the rumours of a 'Russian Bonaparte' as disinformation. The key to these entrapment operations was the use of big names in the military elite presented as members of counterrevolutionary organisations. The aim was to gain information about genuine White organisations, to spread disinformation and snare and reveal conspiracy. That these entrapment operations were so successful is a testament to the potency of the idea of military betrayal in the Red Army command. The operations are also an indication of the tactical change forced upon the political police after the Civil War. Espionage and counterintelligence were becoming increasingly important and these disinformation operations show that the political police were beginning to understand this. The notable operations are 'Sindikats-4' which began in November 1924 and created a fictional White organisation, 'The Internal Russian National Organisation', and 'D-7' which created 'The Military Organisation'.⁵⁸ However the most successful by far was the Trust operation (*Trest*).

The Trust operation began in November 1921 and ran all the way until April 1927. The operation created a fake counterrevolutionary organisation, the 'Monarchist Union of Central Russia' (MOTsR), which was presented to the Whites as: 'including a significant part of the command of the RKKKA and able to lead counterrevolutionary forces and overthrow Soviet power'.⁵⁹ Its alleged leaders were the former pre-revolutionary Generals, A. Zaionchkovskii and A. Iakushev. Both were working for the Soviet political police.⁶⁰ An early target of the operation was the leaders of the Supreme Monarchist Soviet in Berlin and the names of prominent Red Army officers were used for entrapment. For example, Iakushev, acting as a member of MOTsR, met the head of

⁵⁸ For details on both operations, see Goldin, *Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i sovetskie spetssluzhby*, pp. 188-189.

⁵⁹ *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 229.

⁶⁰ Goldin, *Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i sovetskie spetssluzhby*, pp. 327-331

the Supreme Monarchist Soviet, N. E. Markov, in December 1922 in Berlin and worked out a plan for the struggle against the Bolsheviks. In this case, Markov did not need much nudging to believe an alleged military conspiracy.⁶¹

From 1922 the targets of the Trust operation began to widen. It made more fixed contact with the leaders of the White movement, including the Grand Duke Nikolai Romanov, the grandson of Nicholas I, and the Generals Wrangel, Kutepov and Evgenii Miller.⁶² The operation also targeted foreign intelligence services.⁶³ For example, in 1923 both Polish and Estonian intelligence agencies made inquiries to MOTsR about senior officers in the Red Army.⁶⁴ With the founding of ROVS in 1924, the Trust operation was deployed to establish contact and to neutralise the organisation. This was particularly important in light of Kutepov's terrorist campaign. The Trust operation spread false information that Tukhachevskii and other senior officers, including Boris Shaposhnikov, Aleksandr Svechin, P. P. Lebedev and S. S. Kamenev, were all members of MOTsR and were hostile to the Bolsheviks. Kutepov was completely taken in by the operation and it successfully managed to restrain his anti-soviet activity.⁶⁵ Indeed, in order to make MOTsR even more convincing, fabricated documents were passed to White groups and foreign intelligence agencies from MOTsR including materials about the Red Army and its command with genuine signatures from the military leadership.⁶⁶ These entrapment operations represented some of the political police's greatest successes in the 1920s. Kutepov was taken in entirely by the Trust operation, meaning the Bolsheviks received a constant feed of intelligence about his activity. In the final year of the operation a report by its leader, Artur Artuzov, displayed confidence that information held on the Red Army by Poland, France, Germany, Estonia and Japan was almost exclusively disinformation.⁶⁷ When the Trust operation was finally exposed in 1927 this had a highly debilitating effect on the Whites. Paul Robinson argues that when the Whites learnt the reality of the operation it reinforced suspicions that they were

⁶¹ *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, pp. 231-232.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁶³ Goldin, *Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i sovetskie spetssluzhby*, p. 337.

⁶⁴ *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 233.

⁶⁵ Robinson, pp. 138-141. Tukhachevskii's name was officially withdrawn from the operation at the beginning of 1924, however, the political police continued to use his name despite this, see *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, pp. 236-237.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁶⁷ Zdanovich, p. 630.

surrounded by enemies and provocateurs, and mutual trust was undermined. Kutepov himself came under great pressure to resign after being so wilfully taken in.⁶⁸

The Soviet political police's use of rumour guaranteed that the 1920s would see no respite from notions of Red Army betrayal and treachery. Thus, the accusations that the ground being prepared for a military coup seen from Zinoviev and V. M. Smirnov in 1927, and the continued hopes the Whites placed in betrayal from within the Red Army elite, were ideas partly reinforced by the Soviet political police themselves. The atmosphere in the 1920s was heavy with rumour and it is clear why outsiders and those not from the immediate party or military establishment could believe in an approaching 'Soviet Thermidor'. Indeed, separate military coups in Europe, such as in Bulgaria in 1923 and General Jozef Pilsudski's coup in Poland in 1926, would heighten concerns about 'Bonapartism' in the Red Army. Yet, importantly, the end of the Trust operation did not stop the rumours about betrayal in the military. In 1928 the Polish and English press still reported about a supposed 'insurrection' in the Red Army led by Tukhachevskii.⁶⁹ As shown in chapter four, new forms of rumours about disloyalty in the military appeared in the 1930s meaning that the Red Army elite never escaped the hearsay that they were untrustworthy. These rumours and pieces of information about disloyalty in the high command would be added into the various political police files on members of the military elite. Even if at this point they were not taken too seriously, they provided a constant drip of suggestions that the army elite's loyalty was not guaranteed. This created files full of compromising information which would be used in the future when the senior officers were held with far more suspicion.

The Espionage Threat from Foreign Governments

The political police had shown concerns about foreign agents targeting the Red Army during the Civil War and this remained the case after the conflict. Espionage was widespread and alleged spy networks and intelligence agents were 'exposed' with regularity in the Soviet Union in the 1920s.⁷⁰ The Red Army also saw its share of espionage activity. For example, in 1922 Trotsky was certain that foreign agents were

⁶⁸ Robinson, pp. 140-141.

⁶⁹ Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov*, p. 580.

⁷⁰ See Harris, 'Encircled by Enemies'.

trying to infiltrate into the military and he prohibited soldiers from having contact with foreigners.⁷¹ The political police were particularly concerned about the loss of secret documents to foreign agents working inside the Red Army.⁷² But the possibility of officers and soldiers being recruited as agents also caused concerns. Foreign agents were ‘exposed’ by the political police at a low, but frequent, level in the 1920s. For example, in June 1924 the counterintelligence department of the Kiev OGPU arrested a group on charges of Polish espionage. The majority were military specialists who had served in the Red Army, and one was still employed.⁷³ On 22 March 1925 the army newspaper *Krasnaia zvezda* published an article on the ‘exposure’ of a Polish spy network in the army. The alleged organisation included a number of former Imperial officers, who were allegedly working for Poland. All had previously served in the Red Army.⁷⁴ Agents working for Latvia and Britain were also ‘discovered’ in the military.⁷⁵ For example, in October 1926 the head of the Inspectorate of the Moscow Military District Staff (MVO), P. Filin, and his wife, were arrested for espionage. Filin had alleged British contacts.⁷⁶ After this case Voroshilov ordered that even soldiers’ families were forbidden to have any contact with foreigners.⁷⁷ June 1927 saw the execution of twenty people, including former officers and military specialists, accused of counterrevolutionary activity and espionage for the Whites and foreign governments.⁷⁸ During the 1920s, the Bolsheviks regarded Poland as the most threatening country. When the staunch anti-communist Pilsudski came to power in 1926 the political police reported an increase in Polish espionage and apparent attempts to recruit from within the Red Army.⁷⁹

Common to many of these alleged espionage cases are military specialists being used as agents. For example, in a Military Procuracy report on counterrevolutionary

⁷¹ Sanborn, p. 128.

⁷² For further details of the political police’s concerns about secret military documents, see Zdanovich, pp. 483-524.

⁷³ Boris Viktorov, *Bez grifa “sekretno” : zapiski voennogo prokurora* (Moscow: Iurid. lit-ra, 1990), p. 62; Tynchenko, p. 100; ‘Pol’skii shpionazh na Ukraine – Delo general Belavina’, *Krasnaia zvezda*, 27 May 1925, p. 4.

⁷⁴ ‘Delo kontrrevoliutsionnoi i shpionskoi organizatsii’, *Krasnaia zvezda*, 22 March 1925. For another example of alleged Polish spy operations with links to former officers, Whites and serving members of the Red Army see, ‘Shpionskaia rabota pol’skikh diplomatov s SSSR’, *Krasnaia zvezda*, 3 April 1925, p. 1.

⁷⁵ For a case of Latvian agents, see RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 84, l. 111. Some Military specialists had been ‘exposed’ as working for British and Finnish intelligence in November 1926, see Viktorov, p. 66.

⁷⁶ Zdanovich, pp. 606-613.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 493.

⁷⁸ Tynchenko, pp. 18-22.

⁷⁹ Zdanovich, pp. 74-75.

organisations in the army for the period of October 1926 to October 1927, it was noted that: ‘for their aims foreign intelligence agents use social aliens and those with harmful moods towards sov[iet] power, elements/former noblemen (*dvoriane*)...[and] in the main individuals from the command.’⁸⁰ Like the Whites, foreign governments were seen as taking advantage of disaffected outsider elements within the Red Army, primarily the military specialists.⁸¹ However, the Military Procuracy report also stressed that the scale of espionage activity in the army was very minor and much smaller than other types of criminal activity. In 1927 the procuracy noted that: ‘The infiltration of foreign intelligence agents into the RKKA is on an insignificant scale’.⁸² Thus, spies were seen as having the capability to infiltrate into the army, and to recruit from within, but the problem was still not extensive.⁸³ As far as the Military Procuracy was concerned the military’s vulnerability to subversion had been demonstrated, but spies were not a major problem. However, it would be a mistake to evaluate the significance of the espionage threat to the army from the Military Procuracy alone. This was the mainstream judicial arm responsible for army crime. The Military Procuracy valued evidence-based arrests more so than the political police and had less of an interest in actively ‘exposing’ ‘enemies’ to justify their value. The political police no doubt saw the espionage threat differently, and as more dangerous and on a larger scale. Indeed not all the spies ‘exposed’ by the political police were genuine. They continued to use forced confessions which resulted in more ‘discoveries’ of foreign agents and increased the perceived scale of the overall spy threat. Again, there were a number of different appraisals of the threats facing the Red Army from several institutions. These differing views were in competition. The political police’s perception of army vulnerabilities was the most alarmist. But despite the political police’s tendency to inflate the scale of dangers to the military, it is likely that Stalin too would see the small spy threat as very concerning. Indeed, in understanding the significance of the spies and foreign agents for the Bolsheviks, it is necessary to appreciate their particular worldview, informed by Lenin’s theory of ‘capitalist encirclement’. The Bolsheviks believed that the Soviet Union was surrounded by a hostile coalition of capitalist powers making preparations for war. This caused a heightened sensitivity to war and the expectation of conflict.

⁸⁰ RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 70, l. 1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 14-15. The report also gave further examples of Red Army men allegedly working for Latvian, Polish and Estonian intelligence.

⁸² *Ibid.*, l. 1.

⁸³ For separate statistics on the small scale of the espionage threat, see RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 81, l. 6.

Consequently, even a low level of foreign espionage, and particularly that targeted at the Red Army, could be seen as a manifestation of this looming threat.

The Bolsheviks believed that the Soviet Union was under siege and that a new war was not only approaching, but was unavoidable. They believed that the communist and capitalist worlds were incompatible and that it was only a matter of time before the Soviet Union faced a coalition of hostile capitalist powers.⁸⁴ Judging by the instability in the international situation after the Civil War, it is easy to see why the Bolsheviks believed a major conflict was on the horizon. Soon after the end of the conflict, a communist uprising in Germany in 1923 created the possibility for a new war as it risked drawing in Poland militarily. The Soviet political police in particular were concerned about the ‘German October’ and worried that Tukhachevskii would act impulsively on the western front, using the events in Germany as a pretext to make a drive into Poland in revenge for the failed 1920 war.⁸⁵ The Bolsheviks wanted to avoid a renewed conflict until they were strong enough to win this. Relations with Poland in particular had been very poor since the 1920 war. The close ties between Poland and Romania made it seem an even more dangerous adversary. Furthermore, the Bolsheviks also suspected that the British were attempting to form an anti-Soviet bloc with Poland, Romania and the Baltic states.⁸⁶ In short, the Bolsheviks were again making plans and preparations for war and watching the international situation carefully, but their perspective was skewed. They tended to see diplomatic ties between capitalist states as evidence of the formation of a hostile coalition.⁸⁷ The Bolsheviks misperceived the international situation and this created an expectation of conflict. This anticipation of war can be seen in directives sent to the Western Army and the troops stationed in Ukraine in 1923, by S. S. Kamenev and P. P. Lebedev, the commander of the Soviet republic armed forces and Chief of Staff of the RVS respectively. These directives stated that in the near future the Red Army may be required to defend the borders and that the most probable aggressor states would be the White movement with Polish and

⁸⁴ This point has been made in numerous works, see for example, *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars*, ed. by Ernest R. May (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Gabriel Gorodetsky, ‘The Formulation of Soviet Foreign Policy: Ideology and *Realpolitik*’ in *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1991: A Retrospective*, ed. by Gabriel Gorodetsky (London: Frank Cass, 1994), pp. 30-44; Alfred J. Reiber, ‘Stalin as Foreign Policy-Maker: Avoiding War, 1927-1953’ in *Stalin: A New History*, ed. by Davies and Harris; Silvio Pons, *Stalin and the Inevitable War, 1936-1941* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), pp. 140-158; Harris, ‘Encircled by Enemies’.

⁸⁵ Zdanovich, pp. 283-286.

⁸⁶ Harris, ‘Encircled by Enemies’, pp. 518-519.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 517.

Entente assistance. There were also concerns that other European countries would join the war, including Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania.⁸⁸

Within this tense climate intelligence gathering became a priority. For the Bolsheviks, in the face of what was regarded as an inevitable clash between capitalism and communism, knowing as much about the enemy and its military capability was crucial. Much the same can be said for the leaders of the European countries, who had hoped for a White victory in the Civil War and now had to adjust to life with the Soviet Union. Thus, information about military strength was valuable. The ‘exposure’ of intelligence agents within the Red Army had a special significance, despite its small scale. As far as the Bolsheviks were concerned, the capitalist states were not only gathering information but actively preparing for war. They would see further ‘evidence’ of the capitalist states’ hostile intentions through the continued support of the exiled Whites. For example, the British had maintained links with the Whites into the 1920s and continued to subsidise White intelligence.⁸⁹ The British also used the Whites for their own ends and their White contacts operated in the Baltics as part of their own intelligence operations.⁹⁰ Such collaboration would only reinforce the impression that alliances were being forged for an attack on the Soviet Union. Thus, the scale of foreign espionage against the Red Army may have been small, but when viewed in the context of capitalist encirclement and foreign collaboration with the Whites, it could appear as part of a larger capitalist conspiracy to crush the Soviet Union. Espionage was indicative of what the Soviets feared the capitalist states were planning, an intervention by hostile coalition. Worst of all, the Red Army was perceived to be vulnerable to infiltration by foreign agents who were exploiting military specialists, and there was no shortage of potential recruits.

In contrast to other European countries, Germany was given extensive access to the Red Army during the collaboration with the Reichswehr. This collaboration began in May 1921 with the signing of a commercial agreement which also established

⁸⁸ Vladimir Pozniakov, ‘The Enemy at the Gates: Soviet Military Intelligence in the Inter-war Period and its Forecasts of Future War, 1921-1941’ in *Russia in the Age of Wars*, ed. by Pons and Romano, pp. 215-234 (p. 218).

⁸⁹ *Russkaia voennaia emigratsiia 20-kh-40-kh godov*, I, book II, p. 129. For British support of Kutepov, see Goldin, *Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i sovetskie spetssluzhby*, p. 413. For American negotiations and Polish agreements with Monarchist groups, known to the Bolsheviks through the Trust operation, see Zdanovich, p. 632.

⁹⁰ Goldin, *Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i sovetskie spetssluzhby*, p. 272.

military-industrial contacts.⁹¹ The Treaty of Rapallo in April 1922 established formal diplomatic relations. The two countries had mutual interests. Russia was bereft of the technical ability essential for a build-up of industry, while Germany needed secret locations which it could use to rearm and work around the Treaty of Versailles. The collaboration was meant to remedy both problems. Germany also helped create the Red Army's chemical weapons program and gave assistance in tank and aircraft production.⁹² However, hopes that the collaboration would provide what the Bolsheviks needed were short-lived. By late 1925 the Bolsheviks realised that they needed to industrialise and build their own armaments industry.⁹³ Despite this, a military collaboration was still continued and included the exchange of officers between Germany and the Soviet Union. For example, one of the first Red Army officers to spend significant time in Germany was Uborevich, who was there for thirteen months from November 1927. Uborevich studied with the German officers and was given open access to large amounts of military technology.⁹⁴ Following in his steps nearly all of the army elite studied in Germany for varying periods of time.⁹⁵

Such close collaboration with Germany, though this had obvious benefits, would put the Red Army at risk in giving German agents a free hand. The Soviet political police were suspicious of this from the beginning.⁹⁶ For instance, an OGPU circular from 1924 pointed to the espionage threat from the presence of so many Germans inside

⁹¹ Aleksandr Nekrich, *Pariahs, Partners, Predators: German-Soviet Relations, 1922-1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 5.

⁹² Sally Stoecker, *Forging Stalin's Army: Marshal Tukhachevsky and the Politics of Military Innovation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), p. 77.

⁹³ Samuelson points to the German rejection of several Soviet proposals and their agreement to collaborate only at a low level as sticking points in the collaboration, for example, in avoiding joint construction ventures and investments. It was the failure of the collaboration and the Bolshevik realisation that they needed to industrialise independently, rather than the pressure of the worsening international situation which entailed a move towards independent military rearmament, see Samuelson *Plans for Stalin's War Machine*, pp. 32-34. As Erickson notes, there was a shift in the type of collaboration between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1925, with less emphasis on the production of war materiel in the Soviet Union and greater emphasis on the 'testing of equipment and the training of personnel'. This shift brought the Red Army and the Reichswehr into closer contact, see *The Soviet High Command*, p. 248.

⁹⁴ There are indications that Uborevich was favoured by the Germans and that they gave him more access than other Red Army officers. In a July 1929 letter to Stalin, the Soviet Ambassador in Berlin, Nikolai Krestinskii, noted that the Germans had friendly relations with Uborevich, see Kantor, *Zakliataia družba*, p. 108. Voroshilov warned Uborevich against striking up too friendly relations with the Germans, see Nekrich, p. 30.

⁹⁵ During 1925-32, 193 Red Army officers trained in Germany, of whom twelve visited twice. Three officers, Iakir, Uborevich and Belov spent at least a year in Germany, but the majority, 125, spent one to three months only, see RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 19, l. 110.

⁹⁶ Nekrich, p. 13. According to Nekrich, Dzerzhinskii believed that the Germans were working to overthrow the Bolsheviks or working with White organisations, see pp. 36-37.

the Soviet Union.⁹⁷ With the foundation of the aircraft construction company Junkers in the Soviet Union the political police made a number of accusations, including that the company was attempting to forge links with the Red Army command to gather intelligence and that it was a counterrevolutionary organisation working with the British.⁹⁸ The political police's fears were not entirely incorrect, but in many cases what the Germans were engaged in cannot be described as 'espionage'. Some German representatives did gather materials during the collaboration. They sent home information from the Soviet military press and notes from personal observations of military manoeuvres and conversations with Red Army officers.⁹⁹ This type of information gathering is documented in interrogation transcripts of arrested German diplomats from the 1940s.¹⁰⁰ But this activity cannot be described as 'espionage'. Furthermore, it appears to have been tolerated. For example, on 24 December 1928 the head of military intelligence, Ian Berzin, sent a letter to Voroshilov, detailing that:

There is no doubt that all the German enterprises apart from their direct task also have the task of economic, political and military information/espionage... But this espionage, according to all information, is not directed along the line of the extraction and collection of secret documents, but is conducted through personal observations, conversations and verbal information (*ustnikh informatsii*). This espionage is less dangerous...¹⁰¹

There is no indication that Berzin felt the Germans were trying to undermine the Red Army or constituted a serious threat. He did not regard the German 'espionage' as espionage in its true sense. This was not the theft of highly secretive material. In addition, Berzin added that an exchange of intelligence on Poland with the Germans was desirable.¹⁰² Indeed, the two countries did exchange intelligence on Poland, Romania and the Baltic States throughout the collaboration.¹⁰³ Thus, the threat from Poland was regarded more seriously than the possible danger of German intelligence. Even though Voroshilov had shown some scepticism towards German intentions,

⁹⁷ Document printed in Zdanovich, pp. 643-648.

⁹⁸ Nekrich, p. 47.

⁹⁹ Kantor, *Zakliataia druzhba*, p. 119.

¹⁰⁰ For example see the interrogation transcript from September 1946 of the German military attaché General-Major Karl Spalcke, *Tainy diplomatii Tret'ego reikha: germanskie diplomaty, rukovoditeli zarubezhnykh voennykh missii, voennye i politseiskie attashe v sovetskom plenu, dokumenty iz sledstvennykh del, 1944-1955*, ed. by V.S. Khristoforov and others (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond "Demokratiia", 2011), p. 698. Spalcke also noted that he was on good terms with Iakir, who gave him a cigarette case, see *ibid*, p. 700.

¹⁰¹ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 295, l. 75.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, l. 77.

¹⁰³ Kantor, *Zakliataia druzhba*, p. 118.

believing that they were holding back information during the collaboration and exploiting the Bolsheviks, he also took advantage of the close contact. Voroshilov instructed those visiting Germany to find out specific information about the organisation of the Reichswehr and its level of military technology.¹⁰⁴ Before Uborevich's long stay in Germany in 1927 Voroshilov asked him to find out specific information about the organisation and armament of the German forces.¹⁰⁵ Both Voroshilov and the German government used the collaboration to gain information. For the Bolsheviks, it seems that despite the potential dangers of such close contact with Germany, the benefits of collaboration outweighed the disadvantages. Even though a close relationship with Germany would leave the Red Army open to infiltration, the partnership was seen as vital in helping the Soviet Union prepare for the inevitable war. There is little to suggest that either Berzin or Voroshilov shared the opinions of the political police about the German threat. Indeed, the collaboration took place before Hitler's ascendancy to power. However, as Germany became more hostile to the Soviet Union from 1933, the close collaboration, and particularly the personal connections between the Soviet and German officers forged in the 1920s, put the entire Red Army elite in danger.

Trotskyism in the Red Army

The perceived external threats from the White movement and foreign agents were seen as serious enough problems for the Red Army, but it faced one final threat in the 1920s. This was from what Stalin regarded as the Trotskyist 'Opposition', which found a small level of support within the ranks. The Trotskyist 'Opposition' differed to the perceived subversive threats from Whites and foreign agents. It was wholly internal and not reliant on infiltrated agents. It could potentially spread easily from one army party organisation to another. Thus, it posed a specific type of threat. However, typically within the literature on the Red Army, Trotskyists have only been briefly commented upon. There has been little examination of how this threat was perceived and on what terms. Importantly, there were differences of opinion about the danger posed by the Trotskyists

¹⁰⁴ Stoecker, p. 81. For a request instructing information collection in Germany from military intelligence, see, RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 393, l. 140.

¹⁰⁵ Kantor, *Zakliataia druzhba*, p. 176.

to the military and this internal danger demonstrates particularly well how perceptions of army vulnerabilities were shaped by institutional interests.

In the early 1920s the Bolshevik Party was divided over how to overcome the economic crisis and rebellion in the countryside, both consequences of the Civil War. The authoritarian policy of War Communism which had seen forced grain requisitions and kept the Bolsheviks afloat during the conflict was now to be abandoned. A new course was required to revive the country's struggling economy. Yet the solution proved to be divisive. The Tenth Party Congress in March 1921 laid the foundations for the New Economic Policy (NEP) that aimed at economic recovery through introducing a limited private sector and allowing peasants the freedom to engage in their own economic activity. The policy, however, was controversial and Trotsky did not agree with the measures. Trotsky saw a risk in giving too much leeway to the rich peasants, the reviled kulaks. He also began to argue for fast-paced industrialisation, which went against many in the wider party.¹⁰⁶ However, the NEP was not the only cause for Trotsky's growing opposition. He openly criticised Stalin and accused him of centralising power and argued that there was a lack of democracy and a creeping bureaucratisation of party life. But Trotsky's own position was not as strong as it had once been. His popularity had seen a sharp decline since the Civil War and in the early 1920s a new dispute erupted over the trade unions which drew further dividing lines. Trotsky's weakening support in the party was clearly shown at the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921 where he only managed to come tenth in the vote for the new Central Committee and the number of his supporters was reduced.¹⁰⁷ Tensions were further exacerbated by Lenin's developing illness and subsequent absence from public and party life. 1922 saw the transfer of everyday leadership to a triumvirate of Stalin, Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev.¹⁰⁸

Trotsky's record as head of the army was also increasingly undermined. He continued to attract animosity because of the employment of military specialists and came under further pressure due to the poor condition of the Red Army itself.¹⁰⁹ In 1923 a military commission found a series of problems with the army, chiefly relating to

¹⁰⁶ For a discussion on Trotsky's views in the early 1920s, see Service, pp. 349-357.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

¹⁰⁸ Michal Reiman, 'Trotsky and the Struggle for 'Lenin's Heritage'' in *The Trotsky Reappraisal*, ed. by Terry Brotherstone and Paul Dukes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), pp. 41-52 (p. 47).

¹⁰⁹ R. W. Harrison, p. 125.

manpower and supply, and as War Commissar, Trotsky was held responsible.¹¹⁰ A further commission in 1924, that included a number of Stalin's allies and both future heads of the army, Mikhail Frunze and Voroshilov, further weakened Trotsky in criticising the condition of the military.¹¹¹ These commissions were certainly politicised and used to weaken Trotsky, but the defects and problems in the Red Army were genuine. In addition, 1924 saw a range of transfers and promotions which undermined Trotsky further. His deputy Sklianskii was replaced by Frunze and Voroshilov took command of the MVO, ousting another Trotsky supporter, Nikolai Muralov.¹¹²

Despite Trotsky's weakened position, he continued to have support. In October 1923 forty-six party members, including a number of Trotsky's supporters and Democratic Centralists, sent a letter to the Central Committee repeating his earlier criticisms of economic policy and party bureaucratism. The letter, known as the platform of the forty-six, was denounced by Central Committee and before long Trotsky was accused of factionalism by the triumvirate. But Trotsky also attracted some support from the Red Army. His army supporters included senior military figures such as Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, who headed PUR until his removal in 1923, and several other senior officers such as Muralov, who commanded the MVO until his replacement with Voroshilov, and the commander of the PriVO, Sergei Mrachkovskii. A number of other officers and political workers also joined the Opposition. Those most notable are Vitalii Primakov, Vitovt Putna and Gaia Gai. Trotsky was also supported by numerous military specialists both in the army and the military academies.¹¹³ The Trotskyist influence was most strongly felt within the military academies and the navy, and especially among the young and within PUR.¹¹⁴ In terms of scale, Trotsky's support in some places did reach quite significant levels in the early 1920s. For example, it has long been known that he had the support of approximately a third of Moscow's military cells in 1923.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, pp. 164-165.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹¹³ Zdanovich, p. 287.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

¹¹⁵ D. Hincks, 'Support for the Opposition in Moscow in the Party Discussion of 1923-1924', *Soviet Studies*, 44. 1 (1992), 137-151 (p. 143); Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, p. 165. Von Hagen notes that in an address to the Moscow Garrison Antonov-Ovseenko said that the military cells, 'were solidly behind Trotsky'. Von Hagen admits this is probably an exaggeration on Antonov-Ovseenko's part, but he does not doubt that the opposition got a fair hearing in both Moscow and Petrograd, see *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, p. 200. During the 1937 February-March Plenum of the Central Committee Voroshilov confirmed that the Moscow garrison supported Trotsky, see *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 154.

The party regarded this army support for Trotsky as dangerous. One event of particular scorn was Antonov-Ovseenko's unsanctioned distribution of a PUR circular on 24 December 1923 that addressed the restoration of party democracy and called for the election of party cell secretaries. The circular prompted a resolution from the Central Control Commission in January 1924 describing Antonov-Ovseenko's behaviour as having created a 'harmful mood' in a section of army communists and that he had attempted: 'to raise the military workers against the leading organs of the party and all the party as a whole'.¹¹⁶ At the Thirteenth Party Conference in January 1924 Antonov-Ovseenko was criticised for sending the circular. He was removed from the head of PUR and sent overseas on diplomatic work. Lenin died on 21 January and infighting within the party sharpened further. The triumvirate of Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev were now determined to stop Trotsky from becoming the party leader. Pressure on Trotsky and his supporters began to build throughout 1924.¹¹⁷ In January 1925 Trotsky resigned from his position as the head of the army and was replaced by Mikhail Frunze. Frunze, however, died shortly after and was replaced by Stalin's old comrade Voroshilov.¹¹⁸

The party may have come down hard on the Trotsky's army supporters in 1924, but in general, reactions varied widely. For instance, PUR tended to downplay the impact of the Opposition in the military. In a range of reports throughout the 1920s, PUR consistently reported on the Opposition's minority presence in the armed forces. For example, in a PUR survey from February 1925, compiled in reference to the previous year's publication of Trotsky's essay 'The Lessons of October', it was reported that support for Trotsky was only at a low level in the army and navy.¹¹⁹ In September 1926 another PUR report stressed the unity of the army party organisations in face of the Opposition's agitation. The report noted that despite oppositionist speeches during a plenum of the Central Committee: 'The resolutions, accepted in the party meetings, meetings of the *aktiv* etc; utterly and completely endorse the decisions of the plenum, sharply condemning the opposition and welcome the firm Lenin line (*leninskuiu liniu*)

¹¹⁶ *Partiino-politicheskaia rabota v krasnoi armii: dokumenty 1921-1929 gg.*, ed. by T.F. Kariaeva and others (Moscow: Voennoe izdatel'stvo Ministerstva oborony SSSR, 1981), p. 184.

¹¹⁷ For more detail on the emergence of the Left Opposition and the growing divides in the party at the beginning of the 1920s, see Priestland, pp. 133-189.

¹¹⁸ See chapter three.

¹¹⁹ RGVA, f. 33988, op. 3, d. 69, l. 133. 'Lessons of October' was an attack on Zinoviev and Kamenev for their opposition to Lenin in 1917 to the launching of the seizure of power.

of the TsK (Central Committee).¹²⁰ A month later Anton Bulin, a senior political commissar, sent Voroshilov a report on the scale of the Opposition in several military districts. According to Bulin the Opposition was only having limited impact in the ranks. For example, in the PriVO Bulin reported: ‘...the oppositionists have shown their political wretchedness, poverty and full unscrupulousness. It absolutely has no trust and influence in the wide party mass’.¹²¹ Similar appraisals were described in the Central-Asian Military District (SAVO).¹²² Indeed, a PUR report from 1927 placed Trotskyists at only 0.25% of the army party organisations.¹²³ As such, PUR were consistently reporting the Opposition’s lack of impact in the ranks. However, PUR were of course responsible for the political reliability of the army. They had an interest in downplaying problems with its political stability. It is natural that they would try and emphasise the reliability of the army. They did not want to attract criticism over how they were failing to instil a proper political education. Thus, it is likely that PUR saw a danger posed by Opposition to the military, but also saw a danger in admitting this.

Voroshilov also publicly downplayed the oppositionist threat to the army. As noted above, as head of the Red Army he was ultimately responsible for political reliability. He had a direct interest in not admitting to problems with its stability. For example, in a speech on the achievements of the party organisations, given on 10 January 1927, Voroshilov praised the army highly for having stood firm in the face of the oppositionist threat: ‘The interparty events, which happened in the past year were in my opinion a serious examination for our party organisations, and we should note with satisfaction that our party organisation brilliantly passed this examination in political Leninist maturity’. Voroshilov added that: ‘The Red Army is the most delicate organisation in all of the Soviet system and therefore party work here should be arranged the most correctly.’¹²⁴

However, the political police held a very different view of the army Trotskyists and were far more concerned about their agitation in the ranks, despite their small

¹²⁰ RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 51, l. 21.

¹²¹ Ibid., l. 24.

¹²² Ibid., ll. 23-24.

¹²³ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 227, ll. 190-191. The report does mention that it is not conclusive and a few military districts are absent from the figures. It is also worth noting that PUR were concerned about those individuals wavering between loyalty to the party and going over to the opposition, and this group was a priority for political agitation. As such, the scale of opposition in the army is greater than the figures which concentrate on the number of genuine oppositionists, see RGVA, f. 9, op. 26, d. 446, ll. 12-25.

¹²⁴ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 186, ll. 1-18. Voroshilov had described the Red Army as a ‘very complex and delicate instrument’ a year previously in June at a joint Plenum of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission, see RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 49, l. 17.

numbers. They received reports about alleged underground and illegal oppositionist propaganda and agitation within the army and took action.¹²⁵ From December 1925 to 15 November 1927, eighty army oppositionists were discharged from the ranks and expelled from the party.¹²⁶ The problem was not merely confined to propaganda and agitation. The political police were very concerned about a possible oppositionist coup using the army Trotskyists. An early investigation into possible military involvement in a coup attempt concerned the case of Iakov Dvorzhets, a subordinate of Antonov-Ovseenko.¹²⁷ In this case, Antonov-Ovseenko had apparently persuaded Dvorzhets to speak out against Zinoviev in a discussion meeting in 1923. In response, Zinoviev argued that Dvorzhets's speech was counterrevolutionary and the case attracted the attention of the political police.¹²⁸ When Antonov-Ovseenko heard about the case against Dvorzhets he sent an ultimatum to the Central Committee which threateningly noted that there were members of the party, in particular within the Red Army, that: 'will at some point call to order those leaders (*vozhdei*) who have overstepped the mark'.¹²⁹ Dvorzhets was formally arrested on 11 January 1924.¹³⁰ When the political police interrogated him they tried to find out specific information about a possible military coup led by Trotsky, but no convincing evidence was found.¹³¹ But the lack of evidence this time did not bring an end to the political police's search to uncover plans for a Trotskyist coup.

In 1926 Trotsky was joined by Zinoviev and Kamenev in the formation of the 'United Opposition' after they had too had broken with Stalin a year earlier. 1927 was the peak year of the United Opposition's activity. In response, all three were expelled from the Central Committee in October and later expelled from the party. Similar discharges were also seen in the Red Army as the party put further pressure on the Opposition. For example, in 1927 Primakov and Putna, the senior Trotskyist officers,

¹²⁵ See for example RGVA, f. 33988, op. 3, d. 106, l. 2.

¹²⁶ Zdanovich, p. 323.

¹²⁷ See *Ibid.*, pp. 288-203, Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov*, pp. 449-459.

¹²⁸ Zdanovich, p. 289.

¹²⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 290. Zdanovich notes correctly that this letter is clearly an ultimatum hinting at the possible participation of the Red Army in the defence of Trotsky. In terms of the army's ability to call Stalin 'to order', Antonov-Ovseenko is clearly exaggerating, but the political police no doubt took the threat seriously. That Antonov-Ovseenko threatened the Central Committee has been in circulation for a long time, see Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed. Trotsky: 1921-1929* (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 117.

¹³⁰ Zdanovich, p. 289.

¹³¹ Zdanovich details that under interrogation Dvorzhets testified that he had been agitating within the Kremlin military organisations. Dvorzhets said he was acting on Trotsky's orders and defending the interests of the rank-and-file. It is easy to see how agitating at the Kremlin could be interpreted by the political police as preparing the grounds for a coup, see *ibid.*, pp. 292-293.

lost their commands and were sent overseas on diplomatic work. Primakov became the military attaché in Afghanistan and Putna likewise in Japan, though they both remained members of the party. In November 1927 the Opposition planned demonstrations on the anniversary of the October Revolution, but importantly, the political police received information that the Opposition's 'combat organisation' was allegedly planning a coup. The head of the political police, Menzhinskii, informed the Central Committee.¹³² According to the Menzhinskii, the conspirators had planned to take over the Kremlin and the OGPU headquarters with similar operations hatching in Leningrad and Kharkov. The coup never materialised and the political police were praised for their response, though Trotsky's resistance to the plot was also alleged to be a factor. From the letters sent to the Central Committee about this supposed coup attempt it is clear that Stalin did not doubt its credibility. He did not regard it as a political police intrigue. Stalin specifically praised the decisive actions taken by both Menzhinskii and Voroshilov in forestalling the plot and reiterated the dangers posed by the oppositionists.¹³³ Importantly, the army was central to the conspiracy. According to Menzhinskii, the preparations for the coup coincided with continued and vigorous oppositionist agitation within the Red Army, of which Menzhinskii was now particularly pessimistic about its reliability. In his initial letter about the Opposition's 'combat organisation' Menzhinskii detailed:

In this secret report of the combat organization it is further stated that propaganda among the workers and in the Workers' and Peasants' Army should continue by all possible means until further orders. Especially in the army. The destructive effect of this propaganda in the army, I have already pointed out many times – though, unfortunately, not always with the desired results... We must therefore expect, in the time immediately ahead, that opposition propaganda will be at least as vigorous as it has been until now. It will be directed first of all, judging from the present state of affairs, at subverting the army. Comrade Voroshilov has acknowledged to me without question the pernicious effect of the opposition slogans... It makes me very sad to have to assert here, in this place, that the army today, unlike before, had already been partly contaminated and that the commanders now are often not reliable in the full sense of the word. Comrade Voroshilov is thoroughly aware of the seriousness of the situation and fully shares my pessimistic mood.¹³⁴

¹³² It is important to note that there is no evidence that this coup attempt was genuine. It is likely it was fabricated by the political police, see Reiman, *The Birth of Stalinism: The USSR on the Eve of the "Second Revolution"* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 124-126.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125. According to Fedotoff-White, Nikolai Bukharin in 1927, then editor of *Pravda*, believed that oppositionist groups in the army were planning a rebellion, see *The Growth of the Red Army*, p. 253.

Menzhinskii clearly did not place much faith in the Red Army's ability to withstand oppositionist agitation and propaganda. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that he was being pessimistic. PUR held a different view of army reliability and continued to downplay the oppositionist influence in the ranks.¹³⁵ Even though PUR had a tendency to downplay problems with army political reliability, this time they were supported by military intelligence who reported to Voroshilov in October 1927 that oppositionist agitation in the army had been met with a sharp rebuff from the party masses.¹³⁶ Most importantly, even though Stalin did not doubt the reality of the coup attempt itself and regarded the danger from Opposition to the military as serious, he did not entirely share Menzhinskii's view. In a separate letter to the Central Committee Stalin distanced himself from Menzhinskii, noting that he could not 'fully share the very pessimistic viewpoint of the GPU Collegium'. Stalin added that the Opposition's agitation in the army had been made far more difficult because of the countermeasures already taken. Instead, Stalin regarded industry and the Central Committee as more open targets of oppositionist propaganda.¹³⁷ In addition, Menzhinskii's letter reveals he had complained about the Opposition's agitation in the army ranks in the past, but this had not met the 'desired results'. We can only speculate about the nature of these 'desired results' but it is likely Menzhinskii wanted permission for a serious crack-down on the military. He saw a very serious danger from a relatively small number of Trotskyists. Furthermore, Menzhinskii would have heard all of Voroshilov's past assertions that the army was reliable and stable. It is unlikely he agreed. Thus, when the opportunity presented itself with the alleged Trotskyist coup in 1927, Menzhinskii perhaps took this as a chance to try and undermine Voroshilov and convince Stalin of his views about army vulnerabilities. But in the end, Menzhinskii's complaints about the oppositionist threat to army reliability had clearly failed to find resonance with Stalin. He had hesitated. Stalin did not believe the military was at a crisis point in 1927 and favoured restraint. There would be no crack-down that Menzhinskii was lobbying for.

Voroshilov's attitude to the alleged coup was more complex than it first seems. In public he continued to emphasis army loyalty and publicly defended its reliability during 1927. For example, a month before Menzhinskii's letter to the Central

¹³⁵ See PUR report for October 1927, RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 227, l. 24, 89. See also the report for December with much the same conclusions, see l. 24.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 10

¹³⁷ Reiman, *The Birth of Stalinism*, p. 127.

Committee, Voroshilov publicly criticised both Trotsky and Zinoviev for having only weak support within the military:

Comrades Zinoviev and Trotsky, in regard to all their spiteful hatred towards everyone that is not with them, who are against them, they are not able to dispute the fact that in a Red Army of 600,000 people we have ninety-five thousand party and candidate members, and 120,000 members of the komsomol (*komsomol'tsev*). The opposition also knows well that regardless of all its efforts, having sent a factional infection into the party ranks, it has not seen success.¹³⁸

In his speech to the *Krasnopresnensk raion* party conference on 2 November 1927 Voroshilov mentioned a supposed oppositionist coup attempt highlighted by the political police, but argued that the majority of the arrested never had anything to do with the Red Army.¹³⁹ Yet, it is very unlikely that Voroshilov held such a positive view of the army in private. Indeed, Menzhinskii's letter reveals a discrepancy between Voroshilov's private and public views, and gives support to those who have argued that oppositionist activity was hushed up due to the army's importance as a prop to the regime.¹⁴⁰ In his letter to the Central Committee Menzhinskii noted that Voroshilov also shared his pessimism over army reliability. Indeed, it is very likely that Voroshilov did see the oppositionist threat to the military as a more serious problem than his public speeches suggest, but it is doubtful that he was as alarmist as Menzhinskii or that he wanted to go as far as a serious crack-down on the military. Voroshilov would have appreciated the danger from the Trotskyists, but he would not have wanted to draw criticisms about his leadership of the army. The Trotskyists had already gained a foothold in the ranks under his watch and it is unlikely Voroshilov wanted to draw further attention to this and create further concerns about how army stability had been affected. In this sense, it is possible there was a tension between Voroshilov and Menzhinskii over the reliability of the Red Army and a struggle by each to convince Stalin of their particular view. Luckily for Voroshilov, Stalin did not agree with Menzhinskii this time. As such, for now, the Red Army escaped a new round of repression by the political police, but it surely remained under even closer observation

¹³⁸ RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 49, ll. 53-54. A year earlier at a joint Plenum of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission in July, Voroshilov responded to accusations Zinoviev had made that the opposition in the military showed that he did not have the trust of the army. Zinoviev had called Voroshilov a 'doomed person', adding that, 'You know well how much weight (*ves*) you have in the army'. Voroshilov in reply said that Zinoviev had 'lost his head', see *ibid.*, l. 17.

¹³⁹ Voroshilov, p. 151.

¹⁴⁰ Zdanovich, p. 315.

and arrests and discharges for Trotskyism continued. From the end of 1927 to February 1928 there were another 131 cases of Trotskyism in the ranks and during 1928 the political police revealed several alleged Trotskyist groups. Further arrests of senior officers followed. For example, Mrachkovskii was arrested in early 1928 for his Trotskyist activity and for membership in a military group in the capital.¹⁴¹

The alleged coup attempt of November 1927 was not the only time the political police had failed to be convincing about the Trotskyist danger to the military. In 1927 the political police also ‘exposed’ a supposed underground Trotskyist printing house and arrested those responsible. Under interrogation one Trotskyist gave ‘evidence’ that he was linked with a group of military men who were planning a coup, taking inspiration from Pilsudski.¹⁴² However, not all were convinced of the link between an underground print works and a military coup. This time even Menzhinskii requested a more detailed report.¹⁴³ It seems that the political police had been overeager, and in the end, no charge of a military coup was made. Furthermore, at this time the political police were criticised by the Military Procuracy for having a cavalier approach to arrests. For example, in a report examining crime in the Red Army in 1927 the Military Procuracy noted that the Special Departments had investigated 578 cases that year and that half of these investigations had been brought without sufficient evidence. The report also criticised the heavy reliance of extra-judicial methods and interrogation methods: ‘...too long periods of investigation and interrogation and long periods of custody for those arrested is practised by the Special departments even for petty, insignificant matters. The Procurator considers all of this abnormal’.¹⁴⁴ Finally, there are indications that Voroshilov himself was sceptical towards the credibility of some political police investigations. In a letter to Mikhail Tomskii, the head of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, on 2 February 1928, in regard to the Shakhty Trial, Voroshilov questioned whether the political police were fabricating the case.¹⁴⁵ But as noted above, that the political police saw the small number of army Trotskyists in much more threatening terms should not come as a surprise. Since the Civil War they had

¹⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 322-324

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 320; Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKA*, p. 86.

¹⁴³ Zdanovich, p. 322.

¹⁴⁴ RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 74, ll. 11-12, 19. This military procuracy report was compiled on 25 April 1928.

¹⁴⁵ Oleg Mozokhin, *Pravo na repressii: vnesudebnye polnomochiia organov gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti, 1918-1953* (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2006), p. 87. For a detailed study of Soviet crime and justice and the conflict between legal and extra-judicial methods, see Peter Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

monitored the army for any sign of counterrevolution from White and foreign agents. For the political police, the Trotskyist Opposition presented a further destabilising influence in an already difficult situation. Furthermore, the Trotskyist Opposition provides another example of how institutional interest influenced how perceived threats to the military were appraised. In this case, the political police tried to convince Stalin that serious organised conspiracies were being created in the ranks, no doubt to further enhance their own value and perhaps justify a closer involvement with the military. Importantly, Menzhinskii was pushing a view of army vulnerability that clashed with Voroshilov's version. Even if at this point the political police were seen as being too pessimistic, and at times alarmist, Stalin would eventually come to align more closely with their view about army reliability.¹⁴⁶

Despite the tendency of PUR to downplay the impact of the Trotskyist Opposition, there are glimpses about how dangerous some individuals within the organisation regarded this threat to be. For example, on receiving information about oppositionist activity within the Leningrad Military District (LVO), the deputy head of PUR in the district, Mikhail Landa, contacted the Central Control Commission on 18 September 1926 and he was very concerned. The Leningrad PUR had received a letter from a political worker, a certain Khvatskii, who had been until very recently a member of the Opposition. Khvatskii had detailed the activities of his oppositionist group and its military arm the 'Military Bureau'. He described that the Military Bureau had members working in differing positions in a range of units and he described his past position as 'practically against the party'.¹⁴⁷ Landa had reacted to this news with alarm:

This letter paints a scandalous picture of the Opposition's underground work in the army. From this letter it is apparent that in parts of the Leningrad military district the Opposition has organised underground troikas, which are organising underground meetings...Such dissenting and disruptive work is dangerous for the party organisation of the army. I consider it necessary to bring a decisive end to such unprecedented irresponsible and hugely harmful disorder. Therefore I request the TsKK (Central Control Commission) to bring all mentioned in the letter to account.¹⁴⁸

Beyond the formal PUR reports which tended to downplay the Opposition's influence in the army, the reality is that some, such as Landa, saw a greater danger.

¹⁴⁶ See Chapter Five.

¹⁴⁷ RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 51, l. 11.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 6.

After the political Opposition had been crushed in 1927 and its members expelled from the party and sent into exile, the immediate perceived danger appeared to have passed. Indeed, many members of the opposition were allowed to rejoin the Party at the end of the 1920s if they were willing to recant their ‘political errors’. This equally applied to the Red Army Trotskyists. In this respect the officers, Primakov and Putna, who had been sent into exile as military attachés because of their opposition, present particularly interesting cases. Despite their opposition to the party both were given surprisingly levels of responsibility during their diplomatic exile. The trust placed in Putna and Primakov by Voroshilov suggests that he did not see the Trotskyist threat in as threatening terms as the political police.

Even though the political police had established that Putna was working on Trotsky’s orders in the mid-1920s, only a few years later he was given a great level of responsibility abroad and even found a patron in Voroshilov. Moves to find Putna a position again within the Red Army were initiated not long after his exile as a military attaché in Japan. In April 1928 the Soviet ambassador in Japan, Aleksandr Troianovskii, wrote to Stalin and forwarded a letter he had received from Putna. This letter contained Putna’s wishes to once again find work in the army, perhaps as a corps commander. In this forwarded letter Putna had written:

...I must to express the desire that the C[entral]C[ommittee] of the party create the possibility and accept active measures for the return to the party ranks of those excluded comrades who have declared their intentions, joy and unity with the party, to fully submit to the decisions of the Party Congress.¹⁴⁹

In his covering letter Troianovskii praised Putna, writing that there were only very few like him in the Red Army and that he, ‘is a very business-like and very dedicated to military work’.¹⁵⁰ However, Voroshilov’s character assessment of Putna was even more glowing. In May 1929 he wrote to Krestinskii, the Soviet ambassador in Berlin, where Putna was soon to be a military attaché having moved on from Japan. Voroshilov praised Putna highly and asked Krestinskii to give Putna ‘comradely support’ on his arrival in Berlin.¹⁵¹ Later in September Voroshilov complained to Krestinskii about supposedly poor relations between the Soviet embassy and Putna which were hindering his work and making his life difficult. Voroshilov went on to say:

¹⁴⁹ RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 38, l. 35.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., l. 33.

¹⁵¹ RGASPI, f. 74, op. 21, d. 42, l. 9.

I very much request of you to take into consideration that in the person of com[rade] Putna we have one of the best of our commander-party men (*komandirov-partiitsev*), I, the RVS of the USSR, and the party fully trust him and I have entrusted to him extraordinarily serious and responsible tasks, which he will be able to fulfil only in conditions of full support from the side of you and your embassy apparatus... In the period of the last few years com.[rade] Putna, as you well know, had a hard experience of a party and personal character, [and] our responsibility is to help him to now finally eliminate these remaining difficult traces, creating real comradely circumstances for him.¹⁵²

Voroshilov even requested that Putna be allowed to access top secret documents which he had not had previously.¹⁵³ Voroshilov's letters to Krestinskii are striking as it seems that less than two years after the scare over Trotskyism in the military and the political police fears of a military coup he had become an advocate of a prominent ex-Trotskyist. We can only speculate about the 'extremely serious' work that Voroshilov had entrusted to the Putna, but British secret service materials from the period point to an espionage role. Information from British agents and intercepted communications indicate Putna was heavily involved in espionage work while working as a military attaché, and particularly so in Berlin. He had also apparently controlled Soviet agents in Finland. According to the British, Putna was charged with the collection of information about British defence and placing agents within the War Department.¹⁵⁴

The Trotskyist officer Primakov was also given surprisingly responsible work considering the seriousness of the threat he and his associates embodied only a few years earlier. Primakov had also been sent into exile as a military attaché, first to Afghanistan, and then from mid-1929 in Japan. In April 1930, Berzin, the head of military intelligence, wrote a letter to Voroshilov complaining about Primakov's conduct in Japan. Berzin opined about Primakov's careless and uneconomical attitude towards state funding, but also added:

The promotion of c.[omrade] Primakov as military attaché and leader of secret service work (*agenturnoi raboti*) in Japan has not brought a substantial improvement to the leadership of our military apparatus in Japan, not in relation to the obtaining of

¹⁵² Ibid., I, 91.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ National Archives (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO) KV 2/2404. According to V. I. Vinokurov, Putna did have an intelligence role while in Japan and Germany, see *Istoriia voennoi diplomatii: voennaiia diplomatiiia mezhdru pervoi i vtoroi mirovymi voiami*, 4 vols (Moscow: Inzhener, 2010), II, p. 14, 27. The Soviet ambassador in Britain Ivan Maiskii described Putna's post as attaché in Germany as 'extraordinarily important', see Ivan Maiskii, 3 vols, *Vospominaniia sovetskogo posla* (Moscow: Nauka, 1964), I, p. 273.

intelligence (*agenturnikh*) materials...on the contrary, for the past six months a weakening in the flow of the necessary materials from Japan has been noted.¹⁵⁵

Berzin concluded by asking Voroshilov to transfer Primakov elsewhere.¹⁵⁶ That Berzin was not happy with Primakov's performance in Japan is not the key point here, and perhaps his performance was sub-standard. What is interesting is that Primakov had some role in espionage against Japan. Again, for an individual whose political convictions were of such concern not long before his posting to Japan, it seems remarkable that Primakov would be given such responsibility at a time of increasingly strained relations in the Far East.

Both the experiences of Primakov and Putna suggest that Voroshilov believed that the danger from the army Trotskyists had passed. That Primakov, and probably also Putna, were given intelligence assignments is indicative of the trust Voroshilov placed in them. His letters about Putna in particular reveal what seems to be a genuine sense of trust in him. Why Voroshilov placed so much responsibility in the two is hard to say for certain. It is possible that he knew Putna and Primakov previously. For example, both Voroshilov and Primakov had commanded partisan units in Ukraine in 1918.¹⁵⁷ Voroshilov must have vouched for Primakov for him to be given the intelligence role in Japan and this could be because they had a previous acquaintance. Furthermore, both Putna and Primakov certainly had compromised pasts because of their support of Trotsky, but so did a great many other people in the army and within other Soviet institutions. In the late 1920s having a stain on a past record did not automatically exclude someone from working again, even in very responsible positions. Compromises were made regularly, and clearly Voroshilov believed these two could be trusted enough for an intelligence role. In addition, it is possible that there was a skills shortage of experienced officers for intelligence assignments. Or perhaps Voroshilov was simply being naïve. As such, even though Voroshilov surely appreciated the danger from the Opposition in stronger terms than his public speeches indicate, and he may well have shared some of Menzhinskii's pessimisms in November 1927, he was content enough for former Trotskyists officers to return to responsible positions. Similarly, by not indulging Menzhinskii in 1927 Stalin also showed that he believed the immediate Trotskyist danger to the army had passed. Yet, he would certainly not forget how the

¹⁵⁵ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 302, l. 51.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 53.

¹⁵⁷ J. F. N. Bradley, *Civil War in Russia, 1917-1920* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1975), p. 51.

military had been influenced by the Opposition or its alleged role in the coup attempt of 1927. This would create further suspicions and nagging doubts about army reliability. But for now, Stalin did not think a serious crack down on the army was needed. He too was willing to make compromises. Indeed, Stalin would know about Putna and Primakov's responsible assignments abroad. But at the same time, neither Putna nor Primakov's opposition would ever be forgotten. In the Stalinist system nothing was ever forgotten. Everything would be kept 'on file' by the political police. Indeed, as shown in chapter four, even if Voroshilov felt Putna and Primakov could be trusted again, the political police certainly did not. They were far more attentive to past incriminations and showed far greater concern about former oppositionists serving again in the Red Army. The political police continued to keep a close watch over the former Trotskyists and tried to 'expose' a Trotskyist conspiracy within the ranks into the 1930s.

Victory in the Civil War did not bring an end to the perceived threats to the Bolshevik regime. Facing a tense international situation and what the Bolsheviks regarded as hostile capitalist encirclement, the Red Army was of paramount importance. Both Lenin and Stalin believed that the capitalist world would not reconcile peacefully to the existence of the Soviet Union and would actively seek its destruction. Yet, the institution vital for defence, the Red Army, was perceived as not fully reliable. It was seen as displaying alarming vulnerabilities to a number of perceived external and internal threats. As espionage and subversion became key tactics of the Soviet Union's enemies, the Red Army was regarded as a primary target and seen as susceptible to infiltration by foreign and White agents. Indeed, the continued policy of employing military specialists and former White officers out of military necessity only heightened these fears. To many in the party and political police, the use of military specialists and former Whites acted to sabotage army stability at the very time they perceived the building of a hostile capitalist coalition. Consequently, the political police continued to keep the Red Army under very close observation. In addition, the rumours of a 'Russian Bonaparte' surrounding the military elite only heightened tensions further. The Whites were easily drawn in by Soviet entrapment operations such as the Trust operation, but the constant use disinformation by the political police would bring no respite from the rumours of betrayal surrounding the high command in the 1920s. This provided a constant drip of hearsay about certain members of the military elite. Importantly,

everything would be carefully recorded by the political police and kept 'on file', even what was seen as merely disinformation.

However, there were no mass arrests in the army during the 1920s in response to the perceived threats from the Whites or foreign agents. The perception of these threats could be greater than their reality. In fact, the gulf between the perception and reality of these threats increased at this time. The 1920s was a period when the army did not face any large crises, but when numerous perceived threats to its reliability persisted nonetheless. The Bolsheviks did not face the same immediate challenges to their survival as they had during the Civil War, but they still regarded their regime as under threat from the Whites and a range of hostile capitalist powers. However, how threats to the army were depicted depended on institutional interest. Voroshilov and PUR tended to downplay subversive dangers, while the political police tended to overplay the level of threat. But the political police failed to convince Stalin of the danger posed by the Trotskyists to the army in 1927 and they never arrested enough military specialists or spies to bring the army to a crisis point. Indeed, in the 1920s, different and competing narratives of threats to the Red Army began to emerge more visibly between PUR, the political police, Stalin and Voroshilov. But there were no serious crises in the army or in the wider Soviet Union to galvanise the political police's view and allow it to dominate. Indeed, regarding the army Trotskyists, Stalin had the last word, and he ruled that the Trotskyists posed no immediate danger to the army in 1927. He hesitated. Perhaps Stalin took such a pragmatic approach as Trotsky had been crushed politically and he believed the army was now easier to control. One major perceived threat to the military had been removed. However, Stalin would surely harbour some doubts and lingering suspicions about army reliability as a consequence. He would not forget how easily the oppositionists had gained a foothold in the ranks. But for now, the differing appraisals of threats to the Red Army would remain in competition. Voroshilov remained on the defensive and the political police actively searched out further 'enemies' and organised 'conspiracy' in the ranks. Stalin would wait and see what further 'evidence' the political police came up with, but in the 1920s he was not compelled to launch a serious crack-down on the Red Army.

However, the 1920s were only the beginning of a long period of flux in Red Army as it grappled with difficult external and internal challenges. The struggle with Trotskyists, the Whites and foreign agents would continue into the 1930s. But as the next chapter will show, further pressures, divisions and infighting quickly appeared as

the international situation began to worsen in the late 1920s, and when the Bolsheviks realised that alongside improving the political reliability of the Red Army, it also needed to be improved militarily.

Chapter Three: Reorganisation and Crisis in the Red Army

As the previous chapter has shown, numerous suspicions and doubts were raised about the political reliability of the Red Army during the 1920s. The army was still perceived as vulnerable to subversion and the political police believed that close observation needed to be maintained. Yet the army's perceived susceptibility to subversion was not the only problem. In the early 1920s the Red Army was militarily weak and in no condition to fight a major conflict. As Stalin was convinced that the Soviet Union was encircled by hostile capitalist powers and a future war was inevitable, military expansion and reorganisation was deemed essential. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, the arguments put forward about the direction and scale of rearmament revealed bitter disputes between members of military elite. In addition, the rapid industrialisation of the economy in the late 1920s created further difficulties for the army. Industrialisation may have provided the opportunity to build military power, but the collectivisation of agriculture which fuelled economic growth aggravated the large mass of peasants in the rank-and-file. The resulting upheavals called into question army reliability as a whole. Thousands of soldiers were discharged from the ranks in response. Therefore, this chapter will show that the measures intended to eliminate military weaknesses (army reform and industrialisation) in fact revealed additional weaknesses, in terms of exposing divides within the army elite and fomenting mass resentment in the lower ranks. Finally, at the very same time as mass discharges were spreading throughout the ranks the political police 'exposed' a very large military specialist 'plot' which reached into the highest levels of the army leadership. This combination of widespread discontent in the rank-and-file and an 'exposed' military specialist 'plot' in the upper ranks meant that for the first time the Red Army was experiencing a severe period of crisis. The early 1930s should be seen as a tipping point for the Red Army which firmly reinforced serious doubts about its stability and political reliability.

Disputes about Military Reform and the Problem of Tukhachevskii

In the mid-1920s the Red Army was not militarily prepared for the expected inevitable conflict with the capitalist world. In the aftermath of the Civil War the army was weak in comparison to the armies of the capitalist states. The Red Army would struggle for investment during the NEP years and even with the launch of rapid industrialisation in the late 1920s the army leadership did not receive the funds they wanted to build military power. Indeed, despite the tense international atmosphere following the Civil War, and the Bolsheviks' convictions that a war with capitalism was inevitable, the clash was not seen as imminent. There was breathing room for army reform. The Bolsheviks believed they had time on their side. In addition, during the NEP the Soviet economy was financially constricted and giving large boosts to military spending was impossible. It was in this context that the Red Army elite fiercely lobbied for investment, but they were far from united about the best way to lead reform. Questions about the speed and direction of rearmament were hotly debated, and issues of power and authority were sources of tension. Efforts to overcome military weaknesses threw into sharp relief the divides between some senior officers in the military leadership. However, these fissures were not only about rearmament, but had the subtext of institutional interest, power and pure ambition.

On Trotsky's resignation as War Commissar in January 1925, Mikhail Frunze was promoted as People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs.¹ Frunze's promotion represented a consolidation of the red commanders in the army elite. Stalin had strengthened his own hand.² Frunze embarked on a number of reforms which aimed at improving army organisation and these represented the first major attempt to create a modern efficient Red Army. In reality, the Frunze reforms created more problems than they remedied, and in any case, his time at the top was cut short. Frunze died in surgery in October 1925, paving the way for his deputy Voroshilov to take over the army

¹ Frunze had little military experience previous to the Civil War, having only led a red brigade during the seizure of power, see Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p. 653.

² The Stalinist contingent in the army had previously been strengthened in March 1924 when Frunze, as Deputy People's Commissar, created a new RVSR which included a number of Stalin's allies, including Andrei Bubnov, Budennyi, Unshlikht and Ordzhonikidze, see Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, p. 171.

leadership.³ As Voroshilov was Stalin's old comrade from Tsaritsyn, this promotion further increased Stalin's influence in the army. However, not all would have welcomed the appointment. Voroshilov had little military experience and what he did have was confined to the Civil War years. In comparison to the newly promoted Chief of Staff, Tukhachevskii, who now held the second most powerful position in the army, the disparity in experience created a rift between the two. Indeed, this tension between Tukhachevskii and Voroshilov is well documented.⁴ Tukhachevskii was forthright, ambitious and had grand plans for Red Army development and he must have resented having to work under someone he regarded as militarily inferior. As Stone has remarked, in a stark contrast to Tukhachevskii, Voroshilov never wrote anything of substance on military matters.⁵ Voroshilov had risen as the head of the army purely because of Stalin's patronage. Indeed, it is likely that Tukhachevskii thought he was better suited to lead the military. Even though both men had an interest in working together for the benefit of the Red Army and to try and increase its share of the budget, they often held very different views about the direction of army reform. Tukhachevskii was more capable of driving forward army modernisation, but he was not one of Stalin's close allies. As such, he was easily sidelined. This tension between the two top members of the army elite was a constant feature of army life until Tukhachevskii's execution in June 1937.

Frunze had left a legacy of reform, much of which was positive. He made improvements to discipline, pay, regulations, housing and food provisions. However, some measures were more controversial. The introduction of one-man command and the subsequent transfer of influence from the political commissars to the officers provoked

³ Frunze's death has been subject to speculation about whether this was arranged by Stalin, for a small discussion see *ibid.*, pp. 199-200. However, as Frunze's promotion had strengthened Stalin's position within the Red Army in the first place, and that Voroshilov was Frunze's deputy, there seems to be little to suggest that Frunze was a threat to Stalin. Having Frunze sidelined would have been easier than arranging a murder.

⁴ See for example, Otto Preston Chaney, *Zhukov* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), pp. 24, 42. Marshal Georgy Zhukov had supposedly remarked that Voroshilov hated Tukhachevskii, and Tukhachevskii considered Voroshilov incompetent. See also, Oleg Ken *Mobilizatsionnoe planirovanie i politicheskie resheniia, konets 1920 - seredina 1930-kh godov* (Saint Petersburg: Evropeiskii universitet S. Peterburga, 2002), pp. 130-131.

⁵ Stone, 'Tukhachevsky in Leningrad: Military Politics and Exile, 1928-1931', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 48. 8 (Dec., 1996), 1365-1386 (p. 1367). Oleg Ken has argued that many accounts of Voroshilov's weak military knowledge are exaggerations and that he was smarter than his detractors make out. Ken points out that individuals, such as Zhukov and Khrushchev, had a motive in criticising Voroshilov, see Ken, p. 312.

a very negative reaction from certain sections of PUR.⁶ Yet, it was the weakening of Staff authority started under Frunze which caused the first major rift between Tukhachevskii and Voroshilov in the 1920s. Previous to the Frunze reforms the army Staff had been a dominant force in the military hierarchy and wielded great influence. However, the Staff was both powerful and cumbersome. In a bid to increase efficiency Frunze had weakened the Staff by splitting it into three bodies, creating an Administrative, an Inspectorate and a smaller General Staff for mobilisation planning. This was much to Tukhachevskii's consternation, and not only because of the increased confusion and overlapping lines of authority.⁷ Tukhachevskii felt that the reform meant there was no dominant institution responsible for defence and he wanted to reassert Staff influence. Tukhachevskii also argued that the Staff should have a closer relationship with the main economic institutions.⁸ Furthermore, throughout 1926-27 Tukhachevskii pressed that the Staff needed to assume more power and take charge of directing rearmament for the entire Red Army.⁹ In practice, Tukhachevskii believed in the Staff's dominant place in directing army reform, and thus believed in his *own* place in directing this reform. Inter-department rivalry added a further complication to Tukhachevskii's ambitions. He clashed with S. S. Kamenev, the head of the Main Administration of the Red Army, about the latter apparently purposely weakening Staff authority. In a letter to Voroshilov from February 1927, Tukhachevskii accused Kamenev of leading a campaign against the Staff from the very beginning of the Frunze reforms.¹⁰ This conflict made it impossible for the Staff to direct the work of all the central directorates in the People's Commissariat for Military and Naval Affairs.¹¹ Kamenev was putting a halt on Tukhachevskii's ambitions. In addition, Tukhachevskii was particularly agitated about his loss of control over military intelligence on his promotion as Chief of Staff. In January 1926 Tukhachevskii appealed to Voroshilov and complained that without military intelligence the Staff was unable to sufficiently study foreign countries and create mobilisation plans.¹² He saw the loss of military intelligence as a manifestation of a lack of trust in his department, even though, as he

⁶ See Main, 'The Red Army and the Soviet Military and Political Leadership in the Late 1920s: The Case of 'Inner-Army Opposition of 1928'', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47. 2 (Mar., 1995), 337-355.

⁷ Stone, 'Tukhachevsky in Leningrad', p. 1368.

⁸ Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine*, p. 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁰ *Reforma v krasnoi armii*, ed. by Anderson and others, II, pp. 43-44.

¹¹ Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine*, p. 55.

¹² Minakov, *Stalin i ego marshal*, p. 357.

put it, the Staff was now ‘almost 100% Communist’.¹³ More seriously, in February 1928 Tukhachevskii directly accused Voroshilov of weakening and discrediting the Staff and that by not supporting its authority, he was working against it.¹⁴ Clearly Tukhachevskii could not reconcile himself to his now lowered authority. The greater task of preparing the Soviet Union for the inevitable war was too important. However, Tukhachevskii’s ambitions and demands were increasingly pushing against the fixed power relations within the army hierarchy, and he was directly challenging his superior. This was despite Voroshilov being one of Stalin’s closest allies.

The reason why Voroshilov did not give in to Tukhachevskii is revealed in an unsent letter in which he addressed the crux of Tukhachevskii’s complaints: ‘You insisted on concentrating this enormous power in the Staff of the Red Army. I was categorically against this, because I considered that this task must also be accomplished by the civilian authorities and be directed by a government organ.’¹⁵ The mention of ‘enormous power’ is instructive of how Tukhachevskii’s growing ambitions were perceived. Indeed, the tensions about Staff power reached a breaking point between April and May 1928. In April, a group of senior officers, Egorov, Budennyi and Dibenko (all of whom were closely allied with Voroshilov), sent a letter to the RVSR concerning the overlapping lines of authority between military departments, but importantly, the letter also criticised the Staff’s attempts, ‘to take into its hands a leading role in all questions of construction and operational leadership of the RKKA’.¹⁶ Tukhachevskii’s ambitions were becoming divisive. Those close to Voroshilov were closing ranks, unhappy with Tukhachevskii’s attempts to gain ‘enormous power’. Egorov, Dibenko and Budennyi called for Tukhachevskii to be transferred.¹⁷ Tukhachevskii, however, struck back with an even more radical proposal which envisaged a highly centralised Staff, taking over many of the duties of the army Administration and Inspectorate, and controlling not only mobilisation and rearmament, but taking a leading role in guiding industrial policy at large.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, these

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Reforma v krasnoi armii*, ed. by Anderson and others p. 173.

¹⁵ Quoted in Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin’s War Machine*, p. 59. Why the letter is unsent is unknown and not explained by Samuelson.

¹⁶ Quoted in Stone, ‘Tukhachevsky in Leningrad’, p. 1369.

¹⁷ Stone, ‘Tukhachevsky in Leningrad’, p. 1369. There were some tensions between Tukhachevskii and Egorov. The latter had criticised Tukhachevskii in 1929 for his conduct during the war with Poland in the book *L’vov – Varshava. 1920 g. vzaimodeistvie frontov*. For more on the tensions between Tukhachevskii and Egorov and Dibenko, see Kantor, *Voyna i mir Mikhaila Tukhachevskogo*, p. 44.

¹⁸ Stone, ‘Tukhachevsky in Leningrad’, pp. 1369-70.

new proposals were far too ambitious and his radical proposals were rejected. Following his defeat Tukhachevskii resigned from the Staff and took the position as the commander of the LVO. His vacated position at the Staff was taken by the more moderate Boris Shaposhnikov, someone who could be relied upon not to challenge the status quo.¹⁹ Therefore, in a sense, the rumours surrounding Tukhachevskii that he craved power did have a certain degree of substance. From the military elite it was Tukhachevskii who most actively challenged authority. The specific reasons why Tukhachevskii resigned are a matter of speculation, but there is no indication that he was pushed from the Staff. When Tukhachevskii's proposals for increasing Staff authority were rejected, rather than acquiesce, he may have seen resignation as the only option. Tukhachevskii would rather resign than obey a policy he did not agree with. Indeed, his replacement with Shaposhnikov is telling in this sense. Shaposhnikov was a knowledgeable military specialist and was one of the very few from the army elite to survive the Terror. This was a testament to his moderation, but also his reluctance to push boundaries. Despite his defeat and resignation, Tukhachevskii continued to research army organisation and training in Leningrad. But the move to the LVO should not been seen as much of a demotion. This was a strategically important district and a prestigious post. It was an industrial centre and a vital defensive outpost against attack from the north or the Baltic States. Tukhachevskii remained a key individual in the army leadership and his resignation from the Staff did not bring an end to the divides in the military elite or his ability to provoke his comrades.

Tukhachevskii was a military professional committed to an ideal of a superior mechanised Red Army that could compete with the armies of the capitalist countries, but mechanisation quickly became a further divisive issue between Tukhachevskii and other members of the military elite. Even though no one denied that the Red Army had to modernise and mechanise, there were a number of influential officers, most notably Budennyi, who remained nostalgic for tradition, particularly for the role of the cavalry in modern war. This soon became another source of tension. Budennyi was the

¹⁹ Stone has noted that on Shaposhnikov's promotion to the Staff many of the more radical changes that Tukhachevskii had proposed were actually put in place. As such, Shaposhnikov had managed to achieve what Tukhachevskii could not. Eighteen months after Tukhachevskii's resignation all power for army mobilisation was given to the Staff. This suggests that either Tukhachevskii's proposals were more palatable eighteen months later, or what is more likely, that Shaposhnikov did not have Tukhachevskii's level of ambition. He was not seen as craving power like Tukhachevskii. Thus Shaposhnikov was trusted with increased Staff power, whereas Tukhachevskii was not, see *ibid.*, pp. 1372-1375.

cavalry's chief advocate, Voroshilov's closest ally and Stalin's Civil War comrade.²⁰ However, during the 1920s Tukhachevskii was pushing his theory of deep operations which required a strong mechanised army. The theory left little room for the cavalry in its current form.²¹

A split within the military elite over the role of the cavalry is particularly visible during 1929-30. For example, during an RVS meeting in 1929 the key proponents of army modernisation, Tukhachevskii and Uborevich, argued for increasing the development of technical troops, but Budennyi believed that this would mean the sidelining of the cavalry. He made accusations that Tukhachevskii wanted to convert the cavalry into infantry.²² Budennyi then accused Iakir, another proponent of modernisation, of similar desires. He argued Iakir had been '...with the Germans, they indoctrinated him (*emu mozgi svernuli*), he wants to turf the cavalry out on foot'. Luckily for Budennyi, Voroshilov was on his side and registered his support by adding, 'I am against those who believe that the cavalry has had its day'.²³ The support of Voroshilov was obviously important. Like Budennyi, Voroshilov did not want to see the cavalry ignored.²⁴

Budennyi made a number of written complaints to Voroshilov about the cavalry question in late 1929 and early 1930 and his contempt for those supporting large-scale

²⁰ The Civil War cavalry army was disbanded after the conflict, despite opposition from Budennyi and Voroshilov. Only a few divisions were maintained, see Viktor Anfilov, 'Semen Mikhailovich Budennyi' in *Stalin's Generals*, ed. Harold Shukman (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993), pp. 57-66 (p. 60). The cavalry supporters' position was not very strong and they were put on the defensive in the late 1920s, coming under pressure at RVS meetings in 1927 and 1928. In the latter they were accused of not utilising modern communication technology and were criticised for a poor performance in the Belorussian manoeuvres, see Reese, *Red Commanders*, p. 89; Ken, pp. 29-30.

²¹ Deep Operations envisaged a strong strike behind enemy lines which would destroy the enemy's rear. Tanks were vital in such an operation. As early as 1922 Tukhachevskii had given a lecture on the decline of the cavalry and the rise of mechanised units, see Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London; Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997), p. 177.

²² In the late 1920s and early 1930s Uborevich should be regarded as close to Tukhachevskii in terms of ideas, especially over army mechanisation. However, their views began to diverge to a greater extent in the mid-1930s. Because Uborevich held similar ideas about army modernisation to Tukhachevskii he has often been regarded as part of the 'Tukhachevskii group'. However, a number of historians have argued that Uborevich was also close to Stalin and should be considered part of his clique. Uborevich did rise quickly through the army hierarchy which suggests he had Stalin's trust. In 1929 Uborevich occupied the responsible position of Director of Armaments. Thus 'power groups' within the Red Army are difficult to distinguish. Uborevich may well have been close to Tukhachevskii in terms of ideas about army reform, but Stalin also may have considered him a loyal party man. See, Reese, *Red Commanders*, p. 81. For the argument that Uborevich was close to Stalin, see Minakov, *Sovetskaia voennaia elita 20-kh godov*, p. 245; Ken, p. 89 (footnote).

²³ Quoted in Kantor, *Voina i mir Mikhaila Tukhachevskogo*, p. 303.

²⁴ Samuelson has noted that despite Voroshilov commonly being depicted as a staunch advocate of the cavalry, his views were more subtle. Even though he did not want the cavalry sidelined, Voroshilov did see the benefits in the expansion of tank forces. Voroshilov was not completely aligned with Budennyi, see Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine*, p. 145.

mechanisation, particularly Tukhachevskii and Vladimir Triandafillov, is clear.²⁵ In November 1929 Budennyi wrote to Voroshilov describing a report on the cavalry given by Triandafillov. This report had criticised the cavalry's performance during the Belorussian manoeuvres and noted its lack of technological application.²⁶ In his letter Budennyi accused Triandafillov of defaming both Voroshilov and the RVS and interpreted the report as a concerted attack on the cavalry, writing, 'These scoundrels are leading a systematic campaign for the liquidation of the cavalry'. Indeed, Budennyi added that he believed the question of the cavalry had acquired a 'political character'.²⁷ For Budennyi this was also a question of power relations in the army leadership. Indeed, Budennyi had been part of the group who had criticised Tukhachevskii's ambitions for the army Staff in 1928 and was attentive to shifts in power inside the military elite. In March 1930 Budennyi made another accusation against Tukhachevskii and Triandafillov, this time arguing that they were trying to 'indoctrinate' their ideas into the army under the guise of 'progressivism'. Budennyi again accused Tukhachevskii and Triandafillov of discrediting the cavalry and its command.²⁸ Budennyi continued:

Demagogic methods are used in all of these speeches - to attribute to the cavalry staff what they in fact never defended, namely, that the cavalymen, supposedly, in ever way possible deny technology, that the cavalymen recognise the exclusive mode of action in all cases only as attack on horse.²⁹

Budennyi felt that his arguments were being misrepresented, that Tukhachevskii and Triandafillov were being highly dishonest and the subtext to this debate was political power-politics. Budennyi perhaps believed Tukhachevskii wanted to strengthen his control over army modernisation, maybe in an attempt to seize more power within the army leadership itself.

Therefore, alongside the grouping of Egorov, Budennyi and Dibenko, who had positioned themselves against Tukhachevskii's grandstanding over Staff authority, an alliance of Iakir, Uborevich, Triandafillov and Tukhachevskii, linked by a shared

²⁵ Vladimir Triandafillov was the Chief of the Operations Directorate in 1923-31 before his death in a plane crash. He was a close associate of Tukhachevskii and shared many of his ideas over the concept of Deep Operations and the increased mechanisation of the Red Army. Triandafillov wrote a key text on the theoretical concepts of Deep Operations.

²⁶ Triandafillov had alluded to Voroshilov's support for Budennyi, describing the former as 'a wing-mate to the cavalry', see RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 174, l. 43.

²⁷ Ibid., l. 42.

²⁸ Ibid., l. 44.

²⁹ Ibid., l. 46.

commitment to army mechanisation, clashed with Budennyi.³⁰ The latter argued that Tukhachevskii and Uborevich expressed full solidarity with Triandafillov and indeed, there is little doubt that Budennyi felt under siege.³¹ Of course, debates over modernisation are common to all militaries and these can often be heated. However, in this case, the dispute was seen to have the subtext of a power struggle. In this sense, there are parallels to the earlier conflict about Staff power. From the criticisms levelled at Tukhachevskii over his ambitions for the army Staff (specifically the accusations that he was trying to gain ‘enormous power’) to what Budennyi regarded as the politicisation of the cavalry question, Tukhachevskii’s critics implied an ulterior motive. The ambitious Tukhachevskii and his allies wanted to strengthen their position in the army leadership and take control over army reform. Perhaps there were even suspicions at this time that Tukhachevskii wanted to seize control of the army. Importantly, Stalin would not be ignorant of these struggles within the military elite and he no doubt watched the debates unfold attentively. However, the biggest controversy was still to come and Tukhachevskii created further waves shortly after the dispute about the cavalry. This time, however, he would finally raise Stalin’s ire. The wider context of the cavalry debate was issues of military spending and the speed of rearmament. Tukhachevskii was already the most vocal member of the military elite in advocating increasing the Red Army’s technological development and achieving parity with the West.³² However, in the late 1920s he began to argue for much higher levels of military spending than he had done previously, and this proved very controversial.

For the Bolsheviks the international situation worsened during 1926-27. In 1926 Pilsudski came to power in Poland through a military coup, reviving the danger from the Soviet Union’s old enemy. Indeed, the political police wrote to Stalin about ‘evidence’ they believed showed that Poland was planning an operation to seize both Belorussia and Ukraine.³³ Later in 1927 Chinese communists were massacred by the Guomindang following a Chinese raid on the Soviet embassy in April. 1927 was the year of the so-called ‘war scare’, when a wave of mass panic about the outbreak of war gripped the Soviet Union following the breakdown of relations with Britain. This breakdown in relations was caused by a raid on the Soviet trade offices in London that

³⁰ Stoecker notes that Egorov and Dibenko were also members of the group defending the cavalry, see Stoecker, p. 155.

³¹ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 174, l. 47.

³² Stoecker, p. 18.

³³ Harris, ‘Encircled by Enemies’, pp. 519-520.

supposedly revealed compromising documents detailing Soviet intelligence activity. The Soviet government interpreted this raid as evidence of a more assertive British stance against the Soviet Union.³⁴ In the same year the Soviet ambassador in Poland was assassinated by a White monarchist, which increased tensions further. Yet within this threatening international climate, the Red Army remained underfunded and technologically backward.³⁵ Despite the assessment from the Defence Sector of the State Planning Committee (Gosplan) in early 1927 that the army was not ready for war, defence spending was still not substantially increased.³⁶ This was primarily because, even though the war scare was real, the Soviet economy remained too financially restricted.³⁷ Budgets were tight and the defence spending was no exception. While there was a need to rearm and industrialise, there was no appetite within the party for substantial increases in defence spending. In addition, the international situation was certainly seen as threatening, but the probability of war breaking out in the immediate future was appraised as low.³⁸ As such, despite Tukhachevskii and Voroshilov's pleas for more money for the army in the face of what they saw as a hostile international environment, military spending was not expanded. There were no substantial increases in defence spending on the scale that the Red Army were lobbying for.

As noted above, in light of the weak economy, early hopes were placed on collaboration with Germany in giving assistance to the build-up of the Soviet military industry. But the situation changed with the introduction of the first five-year plan (1928-1932). The move to rapid industrialisation saw rising targets and huge investments in heavy industry. The plan pushed the Soviet Union towards rapid economic growth and saw an increase in defence spending, even though still at a

³⁴ Harris, 'Encircled by Enemies', p. 521.

³⁵ Stone, *Hammer and Rifle: The Militarization of the Soviet Union, 1926-1933* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), p. 1, 20. Stone notes that in 1924 Gosplan's military sector remarked that the Red Army was so underfunded it would be unable to field a credible force.

³⁶ Andrei Sokolov, 'Before Stalinism: The Early 1920s' in *Guns and Rubles: The Defence Industry in the Stalinist State*, ed. by Mark Harrison (Yale University: Sheridan Books, 2008), pp. 31-49 (p. 44); R. W. Davies, 'Planning for Mobilisation: the 1930s' in *Guns and Rubles*, pp. 118-155 (p. 119).

³⁷ Before the onset of industrialisation Soviet industry was unable to provide sufficient means for defence. Though there were some increases in the military budget, increasing by 107 million rubles in 1927-28 from the year before, see Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine*, pp. 40-41.

³⁸ See Harris, 'Encircled by Enemies' p. 521. Harris notes that Soviet military intelligence not only exaggerated the threat from an imagined coalition of foreign powers, but that the Soviet regime felt confident that no move would be against the Soviet Union in the near future. Stalin believed that Poland would not attack due to its fear of the domestic political consequences. For the head of Soviet Military Intelligence Ian Berzin's report on the low probability of war in 1927, see Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine*, p. 36.

relatively low level.³⁹ However, Tukhachevskii began to push too far. From his position in Leningrad he sent proposals to the centre for dramatically increased military spending.⁴⁰ Tukhachevskii's approach placed more importance on the *potential* amount of resources which would be released by industrialisation and collectivisation, and it was on these assumptions that he based his armament proposals. These were very hypothetical. Tukhachevskii believed that rapid industrialisation had provided the opportunity for a rapid expansion of the Red Army and he was going to take it.⁴¹ But what Tukhachevskii proposed far exceeded the capacity of the Soviet economy. Perhaps he sincerely believed that the economy could deliver what he was suggesting, or he was simply caught-up in the frenzy of rising targets which characterised the five-year plan and did not want the army to be left behind. However, a substantial increase in defence spending would not materialise until 1931.⁴²

In 1930 Tukhachevskii drew up a far-reaching and ambitious rearmament plan with proposals unrealistic for the current industrial level and spending restrictions of the Soviet Union. He projected massive increases in tanks, cavalry and rifle divisions, communication lines and improvements to chemical industry.⁴³ His memorandum of January 1930 predicted that industry could produce over 100,000 tanks and aircraft for the first year of war and deploy at the very least 240 infantry divisions.⁴⁴ Tukhachevskii sent these projections to Voroshilov, Shaposhnikov and Uborevich and they were rejected immediately. From Shaposhnikov's calculations, in order to fulfil Tukhachevskii's plan those aged just fourteen would need to be called up for military service and the budget required exceeded the combined state budgets for the previous three years.⁴⁵ This was the picture that was presented to Stalin, along with the following note from Voroshilov, who took the opportunity to undermine the ambitious Tukhachevskii: 'Tukhachevskii wants to be original and... "radical". It is bad that in the R[ed] A[rmy] there are these sort of people, who take this "radicalism" at face value'.⁴⁶ Stalin too rejected the Tukhachevskii plan. He replied to Voroshilov on 23 March,

³⁹ Mark Harrison and R. W. Davies, 'The Soviet Military-Economic Effort During the Second Five-Year Plan (1933-1937)', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 49. 3 (May, 1997), 369-406 (p. 369).

⁴⁰ Stone, *Hammer and Rifle*, p. 161.

⁴¹ Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine*, pp. 92-94.

⁴² R. W. Davies, 'Planning for Mobilization: The 1930s' in *Guns and Rubles*, ed. by Mark Harrison, p. 120.

⁴³ Stoecker, p. 43.

⁴⁴ Stone, *Hammer and rifle*, p. 163; Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine*, p. 97.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴⁶ RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 447, l. 9.

writing that he respected Tukhachevskii and considered him an ‘unusually capable comrade’, but Stalin described his proposals as ‘fantastic’, lacking realism and that they would squander and waste equipment. Stalin went so far as to say that to put Tukhachevskii’s plan into operation would be ‘worse than any counterrevolution’.⁴⁷ As Samuelson had shown, in another unsent letter intended for Tukhachevskii, Voroshilov criticised what he regarded as Tukhachevskii’s negligence of his duties in Leningrad in order to draw up his unrealistic armament proposals. He described Tukhachevskii’s views as ‘incorrect’ and ‘politically harmful’.⁴⁸ It is not known why the letter remained unsent, but Voroshilov’s negative opinions of Tukhachevskii are clear.

Tukhachevskii had suffered another defeat and this time not only angered Voroshilov, but more seriously, he had annoyed Stalin.⁴⁹ Events, however, changed rapidly. Tukhachevskii appealed to Stalin throughout 1930 about the rejection of his proposals, complaining that his figures had been distorted by Shaposhnikov. Despite not immediately winning Stalin over, in June 1931 Tukhachevskii made a dramatic return from Leningrad and was promoted as the Red Army’s Director of Armaments. He replaced Uborevich, who was transferred to command the Belorussian Military District (BVO). It appears that Uborevich had also been having difficulty as Director of Armaments.⁵⁰ However, that Tukhachevskii could be brought back into the heart of the army establishment within such a short time may seem remarkable, considering Stalin’s very negative appraisal of the 1930 armament proposals, but this was indicative of the growing international pressures facing the Soviet Union, in particular the threat from Japan.

When Japan invaded Manchuria in September 1931, this provided the impetus to drastically increase military spending. The Soviet Union faced a hostile enemy, now closer to the border. Tukhachevskii’s armament proposals were reconsidered and Stalin brought him back from Leningrad. Military spending was now increased. Just two months after Tukhachevskii’s return, the Council of Labour and Defence (STO)

⁴⁷ *Sovetskoe rukovodstvo perepiska 1928-1941*, ed. by A.V. Kvashonkin (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1999), p. 113.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin’s War Machine*, p. 110.

⁴⁹ In fact, following the rejection of his armament memorandum Tukhachevskii had been banned from even raising the subject again, see Stone *Hammer and Rifle*, p. 164.

⁵⁰ Uborevich had been promoted to Director of Armaments in November 1929. However, it appears that he was not up to the job. In a letter to Ordzhonikidze in 1936 Uborevich wrote that as Director of Armaments he had been under tremendous pressure and that he made many mistakes. That Uborevich underperformed as Director of Armaments no doubt also contributed to his replacement by Tukhachevskii, see Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov*, p. 100.

approved an expansion in tank production known as the ‘big tank programme’.⁵¹ However, it is necessary to point out that the Politburo had been making moves in this direction before the invasion. In summer 1929 priority had already been given to defence with Politburo approval given for the reorganisation of war industries, mobilisation capability and production methods.⁵² Furthermore, in June 1930 Stalin had promised Tukhachevskii that he would look again into his armament proposals in response to his protests about the miscalculations from the Shaposhnikov and the Staff.⁵³ But despite these other factors, it was the heightened international tension following the invasion of Manchuria that finally pushed party opinion towards rapid and large-scale rearmament.⁵⁴ Tukhachevskii was fully rehabilitated in May 1932 when Stalin sent a rare letter of apology for what he admitted was his misunderstanding of Tukhachevskii’s armament proposals in 1930.⁵⁵ Tukhachevskii had thus been the beneficiary of a threatening international crisis and without the Japanese invasion of Manchuria it is doubtful that he would have been brought back from Leningrad.

These conflicts and disputes within the army elite are important in many respects. Firstly, the army leadership were divided over most questions aside from the need for a larger share of the state budget. The Red Army was still very much a fledgling force and attempts at reform had only just begun. These would have been difficult enough without the complication of an awkward mixture of professional and party officers within the army elite and the personal ambitions of certain individuals. Clashes and conflicts were almost inevitable. But questions of army reorganisation almost took the form of power politics as individuals tried to assert their vision for a new Red Army. Tukhachevskii in particular was criticised for what were seen as personal ambitions to increase his power and politicise military issues. The need to reform and reorganise the army to overcome its military weaknesses had consequently revealed further weaknesses in the unity of the high command. However, most surprisingly of all, after all the controversy he had caused, Tukhachevskii’s vision was victorious. This was very unlikely to have pleased some of his colleagues, particularly Voroshilov and Budennyi, and would only fuel further resentment against Tukhachevskii. But now, Tukhachevskii had been given Stalin’s endorsement as someone

⁵¹ R. W. Davies, *Crisis and Progress in the Soviet Economy, 1931-1933* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 113.

⁵² Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin’s War Machine*, pp. 86-89.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁵⁴ Stone, *Hammer and Rifle*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ *Sovetskoe rukovodstvo perepiska 1928-1941*, ed. by Kvashonkin, pp. 171-172.

‘unusually capable’ who would take control of building Red Army power. Yet the need to industrialise and build economic and military power caused even greater problems to wider army stability than the quarrels in the elite. The regime’s policies in the countryside which accompanied the industrialisation drive created a widespread crisis in the rank-and-file.

Collectivisation and the ‘Peasant Mood’

During 1926-27 party opinion had begun to shift towards abandoning the NEP and introducing rapid industrialisation. This shift was driven by a number of factors, including the recovery of industry to pre-First World War levels, the war scare of 1927 and the necessity of building military power in the face of the perceived threat from the capitalist world.⁵⁶ In addition, an agricultural crisis in 1927 finally broke the compromise the regime had held with the countryside during the NEP years.⁵⁷ The grain crisis affected internal supply and exports, which was treated very seriously in the face of the 1927 war scare.⁵⁸ Hoarding of grain was rife, urged on by the war scare and a scarcity in manufactured goods. The peasants began to feed what little grain they had to their livestock, hoping for higher price returns. Consequently, grain supplies to urban areas were adversely affected. The solution to this growing crisis was found in a return to forced grain requisitions, a method not seen since War Communism of the Civil War years.⁵⁹ Party opinion increasingly turned towards squeezing the peasantry in order to fuel the rapid industrialisation of heavy industry. Stalin believed peasants were withholding their grain and waiting for better market prices, engaging in speculative practices which were causing the state to lose out. A crack down against speculation began. 1928 saw increasing repression against the peasantry and the use of ‘extraordinary measures’ of grain requisition.⁶⁰ This shift towards forced grain collection was the beginning of a growing repression in the countryside which would give way to the wholesale collectivisation of agriculture and the attempt to ‘eliminate

⁵⁶ For a brief summary see Stone, *Hammer and Rifle*, pp. 109-111.

⁵⁷ The shortfall in grain in 1927 was several million tons compared to the harvest of 1926, see *The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside: Vol. 1. The War Against the Peasantry, 1927-1930*, ed. by Lynne Viola and others (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 17.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ For a concise introduction to the state’s heavy reliance on grain see *ibid.*, pp. 9-22.

⁶⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 57.

the kulak as a class', so-called 'dekulakisation'. Yet, the introduction of forced grain requisitions was not without resistance.

Opposition to the increasingly repressive measures in the countryside came from the upper echelons of the Bolshevik Party. The party theorist, Nikolai Bukharin, the head of the Soviet Government, Alexei Rykov, and the head of the Trade Union Organisation, Mikhail Tomskii, formed a loose grouping that Stalin labelled the 'Right Deviation'. The group opposed the use of repressive measures in the countryside and forced grain requisitions.⁶¹ By the late 1920s Stalin had substantial support within the Politburo and easily overcame this challenge. The Right Deviation was accused of factionalism and all three were removed from their positions. Opposition to collectivisation, however, did not come solely from the political elite. Resistance from the peasantry itself has been well-documented, but very large numbers of soldiers in the rank-and-file also showed high levels of discontent.⁶² This army resistance has been less well examined in the literature, though there have been some exceptions.⁶³ According to Soviet statistics, at the height of the collectivisation drive in 1930 peasants constituted 57.9% of the army.⁶⁴ As the Red Army contained so many peasants in the lower ranks some kind of negative reaction to collectivisation was unavoidable.

The use of forced grain requisitions and 'extraordinary measures' in the countryside placed the Red Army under great strain. Many peasant soldiers maintained ties to the countryside and were soon aware of the repressive measures and forced grain requisitions. Army reliability quickly began to waver. The crux of the problem for the military was its territorial structure. In an effort to cut costs a process to transform the army into a territorial force had been initiated in 1923. This reform was completed under Frunze and left the Red Army comprising of both a standing cadre army and territorial-militia divisions.⁶⁵ This increased the number of peasants within the ranks as

⁶¹ The Right Deviation wanted a continuation of the NEP settlement with the peasantry and argued that this model could produce growth.

⁶² The resistance of the peasantry to collectivisation has been the subject of numerous monographs, see for example, Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants. Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁶³ See Reese, 'Red Army Opposition to Forced Collectivization, 1929-1930: The Army Wavers', *Slavic Review*, 55. 1 (Spring, 1996), 24-45; Nonna Tarkhova, *Krasnaia armiia i stalinskaia kollektivizatsiia, 1928-1933 gg.* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010).

⁶⁴ *Reforma v krasnoi Armii*, ed. by Anderson and others, II, p. 49; RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 23, l. 99. See Tarkhova, p. 86, for corroborating figures for 1926.

⁶⁵ See Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, pp. 179-181.

a whole. By 1926 the territorial divisions had grown to be 65.8% of the Red Army.⁶⁶ There had been dissenting voices against this reorganisation. The political police were not happy with the new system and saw a danger in letting the peasants have more influence in army life and potentially affect its reliability.⁶⁷ In this sense, the political police were eventually proved right. Furthermore, the upheaval inside the rank-and-file during the collectivisation drive was nothing new. It was only the scale of the problem which was unforeseen. The political police had dealt with similar problems in the ranks before. As early as 1923 the deputy head of the OGPU, Iagoda, had been informed about the hostile reaction within the ranks towards agricultural taxes. In a series of letters from a subordinate in the Far East, Iagoda was briefed about the appearance of a sharp ‘demobilisation mood’ within the ranks and that some soldiers had formed groups which were agitating against taxes. This activity was deemed ‘counterrevolutionary’.⁶⁸ Peasant dissatisfaction had manifested in the army and the political reliability of the troops was seen as weakened.⁶⁹ Presaging the forms of peasant agitation seen under collectivisation, the political police also recorded the circulation of anti-soviet letters.⁷⁰ These letters formed the crucial link between the rank-and-file and the villages and would do so in the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁷¹ In 1923, despite receiving thousands of complaints from soldiers about the tax campaign, the problem was not yet widespread. The so-called ‘peasant mood’ (*krest’ianskoe nastroenie*) had not gripped the ranks as it later would during forced grain requisitions and throughout the collectivisation drive.⁷² Before 1928, dissatisfaction in the ranks towards agricultural policy was nothing that PUR could not easily handle.⁷³

As such, it was already understood that there would be negative consequences for the army if forced grain requisitions were used in the countryside. But whether there was opposition from the army leadership to collectivisation is difficult to establish. Those who were pushing for rapid rearmament, such as Tukhachevskii, appear to have

⁶⁶ Zdanovich, p. 447.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 446. For Iagoda’s concerns that the territorial divisions were more prone to peasant agitation and ‘counterrevolution’ than the cadre divisions, see Tarkhova, p. 116.

⁶⁸ RGVA, f. 33988, op. 2, d. 528, l. 52.

⁶⁹ Ibid., l. 68, and see also RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 27, l. 62, for more on the Red Army reaction to the tax campaign.

⁷⁰ RGVA, f. 33988, op. 2, d. 528, l. 111.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 27, l. 62. The ‘peasant mood’ was not just a reflection of dissatisfaction with grain requisitions, but also a dissatisfaction with the livelihood of the villages, bread prices, the supply of industrial goods to the villages, agricultural taxes and market relations, see Tarkhova, p. 258.

⁷³ Tarkhova notes that before 1928 religious belief in the Red Army was seen as a bigger problem than dissatisfaction with the regime’s approach to the countryside and the peasants, see *ibid.*, p. 94.

had no concerns about the negative consequences of collectivisation in the rank-and-file. Tukhachevskii's calculations for his ambitious armament projections were based upon the potential resources released by both collectivisation and industrialisation. He saw the collectivisation of agriculture as a necessary step in creating a powerful military.⁷⁴ There are some indications that Voroshilov was against launching collectivisation. For example, documents from the British Foreign Office suggest that Voroshilov warned Stalin that he could not be responsible for the army if he continued to push collectivisation.⁷⁵ But these sources are too removed from the decision-making processes within the Politburo to allow any firm judgement. There is, however, concrete evidence that Voroshilov supported Bukharin in 1929, when the latter petitioned not to be transferred to the Commissariat of Education because of his opposition against Stalin (as Oleg Khlevniuk notes, this would have meant political exile). Bukharin instead wanted to become the head of the scientific technical administration.⁷⁶ Voroshilov went against Stalin on this issue. But it is difficult to say whether Voroshilov's support for Bukharin in this instance would have translated into support for his stance against collectivisation. Indeed, Stone argues convincingly that there was considerable animosity between Rykov and Voroshilov over the former's continual attempts to block the army's drive for increased military spending. This would make any wider alliance between Voroshilov and the Right Deviation unlikely.⁷⁷

As soon as forced grain requisitions were used in the countryside problems with army morale were recorded. Autumn 1927 saw increasing levels of dissatisfaction within the rank-and-file towards grain requisitions.⁷⁸ This trend continued into 1928 and it was at this point that the 'peasant mood' became a serious subject of study.⁷⁹ In early 1928 PUR compiled a series of reports on the 'peasant mood' which went some way to reaching an understanding of how the Red Army was being influenced by peasant agitation. The reports noted that, unsurprisingly, dissatisfaction with forced grain requisitions was largely confined to the lower ranks. Reactions were more diverse

⁷⁴ In a book published in 1931 Tukhachevskii gave his full backing to collectivisation, see Tukhachevskii, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, ed. Oskin and Chernushkov, II, p. 167.

⁷⁵ R. W. Davies, *The Socialist Offensive: The Collectivisation of Soviet Agriculture, 1929-1930* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 260.

⁷⁶ Khlevniuk, *Politbiuro: mekhanizmy politicheskoi vlasti v 1930-e gody* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001), p. 23.

⁷⁷ Stone, *Hammer and Rifle*, p. 11.

⁷⁸ Tarkhova, p. 104. The military procuracy also recorded this growing discontent, see RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 70, l. 5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 95. For separate comments on the growth of the peasant mood in the LVO, MVO, UVO and PriVO in early 1928 see RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 258, ll. 46-53.

within the command and depended on how closely officers were linked to the villages.⁸⁰ In addition, soldiers were not just displaying solidarity with the peasantry, but some were apparently engaged in direct action and agitation, something which was largely blamed on the influence of the ‘kulaks’. For example, an RVS order from 1928 noted that the growing rank-and-file hostility was a reflection of the class struggle and kulak attempts to agitate within the barracks.⁸¹ Thus, the growing discontent in the rank-and-file was perceived through the lens of the army’s vulnerability to subversion. The Party regarded this growing hostility in the rank-and-file very seriously. On 10 July 1928 the Central Committee ordered that additional efforts were needed to combat the discontent in the ranks and criticised PUR’s inability in combating the negative influence ‘class aliens’ were having on groups of soldiers.⁸² In terms of the scale of this rank-and-file hostility to forced grain requisitions, the 1928 PUR reports did not note this statistically but described this as a ‘large wave’ which could get stronger as more information fed into the barracks.⁸³ Indeed, PUR noted that even after a lull in the level of hostility in February 1928, questions about grain requisitions remained the centre of attention for many soldiers.⁸⁴

PUR reports noted that by using letters and envoys from the villages peasants were asking their relatives in the army to assist in direct action against grain collections.⁸⁵ PUR collated excerpts from these letters, and it is possible to see the picture of hardship in the countryside presented to the rank-and-file soldiers. For example, in the first two months of 1928 a Caucasus Infantry Battalion received letters on the following lines: ‘In the village and at the shop they’re not giving out goods for money, they’re only giving them out for wheat.’ Another letter described: ‘One village [*stanitsa*] was saddled with a mandatory assignment of 100,000 poods of grain, and we can’t sell the surplus without permission from the village soviet.’⁸⁶ A 1928 PUR report highlighted a letter from the Kuban Oblast’ sent to a soldier which is typical of an incitement to violence. The author of the letter complained that in the countryside the peasants were being ‘fleeced’, and called for action from the military: ‘you are silent in the army. Put pressure on your commanders, bring about a revolt (*bunt*), we have to go

⁸⁰ RGVA, f. 9, op. 26, d. 446, l. 131.

⁸¹ RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 49, l. 116.

⁸² *Ibid.*, ll. 137-138.

⁸³ Tarkhova, pp. 327, 357.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

⁸⁵ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 258, l. 47.

⁸⁶ Quoted in a PUR report in *The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside*, ed. by Viola and others, p. 89.

to war'.⁸⁷ The appeal for soldiers to revolt was common in the intercepted letters and sometimes could be successful in turning army opinion against the regime.⁸⁸ Indeed, a letter from a political worker sent to Rykov described that such letters had fomented in the ranks, 'extraordinarily abnormal and dangerous moods'.⁸⁹ In the PriVO the following comments were reported from a member of a machine gun regiment:

When the campaign for the collection of taxes was done, we supported Soviet power, but now Soviet power has neglected us – it does not give us bread. We must liberate the poor from collection and must force the kulaks to serve.

Furthermore, some remarks were regarded as 'counterrevolutionary'. For example, from the same group of soldiers in the PriVO and in response to whether they were devoted to the government, there was an outcry of 'we all don't love Soviet power!'⁹⁰

Both Voroshilov and the political police called for increased observation of the hostility within the rank-and-file, but more dramatic measures were taken. In July 1928 an army purge was initiated. The targets of the purge were those regarded as 'socially alien' (*sotsial'no chuzhdye*), which included, for example, the sons of priests and judicial bureaucrats. The other targets of the purge were classified as 'class harmful elements' (*klassovye vrazhdebnye elementy*), which included the sons of kulaks, those deprived of voting rights and rich peasants. By January 1929, 4029 discharges had already been made.⁹¹ Importantly, prior to the purge in July 1928 discharges of 'socially harmful' or 'social alien elements' from the army were done on a case-by-case basis, and it was this purge that brought these on a mass scale.⁹²

The resort to mass discharges demonstrates how concerning the problem of the 'peasant mood' was for Stalin and the army leadership.⁹³ But as with the alleged

⁸⁷ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 258, l. 46. Tarkhova also notes that from the reports on the peasant mood in 1928 the volume of letters from the countryside to the army was described as a 'stream of letters', and that a single garrison in the SKVO received 6000 letters in one day, p. 98.

⁸⁸ See for example, RGVA f. 33987, op. 3, d. 258, l. 49; Tarkhova, pp. 97- 99.

⁸⁹ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 258, l. 7.

⁹⁰ Ibid., l. 53. For letters from the MVO from 1932 see RGASPI, f. 82, op. 2, d. 799, ll. 88-90.

⁹¹ Tarkhova, p. 208. Suvenirov gives figures for discharges from the army from 1 November 1929 to 31 October 1930, detailing that 4473 individuals were discharged from the cadre units and 5600 from the territorial units, see Suvenirov, 'Narkomat oborony i NKVD v predvoennye gody', *voprosy istorii*, 6 (1991), 26-35 (p. 26). Tarkhova notes that there were a number of what were characterised as 'excesses' during the *chistka*, for example, discharges not on the basis of being a 'socially harmful' or 'alien element' but simply for not wanting to join a collective farm, see Tarkhova, pp. 209-219.

⁹² Ibid., p. 206.

⁹³ Hagenloh has argued that policing in the late 1920s increasingly concentrated on the repression of population cohorts. This style of policing had origins previous to the collectivisation drive, but it was at this point that it became more established. As such, the use of mass discharges and arrests in the army is

Trotskyist coup of 1927 there was also a divergence between PUR and the political police about the scale of the threat in the lower ranks. Institutional interest continued to influence differing depictions of the seriousness of the threat to the Red Army. The political police were more concerned about the ‘peasant mood’ than PUR. In 1929 they focused on this as the main cause of trouble in the army. They also linked the ‘peasant mood’ to what they saw as increasing activity of ‘anti-soviet elements’.⁹⁴ Thus, for the political police the ‘peasant mood’ in the ranks was a manifestation of how the Red Army remained vulnerable to subversion and infiltration. Perhaps the political police were still trying to make a point about how they remained indispensable to the security of the army and how PUR were unable to adequately secure the army against ‘enemies’ infiltrating into the ranks. In contrast to the political police, PUR had been much more sanguine about the ‘peasant mood’, particularly towards the end of 1929. By this point they argued that it had been largely overcome and regarded the army as stable again. For example in PUR materials prepared for the May 1929 Fifth Congress of Soviets, it was noted: ‘It is possible with full foundation to characterise the general political condition of the Red Army as fully stable, healthy’.⁹⁵ Of course, PUR would continue to downplay anything that influenced army political reliability and particularly where they were directly responsible. In this case, PUR were criticised for not instilling a sufficient political education in the ranks. As such, it is not surprising that they would seize any lull in the intensity of the ‘peasant mood’, which did drop in mid-1929, to declare the army stable.

The lull in the ‘peasant mood’ in 1929 did not last. As ‘extraordinary measures’ gave way to wholesale collectivisation and dekulakisation in late 1929 another wave of the ‘peasant mood’ was recorded.⁹⁶ Dekulakisation increased the scale of repression, aiming to ‘eliminate the kulaks as a class’. Correspondingly, the ‘peasant mood’ in the army now became known as the ‘kulak mood’. Mass arrests and deportations followed of those regarded as class enemies. In this respect, this was another indication of how the broad discontent in the ranks was framed as caused by subversives rather than an

still very indicative of how concerning the ‘peasant mood’ in the army ranks was for the regime and political police, but the resulting *chistka* of ‘socially harmful’ and ‘class alien elements’ was not a completely spontaneous or new approach for dealing with unrest in the army specifically. It should also be seen in terms of the evolving nature of policing in broader terms and how this began to target population cohorts, see Hagenloh, pp. 48-146.

⁹⁴ Tarkhova, p. 114. PUR also saw the kulak influence behind some of discontent in the rank-and-file, but they certainly had a higher opinion of the army to withstand this, see Tarkhova, p. 111.

⁹⁵ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 293, l. 23. For the optimistic appraisals of PUR, see also Tarkhova, p. 104.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

expression of the legitimate concerns of peasant soldiers. Indeed, by mid-1930, PUR was recording an increased growth in ‘kulak agitation’ within the Red Army and the political police reported an increase of ‘counterrevolutionary’ groups within the ranks.⁹⁷ The discontent associated with collectivisation and dekulakisation at this point was extensive. Reese has argued that during the winter of 1929-30 the whole Red Army can be considered as unreliable because of the very high levels of turmoil.⁹⁸ Thus, the purge of the army had to be continued, but at an increased pace. In the first six months of 1930 alone, 5703 soldiers were discharged.⁹⁹ In response to this turmoil greater ‘class vigilance’ and the increased repression of class enemies were called for in an army resolution of 8 January 1930.¹⁰⁰ Later in a directive from 31 January 1930 the new head of PUR, Ian Gamarnik, spelled out the danger facing the army:

The kulak will send provocative letters to the barracks. The attempts by the kulak “to knock at” (*stuchat’sia*) the barracks, to influence it, undoubtedly will increase in the near future. This should force the political organs, party organisations and members of the *komsomol*’ to strengthen class vigilance, to improve political work, mass work, [to] mobilise all the red army masses around the slogans of the party – to liquidate the kulak as a class... More than it has even been the political organs are required to watch the mood of the red army men, to study them and react to them in good time.¹⁰¹

As head of PUR, Gamarnik was surely coming under pressure. His organisation had been criticised by the Central Committee for what was seen as its inability to secure the reliability of the soldiers in the face of kulak agitation, and the discontent in the ranks was getting worse. However, Gamarnik’s solutions were hardly radical. He merely called for greater observation and more ‘vigilance’. It is unlikely this would have a radical impact on restoring army stability. However, Gamarnik would want to be seen as doing something, especially as the political police continued to push an image of an army infiltrated by numerous ‘enemies’. Indeed, a political police report from October 1930 detailed that there had apparently been a ‘greater intensification’ of the formation

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 124-126. Suvenirov highlighted an OGPU order from February 1930 for the arrest of any kulaks trying to establish links with the Red Army, see Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKK*, p. 61.

⁹⁸ Reese, ‘Red Army Opposition to Forced Collectivization, 1929-1930’, p. 42.

⁹⁹ Tarkhova, p. 127.

¹⁰⁰ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 29, l. 18.

¹⁰¹ *Partiino-politicheskaia rabota v krasnoi armii: dokumenty, iul 1929 g.- mai 1941 g.*, ed. by T.F. Kariaeva and others (Moscow: Voennoe izdatel’stvo, 1985), p. 46. Gamarnik was made the head of PUR in 1929. Voroshilov had nominated both Gamarnik and Iakir for the position and Stalin chose Gamarnik. Reese argues this was due to Iakir being closer to Tukhachevskii and that Gamarnik was a party man, see *Red Commanders*, p. 111. Reese’s judgement may well be true, but Stalin certainly displayed a level of trust towards Iakir. In a telegram to Voroshilov, Stalin noted that both Iakir and Gamarnik were good candidates, see Minakov, *1937. zagovor byl!*, p. 103.

of counterrevolutionary groups in the ranks with links to other alleged counterrevolutionary organisations outside of the military. The political police also noted that the participation of junior, middle and even senior officers in what this ‘counterrevolutionary’ activity had also ‘significantly grown’.¹⁰² Gamarnik would be conscious of this occurring under his watch, but it does not seem he had any credible solutions.

It was not until the end of 1932 that the situation in the army improved and, according to PUR, was stable again.¹⁰³ This was partly the result of a change in policy in reaction to the discontent in the ranks. For example, during the dekulakisation campaign the families of Red Army soldiers were exempted.¹⁰⁴ All the letters being sent to the Red Army from the countryside were also checked. In late 1929-30, a propaganda campaign had been initiated involving soldiers themselves writing to the villages promoting the benefits of collectivisation.¹⁰⁵ But by far, the crude method of mass discharges and the eventual winding down of both dekulakisation and collectivisation in 1932 were the most important factors in regaining control over the rank-and-file. This, however, was at a heavy cost to the army. At the very least, 36,938 soldiers had been discharged by the end of 1933.¹⁰⁶ There would be different conclusions drawn about this huge turmoil in the ranks. The political police would see further weaknesses in army reliability and how it remained susceptible to infiltration, especially as they tended to frame so much of the discontent in the ranks as the consequence of the agitation by ‘counterrevolutionaries’ and kulaks. This was more ‘evidence’ that the army could not be depended on and that PUR alone were not properly safeguarding the stability of the military.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, as the peasant and kulak ‘moods’ had been depicted as caused by kulaks and ‘counterrevolutionaries’, rather than stemming from legitimate soldiers’ grievances, this played into the political police’s hands. It is likely that they were in a strengthened position after collectivisation and PUR undermined. Yet, despite the huge levels of discontent in the ranks, Voroshilov denied in public that the army had been affected at all by collectivisation. He publicly hushed up the wave of discontent that had

¹⁰² Tarkhova, p. 126.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 204.

¹⁰⁵ *The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside*, ed. by Viola and others, p. 244; Reese, ‘Red Army Opposition to Forced Collectivization, 1929-1930’, p. 33.

¹⁰⁶ Zdanovich, p. 314. Zdanovich notes that this figure is not complete as it is missing the number of discharges for the second half of 1931 (see footnote).

¹⁰⁷ For an example of criticism of PUR by the political police for what they saw as its inability to control the ‘peasant mood’, see Tarkhova, pp. 115-116.

expanded through the Red Army. At the Sixteenth Party Congress in July 1930

Voroshilov remarked:

The difficulty with collectivisation and the sortie of kulak elements, the intrigues of the right deviation – these are all factors, comrades, which gave us the full opportunity to fundamentally verify the political stability and loyalty of the red army masses to the matter of the proletarian revolution. After these checks we are able to declare with pride that, regardless of the difficulties, despite the sharpening of the class struggle during these two and a half years, the Red army never once wavered.¹⁰⁸

Voroshilov was obviously aware of the huge level of dissatisfaction in the lower ranks in reaction to collectivisation. It was manifestly disingenuous to declare that the army had never wavered. Voroshilov was again masking the problems with army reliability. In reality, Voroshilov had been given a lesson that when under certain social pressures the army could not be fully relied upon. But like PUR, Voroshilov did not want to admit this. Stalin would surely listen to both Voroshilov and the political police about what lessons should be taken from the negative reaction in the rank-and-file to collectivisation, but ultimately, he too would see a military that cracked under pressure and further ‘evidence’ of subversion in the ranks. Yet, the crisis in the army in early 1930s was not limited to the rank-and-file. At the same time as mass discharges were spreading through the lower ranks a very large ‘military specialist plot’ was unrolling in the upper ranks.

Operation *vesna*

Throughout 1930-31 the political police conducted operation *vesna* (springtime) which saw the discharge and arrest of thousands of military specialists from the Red Army and its military academies, with the majority of arrests made in Moscow, Leningrad and Ukraine.¹⁰⁹ The arrested specialists were charged with being members of monarchist and White counterrevolutionary groups that allegedly conducted wrecking, sabotage and espionage, and whose aim was to aid the destruction of Soviet power at a time of war.

¹⁰⁸ Voroshilov, p. 442.

¹⁰⁹ Estimates vary on the total number of military specialists discharged and arrested during operation *vesna*. Most historians place the number at approximately 3000. Tynchenko has revised the figure upwards to a possible 10,000 in his study on the operation, see Tynchenko, p. 3.

Importantly, the charges against the military specialists were nearly entirely fabricated by the political police. They grew from fears about the subversion of the army by groups of traitorous military specialists backed by hostile foreign powers. However, Stalin believed the bases of the arrests, even though forced confessions surely provided the necessary ‘evidence’. In this respect, for Stalin, operation *vesna* was the first time that a large alleged ‘counterrevolutionary conspiracy’ had been ‘discovered’ in the military. This would be something he would not forget. The ‘exposure’ of this ‘conspiracy’ would also directly undermine both PUR and Voroshilov’s assurances that the army was reliable and further strengthen the more pessimistic view of the political police. As this ‘conspiracy’ was ‘exposed’ at the same time as mass discharges were occurring in the rank-and-file, the late 1920s to early 1930s should be seen as a period of crisis in the entire Red Army. There were few areas left within the military where perceived weaknesses had not been revealed and reliability not questioned.

Operation *vesna* did not come out of nowhere. As shown in chapter two, since the close of the Civil War military specialists continued to attract the suspicions of the political police. They were seen as collaborators and potential agents of both hostile capitalist powers and the exiled White movement. The political police made numerous arrests of military specialists throughout the 1920s on indictments of counterrevolutionary agitation and espionage, but these arrests never reached a large scale. There had been an increase in the arrests in 1927 and larger numbers of military specialists serving in the army and teaching in the military academies were arrested for alleged counterrevolutionary activity in Leningrad and Moscow. But these arrests were still not on a mass scale.¹¹⁰ This increase was probably partly linked to the war scare of 1927. Indeed, the political police had initiated closer observation over military specialists in 1926 in response to the perceived worsening international situation. Specifically, they saw a threat from Britain and feared the outbreak of a new war. Military specialists were seen as welcoming such a conflict as it would hasten the fall of Soviet power.¹¹¹

There is another important wider context to the increased observation and arrests of military specialists in 1926-27. In the late 1920s, specialists in all institutions were increasingly persecuted during the turn towards rapid industrialisation and the

¹¹⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 29-30, 100-101. In February 1927 twenty-three military specialists were arrested in the navy for their alleged participation in an alleged counterrevolutionary group, see Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKK*, p. 46.

¹¹¹ Zdanovich, pp. 381-382.

introduction of the first five-year plan. This was a time of utopian optimism and unrealistic industrial targets. Younger idealistic party members were encouraged to challenge their pre-revolutionary superiors.¹¹² There was little room for the realism and guidance from the experienced specialists. Indeed, they were often regarded as lacking sufficient revolutionary optimism and purposely holding back, and even sabotaging, production tempos. But they also served as scapegoats for failures to meet the increasingly ambitious economic targets. This growing campaign against specialists is epitomised by the Shakhty Trial of May to June 1928. The trial convicted fifty-three specialist coal engineers from the North Caucasus of alleged sabotage and working with foreign powers. The cases had no foundation, but the trial was a very public demonstration of how specialists were supposedly holding back the tempos of industrial development through sabotage, which was known as ‘wrecking’. As shortages increased towards the end of the 1920s, campaigns against wrecking and sabotage flourished. In short, as Stone comments, during industrialisation, ‘moderation became criminal’.¹¹³

Alongside the Shakhty trial, there were other key arrests and specialist trials. For instance, the former General V. S. Mikhailov, the head the Main Industrial Directorate, was arrested in May 1928 on a charge of leading a wrecking group in military industry. In general, 1929 saw a spate of arrests of specialists working in industry, in the weapons-arsenal trust in March and within the artillery administrations and ammunition trusts in summer and autumn.¹¹⁴ Late 1929 saw another highly publicised specialist trial, this time of the ‘Industrial Party’.¹¹⁵ Also in late 1929 a number of lecturers, pre-revolutionary ‘former people’ (*byvshie liudi*), were arrested in Leningrad. The arrested were forced to acknowledge their supposed monarchist sympathies and their private meetings were construed as meetings of counterrevolutionary organisations.¹¹⁶ Importantly, the OO OGPU was concerned that this foreign-backed ‘wrecking’ and ‘sabotage’ would also affect the Red Army.¹¹⁷ Consequently, a number of alleged

¹¹² See *Cultural Revolution in Russia*, ed. by Fitzpatrick.

¹¹³ Stone, *Hammer and Rifle*, p. 64.

¹¹⁴ Tynchenko, pp. 104-105.

¹¹⁵ The Industrial Party trial accused the specialist defendants of preparing the ground for a foreign invention by sabotage.

¹¹⁶ Tynchenko, p. 23. For more details on these arrests, the so-called ‘Academy Affair’, see *Akademicheskoe delo 1929-1931 gg: dokumenty i materialy sledstvennogo dela, sfabrikovannogo OGPU*, ed. by Zh. I. Alferov and others (Saint Petersburg: Biblioteka Rossiiskoi akademii nauk, 1993-1998).

¹¹⁷ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 293, l. 220. This document is undated, however Zdanovich points to an OO OGPU report sent to Stalin on 14 September 1930 from the FSB archive which detailed wrecking in exactly these areas, in the same order as they appear on the document. It is likely to be the same document, see Zdanovich, p. 415.

wrecking groups were ‘exposed’ in the artillery, navy, the topographic department and sanitary departments. The ‘wreckers’ were those regarded as outsiders, such as former White officers, former Social Revolutionaries, sons of kulaks, and those who had served with Kolchak in the Civil War. In the military topographical department, military specialist ‘wreckers’ supposedly had ties to Poland and were conducting espionage work.¹¹⁸ As such, the army could not avoid the Party-sponsored persecution of specialists which accompanied the first five-year plan. The large numbers of military specialists still serving in the army made this unavoidable and the political police were looking to the army to find ‘evidence’ of ‘wrecking’. The wider campaign against wrecking continued into the early 1930s and there would be no shortage of ‘exposed’ cases as long as industrial tempos remained impossibly high and hysteria was whipped-up about sabotage.¹¹⁹

As the arrests of military specialists from 1927 shared a wider context with the campaign against wrecking in industry, the extent to which the Red Army was very receptive to the fluctuating currents of Soviet party politics is once again shown. As the party promoted specialist-baiting, the military specialists came under pressure. Furthermore, these earlier anti-wrecking trials had already drawn the broad outlines of the military specialist ‘plot’ that was ‘exposed’ during operation *vesna*. The arrested specialists in industry were accused of sabotage, having links to foreign powers and planning to assist the fall of Soviet power. In addition, the atmosphere was such that during the late 1920s and early 1930s almost all former Whites in military service were regarded as possible ‘wreckers’ and members of counterrevolutionary organisations.¹²⁰ The background was primed for a large military specialist ‘plot’ to be ‘exposed’ within the Red Army. But while this atmosphere of specialist-baiting certainly contributed to the ‘exposure’ of a military specialist ‘conspiracy’ and helped give it seeming credibility, its origins were in 1928 and the specific trigger was the perceived foreign threat.

¹¹⁸ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 293, l. 226. For more on wrecking in the Red Army, which was blamed on former White officers, see Zdanovich, p. 674.

¹¹⁹ On the repression in industry see Shearer, *Industry, State, and Society in Stalin's Russia, 1926-1934* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), pp. 187-203; Stone, *Hammer and Rifle*, pp. 64-84; Zdanovich, pp. 409-439. Tynchenko notes that in the period of November 1929 to February 1930 almost all the members of the artillery inspectorate, administration and scientific committee were arrested and there were several executions in the following year. During February to March 1930, nearly all members of the military-topographic department were imprisoned, see Tynchenko, pp. 105-107.

¹²⁰ Zdanovich, p. 348.

In August 1928 the political police were concerned that the British planned to use the poor relations between the Soviet Union and Poland to stoke a conflict and eventual war.¹²¹ According to intelligence received by the INO OGPU, the British planned to foment an anti-Bolshevik uprising in Ukraine led by members of the then obsolete Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR). Apparently in 1927 the British had paid Pilsudski one hundred thousand pounds to organise the uprising. The plan purported to make use of the forces of the UNR, but also Red Army troops who had been turned against the Bolsheviks. However, later the INO OGPU received further intelligence that these plans had been postponed until spring 1929 as Pilsudski had apparently fallen ill.¹²² It is very difficult to authenticate this intelligence. It could have been disinformation or simply inaccurate, but nevertheless the political police acted on it. They had already kept military specialists under closer observation from 1926 because of the worsening international situation and this was precisely the type of foreign-backed plot they had been searching for. Furthermore, the political police already had concerns in late 1927 that some form of joint action was being prepared between the British government, Ukrainian Nationalists and a host of other foreign powers. A number of arrests had already been made in Ukraine of alleged 'counterrevolutionary' groups.¹²³ As such, when further reports about a Polish collaboration with representatives of the UNR was received by the political police, indicating that the plans for the uprising were again active, a decision was made to make arrests.¹²⁴ In Ukraine the political police searched for 'double-dealers' (*dvurushniki*) working for Polish intelligence and the majority of the arrested were former officers (pre-revolutionary officers). However, many of these arrested former officers had connections to retired or still serving men within the Red Army command. Thus, the focus now turned towards the Red Army. Surveillance was set up over those with connections to the army under an operational name of *vesna*.¹²⁵ Menzhinskii sent the details about the arrests to Stalin, noting that counterrevolutionary organisations had been discovered which were trying to infiltrate into the Red Army. Menzhinskii gave the order to shift the operation towards exposing counterrevolutionary activity in the Red Army, something he

¹²¹ This discussion of operation *vesna* draws heavily on the work of Zdanovich.

¹²² Zdanovich, pp. 385-386.

¹²³ Harris, 'Encircled by Enemies', p. 521.

¹²⁴ Zdanovich, pp. 386-387. Zdanovich does not note the date that the additional intelligence was received by the political police.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

regarded as overlooked.¹²⁶ The first arrests of operation *vesna* were in early 1930 and within months the arrests had spread throughout the military academies affecting thousands of military specialists.¹²⁷ The arrested specialists were charged with being members of monarchist and White counterrevolutionary groups who had conducted espionage and sabotage. The arrests were first concentrated in Moscow, spreading to Kiev and Leningrad into early 1931.¹²⁸ Yet, a large number of these arrests were confined to academies. Indeed, by the end of the 1920s military specialists were increasingly concentrated in teaching roles. In this respect the victims of operation *vesna* were largely army outsiders and not directly in the chain of command. However, a few of the arrests and incriminations did affect the upper Red Army elite.¹²⁹

As operation *vesna* spread to Moscow in August 1930 several senior officers were implicated as members of counterrevolutionary organisations. Tukhachevskii was directly implicated. In early 1930 Tukhachevskii had already started to come under closer police scrutiny and the political police had begun to collect numerous bits of rumour and hearsay about him.¹³⁰ However, when two military specialists working in the Frunze Military Academy, N. Kakurin and I. Troitskii, were arrested, they gave ‘evidence’ incriminating him. During their interrogations in August, Kakurin and Troitskii implicated Tukhachevskii as being sympathetic to the Right Deviation and portrayed him as the head of a Right-led conspiracy that wanted to initiate a military coup.¹³¹ Kakurin had served with Tukhachevskii during the Civil War which perhaps gave weight to the charges.¹³² It is important to emphasise again that the political police still made use of forced confessions. The ‘evidence’ from Kakurin and Troitskii was probably extracted through torture and beatings.¹³³ In this respect, it is possible that the political police were looking to find incriminating information about Tukhachevskii or that they were looking to ‘expose’ some kind of organised conspiracy in the upper military leadership. Perhaps they feared that the growing military specialist ‘conspiracy’

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 388-389.

¹²⁷ According to Tynchenko the first arrest of the operation occurred on 27 January 1930 on a charge of being a member of a monarchist organisation, see Tynchenko, p. 105.

¹²⁸ Ibid., pp. 29, 114.

¹²⁹ In terms of arrests in the Red Army, a separate investigation in the MVO during winter 1930-31 revealed a ‘counterrevolutionary’ organisation in the ranks *ibid.*, p. 157.

¹³⁰ *Reabilitatsiia: kak eto bylo*, 3 vols, ed. by A. Artizov and others (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond "Demokratiia", 2003), II, p. 598.

¹³¹ *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 247.

¹³² According to Minakov, Kakurin had served with Tukhachevskii during the time of the Tambov rebellion, see *Stalin i ego marshal*, p. 107.

¹³³ In 1939 Kakurin gave a statement to the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court that his testimony in 1930 had been false and forced by his interrogators, see *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, pp. 249-250.

extended into the military elite. They already had a large number of collated rumours about Tukhachevskii's supposed disloyalty and alleged ambitions for power from the 1920s. Indeed, the 'evidence' against Tukhachevskii from Troitskii and Kakurin was similar to the earlier 'Russian Bonaparte' rumours, in terms of his supposed aim of establishing a military dictatorship.¹³⁴ Menzhinskii then sent the details of the interrogations of Kakurin and Troitskii to Stalin on 10 September with the following note:

...to arrest the participants of the group one at a time – is risky. There are two possible conclusions: either immediately arrest the most active participants of the group, or to wait for your arrival having applied covert observational measures in order not to be caught off guard. I consider it necessary to add that now the whole insurgent group is maturing very quickly and the later solution presents a certain risk.¹³⁵

However, Stalin chose not to follow Menzhinskii's advice and he first wrote to his ally Ordzhonikidze on 24 September:¹³⁶

Please read as soon as possible the testimony of Kakurin – Troitskii and think about measures to liquidate this unpleasant business. This material, as you see, is strictly secret: only Molotov, I, and now you, know about it. I do not know if Klim [Voroshilov] is informed about it. This would mean that Tukhachevskii has been captured by anti-soviet elements from the ranks of the right. That is what the materials indicate. Is it possible? Of course, it is possible, it cannot be excluded. Evidently the Rights are preparing to install a military dictatorship, just to get rid of the Central Committee, the kolkhozes and sovkhoses, the Bolshevik tempos of development of industry...It is impossible to finish with this matter in the usual way (immediate arrest and so on). It's necessary to think about this carefully. It would be better to postpone a decision on this question, raised in Menzhinskii's memorandum, until mid-October, when we will all be gathered again.¹³⁷

Stalin's letter suggests that initially Voroshilov had not even informed about the 'evidence' against Tukhachevskii, thus showing that the political police went directly to the General Secretary and not through army channels. It is possible that Menzhinskii was trying to undermine Voroshilov in front of Stalin by leaving him in the dark. Even though Voroshilov probably would have welcomed the arrest of Tukhachevskii, the

¹³⁴ Zdanovich, p. 395.

¹³⁵ *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 247.

¹³⁶ Khlevniuk argues that consequently Stalin must have suspected that the case was a political police fabrication, see Khlevniuk, *Politbiuro*, p. 37. Yet, perhaps Stalin did believe in the possibility Tukhachevskii could be guilty and was hesitating once again, waiting to see if enough firm evidence against him would emerge.

¹³⁷ *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 248.

whole case would reflect very badly on his leadership. If someone as prominent as Tukhachevskii turned out to be a ‘counterrevolutionary’, this would be a dramatic demonstration for Stalin that ‘enemies’ were operating at the highest level and Voroshilov seemingly had not noticed. However, as he had done during the alleged Trotskyist military coup in 1927, Stalin showed some hesitation. He had doubts over the next step. Indeed, he had waited two weeks before acting on Menzhinskii’s letter and he wrote to his close ally Ordzhonikidze first. Perhaps Stalin questioned the quality of the evidence against Tukhachevskii. He certainly wanted more time to consider before he made his final decision. Stalin decided to put off the issue until the end of October for discussion in the Politburo. In the meantime Kakurin gave further ‘evidence’ on 5 October. He remarked that Tukhachevskii had spoken about an attempt on Stalin’s life by a ‘fanatic’ and hinted that Tukhachevskii would be the candidate for a military dictator in the case of a struggle with ‘anarchy and aggression’. These were serious insinuations and corroborating material was also received from the interrogation of Troitskii. In October Stalin met with Ordzhonikidze and Voroshilov and they conducted a face-to-face confrontation with Tukhachevskii, Kakurin and Troitskii. Also present at the gathering were Gamarnik, Iakir and Ivan Dubovoi, the aide to the commander of the Urals Military District (UVO). The latter three were interviewed about Tukhachevskii. Following this confrontation Tukhachevskii was released from suspicion.¹³⁸ Stalin later wrote to Molotov on 23 October and remarked: ‘With regard to the case of Tukhachevskii, he turned out to be 100% clean. This is very good.’¹³⁹

Tukhachevskii had escaped arrest despite damaging testimony from both Kakurin and Troitskii. Evidently Stalin doubted the case against him and the face-to-face confrontation had convinced him of Tukhachevskii’s innocence. That this case came so closely after Stalin’s dramatic rejection of Tukhachevskii’s radical armament memorandum is important. Despite previously describing Tukhachevskii’s proposals as being ‘red militarism’ and ‘worse than any counterrevolution’, Stalin did not take the opportunity to have Tukhachevskii removed from the army elite when the chance appeared. This was not due to any doubts over the military specialist ‘plot’ itself. Stalin was not sceptical of operation *vesna*. Indeed, thousands of military specialists remained

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ *Pis'ma I.V. Stalina V.M. Molotovu*, ed. by L. Kosheleva and others, p. 231. Shaposhnikov was also implicated as being a member of a ‘Moscow Counterrevolutionary Centre’. However in a face-to-face confrontation in March 1931, with the participation of Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov and Ordzhonikidze, the charges were also dismissed, see *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 250

discharged from the army and large numbers arrested. In addition, Stalin's correspondence from this time indicates that he believed the premises of the military specialist 'plot'. For instance, at the height of operation *vesna* in September 1930, Stalin wrote to Molotov and mentioned his concerns that Poland was joining forces with the Baltic States and that they were planning to wage war against the Soviet Union.¹⁴⁰ Operation *vesna* grew out of concerns about Polish intervention in Ukraine. Thus, discounting any doubts about the credibility of the 'plot' itself, we can speculate that perhaps Stalin felt a level of respect for Tukhachevskii's military skill and ability, despite the latter's tendency to push boundaries. Indeed, in his letter describing Tukhachevskii's plan as 'worse than any counterrevolution', Stalin also mentioned that he respected Tukhachevskii as an 'unusually capable' comrade. As the face-to-face confrontation had convinced Stalin that Tukhachevskii was innocent, it served no purpose to have him drawn into operation *vesna* on the basis evidence he did not accept. The Red Army needed people of Tukhachevskii's talent. Voroshilov, however, was less forgiving. Even after Stalin's judgment that he believed Tukhachevskii to be 'clean' from any participation in a military conspiracy, Voroshilov continued to send Stalin supposedly compromising information about Tukhachevskii.¹⁴¹ Perhaps Voroshilov now sensed an opportunity to play on Tukhachevskii's incrimination, and ignite some doubts in Stalin, in an attempt to have this troublesome figure removed from the military leadership. Indeed, even though Stalin had hesitated again and decided that Tukhachevskii was innocent, he would not forget this episode or the damning accusations made against him, particularly as Stalin had such a close role in investigating Tukhachevskii's incrimination. Suspicions about the army elite would linger and Stalin would certainly have some nagging doubts about Tukhachevskii's loyalty. The political police file on Tukhachevskii would also continue to expand.

In February of 1931 operation *vesna* reached its apogee and took on an all-Union level. The different strands of investigation in Ukraine, Moscow and Leningrad were finally tied together on 16 February 1931 when the head of the OGPU in Ukraine, Vsevolod Balitskii, sent a telegram to Menzhinskii and Iagoda with 'evidence' of an

¹⁴⁰ *Pis'ma I.V. Stalina V.M. Molotovu*, ed. by Kosheleva and others, p. 209. Zdanovich points to a Politburo order of 15 March 1930 on the subject of Polish intervention, see Zdanovich, p. 67.

¹⁴¹ Ken notes that in January 1931 Voroshilov sent two documents to Stalin, letters from two arrested officers. Verkhovskii and Bergavinov. In Voroshilov's commentary he noted that Bergavinov's letter gave a 'brilliant and damning characterisation' of Tukhachevskii, see Ken, p. 132.

‘All-Union military-officer counterrevolutionary organisation’.¹⁴² In doing so Balitskii was acting in accordance with Menzhinskii and Iagoda’s wishes, who had previously urged him to apply harsher repressive measures applied in Ukraine and find ‘evidence’ of a much broader plot.¹⁴³ Menzhinskii may have pushed Balitskii for ‘evidence’ of a wider plot to confirm his own suspicions about the true scale of the military specialist ‘conspiracy’, but this would strengthen his argument that the army remained vulnerable to infiltration. As Stalin appears to have accepted Menzhinskii’s ‘evidence’ about the the military specialist plot, this meant that for the first time an extensive all-Union plot had been ‘discovered’ within the Red Army, with supposed links to foreign powers and whose members aimed at the overthrow of Soviet power during war. However, only a few months later, the operation reached its end in May 1931 and was gradually wound down.¹⁴⁴

Operation *vesna* had added to what was already a period of acute crisis. A major military specialist ‘plot’ had been ‘exposed’ at the same time as mass discharges were taking place in the rank-and-file. Indeed, the political police drew links between the two processes. In some of interrogation transcripts of arrested military specialists, they gave ‘evidence’ that they believed peasant dissatisfaction towards collectivisation would cause uprisings in the countryside and weaken the Soviet regime. This would apparently allow a foreign intervention to successfully bring down the Bolshevik government.¹⁴⁵ As the ‘plot’ had been fabricated, such ‘evidence’ reveals more about the concerns of the political police and what type of conspiracy they were looking to uncover than any genuine threat. The political police seemed concerned about army vulnerability in times of social strain and they believed that hostile foreign countries may seize the opportunity to provoke discontent in the ranks. These concerns can be seen in political police materials of the late 1920s and early 1930s.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, the early 1930s represent a tipping point. Stalin would see clearly that his army remained vulnerable to

¹⁴² Zdanovich, p. 390.

¹⁴³ Ibid., pp. 390-391. Zdanovich notes that a few members of the political police questioned the ‘evidence’ of an All-Union plot, doubting the links between the various ‘counterrevolutionary’ military groups. However, they were soon criticised and the Politburo had them removed from their positions. Stalin must have believed the basis of the broader ‘all-Union ‘conspiracy’, see *ibid.*, p. 393.

¹⁴⁴ Tynchenko, p. 238.

¹⁴⁵ See the interrogation of a certain military specialist, Akhdverov, from 7 January 1931, published in *ibid.*, p. 421. Links between kulaks and the White émigrés had been made years before operation *vesna* at the start of forced grain requisitions in 1927, for example this link had been identified in the SKVO, see RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 70, l. 32.

¹⁴⁶ See a letter from the head of the political police to all police heads and heads of special departments in the military districts, printed in Zdanovich, pp. 668-669.

infiltration at all levels and this is something he would never forget. In addition, the political police surely came out of the crisis period of the early 1930s strengthened. They played an assertive role towards both the rank-and-file discontent from collectivisation and the military specialist ‘plot’. PUR had been criticised by both the Central Committee and the political police for poor political work in the lower ranks and Menzhinskii had scored a victory with the discovery of a major military specialist ‘conspiracy’. This would undermine Voroshilov’s leadership of the military and the confidence placed in him that he was able to keep army reliability in check. That Menzhinskii did not even inform Voroshilov about Tukhachevskii’s incrimination in 1930 suggests this may have been his intention. But even though Stalin had hesitated again, this time in the face of Tukhachevskii’s incrimination and did not entirely endorse Menzhinskii’s ‘evidence’, he believed the basis of the broader military specialist ‘plot’. He saw that Menzhinskii brought results in guaranteeing army security. In comparison, Voroshilov still tended to downplay problems with army reliability.

A final point on operation *vesna* concerns its legacy. The operation is commonly mentioned in the literature, usually, however, only briefly.¹⁴⁷ Even in more detailed examinations the link to the military purge of 1937 is not fully explored.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, it is easy to regard operation *vesna* and the later military purge during the Terror as separate episodes. The targets were very different. Operation *vesna* targeted primarily military specialists, who were already the subject of suspicion and were increasingly outsiders, occupying teaching roles in the military academies. During the Terror, the Red Army elite and the officer corps were targeted. Those who had contributed so much to reforming and reorganising the army, such as Tukhachevskii, were executed in 1937. However, even if the targets were different, the motivations for both purges were identical. Operation *vesna* was triggered by the foreign threat and those arrested were accused of plotting the downfall of the Soviet government with the assistance of foreign powers. The arrested military specialists were also charged with wrecking and sabotage. These are the exact accusations which would be used against members of the army elite in 1937-38. What was needed was for the officer corps and military elite to be seen with as much suspicion as the military specialists had been in the early 1930s. The incrimination of Tukhachevskii during operation *vesna* was an early sign that the

¹⁴⁷ Exceptions are the work of Tynchenko and Zdanovich.

¹⁴⁸ Tynchenko argues that at the very minimum operation *vesna* was a precursor for the military purge in 1937, but his study does not analyse the similarities between the two.

political police were beginning to develop suspicions about the loyalty of some of the most senior army officers.

The previous chapter examined the perceived weaknesses in the reliability of the Red Army following the Civil War, in terms of what were seen as vulnerabilities to external and internal subversion. However, in emerging from the Civil War the Red Army was also militarily weak. Yet, attempts to push through military reform to make the army competitive with the armies of the capitalist states and ready for the inevitable war only exposed further weaknesses. Firstly, the Red Army elite proved to be divided and quarrelled over the direction and speed of army reform. These disputes were acrimonious, especially between Tukhachevskii, Budennyi and Voroshilov. A divided command would not produce the effective leadership required in the forthcoming conflict. In addition, the petitioning of Stalin about their grievances by both Voroshilov and Tukhachevskii reinforced an impression of disunity in the army leadership. The disputes between Tukhachevskii and Voroshilov continued into the 1930s and would not escape Stalin's attention. Secondly, the industrialisation and the collectivisation drives, which aimed at increasing the power of the Soviet Union and prepare it for war, resulted in widespread discontent from peasant soldiers. The large wave of hostility in reaction to the collectivisation campaign undermined the Red Army's ability to wage war effectively. Furthermore, as much of this hostility was explained by the political police as the consequence of an increase in 'kulak agitation' and 'counterrevolutionary' groups within the lower ranks, rather than soldiers' legitimate grievances, this further reinforced the army's perceived susceptibility to infiltration. Such 'evidence' of subversive activity would demonstrate again that the army could very easily be infiltrated by 'enemies'. Thus, even though it was through both collectivisation and industrialisation that the Soviet regime would increase its strength, they also reaffirmed perceived weaknesses in army reliability. Finally, the initiation of operation *vesna* shows that the foreign threat to the military loomed continually. Even though the operation was carried out in an atmosphere of specialist baiting and the Cultural Revolution, it was the perceived threat from Poland towards Ukraine, supposedly backed by Britain, which provided the trigger. This supposed foreign threat enhanced the army's perceived weakness of being seen as a target of foreign agents and capitalist conspiracy. At times of internal social strain, the political police feared that the army would become the target of 'enemy' agents looking to take advantage of military crises.

In the case of operation *vesna*, the already suspect military specialists were perceived as potential recruits for foreign-backed counterrevolutionary plots. This large military specialist 'plot' would not be forgotten, particularly as it incriminated some of the leading members of the army elite. It undermined Voroshilov's authority and enhanced Menzhinskii's. But most importantly, for Stalin, it showed how easily a widespread foreign-sponsored 'conspiracy' could take root inside the Red Army.

By 1932 more stability was brought to the military. The collectivisation campaign had eased and operation *vesna* had been brought to an end. In this respect it is accurate to say a period of crisis had been passed. This crisis was experienced in the rank-and-file, upper ranks, and between the military and civilian leadership. Of course, the end of the 1920s and early 1930s was not just defined by crisis. The army continued to modernise, defence spending was finally being increased, new tank and aircraft programs were introduced and military doctrine revised. The army was becoming more advanced and modernised through industrialisation. The military was finally gearing up for the future inevitable war. But what were seen as problems with army political reliability continued to cause alarm. Indeed as the next chapter will show, even though overt manifestations of army discontent were absent after 1932 and there were no further rebellions in the rank-and-file or very large 'conspiracies' 'exposed' by the political police, the image of the Red Army as vulnerable to subversion persisted. As the political pressure within the Bolshevik Party began to rise during the 1930s, this perceived vulnerability manifested in new forms.

Chapter Four: The Red Army and Bolshevik Party, 1930-36

With the end of operation *vesna* and the easing of the collectivisation drive very large numbers of soldiers and military specialists had been discharged from the Red Army.¹ However, this had still not eliminated the perceived problem of those officers and soldiers deemed suspicious or unreliable serving in the ranks. Numerous ‘socially harmful’ and ‘socially alien’ individuals continued to be discovered in the army after 1932. Spies, ‘counterrevolutionaries’ and various other ‘enemies’ also continued to be ‘exposed.’ Even though there were no mass purges and arrests in the army until the Terror, efforts were made to remove these remaining ‘unreliable elements’ and ‘enemies’. But as this chapter will show, this process saw little success. The officer corps and PUR were seen as incapable of rooting out ‘enemies’ independently. Dangerous ‘enemies’, including foreign agents, continued to go undiscovered at a time when the perceived espionage threat to the Soviet Union was seen as increasing. In this respect, there are strong indications of serious problems with self-policing within the Red Army. However, in response, Voroshilov tended to ignore the roots of these problems and vaguely called for ‘vigilance’ to be increased. This proved to be ineffective in improving the discovery of hidden ‘enemies’ and ultimately strengthened the position of the political police. Indeed, there are indications that Voroshilov was starting to lose ground to the political police in the first half of the 1930s as the army struggled to successfully ‘expose’ dangerous ‘enemies’ in the ranks. Furthermore, as the political atmosphere became tenser in the 1930s and Stalin assumed more direct control over the party, the military was immediately affected. As pressure increased on members of the former Opposition from 1934, it was impossible to ignore the former oppositionists in the army. As this chapter will show, several senior former army Trotskyists were arrested during the summer and autumn of 1936 and this provided ‘evidence’ that the Red Army had been internally compromised by a Trotskyist military group. Finally, the rumours about an alleged connection between the Red Army high command and the Nazis trailed the military elite in the mid-1930s. These were surely added to the expanding police files on members from the army leadership. During the

¹ Combining Tynchenko’s estimate for discharges during operation *vesna* with the number of discharges of ‘socially harmful’ and ‘alien elements’ detailed in the previous chapter, the total number is in excess of 47,000.

1937-38 military purge this supposed connection between the Red Army and Germany was very prominent. As such, even though there were no mass arrests from the army before the outbreak of the military purge in 1937, this period revealed serious underlying perceived problems with army reliability, particularly within the officer corps and military elite. But most importantly, the summer of 1936 was the point when an alleged Trotskyist military group was 'exposed'. This would quickly lead to growing calls for a deeper investigation into the Red Army and would pave the way for the military purge.

Underlying Problems of Army Reliability in the Early 1930s

The Soviet Union faced a number of international threats in the early 1930s which raised the prospect of imminent war for the first time. The most pressing of all was the increasingly aggressive stance taken by Japan, whose relations with the Soviet Union had worsened since the Japanese seizure of the jointly-owned Chinese Eastern Railway in 1929. In September 1931 Japan invaded Manchuria, which was occupied by February 1932 and a puppet state Manchukuo was established. Regular low-level fighting became commonplace along the border between the Soviet and Japanese troops and would continue into the 1930s.² Why Japanese aggression was so threatening was that it raised a possibility of the Soviet Union having to fight a war on two fronts. This was prospect that both the Red Army and Soviet military industry were woefully prepared for. In addition, Soviet intelligence indicated Japan's desire for a quick and decisive war.³ Consequently, to try and forestall this perceived conflict the Soviet Foreign Commissar, Maxim Litvinov, offered a non-aggression pact in December 1931. This, however, was rebuffed by the Japanese government. At the same Soviet military power was also being strengthened. Stalin had brought Tukhachevskii back from Leningrad in response to the invasion of Manchuria. The army need to be stronger to counter the Japanese threat and Tukhachevskii was the person skilled enough to make this happen. He was trusted to the

² V. S. Mil'bakh, 'Repression in the Red Army in the Far East', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 16. 4 (2003), 58-130 (pp. 58-59).

³ Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Threat From the East, 1933-41: Moscow, Tokyo and the Prelude to the Pacific War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 9, 25; Harris, 'Encircled by Enemies', p. 525; Anthony Best, 'Imperial Japan', in *The Origins of World War Two: The Debate Continues*, ed. by Robert Boyce and Joseph Maiolo (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 52-69 (pp. 58-62).

important position of Director of Armaments and priority was given to defence.⁴ Even though bottlenecks, shortages and unfilled orders remained a problem as military industry struggled to fulfil growing demand, the Soviet Union was finally getting onto a war footing.⁵ Yet, the Japanese threat was only one part of the unstable international scene. The Bolsheviks still faced what they perceived as a hostile coalition of capitalist powers to the West. Even though the Great Depression was deepening in Europe and this made a major European conflict extremely unlikely, Stalin viewed events very differently. In accordance with Lenin's Theory of Imperialism, it was when capitalism was in crisis that war became more likely. During an economic crisis capitalist states would apparently seek out new markets through conflict.⁶ For the Bolsheviks, the threat of war remained real and there was little change about which countries were seen as dangerous, with Poland, Britain, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Finland remaining high on the list. Germany, however, was an additional threat. Hitler's coming to power in January 1933 brought a formal end to the military collaboration between Germany and the Soviet Union. The new threat from Nazism gradually became the focus of Soviet foreign policy in the mid-1930s.⁷ Finally the White movement was still active and intent on overthrowing Soviet power, adding a further complication to an already tense international scene. Admittedly, ROVS had lost much of its dynamism due to an ageing membership. It had also suffered the disappearance of its leader, General Kutepov, in Paris in January 1930, who had been kidnapped by the political police. He did not make it to the Soviet Union alive.⁸ The new leader of ROVS, General Evgenii Miller, was less forthright than Kutepov and eschewed terrorist activity, but he still represented a threat. Miller favoured planting agents within the Soviet Union who, at a point of internal crisis or foreign intervention, would assist in the overthrow of Soviet power. Subversive organisations such as the White youth intelligence group the 'White

⁴ As the build-up of military power was underway in the Far East following the invasion of Manchuria, Putna was recalled from his position as military attaché in Berlin to aid the military restructuring in the region. Posting Putna in the unstable east is indicative of the support he had regained from Voroshilov, see Haslam, p. 27.

⁵ See Stone, *Hammer and Rifle*, pp. 195-209.

⁶ See Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline* (London: Pluto Press, 1996).

⁷ The turning point for the collaboration had been the Geneva Peace Conference in July 1932. Here the German government declared that it would no longer be bound by the Treaty of Versailles. Thus January 1933 was a culmination in the breakdown of relations, see Nekrich, pp. 40-41.

⁸ Robinson, pp 144-150; Pavel Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks: The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness - A Soviet Spymaster* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), p. 91. For the political police plans to kidnap Kutepov, see Goldin, *Armiia v izgnanii*, p. 77.

idea' (*Belaia ideia*) operated within the Soviet Union.⁹ In addition, White groups in the east were reported as collaborating with Japan.¹⁰ Yet, the Whites independently had never been able to launch a serious intervention into Soviet territory and little had changed. Even though White subversion and espionage persisted, the larger threat of European war quickly came to eclipse any other danger. Stalin attempted to avoid the slide into war through collective security, a policy commonly associated with Litvinov that forged international alliances to counter the growing threat from fascism. But alongside open diplomacy, espionage was a key tool for all countries.¹¹

In a climate of approaching conflict and escalating military power, enhancing knowledge about a potential enemy had obvious importance. While the Soviet Union planted agents in other countries, the political police 'exposed' foreign agents within the Soviet Union with regularity in the early 1930s.¹² Unsurprisingly, the Red Army continued to be perceived as a target of foreign intelligence. During the early 1930s there were frequent cases of the 'exposure' agents who had apparently infiltrated the ranks and occupied positions of responsibility.¹³ In addition, the late 1920s had seen a sharp rise in reported cases of soldiers deserting across the borders, apparently taking secret information with them to pass to foreign governments.¹⁴ Of course, it remained the case that not all the 'exposed' spies were genuine. The political police continued to use the same brutal interrogation techniques and actively sought out foreign agents. In addition, within an increasingly hostile international climate the political police no doubt searched more attentively for 'enemies'. This guaranteed that 'spies' would be more frequently 'exposed' in the ranks as the political police searched for anyone who

⁹ Robinson, p. 157; Goldin, *Armiia v izgnanii*, p. 119.

¹⁰ In December 1934 the OO NKVD wrote to Boris Feldman about how 'Japanese-White Guard groups' had been provoked by the recent Japanese aggression. These groups were supposedly trying to agitate within the Red Army troops stationed on the border and trying to convince them to fight against the Soviet Union, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 39, l. 378.

¹¹ For a discussion of intelligence see Harris, 'Encircled by Enemies'; Christopher Andrew and Julie Elkner, 'Stalin and Foreign Intelligence', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 4, 1 (2003), 69-94; John Ferris, 'Intelligence', in *The Origins of World War Two*, ed. by Boyce and Maiolo, pp. 308-329.

¹² For the stream of intelligence received by Stalin previous to the Terror see Harris, 'Encircled by Enemies'. Some of the revealed espionage groups could be extensive, such as the large Japanese spy ring exposed by the political police on 26 November 1932 in the Far East which had supposedly been organised by the Japanese General Staff. The members of the spy ring allegedly included former Whites, traders and kulaks, see RGVA, f. 4, op. 19, d. 13, l. 2.

¹³ See for example RGVA f. 37837, op. 21, d. 10, l. 366; op. 19, d. 19, l. 29; op. 9, d. 42, l. 45. For a rare case of spying for Turkey see, RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 615, l. 70.

¹⁴ See Zdanovich, pp. 502-507. Zdanovich notes that the number of these cases increased during 1933 and that from 1 October 1932 to 20 June 1933, twenty Red Army men fled to Poland. For a case of an officer from the BVO apparently trying to escape to Poland with secret documents in December 1933, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 10, d. 20, l. 22.

fit the profile. Thus the perceived scale of the espionage threat to the army would remain exaggerated. The alleged spy cases ‘exposed’ by the political police were diverse. For example, in December 1931, Gamarnik wrote to Stalin about a group of Latvian spies who had managed to enter Soviet territory. The group had apparently gained access to positions in the Red Army through a member of military intelligence.¹⁵ Polish intelligence was seen as a grave threat.¹⁶ An OGPU circular of November 1932 reported that Polish espionage had increased and that some agents had established links with the Red Army.¹⁷ In September 1932 spies working for the Japanese and Chinese intelligence services were ‘discovered’ in the OKDVA (Special Red Banner Far Eastern Army).¹⁸ In March 1933 Finnish spies were found in the LVO, also within military intelligence.¹⁹ In broader terms, the espionage threat was analysed in a report looking at threats to the army in 1933. This report argued that the more frequent discovery of foreign agents in general terms was an indication of how the ground was being prepared for an invasion of the Soviet Union, and that during 1933 the Red Army was the target of counterrevolution more than at any other time.²⁰ According to this report, in 1932 112 Red Army men had been arrested by the political police for espionage from a total of 8599 cases. In 1933 this had doubled to 224 army arrests from an increased grand total of 23,190 arrests.²¹ Thus, arrests for espionage had increased dramatically from 1932 to 1933. Arrests for Polish espionage alone had seen a three-fold increase. The report also detailed that Japanese agents were collaborating with White groups in the Far East and German spies were targeting both the Red Army and defence industry, and had seen some success.²² The majority of the espionage cases in the military were from the sensitive border regions of the UVO, BVO, LVO and the Far East Region.²³ This is understandable. These regions were on the periphery and the borders were porous. Larger numbers of foreign nationals lived in these areas. Thus, there was a large supply of those who could potentially be labelled as ‘foreign agents’. Indeed, several very large

¹⁵ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 10, l. 341. For another group of soldiers supposedly working as Latvian spies from September 1934, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 39, l. 46.

¹⁶ Zdanovich, p. 77. For examples of Polish espionage cases in the army from 1932-34 see, RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 39, l. 360; d. 52, l. 53; d. 39, ll. 324-325.

¹⁷ Zdanovich, p. 76.

¹⁸ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 14, l. 592. For another Japanese spy case in the army from March 1934 see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 63, l. 59.

¹⁹ Zdanovich, p. 521.

²⁰ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 178, ll. 2-3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, l. 4.

²² *Ibid.*, l. 10. For ‘exposed’ German espionage groups see, *ibid.* l. 25; f. 37837, op. 21, d. 52, l. 44.

²³ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 178, l. 4.

spy rings were 'exposed' on the borders in the early 1930s.²⁴ The troops stationed in these regions were seen as at an increased risk of infiltration and there are signs that the political police were unhappy with how they were being monitored. For example, the political police in the BVO noted that three quarters of the troops in the district were stationed close to the border which left them exposed to infiltration by intelligence agents. They called for more intense countermeasures.²⁵

As such, espionage was perceived to have increased greatly in general terms during 1933 and the Red Army continued to be seen as targeted by foreign agents. It is likely this sharp increase in reported espionage cases was tied to the worsening international situation. Hitler's rise to power, increasing Japanese aggression and the persistent poor relations with countries such as Poland, no doubt compelled the political police further in the search to 'expose' spies. Yet, in examining the numbers alone, the number of espionage cases in the Red Army is not significant in comparison to the grand total, even taking into account the increase in army cases in 1933. But the actual scale of the espionage problem in the army may not have been the entire cause for alarm. What was problematic for Voroshilov was not simply the reported number of spy cases in the military, but PUR and the officer corps' inability in rooting them out.

Voroshilov was clearly concerned about how easily foreign agents were seen to be infiltrating into the Red Army and occupying positions of responsibility. On 2 January 1932 the RVS published an order, signed by Voroshilov, on this very question. The order concerned a former commander of a tank battalion in the BVO, Mikhail Bozhenko, who had been given a promotion within the region. However, Bozhenko apparently turned out to be a Polish agent and had subsequently fled to Poland. Voroshilov was agitated that Bozhenko had been able to slip by and he accused the BVO Staff of not checking Bozhenko's background, despite an already impressive list of accumulated 'anti-moral offences' previous to his promotion. Bozhenko had already been charged with having a 'demobilisation mood' and 'counterrevolutionary Trotskyist mood'. In fact, he had been slated for discharge from the army the year before. This had

²⁴ For example, in a letter to Stalin and Molotov from February 1935, Mikhail Frinovskii, the head of the Chief Directorate for Border Troops of the political police, reported that in 1933 a large espionage group had been exposed on the border strip between Leningrad and Karelia. This was apparently organised by Finnish and Estonian intelligence. 1640 people were arrested. Frinovskii also noted that in 1933 seventeen other Finnish spy groups had been liquidated, totalling 433 people, see RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 1414, ll. 2-4.

²⁵ Document printed in Zdanovich, pp. 682-684.

even been ordered by the RVS.²⁶ Voroshilov criticised this negligent attitude towards the promotion of officers and stressed the need for ‘unremitting’ Bolshevik vigilance and a closer scrutiny of officers by the command, PUR, the army political organisations and the *komsomol*. Voroshilov pressed the importance of officer selection in the border regions, especially for the Air Force, the artillery units and the motorised and mechanised units.²⁷ However, standards were not improved immediately. On 2 April 1933 the same order was published again.²⁸ This was clearly a reminder. Then a year later in August 1934 a Politburo commission issued an order concerning the promotion of officers and referenced the Bozhenko case again. This order called for careful background checks and criticised what it described as an inattentive approach to the study of the officer corps. In addition, the order also mandated the checking of the officers in the border districts within a three month period and the transfer of those regarded as less politically reliable to interior districts.²⁹ The order stipulated that due to the importance of air, tank and artillery divisions, their commanders should be members of the party or from the *komsomol* only.³⁰ Thus, the Bozhenko case had been used as an example three times during 1932-34. The original case was not a stand alone issue. It appears that there were persisting problems with the way background checks were conducted in the army. Perhaps, in the aftermath of operation *vesna*, a very large police operation which involved many arrests by mere incrimination alone, there was resistance from some officers and from PUR in being overly ‘vigilant’. Indeed, if an officer or political worker was constantly on the look out for unexposed foreign agents and ‘counterrevolutionaries’ serving with them, this may be rewarded, but it could also draw unwanted attention. Questions may be asked about why these dangerous ‘enemies’ had not been noticed before, especially after operation *vesna* had made it clear how easily ‘enemies’ could infiltrate the ranks. As such, some officers and political workers may have thought it was easier not to dig too deep in the search for dangerous ‘enemies’ to avoid any unwanted attention. In any case, Voroshilov’s calls for increased ‘vigilance’ were never going to be effective. He was not addressing the reasons why ‘vigilance’ was at a low level and why some officers were not performing proper background checks. Simply calling for more ‘vigilance’ did not engage with the

²⁶ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 10, d. 76, l. 55.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., l. 52.

²⁹ For cases of transfers from border regions to interior districts because of doubts about reliability or the individual having a connection abroad, see, RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 40, ll. 226, 231, 318.

³⁰ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 9, d. 42, l. 65.

problem seriously. It was an easy solution that would ultimately prove ineffective. Furthermore, the reference to the Bozhenko case by the Politburo indicates that Stalin had little confidence that reliable people were being promoted to command positions. Voroshilov may have started to feel pressure from above. But that he chose to merely call for more ‘vigilance’ suggests that he had no real solutions to the problem of the inadequate verification of officers, even though this was occurring at a time when the perceived threat from foreign espionage was increasing. But it was better to call for more ‘vigilance’ than do nothing at all. Importantly, these indications of a failure in army self-policing would only strengthen the political police’s pessimistic view of army reliability and emphasise how the military was unable to independently maintain its internal security.

What Voroshilov did instead was continue to publicly downplay any problems with army political reliability. For example, at a joint Plenum of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission in January 1933 he praised the apparent increasing reliability of the Red Army as a whole. According to Voroshilov, the number of workers within the command had reached forty percent, and sixty-one percent of officers were now party members.³¹ In March, Voroshilov reiterated this theme, highlighting that in 1933 peasants within the army had dropped to forty-seven percent. He pointed out that all the main commanders of military districts were now party members. Voroshilov’s tendency to inflate army achievements in public is clear with the remark: ‘Without any kind of exaggeration it is possible to say that in the business of the preparation of Bolshevik military cadres we have achieved enormous, decisive results.’³² Indeed, Voroshilov made a great deal of the military’s good performance during the Bolshevik Party membership purge (*chistka*) in 1933. Membership purges were common to the Bolshevik Party and were used to weed out members not living up to the standards of party life, be it for reasons of careerism, ‘passivity’ and criminality.³³ Soldiers and officers were expelled from the party during the *chistka* for numerous reasons, including hiding a background as a ‘social alien’, or being linked to one, for having an ‘anti-soviet mood’, or for passivity and poor party political work.³⁴ The 1933 *chistka* expelled 4.3% of the membership of the army party organisations, which was

³¹ RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 19, l. 63.

³² Voroshilov, pp. 573-576.

³³ See Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, pp. 38-58.

³⁴ For individual examples of expulsions in the 1933 *chistka* see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 55, ll. 125-325; op. 9, d. 42, l. 145.

much lower than the seventeen percent excluded from ten other civilian party organisations.³⁵ In his speech to the Seventeenth Party Congress on 10 January 1934 Voroshilov pointed out what he described as a ‘significant’ divergence of the *chistka* results between the army and the civilian party organisations.³⁶ Indeed, the 1933 *chistka* had excluded fewer army party members than the previous *chistka* in 1929, which had expelled 5.04% from the army party organisations.³⁷ These statistics were welcome news for Voroshilov. They were tangible figures providing ‘proof’ that military reliability was at a high level. Voroshilov was using these statistics to present a public image of a Red Army growing in internal cohesion and political reliability that he hoped could not be ignored. However, these statistics masked a range of serious underlying problems that had repercussions in perceptions of army reliability.

Even after the mass discharges from the ranks during the late 1920s and early 1930s the Red Army was still not entirely stable, regardless of the assurances from PUR in 1932. Despite the numerous ‘socially alien’ and ‘socially harmful’ individuals discharged from the army during 1929-32, large numbers continued to be ‘discovered’. Discharges of those deemed ‘socially harmful’ carried on during 1932 and increased in 1933. Evidently, the army may well have regained some stability after the turmoil of collectivisation, but the composition of the military Red Army remained far from ideal. According to the above report from 1933 that examined threats to the army, 22,308 individuals, including kulaks, former Whites, and ‘anti-soviet elements’ were discharged from the army in that year. This represented a huge increase from the 3889 discharged during 1932. The largest group discharged in 1933 were ‘kulaks’. Indeed, during 1933 there was a reported increase in the number of alleged kulak groups operating within the Red Army.³⁸ In addition, the Military Procuracy reported persistent wrecking activity aimed at armaments and it criticised the OO OGPU and military

³⁵ Those excluded from the party appear initially to not have been discharged from the army. However, in October 1933 Anton Bulin and Feldman wrote to Voroshilov suggesting that for those excluded from the party for being ‘class aliens,’ for keeping their past secret (for example previous service in the White armies), or for ‘double-dealers’, ‘careerists’, the morally degenerate and those obstructing military preparation and discipline, to discharge from the army as well. This suggestion was adopted in October and a corresponding resolution was sent to all districts, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 21, ll. 16-18.

³⁶ Voroshilov, p. 611.

³⁷ RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 23, l. 94. However, the 1933 *chistka* appears to have only been conducted in sixty percent of army party organisations, see *ibid.*, l. 101.

³⁸ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 178, ll. 27-28. In addition, in March 1933 the OO OGPU contacted Feldman about an increase in ‘negative behaviours’ and dissatisfaction within the Red Army during the last quarter of 1932 and into January 1933. They had highlighted anti-soviet groups, soldiers with links to class aliens, but also alcoholics and those simply deemed ‘dissatisfied’, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 39, l. 345.

industry for not doing enough to combat this.³⁹ In a March 1933 report, the OO OGPU detailed some of these counterrevolutionary groups that had been ‘exposed’ within the army. Some of the charges against the alleged groups included planning terrorist acts and actively working to undermine the command. Some supposedly planned to murder Stalin.⁴⁰ Aviation in particular saw growing alleged counterrevolutionary crimes. The political police saw this as an explanation for the increase in accidents, such as aircraft crashes.⁴¹ The results of inefficiencies in construction and poor pilot preparation were still framed as ‘evidence’ of sabotage.

Why there was such a very large increase in discharges in 1933 could be because the political police began pushing harder to find ‘enemies’ in the army within an increasingly threatening international environment. The political police were probably conscious of the remaining ‘unreliable elements’ in the ranks, who they had pointed to as causing so much trouble during collectivisation. The 1933 report on threats to the army specifically noted that having large numbers of peasants in the ranks gave foreign agents more opportunities to create espionage networks.⁴² Therefore, the political police may have viewed the remaining ‘socially-harmful’ and ‘alien elements’ in the army as a large pool of potential recruits for foreign agents and tried to secure further discharges. In addition, a severe famine in Ukraine during 1932-33 also caused a new wave of discontent in the army, similar to that seen during collectivisation.⁴³ This would lead to another round of discharges in response. Therefore, even after the conclusion of operation *vesna* and easing of collectivisation, the Red Army was not seen as free from perceived ‘unreliable elements’. The political police still probably had the military firmly in its sights and were searching to expose ‘counterrevolutionaries’ and foreign agents. In addition, it is possible that the political police were trying to undermine Voroshilov’s public assurances that the army was secure. It is hardly likely they accepted Voroshilov’s public defence of army reliability and would be aware of its problems with self-policing. Perhaps emboldened by their recent success in operation *vesna*, they kept up the pressure on the military. In this respect, despite giving a good performance in the 1933 *chistka*, the underlying problems in the Red Army persisted, in terms of both its composition and levels of criminality. Voroshilov made no mention of

³⁹ RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 145, ll. 37-39.

⁴⁰ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 39, l. 360. See also *ibid.*, l. 154; d. 52, ll. 116, 182 for other such groups exposed by the political police in 1934.

⁴¹ Document published in Zdanovich, see p. 697.

⁴² RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 178, l. 3.

⁴³ Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKK*, p. 49.

these problems publicly, but he certainly was very aware of them. He, of course, remained ultimately responsible for army reliability and so pushed instead an image of a united and loyal Red Army.

Even though Voroshilov did not mention these problems in public, efforts were made to discharge the remaining ‘unreliable elements’ from the ranks. Alongside the political police, the army played a key role in the increase in discharges in 1933. Regular purge commissions, chaired at military district and RVS level, met to discharge or make transfers of these individuals from the ranks and the officer corps.⁴⁴ The reasons for discharge were wide ranging. Many fell under a category of being a ‘social alien’, for example former Whites who had not declared their past service, or the sons of kulaks or priests. Individuals were also discharged for having undeclared relations abroad. Discharges were also made for more serious crimes, including membership of a counterrevolutionary group or, more commonly, having an ‘anti-soviet mood’. Within the Russian Military Archives there are numerous documents sent from the OO OGPU to the army leadership petitioning for the arrest and/or demobilisation of soldiers for their supposed counterrevolutionary or anti-soviet activity.⁴⁵ However, a large number of discharges were for more mundane reasons such as alcoholism, having weak health, for being undisciplined or conducting poor political work.

However, in a similar manner to the problems with the promotion of officers seen in the Bozhenko case, mistakes were also being made in regard to discharges. For example, on 4 July 1933 Voroshilov sent a circular to all military districts about the numerous complaints he and the Main Administration of the Red Army had received from officers about incorrect discharges. Voroshilov argued that there was a lack of ‘sufficient attention’ being paid to the important issue of discharging officers. Using similar language to the Bozhenko case, Voroshilov argued that such a ‘formalistic’ approach to discharges was not a small issue and that he could give many other examples.⁴⁶ Indeed, in April 1934 Voroshilov gave another order on discharges, giving an example of the incorrect demobilisation of a Red Army man and publicised the

⁴⁴ For examples of commissions throughout 1933-35 see, RGVA, f. 37837, op. 10, d. 23, ll. 2-103; d. 20, ll. 28-88, 199-207, 265-271.

⁴⁵ For individual cases of counterrevolutionary activity within the ranks in 1932-34 highlighted most commonly by the OO OGPU, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 19, d. 29, ll. 28, 32, 229, 249; op. 21, d. 10, ll. 239-502; d. 39, ll. 72, 289, 392; d. 52, ll. 25-228; op. 10, d. 26, l. 35; op. 9, d. 42, ll. 20-21, 136. Not all cases resulted in the discharge and some soldiers were transferred to the reserves.

⁴⁶ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 21, l. 9.

reprimand given to the officer responsible.⁴⁷ The problem of incorrect discharges was widespread enough to warrant Voroshilov's intervention and when seen alongside the problems of promoting reliable officers, there are strong indications that the system of the verification of army personnel was breaking down.⁴⁸ But again, there is probably more to this than officers and political workers simply not checking the grounds for discharges. Some officers may have been making a conspicuous show of being vigilant and making discharges on weak grounds. They perhaps had worries about the potential consequences of finding dangerous 'enemies' such as spies in their commands and whether they in turn would become the subject of scrutiny. It was maybe easier to respond to Voroshilov's calls to raise 'vigilance' by making groundless discharges in an attempt to cultivate a reputation of being vigilant. This avoided having to actually search and 'expose' dangerous 'counterrevolutionaries' or foreign agents, which could have consequences. Indeed, the reason for the incorrect discharge in the example given by Voroshilov in April 1934 was for being the son of a kulak. This was a minor issue (and evidently this was not even true). In this respect, as in the Bozhenko case, there are suggestions that some officers may have been using tactics to avoid searching for the dangerous 'enemies' in the ranks. Over the next two years there were further criticisms from the army leadership of officers making discharges for minor crimes, sometimes on a large scale, while those regarded as more dangerous 'enemies' were being missed. In addition, Voroshilov's accusation that this behaviour was evidence of 'formalism' does not give the full picture. It is very likely that Voroshilov appreciated the deeper reality. This was not merely a problem of incorrect discharges and promotions. These were only the symptoms of a more serious issue. This was the attitude and approach of some officers towards searching for 'enemies' in the ranks. By calling for more 'vigilance' Voroshilov was not effectively tackling this problem. His focus on weak 'vigilance' and 'formalism' in the command may have been an attempt to turn attention away from these underlying problems that he did not know how to solve. Once again, Voroshilov's criticisms of weak 'vigilance' were unlikely to bring any substantive changes.

⁴⁷ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 10, d. 26, l. 37. In this particular case the OO also acknowledged the mistake, see *ibid* l. 49.

⁴⁸ Voroshilov certainly had an uphill struggle in tightening standards for discharges. For example, a Main Administration of the Red Army report from April 1934 noted that in the Staff of the LVO relevant materials for the discharge of army men were still not being studied correctly. Indeed the report noted that from the protocols of the RVS commission in the LVO it was not clear if anyone had even read the relevant materials for the discharges. The report noted such a situation placed fulfilling Voroshilov's order under doubt, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 10, d. 23, l. 107.

A lesson of the consequences of this apparent ‘weak vigilance’ in the officer corps was soon given through the ‘Nakhaev Affair’ in 1934. On 5 August, A. Nakhaev, the Chief of the Staff of the artillery battalion of Osoaviakhim, attempted to lead a revolt from the Moscow barracks and tried to enlist trainees to help him.⁴⁹ However, Nakhaev lacked sufficient numbers and the revolt was a failure. He was subsequently arrested. Stalin’s deputy, Lazar Kaganovich, wrote to the General Secretary about the incident, informing him that the initial investigation had given the impression that Nakhaev had psychological problems. Kaganovich added that Voroshilov had described Nakhaev as a ‘psychopath’ and placed blame on Osoaviakhim, commenting that they had ‘messed up here’.⁵⁰ As such, there was nothing particularly special about the case. However, in his reply Stalin presented a very different version of events. On 8 August he wrote to Kaganovich:

The Nakhaev affair is about a piece of scum. He is, of course (of course!), not alone. He must be put up against the wall and forced to talk – to tell the whole truth and then severely punished. He must be a Polish-German (or Japanese) agent... He called on armed people to act against the government – so he must be destroyed.⁵¹

The difference between Kaganovich’s and Stalin’s explanation is striking. That Stalin saw the influence of a foreign hand is prominent, despite being far removed from the Nakhaev case (Stalin was in Sochi at the time). Stalin said he was certain that Nakhaev was a foreign agent. As the recorded scale of foreign espionage had increased greatly only the year before, this perhaps explains why Stalin argued that Nakhaev was a spy. In pushing this explanation he may have been signalling that he believed espionage was a more serious problem than others, and in need of attention. In his reply Kaganovich fell quickly into line, agreeing that Stalin was ‘absolutely right’ in his assessment.⁵²

Despite being an Osoaviakhim matter, the Nakhaev arrest affected the Red Army directly. As a revolt had been attempted at the Moscow barracks Stalin ordered that Kork, the commander of the MVO, be called in and given a ‘tongue-lashing for the heedless and sloppy conduct in the barracks’. Kork was later removed from his post.

⁴⁹ Osoaviakhim was the ‘Society to Assist Defence, Aviation and Chemical Development’, an organisation for civil defence, in particular military training. While not being strictly an army organisation, it had links to the Red Army and importantly Nakhaev’s revolt had occurred at the Moscow barracks.

⁵⁰ *The Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence*, ed. by Davies and others, p. 246.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁵² *Ibid.* The investigation of Nakhaev linked him to a former General Bykov, who worked at the Institute of Physical fitness and was allegedly an Estonian intelligence agent, see *ibid.*, p. 264.

Stalin also told Voroshilov to issue an order regarding the ‘sloppy conduct’ at the barracks.⁵³ Voroshilov no doubt came under further pressure about undiscovered ‘enemies’ in the army after Nakhaev’s failed revolt. It would highlight further how standards of ‘vigilance’ were not being maintained by the officer corps. In punishing Kork, Stalin clearly felt that he personally was not doing a good enough job of securing the MVO and this was allowing dangerous foreign agents to gain responsible positions. It is likely that Stalin saw this as problem that went further than Kork alone. Indeed, Stalin was kept notified about espionage within the Red Army at this time. For example, on 17 February 1934, Iagoda had sent him an intercepted telegram from the Japanese military attaché in Moscow, Kavabe. In the telegram Kavabe detailed that he had been speaking with the head of foreign relations for the Red Army, A. A. Sagin. In his comments, Iagoda requested that Sagin be removed from his position, suspecting he had been passing secrets to the Japanese.⁵⁴ Stalin would expect Voroshilov to take more action to secure army reliability in light of the ‘Nakhaev Affair’ and other high-profile espionage cases, but as noted, Voroshilov had very few solutions to this problem. The OO OGPU, however, also took a lesson from the Nakhaev case. In a report from September 1934 they noted that in conditions of approaching war the special departments needed to work especially hard to combat enemies within the ranks. They noted a range of reports about the presence of ‘counterrevolutionaries’ within the army and Nakhaev was given as an example.⁵⁵ The political police intended to keep up their pressure on the army and this should have been concerning for Voroshilov, who was well aware that his officers and PUR were failing to ‘expose’ dangerous ‘enemies’. If this continued it would undermine his authority and the trust placed in his leadership of the Red Army. Finally, Nakhaev had supported the Trotskyist Opposition during 1926-28 and had been expelled from the party and discharged from the army.⁵⁶ This was not prominent in 1934 and Stalin’s certainty that Nakhaev was a foreign agent overrode anything else. But as the political atmosphere became tenser within the Bolshevik Party, former Trotskyists quickly reemerged as a dangerous subversive threat to the military.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 252.

⁵⁴ RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 186, ll. 79-81.

⁵⁵ Document printed in Zdanovich, p. 700.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 326.

Growing Political Pressures and the Red Army Elite

During the early 1930s, with war looming and the international situation worsening, the atmosphere within the Bolshevik Party became tenser as Stalin assumed greater power and control. Stalin suppressed any resistance to the radical policies of collectivisation and industrialisation. Indeed, even though the ‘Left Opposition’ had been defeated in the late 1920s and the ‘Right Deviation’ had been crushed shortly after, vestiges of dissatisfaction towards Stalin and his policies remained within the party. These were not as organised as they had been in the 1920s, but were still taken very seriously and quickly closed down. Indeed, such discontent often manifested within the lower tiers of the party and posed a danger of expanding throughout the rank-and-file.⁵⁷

However, in the early 1930s, the rumours which had been so prominent a few years earlier about a ‘Russian Bonaparte’ and disloyalty within the army elite could converge with this lower-level party criticism of Stalin. For example, in December 1930, Sergei Syrtsov, the Chairman of the Soviet Government and Vissarion Lominadze, the First Secretary of the Transcaucasian Regional Committee, were expelled from the Central Committee having been accused of forming a ‘left-right bloc’ because of their opposition to the severity of collectivisation.⁵⁸ But, interestingly, the ‘Syrtsov-Lominadze Affair’ also affected Uborevich in the army elite. Part of the case against Syrtsov was a denunciation given by a Secretary of a party cell at the Institute of Red Professors, B. Resnikov. This denunciation detailed that Syrtsov had apparently spoken about mooted party plans for Voroshilov to take Rykov’s position as the head of the Soviet Government, and that Voroshilov was going to be replaced at the head of the army by Uborevich. Syrtsov allegedly described the latter as ‘unprincipled’, ‘devilishly narcissistic’ and a ‘clear Thermidor’.⁵⁹ The political intrigues aside, the unflattering description of Uborevich is very reminiscent of the rumours about a ‘Russian Bonaparte’ so common to the 1920s. In addition, a similar declaration was made in the investigation by another party member, a certain Nusinov, who had described a small gathering, supposedly including Syrtsov, where the ‘mood’ of the Red Army was said to

⁵⁷ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 52.

⁵⁸ For a discussion see R. W. Davies, ‘The Syrtsov-Lominadze Affair’, *Soviet Studies*, 33, 1 (1981), 29-50.

⁵⁹ *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politbiuro TsK RKP(b) - VKP(b) 1923-1938 gg.*, 3 vols, ed. by K. M. Anderson and others (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2007), III, p. 211.

have been discussed. Syrtsov had apparently brought up Uborevich's name, describing him as very talented, but narcissistic. In addition, Nusinov acknowledged that he did not know Uborevich particularly well but pointed to an incident when the former had been proposed for candidacy to the Central Committee. Apparently, Uborevich's suitability had been heatedly discussed and some members were very opposed.⁶⁰ According to Nusinov, he had been passed a note describing Uborevich as a capable person, but with little experience in party affairs. The note also apparently described that Uborevich regarded himself as a 'Napoleon'.⁶¹ The accuracy of Resnikov and Nusinov's denunciations is difficult to assess. Denunciations are open to falsehoods and fabrications. But even if both were manifestly false, it is still interesting why Uborevich's name appeared within this factional party case. Clearly Uborevich's name had associations of disloyalty and of being a potential 'Russian Bonaparte'. Such associations were not publicly voiced, but could surface in private and were perhaps held in some party circles.

1932 saw a similar case to the 'Syrtsov-Lominadze Affair', but this time Tukhachevskii's name appeared. During November and December, N. B. Eismont, the People's Commissar for Supply, V. N. Tolmachev, a department head in Transport, E. P. Ashukina, Chief of the Personal Planning Department in the Commissariat for Agriculture, and another party member, V. F. Poponin, were arrested for allegedly having 'counterrevolutionary' conversations. The men had supposedly gathered at Eismont's apartment, drank heavily and were accused of speaking critically about Stalin. There was allegedly some talk of his removal.⁶² What raised the seriousness of this case was the involvement of A. P. Smirnov, a senior party figure and the Chairman of the Public Housing Commission of the Central Executive Committee. He was also questioned.⁶³ During the investigation into the group, Tukhachevskii's name was mentioned in a similar manner as Uborevich's two years previously. In Poponin's declaration he remarked that Eismont had allegedly asked about Tukhachevskii's 'mood'. The context of the conversation between Poponin and Eismont had apparently been the outbreak of war, peasant rebellion and where the government could find

⁶⁰ Uborevich was not promoted as a candidate member in the Central Committee at this time and he did not secure sufficient votes, see *ibid.*, p. 275 (footnote).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁶² Following the investigation Eismont and the other members of the group were expelled from the party as punishment for their anti-party conversations and received three years in the labour camps, see Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 101.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

support.⁶⁴ In this respect, asking about Tukhachevskii's 'mood' suggests Eismont thought his loyalty was not guaranteed. As the group were supposedly 'counterrevolutionary' the implications were more sinister. However, as in the Syrtsov-Lominadze case it is very difficult to authenticate these denunciations, but even if entirely false, it remains interesting why Tukhachevskii's name appeared. It would seem that, like Uborevich, Tukhachevskii's name was loaded with associations of disloyalty and these could surface when accusations were flying over 'counterrevolution'. Furthermore, both the Syrtsov-Lominadze and Eismont-Tolmachev cases located the idea of army betrayal more firmly within party circles, linking this to what was viewed as factionalism. There is also the possibility that as Tukhachevskii had been incriminated in operation *vesna* the political police had lingering suspicions about him and other members of the military elite. They may have tried to steer the testimony in both cases to find out if some senior officers were connected to either alleged 'counterrevolutionary' group. Indeed, at the very same time as Eismont-Tolmachev investigation was underway the political police received further rumours about Tukhachevskii. Reports were received from Berlin about an alleged plot with Tukhachevskii at its head. However, in this case Iagoda apparently brushed this off as disinformation.⁶⁵ Even so, this was another reminder that Tukhachevskii was subject to significant speculation about his loyalty. Indeed, reports from Berlin about alleged disloyalty in the army elite and supposed preparations for a military coup were regularly received by the political police through their agents. These were received in December 1932, June 1933, March, April and December 1934. Even if such reports were regarded as nothing more than disinformation, they would surely be added to the growing files on the relevant members of the army elite.⁶⁶

As such, for now, despite being named in both cases of party 'factionalism' there were no noticeable consequences for Tukhachevskii and Uborevich. Both kept their high-ranking positions and Tukhachevskii's career maintained an impressive upwards trajectory. In February 1933 he received the Order of Lenin and in 1934 both he and Uborevich became candidate members of the Central Committee.⁶⁷ The incriminations in both cases were only indirect and clearly not strong enough to build a case against Tukhachevskii or Uborevich. Furthermore, both were talented and

⁶⁴ *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politbiuro*, ed. by Anderson and others, III, pp. 568, 650-651.

⁶⁵ Minakov, *Sovetskaia voennaia elita 20-kh godov*, p. 296 (footnote).

⁶⁶ See *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 252; *Voenna-istoricheskii arkhiv*, pp. 7-9.

⁶⁷ Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov*, p. 672.

experienced military leaders. The army would be worse off without them. Stalin would gain nothing from having them arrested on the basis of indirect ‘evidence’, though these new incriminations would have almost certainly been kept ‘on file’. Indeed, Stalin had what he needed if he did change his mind about Tukhachevskii or Uborevich in the future.

Trotskyism also remained a simmering issue in the Red Army in the 1930s. Despite the crushing of the Left Opposition in the 1920s and the recantation of many former army oppositionists, active ‘Trotskyist agitation’ remained a cause of arrest and discharge in the army. According to the report noted above examining threats to the army in 1933, Trotskyist groups were still identified as trying to organise counterrevolutionary groups within the ranks.⁶⁸ Thus, low-level arrests for ‘Trotskyist activity’ continued into the early 1930s.⁶⁹ In addition, the political police had initiated surveillance over some senior former army Trotskyists. For example, even after several senior army Trotskyists had recanted their ‘political errors’ in the late 1920s, the political police remained unconvinced about their sincerity. In August 1933 they created a file on the former Trotskyist Primakov, who was sent abroad as a military attaché in 1927, but recanted his opposition the following year. Crucially, the memorandum noted that: ‘in June 1928 he gave a declaration about breaking with the Opposition of a double-dealing (*dvurushnicheskogo*) character, having actually maintained his Trotskyist positions’.⁷⁰ The memorandum called for close observation of Primakov in view of exposing his suspected subversive work and Trotskyist activity.⁷¹ In addition, the former Trotskyist brigade commander, M. Ziuk, had told the political police that, apparently, another former Trotskyist, Ie. Dreitser, had contacted him and proposed starting their underground activity again.⁷² The veracity of Ziuk’s statement or whether Primakov was in fact a ‘double-dealer’ is difficult to gauge. The political police had shown alarmism about the Trotskyist threat in the 1920s, but it is clear that they remained concerned about this influence in the army. They did not trust those Trotskyists who had recanted. Indeed, it is not out of the question that some former Trotskyist officers were actually meeting once again, even if they were not ‘conspiring’

⁶⁸ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 178, l. 55.

⁶⁹ For a small number of cases of ‘Trotskyist agitation’ in the army in 1930-34, see RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 16, l. 1; for 1933, RGVA, f. 37837, op. 10, d. 20, ll. 131-132; for 1934, RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 52, ll. 46, 48; d. 39, l. 32.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Zdanovich, p. 325.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 325-326.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 326.

or agitating against Stalin. It is certain that some former Trotskyists would not have admitted their 'political errors' sincerely. Some would have accepted the need to recant for the sake of keeping their positions and party membership, but privately would remain dissatisfied and discontented with Stalin's leadership. Some former Trotskyists may well have continued to meet each other in the early 1930s after they believed the pressure had eased.⁷³ Yet, as far as the political police were concerned, any gathering of former Trotskyists was suspicious, and perhaps evidence of a 'conspiracy', and they were keeping watch. However, the increased attention Primakov received in 1933 did not halt his advancement in the army. In January 1935 he was made a member of the Military Soviet, one of the army's highest bodies.⁷⁴ That year he also became deputy commander of the LVO, an important strategic military district. Thus, being a former Trotskyist in the army under political police observation did not always stifle a military career. It is possible that Voroshilov was unaware of the surveillance over Primakov. He had been kept out of the loop regarding Tukhachevskii's incrimination in operation *vesna* and the political police may have done so again, perhaps sensing another opportunity to undermine Voroshilov in front of Stalin. It is hardly likely they were happy that Voroshilov had given Primakov responsible intelligence tasks in Japan. Therefore, if it did turn out that he was up to anything suspicious, this would reflect badly on Voroshilov. Though, if Voroshilov did know about the surveillance, he may have preferred to ignore the suspicions surrounding Primakov. Indeed, scrutinising Primakov could clear the way for a wider investigation into 'suspicious' former Trotskyists occupying other command positions. Voroshilov must have known this would result in the 'exposure' of other 'enemies' missed by the officer corps and PUR, and this would undermine his leadership. Or perhaps Voroshilov genuinely believed Primakov was reliable, in the same way that he seemed to believe in Putna's loyalty in the late 1920s. In the first half of the 1930s former Trotskyists were not seen in the same threatening terms that they were in 1936. However, as the 1930s progressed the

⁷³ When Primakov was later under arrest in 1936 he send a letter to Stalin in October denying being a Trotskyist or knowing about a counterrevolutionary military organisation, but he did admit to having continued to meet with other Trotskyists in the early 1930s even though he had publicly broken with Trotsky, see *Izvestiia TsK*, p. 44.

⁷⁴ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 10, d. 32, l. 60. Primakov was also part of the last group of officers to study in Germany from December 1932 to June 1933, and therefore must have been trusted sufficiently enough to spend time in an increasingly hostile country, see Sergei Gorlov, *Sovershenno sekretno: Moskva-Berlin, 1920-1933: voenno-politicheskie otnosheniia mezhdru SSSR i Germaniei* (Moscow: IVI RAN, 1999), p. 233. It may not be a coincidence that on his return the political police created a file on him.

pressure on members of the former Opposition increased dramatically and Voroshilov was soon confronted with the problem of hidden Trotskyists in the ranks.

The Kirov Murder

On 1 December 1934 Sergei Kirov, the Leningrad Party Secretary, was shot outside his office in the Smolny Building in Leningrad by a lone assassin, a disgruntled party member Leonid Nikolaev. The repercussions of the murder were profound. Following the assassination the apparatus of repression was scaled upwards and an emergency decree was rushed through by the Politburo, the law of 1 December 1934. This shortened the process of arrest and trial for those accused of terrorism. Under the law there would be no right to appeal and immediate execution if guilt was established.⁷⁵ There has been much speculation in the literature about whether Stalin had a role in the Kirov murder as a means to increase the apparatus of repression and expand his power.⁷⁶ But while there is no evidence that Stalin had a hand in the murder itself, that he exploited it is beyond question.⁷⁷ Indeed, as some of the initial arrests were of former Zinovievites, Stalin used the Kirov murder to implicate the former oppositionists Zinoviev and Kamenev.⁷⁸ Both were later arrested and charged with creating the conditions by which the assassination could occur. They supposedly had ‘moral complicity’ and received prison sentences. On 18 January 1935 the Central Committee sent a secret letter to all party organisations relaying the charges against Zinoviev and Kamenev and about the existence of a Zinovievite counterrevolutionary group, the ‘Leningrad Centre’. The letter also mentioned apparent ties between the Centre and German fascists.⁷⁹ The murder increased political tensions and in February 1935 hundreds of former oppositionists were arrested in Leningrad. However, in the immediate aftermath of the Kirov murder the arrests were not targeted. These have been described by Getty as ‘spasmodic and unfocused’.⁸⁰ The regime was thrashing around in the wake of the murder of the Leningrad Party Boss. Yet, there has been very little

⁷⁵ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 141.

⁷⁶ See for example, Conquest, pp. 72-96.

⁷⁷ For a recent collection on the Kirov murder see Matthew Lenoe, *The Kirov Murder and Soviet History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁷⁸ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 146.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-150.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

analysis over whether the Red Army was affected by this kneejerk reaction and what the consequences of the Kirov murder were for the military.⁸¹

The Kirov assassination did play some role in several military arrests from December and into January 1935. For example, the charge of ‘counterrevolutionary agitation in reference to the murder of Kirov’ appeared on some indictments. Shortly after the assassination, sixty-three Red Army men, including twenty officers, were arrested for connections to Zinoviev.⁸² In addition, from 1 December 1934 to 20 January 1935, forty-three soldiers were arrested in the MVO for apparently having ‘counterrevolutionary moods’ linked to the murder of Kirov.⁸³ Similar cases can be seen in other military districts.⁸⁴ However, these arrests did not represent a targeted scrutiny of the army and the military elite seemed initially unconcerned about any negative consequences in the army following the shooting. Nine days after the shooting the Red Army held the inaugural meeting of the Military Soviet and Kirov was hardly mentioned at all.⁸⁵ His name was only mentioned twice throughout the three day meeting and only once in terms of how the murder represented the growing class struggle.⁸⁶ There were no calls whatsoever to launch an investigation in the army or to purge the ranks of suspicious individuals. Where Kirov was mentioned, he was used as an example of how the army needed to raise its ‘vigilance’. This was not a new complaint. Yet, despite the few references made to Kirov, the army leadership were not entirely at ease over ‘enemies’ within the ranks.

During the Military Soviet numerous formulaic pronouncements were made by participants about the increasing quality of political work and how the troops were more closely aligned around the party and Stalin. However, some more worrying trends were noted which give a clearer impression of the problems within the army which ran deeper than ‘weak vigilance’. For example, the deputy head of PUR, Anton Bulin, noted that in a recent check of the political reliability of forty-five military formations, thirteen were appraised as ‘good’, twenty-seven as ‘satisfactory’ and five as ‘unsatisfactory’. There

⁸¹ One notable exception is the work of Suvenirov who did provide some examination of the Red Army in light of the Kirov murder, see *Tragediia RKKA*, p. 51.

⁸² Getty and Naumov, *Yezhov: The Rise of Stalin's "Iron Fist"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 140.

⁸³ Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKA*, p. 27. For such a case from the MVO on 3 December 1934 mentioning the Kirov murder on their indictment see, RGVA, f. 37837, op. 10, d. 26, l. 289.

⁸⁴ For such an arrest in the BVO of officer's aid, see *ibid.*, ll. 194-196.

⁸⁵ The Military Soviet was an advisory body attached to the People's Commissariat of Defence.

⁸⁶ *Voennyi soviet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR, dekabr' 1934 g.: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. by P. N. Bobylev and others (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2007), p. 123.

was clearly room for improvement. Bulin also criticised ‘forms of bureaucratic cabinet leadership’, which suggested that some officers and political workers did not know their rank-and-file soldiers well enough.⁸⁷ Apparently, it was this detachment that allowed ‘enemies’ to go undetected. Bulin also argued that even when a satisfactory general appraisal was given for political reliability, this could mask the ‘enemies’ who are working within.⁸⁸ Good appraisals provided little incentive to root out ‘enemies’. Yet, as much as positive appraisals may have induced genuine complacency within the officer corps, they may also have been used by some as a good excuse not to dig any deeper into a regiment to look for foreign agents and ‘counterrevolutionaries’. A good appraisal was an effective means of avoiding attention. Most interestingly, Gamarnik criticised the ‘formalistic’ manner over which reprimands were being applied to soldiers, leaving some divisions with sixty to seventy percent of the soldiers having some kind of reprimand. In describing the practice as ‘formalistic’, Gamarnik viewed this as mechanistic, being without thought or consideration. He also noted that reprimands were given as an easy alternative to proper political education.⁸⁹ A reprimand of this type would be given for a minor crime, and certainly not a political crime, which would lead to arrest or discharge. As such, not only was political education not being conducted correctly, but reprimands for minor crimes were being given out on mass. Again, this could suggest that some officers were taking the easy route out and not tackling the real problems of ‘enemies’ in their units. They were perhaps resorting to mass reprimands as an overt demonstration that they were in fact ‘vigilant’. This way an officer could avoid tackling the more difficult problem of potential political ‘enemies’ and foreign agents in the ranks while still giving the impression of being duly alert against criminality. The ‘exposure’ of political enemy or spy, of whom an arrest may draw attention back to the commanding officer, was avoided. This criticism about reprimands was similar to Voroshilov’s earlier orders condemning incorrect discharges. But most damningly, Gamarnik noted that those who gave inspections of their own troops often exaggerated these in a positive light. The defects and problems in the army were being smoothed over. Gamarnik cautioned against embellishing successes and argued that this allowed ‘enemies’ to get into the

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

ranks. He remarked, ‘under our very nose the enemy is huddled near us’.⁹⁰ Thus, there are further indications that some officers were deliberately not tackling the real problems with political reliability under their commands, through exaggerating their own stability and discharging soldiers needlessly. It is likely this was the reality behind the complaints about poor ‘vigilance’.

The political police had a presence at the Military Soviet in M. I. Gai, the head of the Main Administration of State Security of the NKVD in the army. He kept up the pressure on Voroshilov by presenting a picture of an army highly vulnerable to infiltration.⁹¹ Gai pointed to an increasing espionage threat and the growing activity of foreign intelligence agents on Soviet territory. He argued that foreign agents were not simply collecting intelligence but were engaged in ‘the organisation of diversionary acts’.⁹² Spy residencies were apparently being created which would activate at a time of war.⁹³ Gai noted that he could give several examples of poor ‘vigilance’ in the command and barracks, and made a note of the Nakhaev case.⁹⁴ Gai also complained that the study of people in the army had not been given suitable attention and consequently harmful ‘socially alien elements’ were often exposed. According to Gai, this problem was not confined to the ranks, but was present in the officer corps.⁹⁵ Gai argued that such people were the ‘direct agents of the enemy’, who, using false documents, were able to get into responsible positions in the army and pointed to former White officers with links to the émigré groups who had apparently managed to get command positions.⁹⁶ Thus, according to the political police, the Red Army was still at a high risk from infiltration and this was no time to be complacent. They were maintaining their focus and keeping up the pressure on the military in the context of a perceived increase in foreign espionage, and were emphasising the danger from external ‘enemies’ and subversives. In his final speech Voroshilov pointed to the political stability of the military noting its strength and praised the work which had been done to achieve this. However, he argued that traitors had no place in the army and if they did appear this was the consequence of weak vigilance. He pressed the need once more to

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁹¹ The OGPU became the ‘People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs’, *Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennykh del (NKVD)* in 1934.

⁹² *Voennyi sovet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR, dekabr' 1934 g.*, ed. by Bobylev and others, p. 349.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

raise this.⁹⁷ But criticising ‘vigilance’ did not get to the heart of the problems detailed above. This was not a serious approach in tackling these issues. It seems that Voroshilov still did not have any credible solutions to these symptoms of a failure in army self-policing. However, Voroshilov was in an increasingly difficult position. It was far easier for the political police to ‘expose’ ‘enemies’ in the ranks than the officers and PUR. Indeed, many of those arrested by the political police were innocent. They made arrests on weak grounds, for example in arresting ‘suspicious’ foreign nationals as ‘spies’, and forced confessions could provide the necessary ‘evidence’. Potentially the political police could arrest innocent soldiers on the charge of espionage and then blame the commanding officers and PUR for missing the ‘enemies’ in their midst. In this sense, the army would always struggle to compete with the political police in terms of ‘exposing’ ‘enemies’. The officers and PUR did not have the same approach, methods, or standard of evidence. Thus, the army’s efforts would never satisfy the political police and as shown below, increasingly neither Stalin. But Voroshilov’s orders about ‘vigilance’ are slightly contradictory. He criticised how ‘enemies’ went undiscovered and the danger of this, but his response was always measured and focused vaguely on raising ‘vigilance’. Voroshilov surely knew that the political police had the upper hand when it came to ‘exposing’ ‘enemies’ in the ranks and that Stalin wanted these people found. But considering the problems Voroshilov faced in getting his officers to correctly scrutinise their soldiers, to which he had no real solution, the army could not compete with the political police. Thus, calling for more ‘vigilance’ may have been a way for Voroshilov, and also Gamarnik, to be seen as doing something about the problems with army self-policing, to show that they were aware of the issue and about the serious threat from hidden ‘enemies’, even though this call would prove ineffective. They needed to highlight the danger and display the correct ‘signals’. In this sense, calling for more vigilance may not have been completely sincere, and perhaps it was more a way for Voroshilov and Gamarnik to cover their backs.

In early 1935 German rearmament was progressing as such a rate that it was no longer possible to keep secret and the German government began to signal their aggressive intentions.⁹⁸ In 10 March interview with the British newspaper the *Daily Mail*, Hermann Göring declared that Germany had an Air Force, the Luftwaffe, and on

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 366.

⁹⁸ Joseph Maiolo, *Cry Havoc: The Arms Race and the Second World War, 1931-1941* (London: John Murray, 2010), p. 52.

16 March the German government declared universal conscription. Both announcements caused an international uproar. In the Soviet Union Tukhachevskii was one of the most vocal figures pointing to the German threat. He publicly sounded the alarm in 1935 in a *Pravda* article in March entitled, ‘The War Plans of Contemporary Germany’, which was edited by Stalin. The article attacked German rearmament and criticised their expansionism. On the very day this article was published Stalin met with the British Conservative Anthony Eden and warned about the danger of war and how this was greater than 1914.⁹⁹ The Bolsheviks now saw Germany, Japan, Poland and Finland as their most probable enemies in war.¹⁰⁰ In May the strength of the army was bolstered by phasing out the territorial system and increasing the cadre component of troops by 600,000.¹⁰¹ German-Soviet relations would remain highly tense from this point on and the Soviet Union signed mutual assistance pacts with France and Czechoslovakia in May.

Alongside the worsening international situation, members of the former political Opposition came under growing pressure in 1935. Political arrests in general increased dramatically in the tense political climate following the Kirov assassination. This was a trend which would carry on into 1936.¹⁰² Alongside these political arrests, the numbers of cases of ‘counterrevolutionary crime’ and ‘agitation’ also increased.¹⁰³ The army was not insulated from these political pressures. Despite not being subject to any specific scrutiny following the Kirov assassination, arrests for ‘counterrevolutionary’ crime increased in the army in 1935. For example, the Chief Military Procurator, Naum Rozovskii, reported that in 1935 counterrevolutionary crime constituted twenty-seven percent of all crime in the army, occupying first place, and furthermore it had seen a nine-fold increase from 1934, from 151 convictions to 1374 in 1935.¹⁰⁴ Before the Kirov assassination counterrevolutionary crime had fallen in the army from 2811 cases in 1932, to 2390 cases in 1933.¹⁰⁵ It is difficult to establish whether such a large

⁹⁹ Geoffrey Roberts, ‘The Fascist War Threat and Soviet Politics in the 1930s’, in *Russia in the Age of Wars*, ed. by Pons and Romano, 147-158, (p. 149).

¹⁰⁰ Pozniakov, ‘The Enemy at the Gates’, p. 223.

¹⁰¹ Ziemke, p. 195.

¹⁰² Khaustov and Samuelson, p. 93.

¹⁰³ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 156.

¹⁰⁴ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 281, l. 144. For individual cases of counterrevolutionary crime, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 82, ll. 7-49; d. 63, l. 47; d. 64, ll. 82, 145, 181-206, 391; d. 80, ll. 64, 106, 163, 180, 212, 394; f. 4, op. 14, d. 1413, ll. 12-13; op. 10, d. 76, l. 345; d. 32, l. 247.

¹⁰⁵ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 178, l. 3. The number of cases of counterrevolutionary crime had been in decline in 1934, but there had been a recorded increase in the number of counterrevolutionary groups from 1932 to 1933, increasing from 208 to 309.

increase in arrests for counterrevolutionary crime in 1935 was a consequence of the calls from Voroshilov at the December 1934 Military Soviet to raise ‘vigilance’ or the impact of the Kirov assassination itself. A separate report from the Military Procuracy gave both reasons.¹⁰⁶ Though it is more likely that the increase was more the result of focused political police attentions in searching out ‘counterrevolutionaries’ in the wake of the Kirov assassination, rather than any real improvements in self-policing within the army. Indeed, the officer corps continued to be criticised for ‘weak vigilance’ and their inability to expose the dangerous ‘enemies’ in ranks over the next two years. In any case, political and ‘counterrevolutionary’ crimes were on the increase in the army, but this was at the same time as general criminality was in decline. According to Rozovskii, 5062 cadre Red Army men were convicted of various crimes during 1935, a decline from 5298 in 1934 and 7091 in 1933. This decline in general arrests continued into 1936.¹⁰⁷ As such, it was political arrests and ‘counterrevolutionary’ crime that were becoming the focus of attention. The Military Procuracy also noted that ‘class-alien elements’ were attempting to influence the less ‘conscious’ of the Red Army soldiers and highlighted the convictions of a number of Trotskyist ‘double-dealers’ in 1935.¹⁰⁸ Arrests for Trotskyism continued throughout 1935.¹⁰⁹ According one set of statistics 268 individuals were removed from the army command for Trotskyism in 1935, slightly surpassing the 239 for ‘counterrevolutionary agitation’.¹¹⁰

The chief reason why general crime was falling at the same time as political arrests and cases of ‘counterrevolutionary’ crime were increasing is that the Voroshilov had gained control over the sanctioning of army arrests. This required the political police to gain permission before an arrest was made. Specifically, the Military Procuracy had gained more authority in sanctioning the arrests of officers in April 1933 when the Central Military Procuracy mandated that agreement for these arrests was required from either the Central Military Procuracy or the district Military Procuracies. On 26 May 1934 the Politburo issued a further order forbidding the political police to

¹⁰⁶ RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 1684, ll. 33-36.

¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, according to the Chief Military Procurator, in 1927-28 there were 16,059 convictions in the army, in 1928-29 this fell to 11,123, see RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 281, l. 144. For declining arrests in the army command throughout 1934-36, see Feldman’s comments in March 1937 to a meeting of the Red Army *aktiv*, RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 1820, l. 558.

¹⁰⁸ RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 1684, ll. 33-36.

¹⁰⁹ For examples of cases of Trotskyist agitation in 1935, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 39, l. 32; d. 63, ll. 223-226, 256, 356-357, 458, 633; d. 64, ll. 21, 355, 417; d. 80, ll. 126, 164, 219, 238, 355; d. 94, ll. 6, 209, 270, 307, 324, 338-339; f. 4, op. 14, d. 1366, ll. 12, 62.

¹¹⁰ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 107, l. 14; these same statistics are also in a separate report on l. 16.

arrest soldiers and officers without the agreement of a political commissar. In February 1935 only Voroshilov, or in his absence Gamarnik, could sanction sending a person of the rank of platoon commander and above to court. Sanction for arrest at this level also needed Voroshilov's permission. In a speech to the Red Army party members in March 1937 Feldman specifically highlighted that awarding the army the right to approve arrests caused a decline in arrest levels.¹¹¹ Voroshilov's gaining the right to sanction arrests was in line with a larger shift in Soviet judicial policy in 1934 towards increased legality, giving more power to the courts and removing the extra-judicial power from the political police. This saw the creation of an all-Union Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) on 10 July 1934, which replaced the OGPU, and the creation of a Procurator of the USSR. Such reforms were an attempt to ensure greater supervision and centralisation of police power from the centre. Importantly, the NKVD did not have the same extra-judicial powers as the former OGPU. Indeed, these were coming under criticism. In mid-1934 Stalin had criticised 'illegal' investigative methods used by the political police.¹¹² For Voroshilov these reforms would be welcome news. It allowed him much greater control of the arrests made by the political police. This strengthened his position, and the new emphasis on legality saw declining arrest levels which would support Voroshilov's argument that the army was reliable and stable. However, there were limits to this. 'Counterrevolutionary' crime still surged after the Kirov assassination. The murder was a tipping point for the Bolshevik Party and in escalating political repression. It had huge impact, and Voroshilov would have felt this as much as other senior Party figures. Like Stalin, Voroshilov also no doubt had serious worries about hidden 'counterrevolutionaries' following the murder of his colleague. Furthermore, the climate was such in 1935 that it would be difficult for Voroshilov to take a more evidence-based approach to arrests for 'counterrevolutionary' crime in the military even if he wanted to. Stalin wanted a crack-down on hidden 'enemies' and on members of the former opposition in the wake of the assassination, and Voroshilov needed to show he was doing this in the Red Army. He probably also wanted to find dangerous 'enemies' in the ranks after the Kirov murder. Consequently, broader arrests may have been in decline in the Red Army from 1934, showing that the military purge of 1937-38 was not the culmination of a steady building repression in the wider army,

¹¹¹ See Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKA*, p. 62; 'Narkomat Oborony i NKVD v predvoennye gody', p. 27; *Lubianka: Stalin i VChK-GPU-OGPU-NKVD, ianvar' 1922-dekabr' 1936*, ed. by Khaustov and others, (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond "Demokratiia", 2003), p. 524; RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 1820, l. 558.

¹¹² Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, pp. 121-123. See also Hagenloh, pp. 149-157.

but arrests for counterrevolutionary crimes still grew rapidly from 1935 and worries in the Party about dangerous hidden ‘enemies’ only increased. In this sense, the political police still retained the initiative. With PUR and the officer corps struggling to successfully ‘expose’ these dangerous political ‘enemies’ and ‘counterrevolutionaries’, the groups now the focus of Stalin’s attention, and with Voroshilov’s solution being merely to raise ‘vigilance’, the political police had the upper hand.

Within this surge in recorded cases of ‘counterrevolutionary’ crime, Tukhachevskii’s name was mentioned in another investigation into a ‘counterrevolutionary’ group. In June 1935 Gaya Gai, who had supported Trotsky in the 1920s and a Professor of War History and Military Art, was arrested and accused of being part of a counterrevolutionary group. He was charged with spreading Trotskyist ‘slander’ and having designs to ‘remove’ (*ubrat*) Stalin.¹¹³ G. Gai denied these accusations, which had supposedly occurred during a drunken conversation. This did not save him however, and he received five years in the labour camps.¹¹⁴ G. Gai had a history with Tukhachevskii, having met in the 1st Revolutionary Army in 1918 and subsequently fought in battle. There are indications that they were close acquaintances.¹¹⁵ During the investigation, one of the arrested men, a certain Avanesian, remarked that G. Gai had apparently complained about how his career had been held back and he blamed Budennyi and Voroshilov for this.¹¹⁶ He had supposedly then said: ‘If Tukhachevskii was People’s Commissar (*Narkom*), then my chances would be much better’.¹¹⁷ Not only was this another case where Tukhachevskii’s name emerged during an interrogation into an alleged counterrevolutionary group, but these comments show a clear separation between Voroshilov and Budennyi on one side and Tukhachevskii on the other. This indicates that the disunity within the army leadership had filtered down throughout the ranks and was known to a wider circle of officers. Yet, despite G. Gai’s alleged mention of Tukhachevskii’s name, there were no obvious consequences. Tukhachevskii’s career continued on an upwards trajectory. He was one of the very few to be given the rank of Marshal of the Soviet Union when military rank was restored to the Red Army in 1935 and he seemed to have more influence than ever before. Tukhachevskii had become dominant voice in foreign policy in 1935, beginning with

¹¹³ See the interrogation transcript for Gai, RGASPI, f. 671, op. 1, d. 142, l. 94.

¹¹⁴ Gai was executed in December 1937, see Cherushev, pp. 75-78.

¹¹⁵ Minakov, *Stalin i ego marshal*, p. 96.

¹¹⁶ Avanesian’s first name is not indicated in the document.

¹¹⁷ RGASPI, f. 671, op. 1, d. 142, l. 102.

his *Pravda* article on Germany. He took on further diplomatic responsibilities in 1936 and 1937. During 1935 there is little indication Tukhachevskii was being sidelined due to questions about his character, his judgement or political reliability. Yet, the new incrimination from G. Gai's case would surely be added to Tukhachevskii's growing police file and the case created a further association between him and 'counterrevolution'.

Despite the increase in 'counterrevolutionary' crime in 1935 there was no change in how Voroshilov approached the issue of 'enemies' within the ranks. He still merely called for 'vigilance' to be raised. For example, in April he published another two RVS orders on this issue. The first order gave an example of a supposed 'scoundrel and swindler' who had impersonated a party member and through fraudulent means got a position in an aviation brigade in the Zabaikal forces. The imposter had even been able to fly aeroplanes. Voroshilov noted that the man had managed this because of a close acquaintance with some officers. This was a question of nepotism. Voroshilov argued that the case demonstrated a lack of 'vigilance' towards the class enemy and that the officers in question should be punished harshly. He added that similar cases were to be regarded as serious crimes.¹¹⁸ The second RVS order in April was similar. This time Voroshilov highlighted the 'blunting of Bolshevik vigilance' of a number of soldiers in regiment. Apparently the regiment Chief of Staff had engaged in 'counterrevolutionary' conversations for an extended period but no one had reported this. Voroshilov ordered reprimands to be applied and those responsible to be removed from their positions.¹¹⁹ However, Voroshilov's continued criticisms of 'weak vigilance' were unlikely to change anything. Again, he was not tackling the roots of the problems. Why was there 'insufficient vigilance' in the command? Why were incidents going unreported? Perhaps Voroshilov did not have the answer. It was easier to simply proclaim the need for increased 'vigilance' as a catch-all solution to the army's problems, and be seen as doing something rather than nothing. Indeed, the need for more 'vigilance' was the official line and *Krasnaia zvezda* published a few front page articles about this in 1935.¹²⁰

Voroshilov was soon given the opportunity to find out whether his previous calls for more vigilance had been effective when in May 1935 the party conducted a *chistka*,

¹¹⁸ RGVA, 37837, op. 10, d. 32, l. 404.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., l. 381.

¹²⁰ See *Krasnaia zvezda*, 'Bditel'nost' prezhde vsego', 5.1.1935, p. 1; 'Eshche vishe bditel'nost'', 20.6.1935, p. 1; 'V khode proverki partiinikh dokumentov', 17.10.1935, p. 1.

the verification of party documents (*proverka*). The *proverka* aimed to improve the chaotic state of party record keeping and also weed out corrupt and criminal members. The *proverka* uncovered ‘social aliens’, kulaks, Whites, but also alleged Trotskyists, Zinovievites, and spies. This purge is generally passed over in the literature on the Red Army, but its results are revealing. During the *proverka* the army party organisations expelled 5311 party members and 2472 candidate members, representing 3.6% and 5.3% of their total numbers respectively.¹²¹ The combined total of full and candidate members was consistent with the nine percent expelled from the party nationally.¹²² The most common reason for army expulsion from the party was hiding social origins, having a link to a ‘socially-harmful element’ or having kept secret a past service in the White forces during the Civil War. These reasons totalled 3350 exclusions. For Trotskyism and Zinovievism, 261 were expelled, and 114 were expelled for espionage. The latter represented only 1.5% of expulsions. Thus, while demonstrating the continued presence of these more dangerous groups (spies and former oppositionists) they were by no means dominant. Espionage in particular was low down on the list as a reason for expulsion.¹²³

However, on 26 June 1935 Gamarnik gave a speech to the heads of the political organisations in the BVO and spoke about the results of the *proverka*, and it is clear that he was not happy. Gamarnik remarked that the *proverka* showed that in the army people were still being studied ‘very badly’ and that they ‘did know know people well’.¹²⁴ Despite Trotskyists and spies being on the lower end of expulsions, Gamarnik highlighted them specifically:

The fact of the matter is that in total in the Belorussian district 555 people were excluded. This figure is not so large, it is four or something percent. Among those now exposed and excluded from the party are clear enemies – spies, white guards, Trotskyists, who we had not revealed before the *proverka* of party documents, although the people were studied. The *proverka* of party documents helped us to identify the enormous quantity of people who we did not know earlier or knew poorly.¹²⁵

¹²¹ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 872, l. 85. For examples of individual expulsions see, RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 64, l. 257; f. 9, op. 29, d. 231, ll. 17-19, 68-72.

¹²² Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, p. 82.

¹²³ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 872, l. 85. For cases of espionage in the army during 1935 brought by the political police, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 63, ll. 18, 45-46, 59, 198-201, 678-679; d. 80, ll. 161, 269, 373.

¹²⁴ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 15, l. 39.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

Thus, despite ‘socially harmful elements’ assuming the bulk of the expulsions, Gamarnik was concerned that the more dangerous enemies, the spies and Trotskyists, had not been exposed before the *proverka*. Clearly standards of ‘vigilance’ had not been improved in the army and it had taken an independent party purge to reveal the hidden ‘enemies’. At a time when the focus was increasingly placed on spies and active members of former opposition, this should have concerned Gamarnik as head of PUR. The problems of the conduct of the *proverka* were well-publicised and PUR were criticised in *Krasnaia zvezda* for completing the *proverka* too hastily and taking a ‘purely technical attitude’.¹²⁶ This, however, was an easy platitude that would not get to the real reason why the army was seemingly failing to discover ‘enemies’. Voroshilov and Gamarnik were again only addressing the symptoms of a much deeper problem in how the officer corps and PUR responded to campaigns to root out ‘enemies’. But again, for both men, it was crucial to be seen as doing something, rather than nothing.

In addition, that Gamarnik singled out foreign agents in particular corresponds to how they were gradually perceived as a much greater threat in general terms. For instance, the organiser of the *proverka*, Nikolai Ezhov, who later led the political police, reported to Stalin in the summer of 1935 that foreign agents had infiltrated the party. He repeated this in a report to a conference of regional party Secretaries in September. Ezhov also remarked that he was confident that the, ‘Trotskyists undoubtedly have a center somewhere in the USSR’.¹²⁷ As William Chase notes, Ezhov spoke of Trotskyists and spies very much in the same breath. He saw little difference between them in either goals or tactics.¹²⁸ From 1935 the Soviet Union’s borders were strengthened and thousands of Germans and Poles and other national groups were deported from the border regions from a fear they would turn against the regime during war.¹²⁹ Furthermore, the rise of Hitler in 1933 had increased the number of communists arriving to the Soviet Union from Germany, adding a further perceived security threat. There were questions about whether those fleeing Nazi Germany could be fully trusted.

¹²⁶ Timothy Colton, *Commissars, Commanders and Civilian Authority: The Structure of Soviet Military Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 137.

¹²⁷ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, pp. 200-201.

¹²⁸ Chase, *Enemies Within the Gates?*, p. 103.

¹²⁹ James Morris, ‘The Polish Terror: Spy Mania and Ethnic Cleansing in the Great Terror’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 56. 5 (July 2004), 751-766 (pp. 757-758). In early 1935 approximately 50,000 Poles, Germans and Ukrainians were deported from the western Ukraine border, see Hagenloh, p. 233.

At the end of the year a Central Committee Plenum of December 1935 resolved to check all political émigrés.¹³⁰

When the Military Soviet met again in December 1935 the usual formulaic statements were made about sizable gains in military and political preparation, but many of the concerns from the meeting the previous year were reiterated. In his speech, Gamarnik highlighted the problems associated with ‘vigilance’ demonstrated by the *proverka*:

The *proverka* of party documents, great in its organisational and political significance, carried out according to the initiative of c.[omrade] Stalin, again showed that we still badly, often only formally, know people, that often we miss enemies – spies, Trotskyists, Zinovievites, swindlers, and very often we do not notice, promote, cultivate truly loyal to the party, able and valuable people.¹³¹

In a contrast from the previous year’s Military Soviet, Gamarnik mentioned former oppositionists specifically rather than simply use the term ‘enemies’, showing how they were an acknowledged danger following the Kirov assassination. However, Gamarnik’s chief point was how it had taken the *proverka* to actually reveal the dangerous ‘enemies’ in the ranks and that they should have been discovered before if the officers had correctly responded to the calls for more vigilance. Clearly, there had been little improvement in army self-policing. Yet Gamarnik did note that the *proverka* had increased the practice of studying people and had raised awareness.¹³² During the Military Soviet further examples given about how some officers may have been avoiding scrutinising their own units properly in the search for the more dangerous ‘counterrevolutionaries’ and foreign agents. For instance, the commander of the Siberian Military District, Ia. P. Gailit, highlighted the ‘extraordinary number’ of court cases and discharges from the army, and that soldiers were being rejected far too easily. This was a similar accusation to Gamarnik’s previous complaint about the mass use of reprimands at the previous Military Soviet, and Voroshilov’s earlier criticisms of incorrect discharges. According to Gailit, dismissal was taking precedence over re-education. Sufficient investigations into criminal cases were not being carried out and the officers and political workers were to blame. Gailit noted that in many cases no one

¹³⁰ Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov, *Stalin's Loyal Executioner: People's Commissar Nikolai Ezhov, 1895-1940* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2002), p. 40. See also, Chase, *Enemies Within the Gates?*, pp. 102-145.

¹³¹ *Voennyi sovet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR, dekabr 1935 g.: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. by P. N. Bobilev and others (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2008), p. 56.

¹³² *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

from the command had even properly examined the discharge case or spoken to the individual in question.¹³³ He argued that the officers had responded incorrectly to Voroshilov's call to raise vigilance.¹³⁴ According to Gailit no other methods were being used except sending a soldier to court or discharging them from the army.¹³⁵ The use of large numbers of discharges on weak grounds suggests again that some officers may have been making conspicuous demonstrations that they were actually responding to the calls to raise 'vigilance'. Discharging large numbers of soldiers would give cover to accusations of not being sufficiently 'vigilant'. At the same time the need to dig deeper to uncover the more dangerous political 'enemies' and spies was avoided. Thus, any danger of the officer themselves being incriminated or blamed for the presence of these dangerous 'enemies' in their command was also avoided.¹³⁶ In this respect, Gailit's comments build on earlier accusations at the previous Military Soviet that some officers may have been giving overly positive appraisals of their own units' political reliability. In all, this adds further evidence that some officers were not fully engaging with the task of rooting out 'enemies' within what was becoming a tense political and international climate, and when Voroshilov and Gamarnik were under pressure to produce results.

Indeed, the international situation continued to worsen into 1936. On 7 March Germany took possession of the Rhineland, in May Italy annexed Abyssinia and in July the Spanish Civil War began. For the Bolsheviks it seemed that the hot war had finally begun and Soviet defence spending correspondingly rose sharply.¹³⁷ This downturn in the international scene increased concerns about foreign agents.¹³⁸ In February the Central Committee accepted Ezhov's draft report, 'On Measures to Protect the USSR Against the Penetration of Spy, Terrorist, and Sabotage Elements', which pointed to the growing spy threat within political émigré circles within the Soviet Union. Polish espionage in particular became a focus of the political police's attention.¹³⁹ There was

¹³³ Ibid., pp. 130-131.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Gailit did not mention the reason for these discharges, and whether these were for mundane reasons, such as drunkenness, or for something more serious such as being a kulak, or even a political 'enemy'. But as Gailit argued that re-education and 'support' should be used more extensively it is very unlikely that the discharges he referred to were for serious political crimes or espionage. These discharges were likely to have been made for low-level crimes.

¹³⁷ Harris, 'Encircled by Enemies', p. 541; Mark Harrison and R. W. Davies, 'The Soviet Military-Economic Effort during the Second Five-Year Plan (1933-1937)', p. 371.

¹³⁸ Getty and Naumov, *Yezhov*, pp. 184-186; Chase, *Enemies Within the Gates?*, p. 134.

¹³⁹ See Jansen and Petrov, pp. 41-42.

similarly little change of tone in the army during the first half of 1936 and Gamarnik continued to speak about the need for greater ‘vigilance’ and reiterated the lessons of the *proverka*. For example, in a February speech he remarked:

By the way of a verification of party documents in the personnel of the RKKA we found real enemies, who deceived us, who got into the army using false documents. We revealed spies in the army, of who are not only expelled from the army and party but were sent to prison... much to our shame we are still allowing such scum into the army ... And at the same time there are often people who we are not allowing into the army, but who ought to be permitted, who ought to be in the army.

Alongside the continual ‘discovery’ of dangerous ‘enemies’ in the ranks, the issue of incorrect discharges is clear in this speech.¹⁴⁰ On 1 April Gamarnik gave a similar speech to the Moscow Garrison. Speaking about the party expulsions from the army during the *proverka* Gamarnik remarked that: ‘there are many crooks among them, having infiltrated into the party with false documents. There is a group – not large – of spies’.¹⁴¹ Gamarnik again emphasised the need to raise vigilance and added that:

We have to close all gaps for the enemy, and still it must be admitted, not only gaps, but all the doors and windows were wide open and any clever person, any clever crook, was able to infiltrate anywhere... in link with insufficient vigilance of the individual army party organisations, in our organisations we revealed spies, white guards, crooks, we revealed a group of Trotskyists and Zinovievites who led subversive work.¹⁴²

Gamarnik was still not offering any real solutions in blaming ‘vigilance’. He drew attention to the dangerous ‘enemies’ that had apparently been missed by the army, and perhaps this was his only intention. Gamarnik needed to show he was aware that of the ‘unexposed’ ‘enemies’ in the ranks to provide some cover that he did not have any answers. As such, unfortunately for Gamarnik, the ‘gaps’ he identified would remain unclosed.

1936 saw another party purge, similar to the *proverka*, the exchange of party documents (*obmen partdokumentov*). The *proverka* had stumbled during its fulfilment and the *obmen* provided the opportunity to replace old party documents and reconsider

¹⁴⁰ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 263, l. 42. Gamarnik’s attitude towards incorrect discharges can be seen in his comments in February 1936 on a list of discharges prepared by the officers N. A. Efrimov and A. M. Vol’pe. Gamarnik remarked that many on the list had actually done nothing wrong, and that ‘This list is formally and mechanistically compiled. It is possible there are enemies here, but there are quite a few good men, of whom is it necessary to educate’, see RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 281, l. 19.

¹⁴¹ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 263, l. 81.

¹⁴² Ibid., l. 83.

many of the cases from the *proverka*. During the course of the *obmen* further members of the army party organisations were expelled. Party passivity, being deemed a ‘social alien’ or having a link to one, and moral degeneracy constituted the majority of the expulsions.¹⁴³ However, again the more dangerous political ‘enemies’ were also discovered. According to Voroshilov in early 1937, the *obmen* expelled 244 Trotskyists and Zinovievites, which was just short of the 261 expelled in the *proverka*.¹⁴⁴ Like the *proverka*, the *obmen* would provide another demonstration that despite the calls for the army to increase ‘vigilance’, ‘enemies’ were still unexposed in the ranks and that it took an independent party purge to reveal these. This would add to concerns that the army was still not successfully rooting out ‘enemies’ independently.

However, despite these growing political and international tensions and concerns about unexposed ‘enemies’ in the ranks, there is no indication that anything as extreme as an all-army purge was looming. General military arrest levels continued to decline during 1936. According to a March 1937 report by Feldman, the head of the Main Administration of the Red Army, 6000 people from the army command were discharged in 1936, whereas in 1935 this number had been 7500.¹⁴⁵ A report compiled by Vasily Ulrikh, the Chairman of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court, detailed that within the cadre element of the Red Army for the first half of 1936 there had been 1692 convictions, whereas during the same period in 1935 the number was 2839. The downwards trend was for both officers and ordinary soldiers.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, the army recorded a decline in cases of counterrevolutionary agitation in 1936 in the

¹⁴³ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 872, l. 85.

¹⁴⁴ *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 166.

¹⁴⁵ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 107, l. 3. Feldman details that in 1933 10,000 men were discharged from the command and 7500 in 1934. Feldman’s numbers are clearly approximations. For another set of approximately corresponding statistics, see *ibid.*, l. 14. This report notes 8463 members of the command were discharged in 1935 and falling to 5634 for 1936. See also a report from the then head of PUR, P. A. Smirnov, to Voroshilov from December 1937 detailing discharges from PUR showing 978 removals in 1935 and 716 in 1936. According to this report, in contrast to the army command, PUR saw falling levels of those discharged for political crimes, declining from 301 in 1935 to 250 in 1936, see RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 992, l. 209. For similar general trends see also Mozokhin, *Pravo na repressii: vnesudebnye polnomochiia organov gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti: statisticheskie svedeniia o deiatel'nosti VChK-OGPU-NKVD-MGB SSSR (1918-1953)* (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2011), pp. 449, 455.

¹⁴⁶ RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 1684, l. 89. For a further corroborating report of this trend until September 1936 from Ulrikh, see l. 107. According to Ulrikh’s data convictions do not decrease month by month throughout 1936, but the total over nine months is less than the first nine months of 1935. Ulrikh also noted that counterrevolutionary crime and agitation fell between the first nine months of 1935 and the same period in 1936, from 1158 cases to 416, see l. 108.

commanding bodies, but discharges for Trotskyism were still climbing.¹⁴⁷ This is consistent with the continued pressure put on the former Opposition by Stalin, which saw further intensity in 1936. Indeed, during the first half of 1936 numerous directives were sent to the localities from the political police concerning strengthening the rooting out of Trotskyists.¹⁴⁸ Consequently, in the first half of 1936 there is no indication that repression was increasing in general terms within the Red Army or that a mass purge was on the horizon. If anything, only former Trotskyists were being increasingly targeted, most likely by the political police following the Kirov murder. But Trotskyists had only ever been a minority of the Red Army in the 1920s. In this respect, the military purge beginning in June 1937 was in no way a culmination of a rising general repression. In reality, general arrest levels were in decline before an explosion of arrests in the summer of 1937. However, that political arrests were increasing in 1936 was important. Stalin and the political police were cracking down on the former opposition, but Gamarnik and Voroshilov were not doing anything about these ‘enemies’ in the army. They vaguely appealed for ‘vigilance’ to be raised. Clearly, neither had any real solutions or knew what to do to actually improve the ‘exposure’ of ‘enemies’ by the officers and PUR. Voroshilov’s failure to act would give the political police more space to investigate the Red Army later in 1936.

The rumours about the supposed disloyalty of the military elite had also refused to subside and were maintained into the mid-1930s. Though they did not lead to any serious action at this time, these rumours would add further to the political police’s suspicions about the army elite and would be added to corresponding police files. For example, in Czechoslovakia in December 1935 a Russian journal, *Znamia Rossii*, reported that an illegal underground organisation was operating in the Soviet Union under the name of *Kraskomov*. The members of the organisation were allegedly from the Red Army high command and they aimed to overthrow Soviet power.¹⁴⁹ While on his way to England in January 1936 to attend the funeral of King George V,

¹⁴⁷ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 107, ll. 14-16. This report details that in 1935 the command discharged 268 for Trotskyism and this increased to 337 in 1936. For approximate corroborating figures, but showing the same increase in cases of Trotskyism, see *ibid.*, l. 16. At the same time discharges for counterrevolutionary agitation declined, see l. 15. For Trotskyist cases before summer 1936, see RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 291, l. 108.

¹⁴⁸ Boris Starkov, ‘Narkom Ezhov’ in *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, ed. by Getty and Manning, pp. 21-39 (p. 26).

¹⁴⁹ Lukes, p. 507.

Tukhachevskii gave an interview to the Polish newspaper, *Ekspres Poranni*, which contained the following passage:

...Tukhachevskii had always gone ‘with the wind’ (*po vetru*). In the past, when it had a purpose, he was considered to be a very staunch supporter of Trotsky. But he first turned his back on his patron as soon as he felt that Trotsky was losing and firmly took the side of Stalin.¹⁵⁰

At a time of increasing pressure on the former Opposition, being associated with Trotsky and depicted as politically capricious was damaging. The most prominent rumours, however, concerned an alleged connection between the Red Army elite and Germany. For instance, a report compiled by a corps commissar in Germany in November 1935 describing Red Army officers’ behaviour in Germany was sent to Voroshilov and Stalin in April 1936. The report suggested that Tukhachevskii was friendly with the Germans: ‘Tukhachevskii’s conduct was significant...they say that he is a Francophile. Now in an extremely courteous tone he asked about the acquaintances of the German officers with interest. This is completely different behaviour than before.’ The report noted that nearly all present officers expressed disappointment about the changed relations between their armies and the futility of war for both countries.¹⁵¹ More worryingly, in December 1935 a report on foreign threats to the Soviet Union compiled by head of military intelligence, S. P. Uritskii, noted a supposed ‘secret connection’ between the German officers and the Red Army.¹⁵² Further hints that Tukhachevskii specifically was sympathetic to the Germans were also received by Voroshilov from a military intelligence report of 17 May 1936. This report detailed Hermann Göring’s alleged comments during a meeting with the Polish minister of foreign affairs. According to the report, Göring had said he had met with Tukhachevskii when the latter had stopped in Berlin on his return from England. Tukhachevskii had supposedly raised the possibility of resuming the military collaboration between the two countries.¹⁵³ The idea of renewing the collaboration and the sense of disappointment that this had ended was nothing new. From 1933 many Red Army officers, including Voroshilov, were reported by German representatives of expressing their

¹⁵⁰ RGVA, f. 4, op. 19, d. 16, l. 57.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, l. 171.

¹⁵² Samuelson, ‘Wartime Perspective and Economic Planning: Tukhachevsky and the Military-Industrial Complex, 1925-37’ in *Russia in the Age of Wars*, ed. by Pons and Romano, pp. 187-214 (p. 210).

¹⁵³ Kantor, *Zakliataia družhba*, p. 253.

disappointment at the end of collaboration.¹⁵⁴ However, to speak favourably of the Germans during 1933-1934 was very different than in 1936. Germany was now the most likely enemy in the approaching war.¹⁵⁵ It was possible to be arrested for even making positive comments about Germany and Hitler at this time. For instance, in May 1936 a teacher at the Frunze academy was arrested for apparently saying that Hitler reflected the national sentiment in Germany.¹⁵⁶

In early 1935 the INO NKVD did take an interest in investigating a possible connection between the Red Army command and the Germans. In March 1935 a Soviet agent in Germany was instructed to investigate this supposed connection.¹⁵⁷ Despite this, it remains difficult to judge how credible and threatening these rumours were actually seen. It is very likely that these rumours were recorded and added to the expanding police files on the relevant officers and probably led to a closer police observation of the high command, but still there were no serious, immediate, consequences for the army elite. Tukhachevskii's life seemed to continue as normal. Tellingly, that he was chosen as a representative to attend the funeral of King George V in January 1936 indicates Stalin held him in enough trust for a trip abroad at a time of international crisis. Indeed, 1936 has been pointed to as the high point of Tukhachevskii's career.¹⁵⁸ Tukhachevskii was also promoted as Voroshilov's first deputy in April 1936, the same level as Gamarnik.¹⁵⁹ As relations between Voroshilov and Tukhachevskii remained poor, Stalin may have engineered this promotion. Tukhachevskii was also given additional responsibilities at this time, namely the authority to supervise the department of combat training which had been separated out from the General Staff. This applied supervision of the inspectors of corps, cavalry, artillery, all educational institutions, physical preparation and sport, and the military

¹⁵⁴ See *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945. Series C (1933-1937): The Third Reich: First Phase, vol. II. October 14, 1933 - June 13, 1934* (London: H.M.S.O., 1959), p. 338. For Tukhachevskii's comments, relayed by F. von Twardowski, see pp. 81-83. For similar remarks from Egorov, see p. 352. For Voroshilov's similar comments to H. von Dirksen and R. Nadolny, see *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945. Series C (1933-1937): The Third Reich: First Phase, vol. I, January 1930-14 October, 1933* (London: H.M.S.O., 1957), p. 422.

¹⁵⁵ Stalin rejected the story of Tukhachevskii meeting with Goring when he met Anthony Eden in March 1935, see Ivan Maiskii, *Dnevnik diplomata: London 1934-1943: v dvukh knigakh*, 2 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 2006), I, p. 100.

¹⁵⁶ Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKA*, p. 54.

¹⁵⁷ *Voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv*, p. 11.

¹⁵⁸ Ziemke, p. 197.

¹⁵⁹ Minakov, *1937 zagovor byl!*, p. 247.

work of Osoaviakhim.¹⁶⁰ If Tukhachevskii was a marked man and if there were serious questions about his loyalty due to rumours about a connection to the Nazis, it is strange that he was given a promotion and additional responsibilities. It seems likely that closer observation of Tukhachevskii was probably initiated at this time, but the rumours were not strong or credible enough for any other action to be taken.

Alongside these growing rumours about the alleged disloyalty of the military elite, tensions between Tukhachevskii and Voroshilov continued to simmer. The conflict between the two had never been resolved from the previous clashes in the late 1920s. For example, at the Seventeen Party Congress in 1934 Voroshilov again made his hostility known towards those trying to sideline the cavalry. Voroshilov did not mention any names specifically, but it is very likely that he had Tukhachevskii in mind. He referred to the need to bring ‘wrecking theories’ (*vreditel'skimi teoriiami*) about the cavalry to an end.¹⁶¹ On 1 May 1936 in Voroshilov's apartment after a military parade these tensions came to a head. In Stalin's presence Tukhachevskii accused Voroshilov and Budennyi of having formed an exclusive group who were dominating military politics. Following Tukhachevskii's outburst, Stalin had supposedly called an end to the dispute and offered to examine the issue in the Politburo. Tukhachevskii later withdrew his accusations at this session. Tukhachevskii had not been the only person to speak out. Gamarnik and Iakir were supposedly also on poor terms with Voroshilov.¹⁶² After this clash in Voroshilov's apartment, Tukhachevskii was publicly criticised in *Pravda* on 24 May when an anonymous writer accused him of pushing harmful theories which aimed at undermining the cavalry.¹⁶³ Voroshilov probably would welcome if Tukhachevskii was removed from the army leadership, but for now there was little chance of this happening. Even though Stalin continued to see a divided military leadership, the worsening international situation meant that the Red Army needed experienced leaders like Tukhachevskii in command.

¹⁶⁰ V. Danilov, ‘Sovershenstvovanie sistemy tsentral'nikh organov voennogo rukovodstva v 1929-1939 gg.’, *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal*, 6 (1982), 74-79 (p. 78).

¹⁶¹ *XVII s'ezd Vsesoiuzno kommunisticheskoi partii (b), 26 ianvaria - 10 fevralia 1934 g.:* *stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Partizdat, 1923), p. 226; Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, p. 199 (footnote).

¹⁶² *Vlast' i oppozitsiia: rossiiskii politicheskii protsess XX stoletii*, ed. by V. V. Zhuravlev and others (Moscow: Rossiiskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopediia, 1995), p. 161. Voroshilov confirmed this story in June 1937, see *Voенnyi sovet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR: 1-4 iunია 1937 goda*, ed. by Anderson and others, p. 76.

¹⁶³ Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, p. 199 (footnote).

However, Voroshilov's relationship with some of the other senior officers who would be executed in 1937 appeared to show no tensions whatsoever in 1936. For example, in June Voroshilov wrote to Stalin requesting that a number of military reprimands being removed from several senior officers as four years had passed since their application. This included the reprimands against Kork, Uborevich, Iakov Alksnis and L. N. Aronshtam.¹⁶⁴ In August 1936 Kork had another reprimand removed which he had received over the Nakhaev case.¹⁶⁵ Kork, Uborevich, Alksnis and Aronshtam would all be indicted as members of a 'military-fascist plot' in under a year. Kork and Uborevich would be publicly presented as two of the main conspirators. But for now both their positions seemed secure. Whatever tensions Voroshilov had with Tukhachevskii did not extend to all members of the future 'military-fascist plot'. Thus, conflicts in the army elite may have helped give the 'military-fascist plot' some surface credibility following its 'exposure' in 1937, but there is little to suggest that the divides in the army elite provided the urgency to purge the Red Army. It was not a decisive factor. Importantly, the first major step directly leading towards the military purge can be seen in the summer of 1936 with the 'exposure' of the 'Trotskyist-Zinovievite Counterrevolutionary Bloc'. Links were drawn to middle-ranking former Trotskyist officers, rather than to the military elite, from this alleged oppositionist conspiracy. The 'discovery' of an alleged organised Trotskyist organisation in the ranks changed the path of repression and political climate within the military.

The First Show Trial and the Trotskyist Military Centre

1936 was the decisive year for the fate of the Red Army. In the summer and autumn numerous senior officers who had been Trotskyists in the 1920s were arrested by the political police for their alleged participation in a major 'counterrevolutionary' organisation. These arrests established supposed links between the former Trotskyist officers and the defendants of the first Moscow show trial. This provided 'evidence' of a Trotskyist counterrevolutionary organisation operating within the military. Attentions were now firmly turned towards the Red Army. However, typically in the literature on

¹⁶⁴ RGVA, f. 4, op. 19, d. 18, l. 18.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 58.

the military purge the primary focus is on Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers put on trial in June 1937. The earlier arrests of former Trotskyist officers in 1936 are rarely commented on. Yet, they are vitally important. Without these arrests the military purge would not have developed as it did and may not have even occurred. The arrests in the summer of 1936 are not only crucial to understanding the purge of the military in 1937-38, but are a decisive factor.

In January 1936 the political police arrested an associate of Trotsky, Valentin Ol'berg, soon after his arrival to Gorky from Germany on suspicion of being an emissary from Trotsky. Under interrogation Ol'berg was forced to give evidence about his 'counterrevolutionary activity' and named his fellow participants. Ol'berg's arrest was the starting point of an expanding series of arrests and the 'exposure' of a major 'counterrevolutionary' group.¹⁶⁶ By April the political police had arrested over 500 Trotskyists. Ezhov once again had a close role in the investigations, even though he was not yet the head of the political police.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, during this time Ezhov had been collating an increasingly large file on supposed Trotskyist subversive activity. In late spring he pushed a theory that Zinoviev and Kamenev had a direct hand in the Kirov murder on Trotsky's orders. Thus, their crime was no longer merely 'moral culpability' for the assassination.¹⁶⁸ The 'exposure' of this new counterrevolutionary group in 1936 was the culmination of Ezhov's push to confirm his suspicions. Of course, this was nothing more than a conspiracy theory, but Ezhov believed he had discovered a 'counterrevolutionary centre'. The investigation into the Kirov assassination was reopened and Zinoviev and Kamenev were brought from prison, re-interrogated and forced to give confessions about their terrorist activity and of murdering Kirov.¹⁶⁹ On 29 July the Central Committee published a secret letter, 'Concerning the terroristic activity of the Trotskyist-Zinovievist counterrevolutionary bloc'. This was sent to the party organisations and explained the guilt of Zinoviev and Kamenev in the Kirov assassination and Trotsky's overall direction of the counterrevolutionary centre's plans to murder other Soviet figures, including Stalin, Voroshilov, Kaganovich and Ordzhonkidze.¹⁷⁰ Zinoviev, Kamenev and another fourteen defendants were subsequently put on a show trial in August, the proceedings of which were heavily

¹⁶⁶ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 247; Chase, *Enemies Within the Gates?*, pp. 134-135.

¹⁶⁷ Getty notes the NKVD head, Iagoda, was in a weak position in 1936 and Ezhov was slowly positioning himself to take his place, see *The Road to Terror*, p. 248.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 247-260.

¹⁷⁰ For the text of the letter see *ibid.*, pp. 250-251.

directed by Stalin and Ezhov. All were executed on 24 August. The use of a show trial was a very public demonstration of how a dangerous conspiracy had been exposed. It was a lesson that former oppositionists could not be trusted and that all party members needed to show vigilance.¹⁷¹

This move against former oppositionists affected the Red Army directly. The army was not insulated from changes in political currents. The expanding arrests from the Ol'berg case in January had created numerous connections to former army Trotskyists and they were subsequently arrested for belonging to the Zinoviev-Kamenev group itself or for membership in a separate Trotskyist military organisation. For example, one of the August show trial defendants, R. Pickel, who had been in charge of Zinoviev's secretariat in the past, gave testimony under interrogation on 4 July that the former Trotskyists Putna, D. Shmidt and Ie. Dreitser were members of a military organisation.¹⁷² With the exception of Dreitser, who was the deputy director of the Cheliabinsk factory Magnezit, they were army officers. Shmidt was a battalion commander in the Kiev Military District and Putna was the Soviet military attaché in Britain. Dreitser was arrested at the end of June and on 6 July Shmidt was arrested as a member of a counterrevolutionary Trotskyist organisation.¹⁷³ Shmidt also served with another corps commander, S. A. Turovskii, who was later arrested in September as part of the alleged Trotskyist organisation.¹⁷⁴ Shmidt also gave testimony that a Trotskyist centre existed in Moscow. He said that this centre united the activity of the Trotskyist organisations, particularly those in the Red Army.¹⁷⁵ Another former army Trotskyist arrested was Sergei Mrachkovskii, who as shown in chapter two, had been a senior Trotskyist in the army in the 1920s. In 1936 he was one of the defendants in the August show trial. Thus, there were direct links between the Red Army and the first show trial, and not just associations. The former Trotskyist, B. I. Kuzmichev, the chief of staff of an aviation brigade and one time secretary of Primakov, was also arrested in August.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 257.

¹⁷² Cherushev, p. 101.

¹⁷³ *Lubianka*, ed. by Khaustov and others, p. 765. Shmidt had been a source of complaint already in early 1935. In a letter to Voroshilov from an officer in Kiev a number of complaints were made against Shmidt. These included familiar problems in the officer corps, including a lack of vigilance in the selection of workers, which apparently had led to kulaks, crooks, speculators and former Kolchak officers acquiring top positions. According to this officer Shmidt was doing nothing about this. The officer added: 'Going by theft, drunkenness, and accidents, Shmidt's unit comes first, and obviously, not only in the Kiev Garrison, but in the whole district.' See RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 283, ll. 22-23.

¹⁷⁴ Turovskii and Dreitser had also married sisters. This provided another connection.

¹⁷⁵ Cherushev, p. 96.

These arrests must have been seen as vindication of the political police. They had kept some of these former Trotskyists under observation from the early 1930s, including Dreitser, who was now regarded as one of the key conspirators. He was named in the secret Central Committee letter as receiving direct orders from Trotsky to assassinate Stalin and Voroshilov.¹⁷⁶ Dreitser was also a close acquaintance of Putna, who as Soviet military attaché in Britain in 1936 had often met him. According to a letter from the deputy head of military intelligence, Artur Artuzov, to Voroshilov from 3 September 1936, Putna had been in regular contact with Dreitser in England. Artuzov relayed a conversation he had with Putna's wife, who aside from arguing that her husband was innocent, noted that Putna and Dreitser often saw each other in London. On hearing the news about the Trotskyist-Zinovievist Counterrevolutionary Bloc, according to his wife, Putna had had remarked that because of his contact with Dreitser he would come under suspicion.¹⁷⁷ Again, it is not out of the question that other former Trotskyists continued to meet in the 1930s. These may not have been 'conspiratorial' meetings, but they political police would view them very suspiciously. For Putna, being a former Trotskyist was not the only problem. In the file on Putna, held at the UK National Archives and compiled during his time as military attaché in Britain, he is described as being a Soviet military intelligence agent. In a report dated 26 June 1936 it detailed that Putna had been in 'constant touch' with a German intelligence agent named Erich von Salzman. If this is indeed true, a close association with a German intelligence agent and the meetings with Dreitser would have been very damning for Putna. He was eventually arrested on the 20 August.¹⁷⁸ In addition, five days after Putna's arrest, Voroshilov received a letter from the military attaché in Germany, A. Orlov, who was writing in response to reading about Putna's involvement with the Zinoviev-Kamenev group in German papers. In his letter, Orlov recounted meeting with Putna in Paris in January 1935, and their conversation had turned to the Kirov murder. According to Orlov, Putna had remarked: 'I ran into Kamenev. He invited me to come and see him as an old friend. For some reason I did not go. What would you now think

¹⁷⁶ For details of Dreitser's arrest, see *Lubianka*, ed. by Khaustov and others, p. 764.

¹⁷⁷ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 872, l. 76. In his letter Artuzov displayed a surprisingly lenient attitude and requested that Putna's wife and son be given material aid of 500 rubles a month and an appropriate school be found for the son. Artuzov also revealed that he was not completely convinced about the case against Putna, and maintained an open mind: 'Com[rade] N. R. PUTNA gave me the impression of not being dedicated to the Trotskyist-Zinovievite business of PUTNA in any case, if the latter was indeed involved with them', see ll. 77-78.

¹⁷⁸ See TNA: PRO: KV 2/404: 52a.

about me if I had gone to see him, in link with my past?’¹⁷⁹ If Orlov’s account is accurate, it shows that Putna was very aware that his background as a former Trotskyist was very compromising. He knew how the system worked, and how his past could count against him. If Putna considered himself an ‘old friend’ of Kamenev, it is possible that the political police kept him under closer watch following the Kirov murder when Zinoviev and Kamenev were given ‘moral culpability’ for the assassination. However, it was only with the ‘exposure’ of the Zinoviev-Kamenev group in 1936 that the political police could finally act on their suspicions about Putna and have him arrested. Other prominent army arrests at this time included the former Trotskyist and deputy commander of the LVO, Primakov, on 14 August, who also had been under political police observation since 1933.¹⁸⁰ A day later the former Trotskyist and commander of the 25th Rifle battalion, M. Ziuk, was also arrested.

As expected, Voroshilov tried to distance himself from these arrests. On 7 June he sent a letter to Stalin, and in reference to the ‘evidence’ emerging from the interrogations of Dreitser and Pikel, remarked: ‘...what an abomination, how low people can sink. But the worst of this scum, nevertheless, is Mrachkovskii... This should serve as a lesson: it is impossible to have any kind of business with these people’.¹⁸¹ But as shown in chapter two, Voroshilov had ‘business’ with precisely ‘these people’ in the past. He had been a very strong advocate of Putna in the early 1930s, describing him as ‘one of our best commander-party men’ and had even petitioned for him to have access to secret documents while he was military attaché in Germany. That Putna was now supposedly involved in a counterrevolutionary group should have alarmed Voroshilov. It raised serious questions about his judgment. His letter to Stalin was no doubt an effort to put some distance between himself and the arrested former Trotskyist officers in realisation of this.

Therefore, the increased pressure on Trotskyists during 1936 and the investigation and the trial of the Trotskyist-Zinovievist Counterrevolutionary Bloc had dragged in the Red Army. It had been caught up in an expanding investigation into an alleged counterrevolutionary oppositionist group based on Ezhov’s conspiratorial suspicions, with ‘evidence’ extracted through forced confessions. The arrested individuals from the army were not of the highest ranks, such as Tukhachevskii, Iakir or

¹⁷⁹ RGVA, f. 4, op. 19, d. 16, l. 268.

¹⁸⁰ See *ibid.*, l. 298 for Primakov’s wife’s letter of appeal about her husband’s innocence and noting his disappearance on the 14 August.

¹⁸¹ RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 37, l. 107.

Uborevich, but these were not insignificant cases. Primakov had been a member of the Military Soviet and he was also a member of the Central Executive Committee.¹⁸² In addition these arrests were more serious than the earlier arrests in the army for Trotskyism. A ‘counterrevolutionary centre’ had been ‘discovered’ with alleged responsibility for the Kirov murder and there were ties to the military. Furthermore, the ‘exposure’ of this Trotskyist military centre provided the opportunity for arrests to spread further throughout the Red Army.¹⁸³ For example, following the arrest of Shmidt, Voroshilov received a denunciation from the head of the army Military Political Academy on 4 August, against another an army man named Rubinov. According to the denunciation, Rubinov was very close the Shmidt, they had served together, and Rubinov was said to have defended him. The denunciation noted: ‘I would not be very surprised if an attentive investigation would establish that Rubinov was close to this entire band, and in any case, knew about Shmidt’s mood.’¹⁸⁴ It is unclear what happened to Rubinov as a consequence of this letter but such denunciations would feature much more heavily in 1937-38.

The Red Army may well have regained some stability after ending of operation *vesna* and after the winding down of collectivisation and dekulakisation, but the army leadership could not be confident that they had expunged all ‘enemies’ or that the army was now fully reliable. Large numbers of soldiers continued to be discharged during 1933 and the military remained seen as vulnerable to subversives, particularly foreign agents. Yet, having a powerful and reliable army was becoming increasingly important as the international situation degraded in the early 1930s. The surge of Japanese aggression in the east and the rise of Hitler in the west meant a war on two fronts was becoming more likely. The worsening international situation coincided with an increase in the scale of the perceived espionage threat and the Red Army was regarded as a target. However, what would have concerned the military leadership more than the perceived scale of this espionage threat was the persistent lack of ‘vigilance’ from some officers in rooting out ‘enemies’ in the ranks. Similarly, the officers were just as poor at conducting correct discharges. Thus, ‘enemies’, including foreign agents, continued to

¹⁸² *Izvestiia TsK*, p. 43. Primakov was expelled from the Military Soviet, along with Turovskii in late September, see RGVA, f. 4, op. 19, d. 18, l. 99.

¹⁸³ Trotskyists continued to be expelled from the army during the arrests of these senior former Trotskyist officers. For such cases from the Kharkov military district from August 1936 see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 11, d. 120, ll. 23-234. See also, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 872, ll. 24-26.

¹⁸⁴ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 260, l. 60.

go undiscovered. However, as argued, weak ‘vigilance’ is a codeword which masked deeper problems with army self-policing. There are numerous indications that poor ‘vigilance’ stemmed from some officers’ desires not to examine their own units too carefully, to protect their own interests and make conspicuous demonstrations of being on guard. Further examples of this behaviour will be detailed in chapter five. However, Voroshilov was as guilty of this behaviour as anyone else. It is very likely that he was feeling pressure from Stalin about ‘enemies’ in the army, but his only solution was to call for even more ‘vigilance’. This was not a serious engaging with the problems with army self-policing and was more for show than substance. As a consequence, it would be difficult for Stalin, the army leadership, or the political police, to be confident that the Red Army was sufficiently insulated from the growing perceived subversive threats in the first half of the 1930s. Rather than discover ‘enemies’ independently, it took separate party purges, the *proverka* and *obmen*, to ‘expose’ the hidden spies, Trotskyists and Zinovievites in the ranks. Indeed, it seemed as if the previous army calls for more ‘vigilance’ were having no effect at all. The army failed to ‘expose’ dangerous ‘enemies’, whereas the party *chistki* succeeded. This was very serious, particularly in such a tense political atmosphere following the Kirov murder and at a time of international crisis. But it was the perceived threat from Trotskyists that really began to solidify what came to be seen as organised conspiracy in the army ranks. As Stalin and the political police focused on members of the former opposition as representing a more established danger in 1936, and as links were drawn between former Trotskyist officers and the ‘exposed’ Zinoviev-Kamenev Counterrevolutionary Bloc, it was impossible to ignore the issue of former Trotskyists in the military. During the second half of 1936 the political police would arrest a growing number of former Trotskyists in the ranks. Yet, for now, the upper army elite were not at risk. Despite continued rumours about their disloyalty and brushes with party factionalism, of rumours about a possible German link and the clashes at the very top between Voroshilov and Tukhachevskii, there is little indication that the upper Red Army elite were braced for a purge. Some reprimands were removed from those officers who would be executed only a year later and none of the military elite were former Trotskyists. Indeed, in the summer of 1936 there was little indication that the arrests would move beyond a Trotskyist purge in the army. General arrest levels and criminality were in decline in army during 1936. A mass purge was not being planned.

Some authors have dismissed the significance of the arrests of the former army Trotskyists due to their minority within the forces.¹⁸⁵ However, the importance of Trotskyists within the military was not so much their actual size. An established ‘Trotskyist group’ provided ‘evidence’ for Ezhov that the military had been compromised and focused attentions on the Red Army. This was a decisive moment for the military purge in 1937. It showed once again how the officer corps and PUR were ‘missing’ dangerous ‘enemies’, and that they could not self-police effectively. This would further strengthen the political police and undermine Voroshilov, despite the latter’s control over sanctioning arrests. But the arrests of the former Trotskyist officers turned attentions firmly towards the army and the ‘exposure’ of a Trotskyist military group provided a basis for a perceived ‘conspiracy’ to evolve in the Red Army. As will be argued in the next chapter, this is exactly what happened. In this respect, a police investigation into the former opposition, external to the military, made further political repression in the army inevitable and provided the basis for the 1937 ‘military-fascist plot’. But it was the perceived threat from foreign agents which would eventually change the direction of arrests from Trotskyism. Indeed, Ol’berg was a former Trotskyist, but he had also arrived from Germany. As shown in the next chapter, further links started to be drawn between former Trotskyists and the Nazis from mid-1936. This convergence of two perceived threats widened the possibility of incrimination in the army beyond being a Trotskyist. Once the arrests took on a broader international dimension even those at the very heart of the upper military establishment were put at risk.

¹⁸⁵ See for example, Cherushev, p. 8.

Chapter Five: The Military Purge

The arrests of Primakov, Putna and the other former Trotskyist officers represented the starting point of a much deeper investigation into ‘unexposed’ Trotskyists in the Red Army. The attentions of Stalin and the political police were now firmly turned towards the military as a result of the ‘exposed’ links between the former Trotskyist officers and the Zinoviev-Kamenev group. With the political police taking the lead, the search for further ‘hidden Trotskyists’ gradually expanded into an investigation into widespread espionage and sabotage in the Red Army during the second half of 1936 and early 1937. It was this wider line of investigation into foreign espionage that played a crucial role in triggering the military purge in June 1937. This chapter will explore this transformation. But this chapter will also show that arrests in the army did not expand gradually, but exploded in June 1937 after Stalin was finally compelled to act against the Red Army. The resulting military purge reached an unexpected scale and had to be reined in and central control re-established. Before long there were calls for those incorrectly discharged from the army to be reinstated. As such, this chapter will argue that the best way to understand the military purge is not in terms of a steady expansion of arrests from 1936, showing a premeditated intent to purge the military elite and officer corps, but as a last minute response to Stalin’s misperception that the Red Army was widely infiltrated by ‘enemies’ and foreign agents.

The Investigation into the Trotskyist Military Organisation

The arrests of the former Trotskyist officers in the summer and autumn of 1936 were different in many respects to the arrests of army Trotskyists in previous years. The ‘exposure’ of ties between the defendants at the August show trial and serving officers in the Red Army was more serious than earlier arrests for army Trotskyism. Since the summer of 1936 senior officers were understood to be complicit in a plot to assassinate leading party members, including Stalin. The ‘existence’ of a Trotskyist military organisation gave form to what had previously been a relatively disparate, if growing,

string of arrests for Trotskyism in the military. These had been on an individual basis and showed no signs of organised conspiracy.¹ Now there was what was seen as a defined military group, led by Trotsky, with subversive designs against the party elite. Furthermore, it is not surprising that following the arrests of Primakov, Putna and the other former Trotskyist officers that the army would face scrutiny. The previous years had seen repeated calls about the need to increase Bolshevik ‘vigilance’ in the face of the ‘enemy’ within, of criticisms about incorrect discharges and promotions, and the continued ‘exposure’ of ‘enemies’ within the ranks. The ‘discovery’ of this Trotskyist group in the army would be seen as further evidence that army self-policing remained inadequate. Once again, it had not been improvements in army ‘vigilance’ which had brought about these recent arrests, but this time a separate political police investigation. This would hardly provide assurances that all the ‘enemies’ in the ranks were now discovered and would further strengthen the political police’s views about army vulnerabilities.

The calls to root out the remaining ‘conspirators’ from the ranks came very soon after the arrests of Primakov, Putna and the other Trotskyist officers. One such call came from Budennyi, who sent Voroshilov a letter on 22 August where he remarked:

The trial of the counterrevolutionary band going on now in Moscow, as never before, clearly shows all humanity of the whole world to what point these degenerates and their mangy ringleader – Trotsky – have sunk. But this, in my view, should not be the end. I think that it is necessary to raise all the working people, both in the Soviet Union and in all countries of the world, to demand the extradition of Trotsky and his foreign company, in order to put him on trial in our country... It is clear that the network of this organisation has penetrated into the army, into the railways, industry, agriculture, into the organism of our state in general... It seems to me that it is necessary to especially carefully check the people in the army, since in its ranks we see people from the command, and officers and political workers (*nachal'stvuiushchego sostava*) with careerist tendencies on one side, and on the other, a tendency to consider serious questions not from the point of view of the state, but from a narrowly personal point of view, a local “oligarchy” (*bat'kovshchina*), and also people who are able to give in easily to any kind of influence, in particular counterrevolutionary.²

Because of his close relationship with Voroshilov, Budennyi no doubt believed his letter would carry weight and he was probably also trying to influence Stalin. Indeed,

¹ Lower-level arrests did still continue on the same pattern as in previous years. For example see a report dated 21 August 1936 sent to the deputy head of PUR, G. A. Osepian, from a deputy battalion commissar in the BVO, detailing the arrest of four Trotskyists within the army which appear separate from the main line of investigation into the senior Trotskyist officers, see RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 872, ll. 24-26.

² RGVA, f. 4, op. 19, d. 16, l. 265.

Budennyi chose to write to Voroshilov and he surely had a purpose in mind. It is possible he wanted his letter forwarded to Stalin. If so, Budennyi got his wish. It seems that Voroshilov agreed with his concerns and the letter was sent to Stalin, Ezhov and A. A. Andreev, a Secretary of the Central Committee, on 1 September.³ The significance of Budennyi's letter was not only his direct call for a careful scrutiny of the army, but his singling out the command is important. Aside from the fact that the officers would bear much of the weight of the military purge during 1937-38, by focusing on their supposed narrow self-interest, Budennyi touched on the complaints about the command seen in previous years which had been framed as weak 'vigilance'. Indeed, using the term '*bat'kovshchina*' (oligarchy) implied that some officers were primarily concerned with maintaining their own power and influence. It suggested systems of patronage and nepotism. For Budennyi this type of localism gave the opportunity for 'enemies' to operate freely. If officers were protecting their own narrow self-interests, what motivation would they have to find the Trotskyists, Zinovievites or spies under their commands? Budennyi's comments add further weight to the indications that some officers were reluctant to search out 'enemies' in their own commands and were focused instead on serving their own interests. More explicit descriptions of this behaviour followed in 1937. Finally, in writing such a letter Budennyi may have been starting to disassociate himself from Voroshilov. He was pointing to a serious problem in the officer corps and he did not downplay the danger in his letter. Perhaps Budennyi sensed that further arrests were around the corner and he wanted to show that he had given suitable 'signals' about the threat in good time.

Importantly, the political police also matched Budennyi's call and declared that the army should be searched more thoroughly, but a change in leadership proved decisive. On 25 September Iagoda was replaced by Ezhov as the head of the political police. Ezhov had already begun to encroach into police affairs having been closely involved with the investigation into the Kirov assassination. Then on the 'exposure' of the Zinoviev-Kamenev Counterrevolutionary Bloc, Stalin had criticised Iagoda as being 'four years behind' in its discovery. Interrogations showed the group had apparently formed in 1932. Furthermore, explosions at the Kemerovo mines, blamed on Trotskyist sabotage days later, further undermined Iagoda.⁴ Ezhov's appointment at the head of the political police is commonly understood as a crucial event in the history of the Terror

³ Ibid., I, 262.

⁴ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 276.

and it was no less so for the military purge. Ezhov was far more conspiratorially minded than his predecessor and had a different standard of what constituted evidence. His appointment provided the opportunity for the already ‘exposed’ Zinoviev-Kamenev counterrevolutionary ‘conspiracy’ to achieve greater dimensions. Indeed, following the very public demonstration of the danger from the former Opposition at the August show trial and Ezhov’s appointment at the head of the political police, the pressure on former oppositionists in the party greatly increased and further high-profile arrests followed.⁵ In September the former Trotskyist, Georgy Piatakov was arrested. Piatakov was the deputy People’s Commissar for Heavy Industry, working under Ordzhonikidze, and his arrest located the ‘oppositionist plot’ higher up the party hierarchy. Ezhov was widening the scope of the investigation. In terms of investigating the Red Army specifically, Ezhov signalled his intentions early on. Just prior to his appointment as the head of the political police, in a letter to Stalin on 9 September which discussed the August trial, Ezhov remarked that he believed that there must still be Trotskyist officers unexposed within the Red Army.⁶ Ezhov’s letter was sent to Stalin shortly after he had received Budennyi’s letter, and the latter may have had some influence. Thus, with Ezhov at the helm of the political police and a call from Budennyi to investigate the officer corps, two powerful influences coincided to expand the investigation of the Trotskyist military centre deeper into the Red Army.

There were several ways by which the arrests of former Trotskyists in the Red Army gathered pace. Most directly, implication through interrogation secured further key arrests.⁷ The political police also targeted officers and soldiers who had links to the group of arrested former Trotskyists. For example, on 26 September, M. I. Gai, the head of the OO NKVD, sent Voroshilov a request to demobilise four army men who had supposed links with the now arrested former Trotskyist, Dreitser.⁸ However, arrests also expanded through denunciations. As a Trotskyist military group had been ‘exposed’ including several senior officers with numerous connections throughout the army, the ground was set for a flurry of denunciations. Whether for careerism, to cover one’s own back or a genuine belief in the danger posed by ‘hidden Trotskyists’, the letters flowed in incriminating other soldiers for their supposed connections to the already arrested

⁵ See for example, Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, pp. 281-282.

⁶ Jansen and Petrov, p. 49.

⁷ See Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKK*, p. 54; Cherushev, p. 84.

⁸ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 22, d. 1, l. 178. For other cases of the political police ‘exposing’ Trotskyist soldiers in October 1936 see, RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 94, ll. 365-366, 397; d. 99, l. 65.

officers. Some denunciations were sent directly to Stalin. For example, on 10 October Stalin received a denunciation from a political worker in the Black Sea Fleet with a list of ten people he claimed were former oppositionists. The political worker added that the list was not complete.⁹ Indeed, Stalin was kept well informed about the number of Trotskyists discovered in the military. For example, Georgy Malenkov, the director of the Department of Leading Party Organs of the Central Committee, sent Stalin the details of ‘exposed’ Trotskyists working in the central army apparatus and the military academies in November 1936.¹⁰ These army denunciations show that ordinary officers and soldiers directly participated in expanding the investigation into Trotskyists in the military. This participation from ‘below’ helped the later military purge achieve the very large scale it took during 1937-38.

What is also noticeable from mid-1936 is how the widening investigation into the Zinoviev-Kamenev Counterrevolutionary Bloc began to solidify the notion of a potential ‘military plot’ through its frequent appearance in investigation testimony. For instance, during the investigation into the Zinoviev-Kamenev group, one of the supposed members, Isak Reingol’d, a former Trotskyist and at the time the Chairman of the Cotton Syndicate, had mentioned two ways that power could be seized by the counterrevolutionaries, by ‘double-dealing’ or a ‘military plot’ (*voennyi zagovor*).¹¹ Later, the senior party member and journalist, Karl Radek, who had been indirectly implicated during the August show trial and arrested soon after, testified during interrogation in December to the existence of a military plot which apparently included Primakov, Shmidt and Putna. At the same time the former oppositionist Grigory Sokol’nikov, the first deputy People’s Commissar for Light Industry, gave testimony about preparations for treachery by the Trotskyist officers in the case of war.¹² In light of the more frequent mention of a ‘military plot’ it is important to stress again that the political police used forced confessions. Investigators could shape arrest testimony in a particular direction. The increasing frequency of a ‘military plot’ suggests that the political police were perhaps looking to uncover ‘evidence’ of an organised conspiracy within the Red Army from autumn 1936.

⁹ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 285, l. 22. On 15 November Gamarnik was sent a long list of army men who had in the past been part of the Trotskyist Opposition, ninety-two individuals were named, see ll. 232-242.

¹⁰ Khaustov and Samuelson, p. 108.

¹¹ RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 93, l. 43.

¹² Khaustov and Samuelson, p. 108. For other army arrests in December 1936 and January 1937, see *ibid.*

The Military Soviet met again in October 1936, but this was dominated by strictly military issues such as weaponry and organisation. The arrested former Trotskyists were not mentioned specifically and only the general trend in the arrests of former oppositionists was commented on. It is possible that the army leadership considered these arrests a police matter or they may not have been too alarmed at what were, at this stage, only a relatively small number of arrests. However, despite this, the usual discussion of army political reliability took place. Alongside the litany of pronouncements about the army's apparent growing political cohesiveness, several negative trends persisted. For instance, the deputy head of PUR, G. A. Osepian, remarked that even though the *proverka* and *obmen* had expelled 'class enemies' and 'harmful people' it was not time to be complacent. Not all 'enemies' had been discovered. But Osepian also cautioned against deliberate shows of vigilance. Some officers were apparently classifying what was only harmless talk as something more dangerous and this was leading to unnecessary expulsions from the party and discharges from the army.¹³ This is another indication that some officers were making conspicuous shows of 'vigilance'. Later, P. A. Smirnov, the head of PUR in the LVO, highlighted that the *proverka* and *obmen* had shown that 'class aliens', 'harmful elements' and 'foreign elements' had infiltrated into the army and its command. He pointed to the BVO and LVO, where apparently a number of Polish and Finish nationals had managed to infiltrate the army. Smirnov argued that these individuals had been sent by 'fascist elements'.¹⁴ Ian Berzin, the deputy commander of the OKDVA and former head of military intelligence, made a similar point about hidden 'enemies' and highlighted the danger of treachery by nationalities serving in the military in the border regions.¹⁵ Therefore, the 'enemy' was perceived as having infiltrated the ranks, but the problem was not confined to domestic 'class aliens' and included foreign agents apparently sent by hostile fascist countries and currently serving foreign nationals. The threat from perceived foreign agents was beginning to take on a larger dimension and would become the main focus of attention in 1937.

That the members of the 1936 Military Soviet only made a brief mention of the arrested Trotskyist officers suggests that these had not created a panic. Even though pressure had undoubtedly increased on members of the former Opposition in the army

¹³ *Voennyi soviet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR, oktiabr' 1936 g.: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. by A. S. Kniaz'kov and others (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2009), p. 327.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 377.

after the August show trial, there was no large wave of repression. According to a report summarising arrests between 1 August and 31 December 1936 within the command and other leading army bodies such as PUR, there were 212 arrests for ‘counterrevolutionary Trotskyism’, of which thirty-two were from the command. The number of such arrests for the previous six months, from January to 1 August 1936, totalled 125 with six from the command. As such, from August 1936 arrests had increased in the command, though by less than one hundred cases. From 1 January 1937 to 1 March 1937 the pace of arrest seen in the latter half of 1936 was maintained with 125 further arrests, with forty-three from the command.¹⁶ These are not large numbers in comparison with the military purge in 1937-38. Furthermore, between July 1936 and February 1937, those arrested from the rank of Major and above included only Putna, Primakov, Turovskii, Shmidt, Ziuk, Kuzmichev, Iu. V. Sablin, and I. L. Karpel’.¹⁷ The upper ranks were as yet not affected. Those from the military elite who would become the defendants at the June 1937 military trial as representatives of the ‘military-fascist plot’ were not in danger of arrest at this time. They had never been Trotskyists. In addition, Voroshilov continued to push for promotions for some the future members of the ‘military-fascist plot’. For example, on 10 November he wrote to Stalin about freeing Uborevich from the command of the BVO and promoting him as his deputy and the head of the Air Force.¹⁸ Voroshilov also requested that Eideman be freed from his position as head of Osoaviakhim and promoted to the head of the anti-aircraft administration, as, in Voroshilov’s words, it needed someone of ‘major authority’.¹⁹ Neither promotion was made in the end. Uborevich resisted the transfer to the Air Force and he made this known to Voroshilov.²⁰ Perhaps Stalin thought Eideman was not the right candidate for the new role, especially after the Nakhaev case at Osoaviakhim only two years previously. He may have had some suspicions about Eideman or simply doubted his competence. In any case, in just seven months both men would be executed

¹⁶ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 107, l. 14. Following the August trial political arrests continued to increase, but according to this report, arrests for counterrevolutionary agitation halved between 1935 and 1936 in the command and *nachal’sostav*. PUR seem an exception. A separate report from the then head of PUR, P. A. Smirnov, sent to Voroshilov from 27 December 1937, shows that the number of discharges from the Political staff for either political reasons or belonging to the Trotskyist opposition actually fell between 1935 and 1936 from 301 to 250, see RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 992, l. 209.

¹⁷ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 99, l. 57. Karpel’, the head of staff of the 66th Rifle division, was arrested in December 1936. Sablin, a battalion commander, had been incriminated through the testimony from the Trotskyist officers arrested in the summer 1936, see Cherushev, pp. 70, 97.

¹⁸ RGVA, f. 4, op. 19, d. 18, l. 179.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 176.

²⁰ Minakov, *1937. zagovor byl!*, p. 236.

and Voroshilov did not appear to be suspicious of the pair. Admittedly, Stalin may have had more developing doubts about the military elite. He would be aware of Ezhov's suspicions, which seemed to point towards uncovering an organised conspiracy in the army. Yet, if Stalin had doubts about some members of the army leadership, it looks like he had not made these known to Voroshilov, who would not have suggested promoting Uborevich and Eideman if this had been the case. Stalin was waiting to see what the political police discovered, if anything at all, and for now Voroshilov may well have been kept out of the loop once again.

Another indication of a lack of panic and that a large purge of the army was not yet being planned can be seen from the Military Procuracy. In late January the Chief Military Procurator, Naum Rozovskii, wrote to Feldman about releasing N. Kakurin from prison. Kakurin had been arrested during operation *vesna* in 1930 and had incriminated Tukhachevskii as leading a counterrevolutionary group at that time. Rozovskii contacted Feldman after receiving an appeal from Kakurin's wife, and he wanted Feldman's opinion about whether Kakurin could be reinstated in the army as a specialist.²¹ Feldman's judgement is unknown, but that the Chief Military Procurator was even considering that a convicted 'conspirator' could be released from imprisonment suggests a level of complacency about 'enemies' within the Red Army. If there was growing panic about hidden 'enemies' it is unlikely that releasing Kakurin would be entertained. Yet at the same time there are also suggestions that a cautious approach was being taken. At the same time as Rozovskii was writing to Feldman about Kakurin, Gamarnik ordered that officers discharged from the ranks for 'political' or 'moral' reasons would not be able to rejoin the army even in the early phase of war.²² This is a clear attempt to improve the political reliability of the command, but still not an indication that a major purge was being prepared.

There is also evidence of a certain level of push-back from within the military elite against the unfounded cases brought by the political police. This can be seen most clearly from Feldman, the head of the Main Administration of the Red Army. Throughout 1936 and early 1937 Feldman frequently defended those charged with 'counterrevolution' or espionage and lobbied Voroshilov and Gamarnik for more lenient punishments. In some cases he argued that the cases were actually unfounded. Feldman often made the argument that the accused was in fact good officer who denied

²¹ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 109, l. 87.

²² Vadim Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror* (Oak Park, Mich.: Mehring Books, 1998), p. 414.

the accusations against them and that a transfer would be a better solution than demobilisation.²³ A typical case concerned an alleged wrecking group in the Chemical Industry. This group had been highlighted by M. I. Gai at the OO NKVD, who notified Voroshilov on 26 August. In addition, two men from the Chemical Administration, Nikitin and Ostovskii, had sent Voroshilov a denunciation naming almost thirty alleged Trotskyists.²⁴ It appears that Voroshilov ordered Feldman, Osepian, and a deputy at the OO NKVD, N. I. Dobroditskii, to investigate the case. Feldman and Osepian later reported back to Voroshilov on 19 September. In reference to Gai's case materials and the denunciation from Nikitin and Ostovskii, Feldman and Osepian argued that without a strict scrutiny of the work of the accused individuals they could not advise arrest with full confidence.²⁵ They argued that there was no concrete evidence against the group, and in fact, their appraisals had shown them to be loyal and disciplined.²⁶ In addition, both argued there was no clear evidence in the letter from Nikitin and Ostovskii either.²⁷ The outcome of the case is unknown, but Feldman and Osepian were challenging the political police on the need for better evidence. Importantly, it is very doubtful that Feldman would be able to intervene in this manner if the army leadership were making preparations for a large purge. But Feldman's hopes of maintaining legality would do little to forestall the military purge in 1937. Ezhov's views about hidden 'enemies' in the army was gaining ground. At a political police conference in December Ezhov again voiced his opinions about hidden 'enemies' within the Red Army, arguing that they had more opportunities there to cause damage than in industry.²⁸ Feldman was an influential

²³ For example see a petition from Feldman to Voroshilov from 14 November about keeping an officer accused of Trotskyist agitation in the army, RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 99, l. 91. For another similar case from 19 November, see d. 109, l. 191. In 14 December Feldman examined another case brought by M. I. Gai for a discharge from the command for Trotskyist agitation. Feldman requested to keep the man in the army and that PUR and the command should help him 'improve himself' and become a good officer. In this case, Voroshilov agreed, see d. 94, ll. 311-312. In December Feldman petitioned Voroshilov about an academy student who was linked to Primakov, Shmidt and Ziuk and requested that he be allowed to work within Osoaviakhim in a remote area, rather than be demobilised to the reserves, see l. 375. In a letter to Voroshilov on 9 January 1937 Feldman agreed with an indictment against an army man for anti-soviet agitation, but argued that the man's background and his appraisals were good and that he was not a 'hopeless commander'. In Feldman's opinion he needed support in order to improve himself, see d. 109, l. 126. On 19 March 1937 Feldman wrote to Gamarnik about a colonel who had a brother arrested as a spy. Feldman argued that the colonel said he had no knowledge of this and that he found this explanation convincing. Feldman asked whether the colonel could be transferred to another position in the army, and perhaps also be kept in the party, see d. 99, 160.

²⁴ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 100, l. 570, 537.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 570.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 563.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 565.

²⁸ Jansen and Petrov, p. 69.

military voice, but he did not have Ezhov's power. It was the latter's particular narrative of a conspiracy within the Red Army which became dominant in 1937.

As such, as political repression had gathered pace in the party in 1936 it had been impossible to ignore former Trotskyists in the Red Army. By the second half of 1936 the military was firmly in Ezhov's sights. However, there is nothing to suggest a large purge of the military was imminent or even being planned. Trotskyists were too much of a minority and absent from the upper ranks. For a much larger military purge to even be considered by Stalin, the political police needed to 'expose' a much broader conspiracy and move the charges on from 'Trotskyist counterrevolution'. Otherwise, the upper ranks and those who were not former Trotskyists would remain unaffected. However, during the last few months of 1936 the charge of Trotskyism began to align with a charge of foreign espionage and sabotage. It was this that provided the opportunity for the nascent army 'plot' to move beyond Trotskyism and, at the very last moment, provide the momentum to affect a much wider circle of officers.

Foreign Espionage and the 'Military-Fascist Plot'

Alleged links between the defendants at the August 1936 show trial and the Nazis had been 'exposed' as part of the investigation into the Zinoviev-Kamenev Counterrevolutionary Bloc. But this gradual alignment of the foreign threat with the internal Trotskyist threat had preceded the August trial. For example, the case of Valentin Ol'berg was an early example of how a charge could be levelled as being both a counterrevolutionary Trotskyist and as working for a hostile foreign power. This trend continued after the August trial but in more visible terms. For example, on 29 September the Politburo issued an order, 'About the relations to the counterrevolutionary Trotskyist-Zinovievite elements'. This described that these 'elements' should be regarded as, 'Intelligence agents, spies, subversives and wreckers of the fascist bourgeoisie in Europe'.²⁹ The message was clear: domestic counterrevolutionaries were actively engaged in espionage and wrecking for hostile countries. This increased focus on foreign agents was no doubt fuelled by the worsening of the international situation. On 25 October the Rome-Berlin Axis was formed and a

²⁹ Khaustov and Samuelson, p. 93.

month later the German-Japanese anti-Comintern pact was signed. In addition, the Spanish Civil War demonstrated the dangers of foreign agents infiltrating the military. As Khlevniuk has shown, Stalin received reports about an alleged fifth column within the Republican armed forces. For example, the Trade Representative in Spain, A. Stashevskii, in a letter sent on 14 December remarked that it was, ‘not out of the question that among the highest officers there exists a Fascist organisation which is engaged in sabotage and, of course, spying’.³⁰ Later in March 1937, Georgy Dimitrov, the head of the Communist International, wrote in his diary that Stalin had received two Spanish writers and the discussion had been the Civil War. Notably, Stalin had mentioned that the General Staff of the Republic forces were unreliable and that, ‘there has always been betrayal on the eve of an offensive by Republic[an] units’.³¹ With an ‘exposed’ Trotskyist military centre already within the Red Army this Spanish example would surely reinforce the dangers of a compromised military. However, Ezhov was also a major influence to why the threat from foreign agents became far more prominent during the second half of 1936 and in 1937. Even before he became head of the political police, Ezhov was obsessed about discovering ‘conspiracy’. This can be seen in the manuscript he had been working on since 1935, ‘From Factionalism to Open Counterrevolution’, which set out a conspiracy theory linking the opposition of Zinoviev and Kamenev to acts of terrorism and ‘counterrevolution’.³² This manuscript went through several versions and laid the foundations for how Ezhov defined the former oppositionist conspiracy in 1936-37. Furthermore, as noted above, Ezhov saw little difference in goals and tactics between Trotskyists and foreign agents. He was very sensitive to foreign connections and had been closely involved with checking the activity of soviet citizens working abroad since 1934. In mid-1936 Ezhov was focused on espionage by foreigners.³³ As head of the political police, Ezhov tried to draw links between the differing oppositionist groups and pushed for the foreign connections to be made to the already ‘exposed’ oppositionist conspiracy. The second Moscow show trial represented the results of these efforts.

The second Moscow show trial of the ‘Anti-Soviet Trotskyite-Centre’ was held in January 1937. On the one hand this trial was another public demonstration of the

³⁰ Quoted in Khlevniuk, ‘The Reasons for the “Great Terror”: The Foreign-Political Aspect’ in *Russia in the Age of Wars*, ed. by Pons and Romano, pp. 159-170 (p. 164).

³¹ *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933-1949*, ed. by Ivo Banac (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 60.

³² Getty and Naumov, *Yezhov*, p. 154.

³³ For more on Ezhov’s concerns about foreign agents, see *ibid.*, pp. 182-184; Hagenloh, p. 230.

danger of the former political Opposition and the need for ordinary party members to remain vigilant, but on the other, it thrust the perceived danger from foreign agents into the open. The defendants at the trial included Sokol'nikov, Radek and Piatakov, and fourteen others who had fallen under suspicion during the investigation into the earlier Zinoviev-Kamenev Counterrevolutionary Bloc. These men were not party outsiders like Zinoviev and Kamenev and some like Piatakov held senior positions. The conspiracy was now rising up the party ranks. Specifically, the January trial emphasised the dangers posed by 'double-dealers'. These were individuals in responsible party positions supposedly working for the enemy.³⁴ The accused were charged with terrorism, wrecking and sabotage, which had been directed by Trotsky, Germany and Japan. Their aim was to overthrow Soviet power and not merely to assassinate leading party figures. Furthermore, even though links had been 'exposed' between the defendants with German fascists at the previous show trial, the defendants at the January trial were not only linked to fascist powers, but were supposedly working on the direct orders of Germany and Japan.³⁵ There is a marked difference between the first and second show trials in terms of the prominence of this connection. Stalin believed the 'evidence' extracted by Ezhov from the arrested former oppositionists and hostile foreign powers were now seen as sponsoring and directing terrorism inside the Soviet Union. The chief danger was moving away from domestic Trotskyism and towards the espionage and subversion by foreign agents. This shift in the political repression in the party came to directly shape the military terror.

The January trial was also another occasion when Tukhachevskii's name was mentioned alongside arrested 'counterrevolutionaries'. During his testimony Radek remarked that Putna had come to see him, 'with a request from Tukhachevskii' relating to some government task the latter was engaged in. Much has been made of this name-drop and it has been argued that it was planted by Stalin in order to incriminate Tukhachevskii.³⁶ However, Radek went on to say that Tukhachevskii had no connection to the arrested men and that he was 'devoted' to the party. If Radek's comments had been contrived and meant to be incriminating, they were clumsy and ambiguous. If Stalin wanted to incriminate Tukhachevskii he could have arranged this in a more direct

³⁴ Chase, 'Stalin as Producer: The Moscow Show Trials and the Construction of Mortal Threats' in *Stalin: A New History*, ed. by Davies and Harris, pp. 226-248 (p. 241).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 238-239.

³⁶ See Conquest, p. 212. Erickson argued that Radek's testimony was a 'substantial hint that a move against the military was being contemplated', see *The Soviet High Command*, p. 451.

way. Radek's comments are consistent with how Tukhachevskii's name had a tendency of appearing in investigations in 'counterrevolutionary' groups, as in the Eismont-Tolmachev case. This was another indirect connection between Tukhachevskii and 'counterrevolution'. But that Radek named Tukhachevskii also could be nothing more than the fact that Tukhachevskii and Putna were in professional contact. They had both travelled through Europe in 1936. Yet, early 1937 was a time of increasing political arrests, and even though Tukhachevskii's arrest was still months away, the mention of his name at the trial may have focused political police attentions further.

As the second show trial was underway, there are a number of indications that the perceived problem of foreign agents inside the Red Army specifically was becoming a more pressing issue. Firstly, there were a number of alleged espionage cases in the military in early 1937. For example, in January, P. A. Smirnov wrote to Gamarnik about a soldier who had been arrested as a German agent following the 'exposure' of a Germany intelligence residency.³⁷ In mid-January, I. M. Leplevskii, the head of the Special Section of the GUGB NKVD, notified Voroshilov that a subversive group had been 'discovered' in the 16th artillery regiment in air defence, and eleven arrests were made. This group had been supposedly been created by a German agent and recruited Germans in the Red Army for wrecking.³⁸ At the end of January Ezhov sent Voroshilov a note about an ongoing investigation into a Trotskyist group which included several officers who been arrested at an ammunition depot in November 1936. Ezhov reported that it had now been established that one was a German spy.³⁹ In this respect, Ezhov had added a new charge of espionage against a Trotskyist group. On 9 March Ezhov wrote to Voroshilov that a German spy had been arrested in Leningrad who was serving in the Red Army and that his task had been to find out military secrets from the LVO.⁴⁰ It is likely that Ezhov was looking to uncover specific 'evidence' of espionage in the military at this time as part of a much larger 'conspiracy' that went beyond the confines of the former opposition. The charges at the second show trial demonstrate clearly that Ezhov was trying to make connections between former oppositionists and fascist states. It is very likely that Ezhov was looking to draw the army into his growing 'conspiracy' and make further connections. Indeed, as detailed above, the Red Army had displayed many perceived vulnerabilities since its formation. It was seen as susceptible to

³⁷ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 99, l. 16.

³⁸ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 851, ll. 39-40.

³⁹ Ibid., l. 50.

⁴⁰ Ibid., l. 134.

infiltration and had been identified as a target of foreign agents since 1918. There had been large ‘exposed’ foreign-backed plots in the past, such as the military specialist ‘conspiracy’ ‘discovered’ through operation *vesna*. The army remained seen as a target of foreign agents in the mid-1930s when Stalin and the political police were focused on the growing espionage threat. Furthermore, the rumours about a connection between Germany and the military elite, and their alleged disloyalty, had never abated. Thus, when Ezhov became head of the political police in 1936 he would have inherited thick files full of compromising information and rumours about members of the army leadership. He would also be very aware of how the Red Army had been seen as an object of subversion and would know about all the past ‘conspiracies’ and ‘counterrevolutionary’ plots in the ranks. He would be very aware about how senior officers such as Tukhachevskii had been repeatedly incriminated and how nearly all the military elite had spent extended periods of time in Germany with the Reichswehr in the 1920s. As Ezhov was particularly focused on the threat from foreign agents in 1937 and was trying to ‘expose’ a much broader oppositionist conspiracy, that he now looked to incorporate the army into this vision is unsurprising.

Indeed, the reports and rumours continued to filter in about disloyalty in the army and a supposed connection between the Red Army high command and the Nazis. This would only galvanise Ezhov’s suspicions further and add more material to the files on the military elite that he now controlled. For example, in September and again in December 1936, the political police received information that Marshal Vasily Bliukher was allegedly planning a coup with assistance from the Red Army.⁴¹ In mid-January 1937, *Pravda*’s correspondent in Berlin sent a letter to the paper’s editor, Lev Mekhlis, about an alleged link between the Red Army high command and the Nazis. Tukhachevskii was named specifically.⁴² Furthermore, Tukhachevskii had previously been linked to an arrested Polish Communist, Tomas Dombal’, who had been working at the Moscow Institute of Mechanisation and Electrification and arrested on 29 December 1936 as a member of an espionage organisation.⁴³ On 31 January 1937 Dombal’ confessed to being part of the ‘Polish Military Organisation’ and having

⁴¹ *Voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv*, p. 10.

⁴² *Izvestiia TsK*, p. 61.

⁴³ Kantor, *Voina i mir Mikhaila Tukhachevskogo*, p. 366.

gathered information on the condition of the Red Army.⁴⁴ Dombal' said that he had spoken with members of the high command including Tukhachevskii.⁴⁵ Also in January Ezhov received a letter from the former head of the INO NKVD, Artur Artuzov, about alleged 'wrecking activity' conducted by Tukhachevskii. This information was initially received from foreign agents.⁴⁶ In addition, at this time the INO had apparently planned to collect materials on members of the army high command and to pay closer attention to Moscow and the peripheries to expose 'fascist groups among the army men'.⁴⁷ Finally, in March 1937 during an official conversation with the Soviet ambassador, Vladimir Potemkin, the French Prime Minister, Édouard Daladier, apparently spoke about alleged plans of certain circles in Germany to prepare a coup in the Soviet Union using members from the Red Army high command hostile to the Soviet Government. It was purported that the new Soviet regime would join a military union with Germany against France.⁴⁸ Of course, it is not unlikely that the German government was spreading some of these rumours about a connection between themselves and the Red Army elite in order to undermine Stalin's trust in his military. But even so the rumours about a connection between the Red Army elite and the Nazis were accumulating and by now some officers, most likely Tukhachevskii, were certainly under increased political police observation.⁴⁹

The 1937 February-March Plenum of the Central Committee was a turning point in the Terror and also for the Red Army, leading to a strengthening of the investigation into 'enemies' within the ranks. The Plenum opened under the shadow of the recent suicide of Ordzhonikidze, the People's Commissar for Heavy Industry, and acted as a forum which the remaining members of the former Right Deviation, Bukharin and

⁴⁴ The Polish Military Organisation was a subversive Polish group, originally formed in 1914. The organisation had close links with Pilsudski. During the Terror it formed part of the basis for arrest of Poles, charged with membership of the organisation.

⁴⁵ Kantor, *Voina i mir Mikhaïla Tukhachevskogo*, p. 366.

⁴⁶ *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 255. There is evidence to suggest that Ezhov was more inclined to take rumour and disinformation more seriously than his predecessor at the political police. According to the testimony of a former member of the INO NKVD dated 1939, when Iagoda was the head of the political police and sent materials about a supposed 'military party' within the army from Germany, he quickly realised that this was Soviet disinformation from a double-agent. However, in 1937 when Ezhov was sent this same information he apparently requested that it be investigated, arguing that a Trotskyist organisation was undoubtedly operating within the Red Army, *Reabilitatsiia: kak eto bylo*, ed. by Artuzov and others, II, p. 600.

⁴⁷ *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 255.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 601.

⁴⁹ For more on possible German disinformation attempts, see *Voенно-istoricheskii arkhiv*, pp. 15-20.

Rykov, were denounced by those present at the Plenum.⁵⁰ Bukharin and Rykov had too been incriminated in the growing party ‘conspiracy’ which had grown under Ezhov’s direction from the ‘exposure’ of the Zinoviev-Kamenev Counterrevolutionary Bloc. During the Plenum both were accused of conspiring with former oppositionists, of sabotage and espionage, having knowledge of the Kirov assassination and trying to overthrow the party.⁵¹ Such accusations against very senior party figures represented another escalation in the evolving ‘conspiracy’ in the party. Ezhov had linked the members of the former ‘Right Deviation’ to the former oppositionist ‘plot’, and Stalin accepted their guilt. Both were subsequently expelled from the party and arrested in March.

During the Plenum Voroshilov took part in the attacks on both Bukharin and Rykov, but in terms of problems inside the Red Army he tried to downplay the danger of the enemy within.⁵² It is difficult to see Voroshilov as being sincere here. He, more than anyone, was aware of the army’s failures in self-policing. He had repeatedly criticised ‘weak vigilance’ in the officer corps and how this had allowed ‘enemies’ to go undetected. Yet, despite this, Voroshilov defended the army’s political reliability and argued that the threat from Trotskyists was in reality only small: ‘...in the army at this present time, happily, not that many enemies have been revealed’. Furthermore, in an obvious appeal to army loyalty he argued that the party sent the ‘best of its cadres’ to serve in the Red Army.⁵³ He also raised the familiar refrain that the army was the most delicate and most important instrument in the state apparatus.⁵⁴ Voroshilov was not incorrect in pointing to the small number of arrested Trotskyists. He produced figures showing that since the struggle against Trotskyists in the army began in the early 1920s, 47,000 people from the military leadership had been discharged from the ranks, with 22,000 during 1934-36. He added that 5,000 were oppositionists. Voroshilov also pressed that these discharges had been conducted with caution, no doubt trying to convince all present that this process had been thorough.⁵⁵ Voroshilov did, however, concede the possibility that there were more ‘enemies’ in the military than that were

⁵⁰ For detail on Ordzhonikidze, see Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, pp. 218, 365. The other prominent former member of the Right Deviation, Mikhail Tomskii, had already committed suicide in August 1936 after being implicated with the Zinoviev-Kamenev Counterrevolutionary Bloc.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 367-369.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 375-377.

⁵³ *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 153.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

currently known, but the thrust of his speech was that the army was secure and remained politically reliable. The command and PUR had worked hard to remove subversive influences over the previous twenty years.⁵⁶ Voroshilov did see room for improvement. He pointed to the importance of studying people better and knowing their personal lives, as apparently no one had suspected Putna, Primakov and the other Trotskyist officers of any wrongdoing, but this was hardly a radical solution to protecting the army from hidden ‘enemies’.⁵⁷ Voroshilov was offering the same solutions as he had done in the past, when he had merely ordered ‘vigilance’ to be raised. Importantly, Voroshilov also tried to deflect responsibility, surely sensing that the discovery of these Trotskyist ‘enemies’ in the military could develop into a serious problem. Indeed, he stated that he was not fully responsible for the arrested Trotskyists having gone undiscovered, as no one else had noticed anything suspicious.⁵⁸ In all, Voroshilov’s speech was largely confined to discussing the already arrested officers, rather than the need to further purge the ranks. With the repetition that the army contained the best people in the Soviet system and his emphasis on the small number of ‘enemies’ presently exposed, Voroshilov did not strike a note of alarm. Yet, not all agreed with him. Molotov was not reassured by Voroshilov’s defence of army loyalty. In his speech he called for a more thorough checking of the military. Molotov agreed with Voroshilov that there were only ‘small signs’ of sabotage, espionage and Trotskyist activity in the army, but he argued that if the problem was ‘approached carefully’ further ‘enemies’ would be revealed:

If we have wreckers in all sectors of the economy, can we imagine that there are no wreckers in the military. It would be ridiculous. The military department is a very big deal, and its work will not be verified now, but later on, and it will be verified very closely.⁵⁹

Molotov’s intervention is significant. He would not have made his comments without Stalin’s backing. Yet, there still seems to be some level of hesitation to clamp-down on the army even at this point. There are similarities to 1927 and 1930 when Stalin also

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 153.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 165.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 171.

⁵⁹ For Molotov’s comments to the Plenum, see *Izvestiia TsK*, p. 45. In a final point on the February-March Plenum and the fate of Bukharin and Rykov, during a meeting of the Commission of the Central Committee on 27 February Iakir was one of the few members who voted for the death penalty to be applied to Bukharin and Rykov. Iakir’s vote is difficult to square with the argument contesting that the military elite were unhappy with the rise in political repression during 1937 and this is partly why Stalin had them executed. For Iakir’s vote, see Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, pp. 412-413.

acted with restraint. The military would be more closely investigated, but not immediately. Molotov specifically noted this would be ‘later on’. Perhaps more evidence of ‘counterrevolution’ in the army was required, or maybe Stalin was merely being cautious. The Red Army was a very important institution, especially at a time of looming war. Stalin would not want to crack down without absolute certainty or until he was compelled to. This point had not been reached. At the Plenum, Stalin did not address the issue of the military arrests specifically. On 3 March he did point to apparent espionage and sabotage by foreign fascist agents and Trotskyists.⁶⁰ In this respect, Stalin explicitly linked Trotskyists to foreign agents and Ezhov’s influence is clear.⁶¹ He also warned about the dangers of ‘enemies’ masked as party members, another reference to ‘double-dealers’. Those carrying party cards working for the ‘enemy’ were seen as the chief danger. Stalin also warned about not forgetting the dangers of capitalist encirclement.⁶² Stalin did make one reference to the dangers of hidden spies in a military during war when he remarked:

In order to win a battle during war, this may require several corps of soldiers. But, in order to thwart these gains at the front, all is needed are several spies somewhere in the staff of the army or even in the staff of the divisions, who are able to steal operative plans and give these to the enemy.⁶³

A final indirect reference to the army came from Ezhov. Along with talking about the alleged connections between the former Right Deviation and foreign agents, he spoke about one of the arrested ‘counterrevolutionaries’, a certain A. Slepko, who had apparently given ‘evidence’ that a military coup was a potential method of seizing power.⁶⁴ This was yet another example of how the idea of a ‘military plot’ increasingly appeared in interrogation testimony. It seems that the Ezhov continued to steer investigations in this direction.

The impact of the Plenum is visible in the sharp contrast between Voroshilov’s Plenum speech and a speech he later gave to a meeting of the Red Army party members (*aktiv*) on 13 March. Here he spoke with more concerned terms about the danger to the army from hidden ‘enemies’ and struck a note closer to Molotov’s position. The party line towards the army had changed at the Plenum and Voroshilov had no choice but to

⁶⁰ *Voprosy istorii*, 3 (1995), p. 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 4-10.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

⁶⁴ Hagenloh, p. 233; Cherushev, p. 328.

follow. Yet, before his speech to the *aktiv* there were more prominent army arrests. On the 11 March, I. I. Garkavyi, the commander of the UVO, and V. I. Vasilenko, his deputy and commander of the 65th rifle division, were arrested.⁶⁵ Both had been implicated in February when Stalin received a denunciation about an alleged wrecking group operating within the engineering department of the Red Army. This was quickly investigated by the political police, leading to the arrest of N. I. Velezhev, the aid to the head of the engineering troops in the UVO. Velezhev's arrest led to the incrimination of Garkavyi, Vasilenko, the commander of the 65th rifle division, G. F. Gavriushenko, and a number of other officers.⁶⁶ The arrests of Garkavyi and Vasilenko are significant. Neither was a former Trotskyist and they had connections to the upper military elite. Garkavyi was an acquaintance of both Iakir and Gamarnik.⁶⁷ Thus, the expanding arrests were starting to creep higher towards the upper military elite. This may have influenced Voroshilov in taking a more forthright tone about hidden 'enemies' during his speech to the *aktiv* in March. Yet Molotov's insistence that the Red Army would be thoroughly checked remains the decisive factor.

In his speech to the *aktiv* Voroshilov spoke about how deeply the 'fascist-Trotskyist bands' had penetrated into the Soviet Union and pressed the need for all of the army to keep an eye on each other.⁶⁸ Voroshilov highlighted what he saw as poor 'self-criticism' and placed blame on the army party organisations.⁶⁹ These criticisms were similar to highlighting 'weak vigilance' as he had in the past. In this sense, there is still little to suggest Voroshilov was tackling, or knew how to approach, the problem of why officers were not successfully rooting out the 'enemies' in the ranks. Pointing to a lack of 'self-criticism' was not going to get results. But in other respects, Voroshilov was far more forthright than he had ever been. For the first time he articulated the danger from foreign agents in very clear terms. For example, Voroshilov mentioned a series of fires which had resulted in a number of deaths and damage to machinery and transport, and he remarked, 'I am absolutely convinced that it is the work of Japanese

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 100, 163.

⁶⁶ Khaustov and Samuelson, p. 110. Stalin received reports of the continuing arrests in the army at this time, see pp. 109-111.

⁶⁷ After the 'exposure' of the 'military-fascist plot' at the June 1937 Military Soviet, Stalin recalled that following the arrest of Garkavyi he was visited by Iakir who apparently said: 'I am guilty c.[omrade] Stalin...I was close with him [Garkavyi], I did not expect that he was such a person. It's my fault', *Voennyi sovet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR: 1-4 iunia 1937 goda*, ed. by Anderson and others, p. 150. Cherushev notes that Gamarnik and Garkavyi were Civil War associates, see Cherushev, p. 125.

⁶⁸ RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 117, ll. 42, 47.

⁶⁹ Ibid., ll. 95-97.

spies, it is the work of Japanese agents.⁷⁰ Voroshilov also pointed to the large numbers of accidents in the army that were apparently due to ‘enemies’ and he called for each incident to be carefully investigated.⁷¹ Most importantly, in referring to the already arrested Trotskyists, Voroshilov now argued that these arrests did not mean that the Red Army was free from ‘enemies’. He argued:

We do not have the right to permit one enemy in the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army, we must not allow this. Not only should we not have a single enemy in the ranks of our party, but we should not accept one enemy in the army because the army should be utterly and completely clean.⁷²

This was a much stronger call to ‘clean’ the ranks than he had made at the February-March Plenum. Even though Voroshilov did not propose many specific solutions to tackling these remaining ‘enemies’ in the army, since Molotov’s intervention he was surely feeling the pressure from Stalin and wanted the officers to redouble their efforts. Voroshilov must have known that this meant further ‘enemies’ would inevitably be found and perhaps he worried that he would be held responsible. But he could no longer deny or downplay the threat that Stalin and Ezhov now saw within the Red Army. As such, rather than emphasise how well the army had done in exposing ‘enemies’, as he had done at the February-March Plenum, Voroshilov now pushed for the remaining hidden ‘enemies’ to be rooted out.

Voroshilov’s comments were echoed by others during the meeting. There were similar criticisms about a lack of ‘Bolshevik vigilance’ and how ‘enemies’ had been able to slip by.⁷³ However, some present also called to deepen the search into the Red Army. For instance, Budennyi argued that it was impermissible that ‘enemies’ were within the military. It was just too vital an institution. He pushed for deeper investigation to find the remaining ‘conspirators’:

It is not possible that it is one group, fifteen to twenty people, and no more. You know that in the first trial, the Trotskyist-Zinovievite trial, Mrachkovskii openly said that we have a direct order from Trotsky to plant groups in the RKKA.⁷⁴

The commander of the MVO, I. Belov, spoke in similar terms:

⁷⁰ Ibid., l. 51.

⁷¹ Ibid., ll. 51-53.

⁷² Ibid., l. 58.

⁷³ See for example the speeches of Batvinnik, RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 1820, l. 114; Smolenskii, l. 127; Redkin, l. 349; Kork, ll. 745-747.

⁷⁴ Ibid., ll. 448-449.

it is impossible to be so naïve that since the arrest of several officers that there are no more enemies in the ranks of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army... We should understand now more than ever that the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army is a very attractive object for all counter-intelligence agents, and we should note that the group of arrested commanders, who were actively working, will have had some kind of nest, a nest that we have to open and help the organs of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs more actively in our future work than we are doing at the moment.⁷⁵

Again, not only were there unexposed 'enemies' in the army but the perceived danger from foreign agents is very clear. Budennyi and Belov presented the threat from hidden 'enemies' in stronger terms than Voroshilov, perhaps sensing the approaching arrests and the need to display the necessary 'signals' of having highlighted the threat to the army. However, not everyone argued in the same terms despite also seeing the coming arrests. Feldman agreed that insufficient 'vigilance' had provided the enemy the opportunity to infiltrate the ranks and he called for a need to study each individual officer carefully.⁷⁶ But Feldman remained consistent in pushing for legality to be observed during an investigation. He pointed out that since 1934 the improved standards of evidence required for arrests had seen declining levels in the officer corps. Feldman emphasised the importance of Voroshilov having gained the right to sanction arrests in the army. Feldman saw a danger of a shift towards mass unfounded arrests. Indeed, he criticised the discharges of officers 'indiscriminately' or by 'list'.⁷⁷ These concerns turned out to be justified. However, Feldman was not out of step with Ezhov on this particular issue. At the February-March Plenum, Ezhov had criticised the use of mass arrests as ineffective in finding genuine 'enemies'.⁷⁸ Mass arrests were seen as a blunt instrument. Thus, Feldman's concerns about arrests 'by list' were not controversial. The use of mass arrests was facing criticism at this time and in this respect there is still little indication that a large military purge was being planned. Ezhov and Stalin wanted a centrally controlled and careful investigation of the army to find the hidden 'enemies'. However, when the 'military-fascist plot' was finally 'exposed' in May, there was little restraint and a noticeable lack of central control.

Finally, Gamarnik's speech to the Red Army *aktiv* demonstrates the degree to which the military was now perceived as internally compromised. In a contrast to his

⁷⁵ Ibid., I, 485.

⁷⁶ Ibid., II, 547-551.

⁷⁷ Ibid., II, 558-559.

⁷⁸ Getty, "Excesses Are Not Permitted": Mass Terror and Stalinist Governance in the Late 1930s', *Russian Review*, 61, 1 (Jan., 2002), 113-138 (pp. 121-122).

speeches in previous years, Gamarnik now described the scale of the infiltration in much greater terms: ‘Comrades, the Japanese-German Trotskyist agents, spies and wreckers are in a full range of our army organisation, in the staffs, the institutions, the academies, the military-training institutions.’⁷⁹ The problem was no longer a small number of Trotskyist officers, but foreign-backed Trotskyist agents operating in a great many areas of the Red Army. Notably, Gamarnik no longer tried to downplay the perceived danger to the army. Like Voroshilov, after the February-March Plenum Gamarnik must have known that it was impossible to go against how Ezhov was framing the threat to the Red Army and how Stalin believed there were undiscovered ‘enemies’ in the ranks. Again, foreign espionage was firmly on Ezhov’s agenda at this time. All foreign citizens in the Soviet Union had been placed under surveillance in early 1937 and those suspected of espionage were expelled from the country. Following the February-March Plenum, the political police had begun to gather further information on suspected foreign agents. Instructions sent to local NKVD administrations noted that foreign agents were working inside the Soviet Union and had created networks ready to provoke rebellions when war broke out.⁸⁰ It is very likely this search extended to the Red Army. In addition, speaking about weak ‘vigilance’ was familiar territory for Gamarnik, and in his speech to the *aktiv* he once again highlighted the lessons of the *proverka* and *obmen*:

We have excluded many people from the party. Some of this group were excluded probably for nothing, for so called passivity, insufficient activity, insufficient political preparedness and so on. And regarding Trotskyists and Zinovievites, during the *obmen* and *proverka* of party documents, despite all the warnings of the TsK (Central Committee), we excluded only 300 people from all of the army. But the main thing is that after the *obmen* of party documents, after the issue of new party documents, 250 Trotskyists and Zinovievites were exposed and excluded from the party. Here are the characteristics of vigilance. For long time, for almost a year, documents were checked and exchanged, and during this long period of work only 300 enemies of the party were successfully exposed and excluded; after the *obmen* 250 were exposed and excluded, to whom party documents had been issued. Is this not evidence of insufficiency, of the belated vigilance of many of our party organisations and political organs?...each of you understands that only one spy, penetrated in any staff of a division, a corps, army, general staff – is able to cause enormous, incalculable disasters (*bedstviia*).⁸¹

⁷⁹ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 319, l. 2.

⁸⁰ Hagenloh, pp. 233-234. In addition, in March the political police had ordered that a special registry be created for all foreigners who had been given Soviet citizenship since 1 January 1936, see Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, p. 180.

⁸¹ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 319, l. 4.

What is interesting about Gamarnik's comments is how they again suggest deeper problems with army 'vigilance'. Dangerous 'enemies' continued to be discovered in the ranks even after the *proverka* and *obmen*. Gamarnik had previously pointed to these party *chistki* as having highlighted the poor state of army self-policing. It had taken these *chistki* to find the dangerous 'enemies' which the army itself was incapable of doing. But with the continued 'exposure' of dangerous 'enemies' even after the *proverka* and *obmen*, Gamarnik now argued that these *chistki* themselves were inadequate. 'Enemies' were still perceived as hidden within the ranks and neither army self-policing nor the party *chistki* had been effective at discovering these. In highlighting how 'enemies' continued to be missed, Gamarnik was in part reacting to the changed line towards the Red Army at the February-March Plenum. He needed to show that he saw the danger as defined by Stalin and Ezhov. However, Gamarnik's comparison between expulsions from the party for more serious reasons, such as for being a political 'enemy', and those for passivity and weak political preparedness, demonstrates his awareness of the problems with the party *chistki* in general terms. As Getty has argued, the performance of the *chistki* was complicated by the relationship between the central and regional party organisations. Regional party leaders held great influence within their locality and had built systems of patronage and support. Getty terms these 'family circles'. When the local elites were ordered to conduct the *chistki*, they tended to deflect the purge downwards and found 'enemies' in the party rank-and-file, rather than purge their 'own machines', their own close systems of patronage and alliances.⁸² Indeed, local elites wanted to avoid weakening their own power and influence, but also avoid attracting questions about the type of person working with them. This was particularly the case if some of the people within the family circles could be regarded as dangerous 'enemies'. Indeed, Getty notes that local elite family circles were likely to include former Trotskyists and Zinovievites who had worked their way to the top by the mid-1930s and were now experienced party members. The reluctance from party elites to correctly conduct the *chistki* explains why many of those expelled were from the party rank-and-file and for minor reasons, such as 'passivity', and why the dangerous political 'enemies' could remain seemingly undiscovered in the party.⁸³ As shown above, there are indications that some army officers also behaved in this way. They turned towards making unnecessary discharges for minor crimes to

⁸² Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, pp. 204-205.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

perhaps satisfy demands for increased ‘vigilance’, rather than seek out those deemed dangerous ‘enemies’ who could be in their close systems of patronage. Budennyi’s reference in his August 1936 letter to Voroshilov about some officers and ‘*bat’kovshchina*’ (oligarchy) suggests he believed that some officers had built similar systems of patronage and local cliques. In this respect, it is very possible that the conduct of the *chistki* in the army was similarly affected by deliberate resistance from some officers. Further references to ‘family circles’ in the army will be detailed below

The growing prominence of the espionage threat to the army can also be seen by the frequent mention at the March meeting of the *aktiv* about the poor security of secret documents. For instance, Gamarnik criticised loose talk about the contents of secret files and that documents were being left open in public.⁸⁴ Egorov pointed to ‘the disappearance of a colossal number of critical documents’ and how the army had ‘slept on our laurels’ in organisational work.⁸⁵ Another officer, B. I. Bazenkov, remarked: ‘There is not a month when in any department of the NKO (People’s Commissariat of Defence) some kind of secret document is not lost.’⁸⁶ The army had always struggled with the security of secret documents, but with the increasing attention now given to hidden foreign agents in early 1937 further preventative measures were needed. Thus, only days before the meeting of the *aktiv*, Gamarnik signed a secret order regarding ‘enemies’ working in the clerical and technical offices in a range of army staffs and institutions. Apparently, secret documents were being handled by ‘enemies’ and this was going unchecked by the political police. Gamarnik ordered that all technical and clerical staff to be checked within a one month period and those exposed as untrustworthy to be discharged from the army.⁸⁷ Later on 20 March Voroshilov also published a secret order concerning document security. This recounted an episode when a secret military document had been left in a drawer in one of the rooms of the National hotel on 3 February. An investigation had found that Dibenko, the commander of

⁸⁴ Ibid., l. 6.

⁸⁵ RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 1820, l. 170.

⁸⁶ Ibid., l. 247. According to a report from a Polish intelligence agent from 23 November 1936 there were rumours that a number of Red Army men, including the head of the organisational department of the Staff, had illegally copied the mobilisation plan for the Western Border regions. According to the report the most senior of the group then fled to Poland, while the others were arrested. The mobilisation plan then allegedly surfaced in the British Press, see *Sovetsko-pol’skie otnosheniia v politicheskikh usloviakh Evrope 30-kh godov XX stoletia*, ed. by E. Durachinski and A.N. Sakharov (Moscow: Nauka, 2001), pp. 67-68.

⁸⁷ RGVA, f. 4, op. 15, d. 12, l. 16.

PriVO, was responsible and he received a reprimand. Voroshilov ordered a review of how documents were stored and noted that this case was not an isolated incident.⁸⁸

However, that the perceived spy threat to the army was beginning to be seen in greater terms is most clearly demonstrated in a speech Gamarnik gave on 20 March to the Leningrad *aktiv*. Here he remarked:

Didn't you know that each capitalist country has spies in other countries, do the Germans not have their own counterintelligence agents, spies, agents in France, Czechoslovakia and in a whole range of other countries and the other way round? There is no capitalist country which would not practise espionage, wrecking, counterintelligence work in another capitalist country. These are the laws of capitalism... And it is quite natural and understandable that if one capitalist country is sending agents and spies to another capitalist country, that it would be incomprehensible, strange, foolish, it would be naïve, if we did not think that each capitalist country is attempting to get agents, spies inside our country, it would be naïve to think that each capitalist country does not have its own agents and spies inside our country.⁸⁹

Gamarnik also mentioned a resolution from the February-March Plenum regarding wrecking and espionage within the People's Commissariats of Transport and Heavy Industry, and how this also affected the Chemical Industry and the Red Army.

Gamarnik noted that the NKVD needed to report to the Soviet Government and Central Committee about this question within one month. He added:

The evidence of wrecking and espionage is not small... We know that Trotsky gave a direct order to his agents from abroad to create a Trotskyist terrorist cell in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, and Hitler and Trotsky gave an order to organise subversive cells in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army in peace time, which prepared the defeat of the RKKA in the future approaching war.⁹⁰

The perceived scale of the threat from foreign agents in Gamarnik's speech was described in far greater detail than he had done previously. Gamarnik's comments suggest that from the 'evidence' given by the arrested Trotskyists, the political police had started to make connections between the former Trotskyists in the Red Army and German agents. A broader 'conspiracy' inside the army was being pieced together by Ezhov. In addition, Gamarnik's speech shows that the danger from foreign agents specifically was now a priority for the Red Army as mandated by the February-March

⁸⁸ Ibid., l. 28.

⁸⁹ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 319, ll. 73-74.

⁹⁰ Ibid., ll. 75, 84.

Plenum. During the *proverka* and *obmen* Gamarnik had pointed to this espionage threat, emphasised its importance, but crucially, he had specified its minor scale.

Circumstances had changed. With Ezhov and Stalin putting pressure on the army and with Hitler and Trotsky now seen as working in tandem, the espionage threat was perceived in much larger terms.⁹¹

At the end of March Stalin signalled his growing distrust of the officer corps when the Politburo ordered that any senior officer who had been expelled from the party for political reasons was to be discharged from the army.⁹² In addition, on 28 April, *Pravda* published a call for the army to tackle ‘internal enemies’ and ‘to master politics’.⁹³ These were attempts to improve the political reliability of the army. At the same time, arrests in the army continued. The end of April saw the arrests of several senior officers, including N. G. Egorov, the head of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee military school, and M. I. Alafuzo, the head of the Department of the Academy of the General Staff.⁹⁴ On 27 April, the aide to the commander of the KVO, R. A. Peterson, was also arrested.⁹⁵ Egorov and Peterson gave ‘evidence’ about their role in a possible coup. This was another mention of a ‘military plot’. Peterson also said he was a member of a ‘Right-counterrevolutionary’ organisation.⁹⁶ Indeed, as noted, the conspiracy that Ezhov was piecing together linked all earlier oppositionists, including the Right Deviation. Yet, the key arrests which brought the direct incriminations of Tukhachevskii and the other future members of the ‘military-fascist plot’ were not from the army, but from the political police itself.

During the February-March Plenum Ezhov had denounced his predecessor Iagoda for his poor leadership and he attacked the remaining Iagoda group inside the political police.⁹⁷ A resolution from the Plenum entitled, ‘Lessons of the wrecking, diversionary, and espionage activities of the Japanese-German-Trotskyist agents’, accused the previous political police leadership of harbouring criminal individuals who

⁹¹ In a further sign that the perceived espionage threat was becoming more prominent there were a number of articles in *Krasnaia zvezda* about spies during the first half of 1937, see ‘Fashistsko-trotskistskii zagovor v Valensii’, 28 March 1937; ‘Podrobnosti shpionskoi raboty fashistskoi organizatsii v madride’, 20 April 1937; ‘Iaponskaia razvedka v russko-iaponskoi voine’, 23 April 1937; ‘Avstro-germanskii shpionazh pered mirovoi voinoi’, 24 April 1937; ‘Aktivnaia maskirovka’, 28 April 1937; ‘Set’ shpionazha i provokatsii fashistskoi germanii’, 14 May 1937; ‘Germanskaia shpionazh v ispanii’, 28 May 1937.

⁹² Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, p. 180.

⁹³ Conquest, p. 193.

⁹⁴ Cherushev, pp. 128, 331.

⁹⁵ Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKA*, p. 158.

⁹⁶ Cherushev, p. 331.

⁹⁷ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 422.

had apparently held back in exposing the Trotskyist centre, despite already accumulated ‘evidence’.⁹⁸ Following the Plenum, Iagoda was expelled from the party and later arrested. Furthermore, Ezhov had been staffing the political police with his own supporters since his appointment as the head of the NKVD in September 1936.⁹⁹ After the February-March Plenum, he conducted a purge of the political police which led several arrests in early April, including M. I. Gai, the head of the OO NKVD, G. E. Prokofiev, a former deputy of Iagoda, who at the time of his arrest was deputy People’s Commissar of Communications, and the deputy of OO NKVD, Z. I. Volovich.¹⁰⁰ Ezhov had previously declared at a meeting of NKVD officers during 19 to 21 March that Gai and Volovich were German spies.¹⁰¹ Under interrogation at the end of April, Gai, Volovich and Prokofiev gave incriminating ‘evidence’ against the Red Army elite, linking Tukhachevskii, Uborevich, Iakir, Kork, Eideman and other senior officers with the Iagoda conspirators and a planned coup and espionage.¹⁰² This was the first time that direct testimony was given against the members of the military elite who would be put on trial in June. From this point on their names would feature frequently in the testimony of other arrested officers. In a sense, it is understandable why it was the NKVD men who finally delivered the direct ‘evidence’ against the Red Army elite. The political police had a long history of working-up plots and trying to ‘expose’ conspiracy in the ranks. They were in the business of looking for ‘counterrevolution’ in the military and when arrested this remained familiar territory. If Ezhov was trying to find ‘evidence’ of an organised military conspiracy in the army elite with links to fascist states, this could be easily obtained from the arrested NKVD men. M. I. Gai, in particular, had close involvement with the army. He was present and the meetings of the Military Soviet and would have repeatedly met with members of the high command. It is reasonable to assume that his testimony would carry weight. Thus, the arrests of those who had worked for so long to guard the Red Army against subversion had in the end delivered the outlines of an imagined conspiracy which would heavily undermine it. Yet, Stalin displayed growing suspicions about Tukhachevskii specifically even before the ‘evidence’ from the NKVD men had been given. A day before M. I. Gai gave his ‘evidence’, the Politburo cancelled the Tukhachevskii’s trip to Britain to attend the

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 422-425.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 280.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 433, 436; For more details on the NKVD purge see, Jansen and Petrov, pp. 60-62.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁰² *Reabilitatsiia: kak eto bylo*, ed. by Artizov and others, II, p. 602.

coronation of King George. This was later publicised on the grounds of ill health.¹⁰³ However, previously on 21 April, Ezhov had sent Stalin, Molotov and Voroshilov a message detailing a chance of a German terrorist attack against Tukhachevskii if he attended the coronation. Yet, there is nothing to suggest that this anything more than a fabrication. It seems Ezhov had created this story as a means to keep Tukhachevskii inside the country.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Ezhov's growing suspicions about Tukhachevskii can be seen even earlier on 12 April, when he sent Voroshilov a report which detailed a supposed link between Tukhachevskii and the Japanese military attaché in Poland. Voroshilov noted on the report, 'Reported. Decisions have been made to investigate'.¹⁰⁵

At the beginning of May Stalin signalled again that the army's political reliability needed to be strengthened. The Politburo passed a resolution ending single military and political command and reinstated the influence of the political commissar. This was a step back to the arrangement that had existed during the Civil War when military specialists were regarded as unreliable and needing close observation. The officers were beginning to test Stalin's instinct for restraint. Further damaging testimony against the military elite came soon after and this gradually began to solidify the case against Tukhachevskii and his 'co-conspirators'. On 6 May, M. Ie. Medvedev, a brigade commander, was arrested as a member of a 'counterrevolutionary' group. Between 8 and 10 May Medvedev gave testimony, which was undoubtedly forced, that he had been a member of a Trotskyist military organisation which included Tukhachevskii, Feldman, Iakir, Putna, Primakov and Kork.¹⁰⁶ This direct testimony against the senior officers now had serious consequences. On 10 May Tukhachevskii was removed from his position and transferred to command the less prestigious PriVO. The decision to remove Tukhachevskii had been taken earlier on 7 May as Medvedev was giving his 'evidence'.¹⁰⁷ Later on 13 May members of the political police sent Ezhov a report containing materials on Tukhachevskii, the 'evidence' from Kakurin and Troitskii from operation *vesna* in 1930, and a note which contained the types of rumours about Tukhachevskii seen in previous years: 'he dreams more about being a Marshal at the command of Germany, than the Soviet government...'¹⁰⁸ This was perhaps also

¹⁰³ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, p. 459.

¹⁰⁴ *Izvestiia TsK*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁵ See *Reabilitatsiia: kak eto bylo*, ed. by Artizov and others, II, p. 601. This document is seen today as disinformation by Japanese intelligence, see *Voенно-istoricheskii arkhiv*, p. 33.

¹⁰⁶ Khaustov and Samuelson, p. 115.

¹⁰⁷ Minakov, *1937. zagovor byl!*, p. 288.

¹⁰⁸ *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, p. 255.

forwarded to Stalin. On 14 May Kork was removed from his position and arrested. Kork initially denied the accusations of being a counterrevolutionary, but presumably under pressure, he gave ‘evidence’ on 16 May about preparations for a coup with Tukhachevskii and Putna’s involvement.¹⁰⁹ On 15 May Feldman’s appointment as deputy commander of the MVO was annulled and he was also arrested. In Feldman’s case, it may have been his attempts to restrain the gathering repression in the military in 1936 that brought him under Ezhov’s suspicions. As with Iagoda, those perceived to be holding back in ‘exposing’ ‘enemies’ were in danger of arrest. Putna was also re-interrogated also on 14 May as the conspiracy was pieced together and he incriminated Tukhachevskii. Primakov also gave testimony incriminating Iakir.¹¹⁰ The latter was removed from his position on 20 May and transferred to the LVO, while Uborevich was transferred to command the troops in the remote SAVO.¹¹¹ Under interrogation during 19 to 23 May Feldman gave evidence about the existence of Trotskyist Military plot within the Red Army which he said was headed by Tukhachevskii. Feldman also mentioned more than forty other officers and political workers.¹¹² Primakov gave further evidence on 21 May naming Tukhachevskii and forty others as members of the military conspiracy, including Shaposhnikov, Gamarnik, Dibenko and S. P. Uritskii.¹¹³ On 22 May Tukhachevskii, Eideman, Iakir and Uborevich were all arrested. On 24 May Tukhachevskii was expelled from the party.¹¹⁴ On 29 May Tukhachevskii himself gave testimony. All of the future key ‘conspirators’ of the ‘military-fascist plot’ were now arrested. Importantly, Stalin had been very closely involved throughout the investigation, receiving Ezhov regularly between 21 and 28 May.¹¹⁵

However, this series of events is unusual. Despite the incriminating ‘evidence’ against the group of officers only Kork and Feldman were actually arrested in the first instance, while the others were transferred. This was an unusual way to handle

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 182.

¹¹⁰ *Izvestiia TsK*, p. 48.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 49.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 48. Shaposhnikov was the only individual to survive the Terror named in this list. This could be because he was a moderate figure who Stalin seems to have trusted. As detailed in chapter three, Shaposhnikov took Tukhachevskii’s place on the Staff in 1928 and achieved what the latter had been unable to do. Shaposhnikov did not push boundaries and typically maintained the status quo. Stalin may thus have lifted him from suspicion.

¹¹⁴ The Politburo resolution to expel Tukhachevskii charged him with: ‘participation in an anti-Soviet, Trotskyist-rightist conspiratorial bloc and in espionage work against the USSR on behalf of fascist Germany’. In the margins Budennyi had written ‘It’s necessary to finish off this scum’, see Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 448.

¹¹⁵ *Izvestiia TsK*, p. 51.

dangerous ‘conspirators’. If these officers were under suspicion, why were they all not immediately arrested? Iakir’s transfer from the KVO to the LVO is the most unusual. It may have been a move to a less significant military district, but Leningrad was still very important strategically. It was a responsible position. These transfers strongly suggest a level of uncertainty from Stalin and how he should next to proceed. There is little indication that the group of officers had been targets for arrest for a long period of time or that there was a well-thought-out plan. Indeed, the decision to move against the group appears to have been taken quickly and without a plan. It seems very likely that the initial testimony from the arrested NKVD men from April must not have been completely convincing. Arresting some of the most senior members of the army leadership and accepting the existence of a ‘military plot’ was very serious. Stalin must have known that if the military plot was real, there would need to be an extensive search for any other undiscovered ‘conspirators’. This risked gutting the officer corps, which was a dangerous move at a time of looming war. Stalin would not undertake this until he was absolutely certain. Thus, he hesitated once again after the ‘evidence’ was received from the NKVD men and the case against the military elite needed to be strengthened over several weeks. But even after additional incriminated testimony had been extracted from Medvedev in early May, Stalin still chose to make transfers rather than arrests, with the exceptions of Kork and Feldman. Even at this point Stalin must not have been completely convinced about all of the ‘evidence’. It was not strong enough to risk heavily undermining the Red Army. Tukhachevskii was arrested twelve days after his transfer and only after further testimony had been received from Putna, Feldman, Kork and Primakov.¹¹⁶ But importantly, this sequence of events does not tell the full story. In April and May the broader perceived spy threat to the army, which had been building throughout 1937, finally peaked.

It is clear that Voroshilov had been preparing actions to address the perceived espionage threat to the army from at least April. On 21 April, Alksnis, the head of the Air Force, sent a report to Voroshilov which opened with the line: ‘Herewith I submit for your approval a plan of measures for the unmasking and prevention of wrecking and espionage in the VVS RKKA (Military Air Force).’¹¹⁷ Alksnis suggested measures such as tightening the fulfilment of orders to try and deprive spies and wreckers of the ability

¹¹⁶ Three days after his transfer on 13 May Tukhachevskii visited Stalin in the Kremlin, but there is no record of their conversation. Presumably Stalin challenged Tukhachevskii about his incrimination, see *ibid.*, p. 49.

¹¹⁷ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 965, l. 88.

to hide their activity, and that those who had access to secret documents needed to be scrutinised.¹¹⁸ Alksnis also noted that those excluded from the party for political reasons should be discharged from the army.¹¹⁹ Alksnis's report was followed by a similar report a day later from the head of the Navy, Vladimir Orlov, which also addressed searching for wreckers and spies. Orlov pointed to the need to check the command, the central apparatus and all industrial failures to look for evidence of wrecking. He wrote that this process was already underway in the navy with forty-three discharges already made.¹²⁰ On the same day another report was sent to Voroshilov from the army medical services on the same theme.¹²¹ Voroshilov had clearly solicited these reports, demonstrating that the search for spies and wreckers was firmly on his agenda. Indeed, he had no choice but to follow Ezhov's lead after the February-March Plenum. Later on 10 May, on the very day of Tukhachevskii's transfer, Voroshilov sent a lengthy report to Stalin and Molotov entitled, 'Measures for the exposure and the prevention of wrecking and espionage in the RKKA'.¹²² In this report Voroshilov emphasised the large scale threat of espionage to the army:

The wrecking and espionage activity of the Japanese-German-Trotskyist agents has touched (*zadela*) the Red Army. Acting on the instructions of intelligence agents of the imperialist states, the malicious enemies of the nation – the Trotskyists and Zinovievites – have penetrated their vile designs into the Red Army and have already managed to inflict considerable damage in various domains of military construction.

In response Voroshilov called for 'vigilance' to be raised and for all to study the evidence of wrecking and sabotage.¹²³ He also called for widespread checks to be made by officers on political reliability, discipline and military preparation. In a reference to the army's previously poor record on ensuring only reliable officers were in service, yearly appraisals were to be improved and 'formalism' and 'irresponsibility' were to be stamped out. Emphasis was also to be placed on investigating political pasts.¹²⁴

Voroshilov also argued that the promotion of new officers should be given importance. Indeed, he now made very specific comments about the problems with promotions with the officer corps, criticising: "familiness" (*semeistvennost*), nepotism, injustice,

¹¹⁸ Ibid., II. 90, 97.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., I. 98.

¹²⁰ Ibid., I. 101.

¹²¹ Ibid., I. 110.

¹²² Ibid., I. 65.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

helping on the one hand sycophants and unworthy people (and sometimes enemies) to advance easily through the ranks and cause damage'. He argued that this was not only harmful, but it produced discontent among the loyal officers.¹²⁵ This was the clearest articulation yet of the existence of possible 'family circles' within the officer corps and was very similar to Budennyi's criticisms of patronage groups in 1936. Voroshilov's comments also aligned with the complaints of previous years suggesting that some officers may have been deliberately avoiding searching for 'enemies' under their command. From the complaints about officers giving overly positive assessment of their units, to excessive reprimands and discharges for minor crimes, Voroshilov's comments add further support to the possibility that some officers closed ranks in the face of the search for hidden 'enemies'. They protected one another meaning that army self-policing broke down.

In terms of more direct practical measures to combat the perceived threat from spies and wreckers, Voroshilov called for a checking of all officers in all areas of the Red Army and Navy. Those who have access to secret documents were singled out for a more intensive scrutiny. Voroshilov also recommended a strict procedure for checking all accidents and 'extraordinary incidents' to look for evidence of wrecking or the work of spies and saboteurs.¹²⁶ Thus, Voroshilov's report shows clearly that a comprehensive verification of the army was needed to combat the perceived danger from wreckers and foreign agents. The military was perceived as heavily compromised by 'enemies' who had already done serious damage. What had once been regarded as a minor spy threat in 1936 was now seen in much greater proportions and was being highlighted by Voroshilov as a key danger. As detailed above, Ezhov and the political police showed more concerns about the spy threat to the Soviet Union and this had manifested in the charges of the second Moscow show trial. During the first months of 1937 it seems that the political police were now making links between Trotskyists in the ranks and foreign agents. Indeed, as shown above, the spy threat was increasingly on the army leadership's agenda in February and March. Ezhov was the key person in creating this agenda. By April and May the spy threat to the army had peaked as demonstrated by Voroshilov's report. Furthermore, this report represents his acceptance of Ezhov's narrative about 'enemies' in the ranks. Voroshilov made no effort to downplay the danger to Stalin and Molotov. He knew that this was impossible. Crucially this

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., ll. 65, 72, 81.

acknowledgement that the army was widely infiltrated by spies came before Tukhachevskii and the other officers were arrested for their supposed participation in the ‘military-fascist plot’. Indeed, as Voroshilov’s report described that German spies in particular had infiltrated the Red Army this was highly dangerous for the military elite. All members had spent extended periods in Germany training with the Reichswehr in the 1920s and early 1930s. Long-term contacts had been established. With persistent rumours running into early 1937 about a secret link between the Red Army command and the Nazis, Ezhov must have pushed harder in trying to make connections between senior army officers, such as Tukhachevskii, and foreign agents in the light of what he saw as a serious spy threat to the army and Soviet Union. Consequently, as the perceived spy threat to the Red Army became far more prominent in April and May, it is likely that this was a factor in the timing of when the direct incriminating testimony against Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers emerged, beginning with the ‘evidence’ extracted from the arrested NKVD men at the end of April.

It seems very likely that this broader spy threat was decisive in pushing Stalin to act against the Red Army elite in early May. Indeed, at this time Stalin himself was strongly focused on the danger from foreign agents in general terms. Since the Nakhaev case in 1934 Stalin had demonstrated his concerns about foreign agents infiltrating into the Soviet Union. In 1937 he articulated the great danger he believed they posed during the February-March Plenum and in May he saw this threat as a priority. From his appointment as head of the political police Ezhov had convinced Stalin that the oppositionist ‘plot’ was far broader than internal counterrevolutionaries and that there was a serious danger from foreign agents. Ezhov’s version of a ‘conspiracy’ of former oppositionists and foreign agents had become the dominant narrative. In mid-1937 Stalin appeared particularly concerned about German agents. In May he participated in writing a *Pravda* article on the methods of foreign intelligence agents. This article, published on 4 May, argued that German intelligence had a large number of agents it could call upon in Russia, France and Britain.¹²⁷ Also in May Stalin apparently told Voroshilov and Ezhov that biggest enemy was now the German intelligence service.¹²⁸ On 21 May he also declared that Soviet military intelligence had fallen into the ‘hands

¹²⁷ Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, pp. 175-176.

¹²⁸ V. K. Vinogradov, ‘Tret’ia reforma organov bezopasnosti (1934–1941)’, in *Trudy Obshchestva izucheniia istorii otechestvennykh spetssluzhb*, 4 vols, ed. by V. K. Bylinin and others (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2006), II, p. 93.

of the Germans'.¹²⁹ Stalin's concerns about foreign agents would give credibility to the reports and 'evidence' obtained by Ezhov about large numbers of spies apparently working inside the army and the concurrent incriminations of Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers. In early May Stalin must have felt some action was necessary. But what may still seem curious is why he still hesitated. Only Kork and Feldman were arrested in the first instance from the investigation into the military 'conspiracy' in the army elite. The other 'conspirators' were merely transferred. Stalin needed to be certain about the basis of the 'plot' in the high command. The broader spy threat to the Red Army was serious enough, but if there was also a military conspiracy within the upper military elite this was a very different matter and greatly raised the seriousness of the situation in the army. This would mean that the Red Army was not only widely infiltrated by foreign agents but they had established an organised conspiracy at the highest level. It is likely this is the reason Stalin was uncertain. He wanted more 'evidence' of the 'conspiracy' in the upper military elite. Indeed, if the 'conspiracy' was real then his response would be severe and create huge upheaval inside a key institution vital for defence. Thus, in most cases transfers were made first while Stalin checked 'evidence' against the group of senior officers. Indeed, he was closely involved during the investigation, indicating that he wanted to make certain of the reality of the charges himself.¹³⁰ But once more 'evidence' was extracted by the political police from Feldman, Kork, Eideman and Putna, Stalin did not hesitate any longer. He now either fully believed in the basis of the military plot in the army elite, or he believed this to a great enough extent when it was too risky not to take any further action. How could Stalin fight the approaching war with an army he saw as infiltrated by spies with a military conspiracy in the upper leadership? Thus, Stalin had waited until the very last moment until he was certain, but once he had sufficient 'evidence' about the supposed 'plot' in the high command, this meant taking no further action was impossible. Finally, a defining feature of what became the 'military-fascist plot' in the Red Army was an alleged connection to Germany and espionage by the senior officers. The 'exposed'

¹²⁹ Evgenii Gorbunov, 'Voennaia razvedka v 1934-1939 godakh', *Svobodnaia mysl'*, 3 (1998), 54-61 (p. 57). Military intelligence saw a large numbers of arrests starting at the end of April due to 'evidence' that it was riddled with foreign agents. There were over 300 arrests, including the deputy Artur Artuzov, see Khaustov and Samuelson, pp. 199-120.

¹³⁰ For example, in a letter of 8 May sent to Ezhov from Primakov, after nine months of denying his participation in the military conspiracy Primakov finally relented. However, in his letter he indicated that Stalin himself had been involved in the investigation and in his interrogation. Stalin was surely involved during the entire investigation, *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, pp. 180-181.

military ‘conspiracy’ was chiefly defined by supposed connections to hostile countries and to foreign intelligence agents. Consequently, it is possible to speculate that without this wider perceived spy threat which had been pushed by Ezhov throughout 1937 and which culminated in Voroshilov’s report, the arrests in the army elite may not have been sanctioned in May, or even at all. The ‘evidence’ against the senior officers, such as Tukhachevskii, may not have even appeared in April and May in the absence of a growing spy scare in the military which no doubt focused Ezhov’s attentions on the army elite to a much greater extent.

At the end of May the ‘military plot’ remained officially unpublicised but the arrests of the senior officers were known to the wider army. A new round of denunciations began. For example, on 27 May a denunciation was received by the commissar of the Frunze Academy from a brigade commander pointing to alleged links between Kork and Tukhachevskii and an academy lecturer. There are numerous similar examples.¹³¹ Thus, almost immediately the scale of the ‘military plot’ began to expand through denunciations. These letters would be instrumental in providing momentum to a wave of arrests over the next two years. In addition, the political police also widened their line of investigation. For example, on 28 May they compiled a list of those working in the artillery administration who had been incriminated by the testimony of the already arrested ‘conspirators’. This totalled twenty-six officers. Voroshilov gave the order to arrest.¹³² Thus, the ‘plot’ moved beyond the upper military elite almost immediately.

A final key victim of the ‘military-fascist plot’ was Gamarnik, who committed suicide on 31 May after being removed from his position the day before. Gamarnik had been named by Primakov on 21 May, but there appears little indication that he was under any suspicion before this point. For example, at the end of April the STO was abolished and replaced by a Defence Committee under the Soviet Government, which included as members Stalin, Ezhov, Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov and several others. Gamarnik was also made a member of this new body.¹³³ It is hard to see why Gamarnik would be given membership to this exclusive committee if he was under any kind of suspicion. In addition, there is little indication that Gamarnik disagreed or was

¹³¹ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 100, l. 110. For other denunciations with alleged links to Tukhachevskii the other officers at this time, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 10, d. 90, l. 86; op. 21, d. 100, ll. 112-113, 121-193, 591; op. 22, d. 1, ll. 1, 27, 131, 133.

¹³² *Izvestiia TsK*, p. 58. Numerous other senior officers were also discharged from the army and arrested in May, see Cherushev, pp. 143-145.

¹³³ Jansen and Petrov, p. 72.

becoming a block to the political repression within the Red Army. He continued to sanction the arrests of soldiers for political crimes into mid-May.¹³⁴ Unless Gamarnik was not sincere in sanctioning these political arrests, that he continued to do so suggests that he raised no objections. Gamarnik had argued persistently about the dangers of hidden ‘enemies’ in the ranks over the previous few years. But it seems that he was incriminated by his association with Iakir at the very last moment. Indeed, on the very day before Iakir’s arrest, the latter had visited Gamarnik in the morning. When Gamarnik was removed from his position on 30 May the Politburo resolution mentioned Iakir specifically.¹³⁵ As such, perhaps as soon as Gamarnik was removed from his position he realised he would also share Iakir’s fate.

The day after Gamarnik’s suicide the Military Soviet met again between 1 and 4 June in an extraordinary session which was dominated by the newly ‘exposed’ ‘military-fascist plot’.¹³⁶ Voroshilov’s opening speech outlined the ‘conspiracy’. The arrested officers were said to be spies and wreckers working for Trotsky and foreign intelligence who had left not a single area of military industry or army organisation unaffected by sabotage. Voroshilov argued that the conspirators had been trying to undermine the army so it would be defeated in war. The military plot was seen as one part of the wider oppositionist conspiracy. For those present at the meeting, this was the first time they read the ‘evidence’ against Tukhachevskii and the other officers. Some read their own names in the interrogation transcripts.¹³⁷ Voroshilov regularly quoted from the transcripts and also pointed to other supporting ‘evidence’ in explaining the ‘military plot’. For instance, past disputes, such as the controversy over Tukhachevskii’s radical armament plan in 1930, were now recast as ‘wrecking’.¹³⁸ But in other cases, Voroshilov downplayed the significance of past disputes. For example, he recounted the confrontation in May 1936, when Tukhachevskii had accused Voroshilov and Budennyi of hoarding all the power within the Red Army. But

¹³⁴ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 109, l. 327.

¹³⁵ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 313, l. 1; *Izvestiia TsK*, p. 52.

¹³⁶ What is interesting about this Military Soviet is that in an early list of attendees, which has been dated 21-22 May, Iakir, Uborevich and Tukhachevskii were actually included. Additional incriminating testimony against the three was extracted from Primakov and Feldman at around this time, but clearly before this additional ‘evidence’ had been received there was still no firm decision about what to do with the three after they had been transferred. Again, this shows that Stalin was very indecisive about some of the ‘evidence’ for the ‘military conspiracy’ in the first instance. For this initial list of attendees to the Military Soviet, see *Voennyi sovet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR: 1-4 iunია 1937 goda*, ed. Anderson and others, pp. 29-34.

¹³⁷ Cherushev, p. 139.

¹³⁸ *Voennyi sovet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR: 1-4 iunია 1937 goda*, ed. Anderson and others, pp. 66-70.

Voroshilov noted that such clashes were nothing but the ‘usual squabbles’ between people who had worked together for a long time. He downplayed the incidents that may have prompted questions about why he did not sound the alarm about the military ‘conspiracy’.¹³⁹ Indeed, some may have questioned why Voroshilov did not recognise Tukhachevskii’s ‘ambitions’ for power in May 1936. In fact, Voroshilov pleaded ignorance that he had not suspected any suspicious behaviour whatsoever. For instance, he commented:

The people were so disguised that I have to be honest here and admit that I not only did not see counterrevolution in the actions of these people, but I simply did not have any idea. Of Tukhachevskii, I, as you well know, did not especially like, did not especially love. I had strained relations with him. I did not regard Tukhachevskii highly as a worker.¹⁴⁰

Voroshilov was distancing himself from Tukhachevskii, pressing the point that they were not on good terms. He did not really have any other option without inviting suspicion about why he had not raised questions earlier about the ‘suspicious’ conduct of his deputy. Voroshilov was in a difficult position. Even if he had been suspicious about Tukhachevskii during the previous months, perhaps regarding the rumours about his disloyalty and the reports of a connection with Germany, to bring these up now at the Military Soviet would have asked further questions about his own ‘vigilance’. How could he have not noticed that his deputy was a German spy, and if he was suspicious, why did he do nothing about it? Potentially Voroshilov had a lot to answer for and he played it safe. Indeed, Voroshilov instead tried to spread the responsibility for having missed the ‘conspirators’. He was blaming others. Voroshilov remarked: ‘I have to declare just one more time that from you sitting here, I did not once hear one signal.’¹⁴¹ Others in the room should have been more alert to the danger. However, there were other voices at the Military Soviet who tried to argue that suspicions had actually been raised against Tukhachevskii much earlier. For example, Dibenko remarked that he had highlighted his suspicions of Tukhachevskii in 1931 and that he had doubts about him as early as 1923. According to Dibenko, Tukhachevskii had refused to sign a declaration condemning Trotsky in 1923. He also noted his suspicions and doubts about

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 76.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 74-75.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 76.

Uborevich and Iakir, but said these were ignored.¹⁴² Dibenko was trying to show that he had shown necessary ‘vigilance’ and given the correct ‘signals’ in light of the ‘military-fascist plot’, but that these had not been taken seriously. Voroshilov did not accept Dibenko’s version of events, replying that he should have written to him about his suspicions.¹⁴³ In contrast, other speakers spoke of their surprise at the arrests. For instance, Egorov remarked, ‘the party trusted them politically’, and commented there were no indications whatsoever that they were wreckers or spies.¹⁴⁴ Dubovoi remarked that he had believed Iakir to be a loyal party member, and on this point Stalin agreed, noting that Iakir was ‘one of the best commanders’.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, from those arrested, Iakir appeared to evoke the most surprise. He was someone who had been highly regarded. Yet some comments about Iakir were less complimentary. The deputy commander of the cavalry in the BVO, Iosif Apanasenko, remarked that Iakir apparently had a ‘*bat’kovshchina*’ in Ukraine. This was an exclusive group which contained only Iakir’s supporters.¹⁴⁶ This is a further indication that some officers were perceived as having created their own local fiefdoms and systems of patronage.

Having glossed over his own responsibility for having not noticed the formation of a military ‘conspiracy’ under his watch, Voroshilov proposed the solution to the crisis. He wanted a purge:

to sweep out with an iron broom not only all this scum, but everything that recalls such an abomination....It is necessary to purge the army literally up to the very last crack (*shchelochek*), the army should be clean, the army should be healthy.¹⁴⁷

Rather than dwell on the past, Voroshilov wanted to move on from how these dangerous ‘enemies’ had been missed and focus instead on a full-scale purge. The contrast to his speech at the February-March Plenum is striking. Voroshilov was now focusing on the future and the need to purge the ranks, whereas only a few months earlier he had emphasised the past performance of the army and how well he had done in removing the small number of Trotskyist enemies. This change in emphasis paved the way for a large wave of arrests.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 320.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 148. Stalin repeated this opinion later in the meeting, see p. 256.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 77.

In his speech, Stalin explicitly stated that the military plot was financed by the Nazis and he repeatedly accused many of the arrested officers of being German spies. He also saw the military ‘conspirators’ alongside those arrested in the party, such as Bukharin, Iagoda and Rykov.¹⁴⁸ Stalin presented the ‘military-fascist plot’ as only one part of a much broader conspiracy. But as others had done, Stalin also did not admit to previous suspicions about Tukhachevskii. For example, he remarked, ‘We thought he wasn’t a bad soldier, I thought he wasn’t a bad soldier’.¹⁴⁹ Stalin must have had some growing doubts about Tukhachevskii before his arrest. Ezhov certainly did. But nothing would be gained from admitting this at the Military Soviet. In addition, if Stalin had told of his suspicions about Tukhachevskii, this would seriously undermine his old comrade Voroshilov. In not mentioning his suspicions it is possible that he was trying to help his old friend. Stalin argued more generally that the army had been blinded by its successes.¹⁵⁰ In a further reference to espionage Stalin also pointed to intelligence failures and how poor intelligence was part of the problem. He reiterated that military intelligence was riddled with spies.¹⁵¹ Stalin also highlighted what he saw as a problem in promoting reliable officers and gave examples of those in command positions who turned out to be ‘enemies’.¹⁵² Stalin was no doubt very aware of the issues the army had with ensuring reliable promotions over the previous few years. However, the key part of his speech was when Stalin encouraged denunciations with the remark:

I have to say that they signalled very poorly from the field. Badly... They think that the centre should know everything, see everything. No, the centre does not see everything, nothing of the sort. The centre sees only part, the rest is seen by the localities. It sends people, but it does not know these people 100%, you should check them. There is one way to test this – it is checking people at work, according to the results of their work.

Stalin wanted more denunciations and more ‘signals’. Everyone needed to keep a closer eye on each others’ conduct. Suspicions needed to be reported. Stalin even remarked that it would be enough if these reports contained only ‘5% of truth’.¹⁵³ Stalin raised this point again during Egorov’s speech, pressing the importance of letters from ‘below’, interjecting that, ‘Not a single query, not a single letter from local people

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 128-131.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 136-137.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 140.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 137.

should remain without an answer.’¹⁵⁴ Denunciations were to be a key tool in combating the exposed ‘plot’. Stalin wanted the whole army to support the centre in flushing out the ‘enemies’ hidden in the ranks. This appeal to the lower ranks in helping root out the ‘conspirators’ in the army was one of the primary reasons that arrests from the ‘military-fascist plot’ exploded in the months after the June military trial.

A few days after the Military Soviet Voroshilov reiterated many of the same points from the Military Soviet at a meeting of the *aktiv* for workers in the Commissariat of Defense. The military conspiracy needed explaining to the broader masses in the Red Army, particularly if the rank-and-file were to be mobilised to root out ‘enemies’. Voroshilov made a reference to his earlier speech to the *aktiv* in March, remarking that at that time the army was in ‘last place’ in terms of ‘revealed’ enemies, but in three months ‘the picture has sharply changed’.¹⁵⁵ Voroshilov went on to describe the conspirators, commenting that Tukhachevskii had established a link with the Germans as early as 1925.¹⁵⁶ Voroshilov remarked that to many people Iakir was ‘a distinguished military worker’ who had ‘sympathy among the Red Army masses’, but that these qualities were his mask. Voroshilov also noted that he had trusted both Gamarnik and Eideman.¹⁵⁷ But the main point of the speech was that ‘enemies’ remained within the ranks.¹⁵⁸ Voroshilov mentioned again the need to study the people ‘below’, in particular the youth. He wanted these to be the example to follow and for all to look to their lives, enthusiasm and ‘healthy revolutionary fervour’.¹⁵⁹ Voroshilov was emphasising a distinction between the younger loyal generation and the now corrupted command.

On 11 June the ‘military-fascist plot’ was publicised and a group of the arrested officers were selected for trial in a closed military court. The group chosen for the trial as the public representatives of the military ‘conspiracy’ were Tukhachevskii, Iakir, Uborevich, Kork, Feldman, Eideman, Primakov and Putna. All were executed on 12 June. On that day *Pravda* published an article about the trial. Little is known of the trial itself, but there a limited number of existing accounts from those present. For example, on 14 July, Belov, now the commander of the BVO, sent a report to Voroshilov with his impressions of the trial. Belov gives a rich account, describing the behaviour of each

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 320.

¹⁵⁵ RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 118, l. 3.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., ll. 8, 50.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., ll. 9, 63.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., l. 30.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., l. 62.

defendant. According to Belov: ‘Tukhachevskii tried to maintain his ‘aristocratism’ and his superiority over others, from the beautiful English suit, with an expensive thin tie, to how he held his head and the precision of expression’. Belov remarked that Iakir tried to make an emotional appeal to the court: ‘...with several reminders about past joint work and good relations with the majority of the members of the court’. He described a dishevelled Uborevich, in a civilian suit with no tie, who had, ‘lost his nerve more than the first two’.¹⁶⁰ Belov described Kork as striking a more confident figure, apparently speaking more directly than the first three. According to Belov, Feldman showed little resistance. Belov remarked that he: ‘chided his colleagues, that they, like school children, were afraid to say things as they were, that they were most often occupied with espionage, and here they want to turn this into legal communication with foreign officers.’¹⁶¹ Belov described Eideman as looking ‘more miserable’ than the others, with a limp figure having difficulty standing, and that he, ‘babbled with a broken muffled spasmodic voice’. Putna was apparently thin and showing signs of deafness, but he answered with a, ‘clear and firm, confident voice’. In Belov’s opinion Primakov was one of the strongest and intelligent of the ‘enemies’.¹⁶² He concluded his report with his opinion that the group had not spoken the whole truth.¹⁶³ In any case, if Belov’s impressions are truthful, it is clear that torture or physical force must have been used during interrogation.¹⁶⁴ Budennyi was also present at the trial. In his version Tukhachevskii tried to question some of the charges put against him, challenging that they did not correspond with reality. But apparently he eventually acknowledged his guilt.¹⁶⁵ Finally, on the same day as the military trial Voroshilov published a secret order regarding the promotion of talented and loyal officers and political workers throughout the army. Voroshilov remarked that, ‘every good organisation is as strong as its cadres’.¹⁶⁶ Thus, at the very same time as widespread discharges and arrests in the officer corps were just about to begin in the Red Army, replacements were already being anticipated. Creating a politically reliable command had become a new priority.

¹⁶⁰ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 955, l. 97.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., l. 98.

¹⁶² Ibid., ll. 98-99.

¹⁶³ Ibid., l. 99.

¹⁶⁴ The transcript of Tukhachevskii’s confession was blood spattered, see Getty, ‘The Politics of Repression Revisited’ in *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, ed. by Getty and Manning, pp. 40-64 (p. 41).

¹⁶⁵ Khaustov and Samuelson, p. 118.

¹⁶⁶ RGVA, f. 4, op. 15, d. 13, l. 191.

The Aftermath of the Trial and the Expansion of the Military Purge

Denunciations from the lower ranks appeared immediately after the Military Soviet Meeting in June, but after the closed military trial there was an explosion of denunciations and arrests as large numbers of officers and soldiers were linked to Tukhachevskii and the other ‘conspirators’.¹⁶⁷ From June the arrests began to spread throughout the military districts and Stalin received frequent reports of the arrests and ‘evidence’ of wrecking.¹⁶⁸ The arrests also moved into PUR, primarily because of Gamarnik’s suicide.¹⁶⁹ But as denunciations from ‘below’ were so crucial in driving forward the expanding wave of arrests, it is important to try and appreciate the different reactions from the lower ranks to the ‘exposure’ of the ‘military-fascist plot’. Importantly, these reactions were diverse and motivations for denunciation varied. Some soldiers may have taken advantage of the ‘exposure’ of the ‘military-fascist plot’ to denounce their fellow soldiers for personal reasons, for careerism, or from a genuine belief about the ‘enemy’ within. In addition, when the ‘military-fascist plot’ was publicised some soldiers were unsure about who they could now trust. For example, on 15 June, Budennyi, then the commander of the MVO, sent Voroshilov a report detailing the reactions within the military district. Budennyi remarked that the sentence of execution for the ‘military fascist spies’, apparently, had met with approval and satisfaction, however, there were some negative reactions.¹⁷⁰ Budennyi recorded distrustful sentiments such as, ‘It is impossible now to believe any one of the leadership’. Another soldier had said: ‘...Gamarnik shot himself, but he was a prominent and influential person, and to believe the others now is impossible’.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ For denunciations following the military trial and into July see, RGVA, f. 37837, op. 10, d. 90, ll. 209, 301; d. 91, l. 25; op. 21, d. 100, ll. 116, 161, 210, 388, 390-391, 451; f. 9, op. 29, d. 320, l. 181. Many immediate subordinates of the executed officers were also quickly arrested, for example those who had worked under Iakir in the KVO were later arrested in July, see Khaustov and Samuelson, pp. 189-190.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 194-195.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 206.

¹⁷⁰ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 1023, l. 40.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., Gamarnik’s suicide in particular seemed to have intrigued some soldiers, see for example, RGVA, f. 37837, op. 10, d. 90, l. 212. See also David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927-1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 185-186, for the drop in public morale in wider society because of Gamarnik’s death.

Budennyi, however, attributed these views to the influences of ‘harmful elements’.¹⁷² Budennyi also noted the prevalence of a view that the spies and wreckers were in the upper rather than the lower ranks, hinting at a galvanised cynicism towards those in power.¹⁷³ But there are strong indications that some soldiers were not just confused about who they could trust but that they had been panicked by the arrests of their superiors. Before the military trial Voroshilov had received a report on 25 April from the commander of the UVO, Boris Gorbachev, describing the condition of the district (Gorbachev himself was later arrested in May). Aside from describing a poorly prepared district with underfulfilled orders and overspending, all of which Gorbachev deemed due to wrecking, he also detailed the soldiers’ reactions to the presence of ‘wreckers’ in the district. According to Gorbachev, this had created a sense of confusion in the ranks. He described:

frantic attempts to realise, open and find the effects of sabotage in the most important areas... Many workers in the district apparatus are full of fear of personal responsibility for what is happening in the district. They show senselessness and excessive zeal, they make a lot of noise, and try to insure themselves against an imaginary or real liability for their errors and mistakes.¹⁷⁴

From Gorbachev’s description it seems a panic had gripped the district and accusations about ‘wrecking’ had started to spread. Indeed, Gorbachev commented that it was difficult to ascertain the true extent of the ‘wrecking’ within the district due to the level of confusion.¹⁷⁵ He pointed to the arrests of the senior officers in the UVO, Garkavyi, Vasilenko and Gavriushchenko (who were arrested in March) as having sparked this panic.¹⁷⁶ Gorbachev’s account gives strong suggestions of how a sense of alarm quickly spread through the rank-and-file in response to the arrests of their senior officers. With a confused and distrustful rank-and-file it is easy to see how they could turn on each other.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, there was nothing particularly unusual about the UVO. It

¹⁷² RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 1023, l. 41.

¹⁷³ Ibid. The deputy of the NKVD, Frinovskii, also reported on 19 June about expressions of distrust to authority, see Khaustov and Samuelson, p. 194. Khaustov and Samuelson note that some political workers also had trouble answering questions from the soldiers, and often agreed with them about not being able to trust anyone.

¹⁷⁴ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 955, l. 16.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., ll. 24-26.

¹⁷⁷ At the Military Soviet of November 1937, when the military purge was underway, the commander of the Zabaikal Military District, M. D. Velikanov, also commented upon panic and distrust in the district as a result of the increasing arrests, *Voennyyi soviet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR: noiabr’ 1937 g.: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. by A. S. Kniaz’kov and others (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006), p. 119.

was not unrepresentative of other districts. Consequently, as such panic had gripped the UVO after only the arrests of Garkavyi, Vasilenko and Gavriushchenko in April, when the most senior officers in the army, those seen as military heroes, such as Tukhachevskii, Iakir and Uborevich, were executed in June, it is likely that this threw the rank-and-file into further disarray, causing even more denunciations about hidden 'enemies' in the ranks. David Brandenberger has argued that the arrests of Tukhachevskii and the other officers 'shattered public confidence in the Soviet system.' In addition, Sarah Davies notes reactions to Tukhachevskii's death such as, 'Whom do we trust now?'¹⁷⁸ Privately, even Voroshilov appeared dejected. Shortly after the executions in the outline of his speech for the June 1937 Central Committee Plenum Voroshilov wrote that the authority of the army had been 'crippled' and the high command 'undermined'. These comments did not make it into the final version of his speech, but Voroshilov's private thoughts are clear. Indeed, the following line was also absent from the final speech: 'This means that our method of work, our whole system for running the army, and my work as People's Commissar, has utterly collapsed.'¹⁷⁹ Voroshilov seemed to be seriously affected by the 'exposure' of the 'military-fascist plot'. He had tried to defend the Red Army for years, but had been forced to surrender by Ezhov's relentless pursuit of 'evidence' of a 'conspiracy' in the ranks.

The surge in denunciations from the lower ranks needed the participation from the army party organisations for 'enemies' to be 'exposed'. On 14 June *Krasnaia zvezda* directly called on the army party organisations, which were attached to companies and regiments, to help the political police flush out the hidden enemies.¹⁸⁰ The party organisations acted upon the denunciations they received, approving the expulsions or arrests of the individuals in question. Importantly, these organisations were later blamed for allowing the purge to get out of control. In addition, Voroshilov and Ezhov tried to solicit voluntary confessions of guilt. On 21 June Voroshilov and Ezhov published a joint order on the need to expose the remaining 'enemies' in the army. The order noted that in several districts there were examples of individuals with connections to the executed military conspirators, but these had not been communicated to the centre. The order made a promise that if those with links to the 'conspirators' turned themselves in

¹⁷⁸ Brandenberger, p. 185; Sarah Davies, "'Us Against Them": Social Identity in Russia, 1934-41', *Russian Review*, 56.1 (1997), p. 79. For more on the confusion in wider society and within the army following the announcement of Tukhachevskii's execution, see Brandenberger, pp. 187-197.

¹⁷⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 190.

¹⁸⁰ Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers: A Social History of the Red Army, 1925-1941* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, c1996), p. 138.

voluntarily they would not be arrested or have criminal charges brought against them. The order promised that there was also the possibility that these people could remain within the army.¹⁸¹ It is of course very doubtful that this was honoured. It is certain that some of those who did come forward voluntarily were arrested. Indeed, the Special Departments planned to launch investigations into any of the cases voluntarily brought forward. Unsurprisingly, very few soldiers took up the offer.¹⁸²

The number discharged from the ranks in the short term for political crimes from the ‘exposure’ of the military plot is detailed in several sets of statistics. Importantly, these figures demonstrate that the growth in arrests was not gradual, but an explosion. According to PUR, from 1 January to 10 July 1937 there were 4947 discharges for political crimes with 1217 arrests. However, 4370 of these discharges were made after 1 April.¹⁸³ Approximate corresponding numbers are seen in another set of statistics, showing that discharges from the command for ‘counterrevolutionary Trotskyism’ during the second quarter of 1937 (from the February-March Plenum until 1 June) totalled 3387.¹⁸⁴ So, according to these statistics large numbers of discharges and arrests had occurred between April and July. But these statistics do not show at which point the rate of discharges and arrests increased. However, Khaustov notes that by the end of April the arrests in the army were still at an insignificant level. Furthermore, during Stalin’s speech to the June Military Soviet he placed the number of arrests at only 300 to 400.¹⁸⁵ In this respect, it seems that large numbers of arrests came only after the June military trial and when the ‘military-fascist plot’ was finally publicised. Indeed, during the nine days after the trial, 980 senior officers were arrested as participants of the ‘military-fascist plot’. During the 23 to 29 June Plenum of the Central Committee, Ezhov detailed that the number was now 1100.¹⁸⁶ Thus, it was after the ‘military-fascist plot’ had been publicised that arrests and discharges increased radically. In August, at a meeting of political workers, the new head of PUR, P. A. Smirnov, noted that over the past few months the total number of discharges from the army was approximately

¹⁸¹ RGVA, f. 4, op. 15, d. 13, l. 196.

¹⁸² Khaustov and Samuelson, pp. 192-193.

¹⁸³ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 340, l. 429. RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 107, l. 14.

¹⁸⁴ See *Voennyi soviet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR: 1-4 iunია 1937 goda*, ed. K. M. Anderson and others, p. 4. This represents a significant increase in discharges from the 125 discharged from the command and *nachal'sostav* from 1 January to 1 March, see RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 107, l. 16.

¹⁸⁵ Khaustov and Samuelson, p. 113; *Voennyi soviet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR: 1-4 iunია 1937 goda*, ed. K. M. Anderson and others, p. 134. Importantly, Stalin referred to 300 to 400 arrests as strictly part of what he saw as the ‘military-fascist plot’ in his speech on the conspiracy. In this respect, these are not army arrests in general, or those associated with the broader spy threat in the military.

¹⁸⁶ *Izvestiia TsK*, p. 57.

10,000, and the number arrested from this total was 1217. The latter figure is consistent with an increase from the figures quoted by Ezhov from the June Plenum.¹⁸⁷

Importantly, Smirnov also pressed the point that despite the already large numbers of discharges, the army was not yet fully purged. He argued that, ‘the enemies are well-masked’.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, denunciations were clearly playing a key role in the expansion of discharges and arrests. Smirnov noted:

hundreds and thousands of eyes are now looking at the troops for the intrigues of enemies. The troops and commanders are writing hundreds, thousands of letters about faults, failures... Now tens, hundreds of thousands of letters are being received by the Secretariat, recently more than ten thousand were received.¹⁸⁹

Denunciations had increased hugely and the Military Purge was beginning to gather momentum of its own. During the meeting there was also an interesting exchange between Stalin and a political commissar from the SKVO, A. P. Prokofiev, which shows that Stalin understood that the rank-and-file had reacted with confusion and distrust to the arrests in the military elite:

STALIN: And how have the soldiers related to the fact that that they had commanders that they trusted, and then they were busted and arrested (*ikh khlopnuli, arrestovali*)? How did they react to that?

PROKOFIEV: As I reported, Com[rade] Stalin, at first in the ranks among an array of soldiers there were some doubts, and they expressed these doubts by saying that such people like Gamarnik and Iakir, whom the party trusted over a period of many years with high posts, had turned out to be enemies of the people, traitors of the party.

STALIN: Well, yes, the party was caught napping...

PROKOFIEV: Yes, the party was indeed caught napping.

STALIN: Are there instances where the party has lost its authority, where the military leadership has lost its authority? Do they say to hell with you, you send us someone today and then arrest him tomorrow. Let God sort it out and decide who’s to be believe?¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 318, l. 11. According to another set of figures, from June to November 1937 15,140 commanders and political commissars were discharged from the army, see *Voennyi sovet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR: noiabr’ 1937 g.*, ed. by Kniaz’kov and others, p. 5.

¹⁸⁸ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 318, l. 11.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 22.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, l. 90. Brandenberger quotes the same exchange between Stalin and Prokofiev and his excellent translation has been used here, see Brandenberger, p. 191.

The arrests and discharges from the Red Army continued into the second half of 1937 and other senior officers were soon drawn into the ‘military plot’. For example, Dubovoi was arrested on 22 August. Such arrests of prominent officers allowed the circle of arrests to expand further and for the momentum of the purge to be maintained. Dubovoi had many connections throughout the army hierarchy. As the arrests continued to gather pace, Stalin was kept well informed. For example, he received regular reports from the new head of PUR, Lev Mekhlis about the numbers arrested in the ranks.¹⁹¹ Voroshilov also kept up the pressure in driving the purge onwards. At the Military Soviet of November 1937 he gave another call to push this to its completion. He declared that the purge was not finished by a long way and called for it to be completed quickly. Voroshilov again emphasised the danger from foreign agents and reminded those present of Stalin’s guidance:

[Stalin] correctly says, and repeatedly draws our attention to, that if the bourgeoisie countries are sending spies to each other, sending thousands of spies, then it would be ridiculous to think that they would not send hundreds and thousands of spies to us.

Voroshilov argued that foreign states had taken advantage of oppositionists, such as Tukhachevskii, Iakir and Gamarnik, who he argued had never been true Bolsheviks or genuine revolutionaries.¹⁹² Therefore, Voroshilov continued to frame the military conspiracy as the consequence of foreign agents having infiltrated into the military.

However, even as the arrests and discharges were still expanding there were signs that the process was already starting to be reined in by Stalin. In January 1938 a Plenum of the Central Committee published a resolution criticising incorrect expulsions from the party based on false evidence.¹⁹³ This resolution applied to the broader Terror, of which the military purge was one part. As Getty notes, this resolution did not signal an end for ‘vigilance’ in the face of hidden ‘enemies’, but it drew attention to incorrect conduct in expelling party members. This was an attempt to reassert central control over the wider Terror.¹⁹⁴ Similar indications of an attempt to re-establish central control can

¹⁹¹ See for example, RGVA, 33987, op. 3, d. 1085, ll. 1-6, 35, 57, 99, 133, 323; f. 9, op. 29, d. 358, ll. 5-6, 10, 21-22, 37, 49, 72, 196. See also similar reports by a senior commissar, Kuznetsov, ll. 94, 118, 140, 176. P. A. Smirnov served only six months as head of PUR before being replaced by Mekhlis in December 1937, who moved from being the editor of *Pravda*. Mekhlis also became deputy People’s Commissar for Defence. Smirnov then served as the head of the Navy before being arrested in June 1938.

¹⁹² *Voennyi soviet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR: noiabr’ 1937 g.*, ed. by Kniaz’kov and others, pp. 24, 324-325.

¹⁹³ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p 493.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 496.

also be seen from the Red Army. On 23 February Mekhlis sent a circular to all PUR organisations which noted that:

recently a range of party organisations have expelled from the party, often incorrectly, commanding officers and commissars of regiments, brigades, battalions and other units equal to them, whereas the question of their party membership should be handled with the knowledge and consent of the Political Directorate of the RKKA, working on an equal basis with the military department of the TsK VKP(b) (Central Committee).

Mekhlis reminded all army party organisations that materials which, ‘cast doubt on the advisability of party membership of commanding officers and commissars’ were required to be sent to PUR, and that the party membership of the individual in question should only be considered after permission has been given.¹⁹⁵ This was a clear attempt to gain greater control over party expulsions in the military purge.

In March 1938 there were further signs that the repression in the Red Army was being scaled down. On 9 March, Ie. A. Shchadenko, the deputy Commissar of Defense and head of the officer personnel section, sent Mekhlis a report on complaints about incorrect discharges from the army. In his report Shchadenko noted that: ‘Examination of the presented material on the removals from the RKKA of the command and *nachal'sostav* staff shows that in the overwhelming majority the motive of removal is insufficiently grounded, and the incriminating material is unchecked.’¹⁹⁶ Shchadenko then made reference to the decision of the January Plenum of the Central Committee and how this should be applied to the Red Army and that all discharges made by the District Military Soviets for 1937 should be re-checked. Those incorrectly discharged should be restored to the ranks.¹⁹⁷ The extent that those arrested for political crimes were affected by Shchadenko’s directive, however, is unknown.¹⁹⁸

On 2 April, Mekhlis gave a report to a meeting of political workers where he remarked that the military plot was now ‘defeated and destroyed’ with only ‘fragments of various groups’ remaining.¹⁹⁹ Mekhlis did warn the political workers that it was still no time to be complacent. Indeed, according to Mekhlis, PUR itself still contained ‘enemies’.²⁰⁰ But he appeared to be trying to bring some sense of closure to the purge.

¹⁹⁵ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 1085, l. 49.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., l. 70.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ For more detail on the broader moves to curtail repression, see Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 528.

¹⁹⁹ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 1085, l. 101.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., l. 104.

Indeed, the military plot was now apparently ‘destroyed’. Mekhlis raised the issue of incorrect expulsions from the party and referenced the decision from the January Plenum:

The party commissions of PURKKA looked at around thousand appeals. Almost fifty percent of the excluded were readmitted. After the decision of the Plenum of TsK VKP(b) the stream of appeals to the party commissions of PURKKA grew – they were sent a new 2081 declarations. Our sacred duty is to correct all the mistakes which happened at the time of exclusions of communists from the party, and to create a friendly environment for them for work.²⁰¹

Mekhlis blamed the large numbers of incorrect removals from PUR during 1937 on ‘enemies’ within PUR itself.²⁰² He remarked: ‘They were not guilty when they were expelled from the party, but we were - the leaders of the political organs and commissars.’ Mekhlis called on these ‘mistakes’ to be corrected.²⁰³

Arrests did not immediately cease despite the attempts in early 1938 to regain control over the military purge. More big names continued to be drawn into the ‘conspiracy’. Egorov, who was now the first deputy People’s Commissar for Defence, came under suspicion at the end of 1937. A Politburo decision of February 1938 accused Egorov of knowing about the ‘military-fascist plot’ and having organised his own anti-party group. The Politburo ordered him removed from his position, but suggested that he be given a final chance to command a smaller military district. Dibenko was accused of having links to American spies and there were incriminations that he was a German agent.²⁰⁴ Dibenko was removed from his position, but again it was suggested that he could still be put to work this time in civilian area.²⁰⁵ Both were later arrested and executed. Other high-profile army victims included Bliukher, Alksnis, Berzin, Orlov, Bulin, Osepian and Ivan Fedko.²⁰⁶ Such high-profile arrests would continue to provide momentum to the military purge.

However, a clear indication that Stalin wanted the military purge to be brought under control came at the Military Soviet in November 1938. Here Voroshilov again recited how the army had missed the ‘conspirators’ and emphasised the importance of

²⁰¹ Ibid., I. 116.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid. Reese also notes Mekhlis’s critical attitude to incorrect expulsions during 1938, some of which he labelled as ‘absurd’, see *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers*, pp. 137-138.

²⁰⁴ There is evidence that Primakov incriminated Dibenko on the day before the June military trial, see *Izvestiia TsK*, p. 56.

²⁰⁵ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, pp. 521-523; Khaustov and Samuelson, p. 216.

²⁰⁶ For a fuller list, see *Izvestiia TsK*, pp. 59-60.

having politically reliable people serving in the ranks.²⁰⁷ But like Mekhlis, Voroshilov signalled that the main bulk of the purge was now over:

Have we done everything to cleanse the ranks of the army from enemies of the nation, of spies (*lazutchikov*) of the enemy? I think that not everything, but the main and most important has already been done. The enemy has lost their large eyes and ears in our ranks. But the ears and eyes of course are still somewhere and they need to be found, otherwise they will bring enormous and serious harm to the country and Red Army.

On the course of the purge itself, Voroshilov noted:

I will not publish detailed figures here. They are fairly impressive. The *chistka* was carried out radically and comprehensively... This stinking filth, unfortunately, did not leave one area, not one layer of our command and political staff that somehow was not polluted, messed, dirtied. Therefore the quantity of those cleansed was high and very impressive.²⁰⁸

Voroshilov put the numbers purged from the Red Army at over 40,000. He argued that since the purge had been so intensive, the ranks were now strong and loyal.²⁰⁹ He called for the purge to continue, but warned that it should be carefully carried out, and that people should ‘not just shoot from the hip’ (*ne prosto rubit’ s plecha*).²¹⁰ Voroshilov was signalling that the purge was now largely completed and those ‘enemies’ which did remain in the ranks should be sought out more carefully. Thus, by the end of 1938 and into 1939 the repression in the Red Army was winding down, a process alongside the weakening in the strength and pace of the wider Terror itself. By early 1939 Mekhlis was criticising unjustified army expulsions, arguing that fifty percent of these were incorrect.²¹¹

It is difficult to know the precise number of arrests relating to the ‘military-fascist plot’. Indeed, as Reese has shown, officer recruitment came to move faster than discharges.²¹² But undeniably, the purge cost the Red Army very heavily. Different sets of statistics put the overall number of discharges of army leaders during the purge at approximately 35,000.²¹³ However, a great many were eventually reinstated. According

²⁰⁷ *Voennyyi sovet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR, 1938, 1940 gg.: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. by P. N. Bobilev and others (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006), p. 236.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

²¹¹ Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, p. 146.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

²¹³ The differing totals include 33,460, 36,761 and 38,352, see *Voенно-istoricheskii arkhiv*, pp. 113-117.

to Reese, between 1937 and May 1940, 34,301 leaders from the Red Army, Navy and Air Force were discharged, but 11,596 of these were eventually reinstated.²¹⁴ In regard to arrests, one set of statistics records 4474 arrests in 1937 and 5426 in 1938.²¹⁵ But 1431 of the arrested were eventually returned to the ranks. In terms of expulsions from the party, Reese details that 11,104 were expelled in 1937 and 3580 in 1938, with 7202 later reinstated.²¹⁶ However, despite the many restored to the ranks, the true scale of the military purge is unknown. These figures only allow an understanding of the number of army leaders removed from the military from 1937 to May 1940 and not from the wider army. The numbers affected in the whole Red Army will be far higher.

²¹⁴ Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, pp. 210, 75.

²¹⁵ *Voenna-istoricheskii arkhiv*, p. 114. Reese has the same number of arrests for 1937, but 5032 for 1938, see *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*, p. 143.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

During a series of interviews in the 1970s with the writer Felix Chuev, Molotov spoke about the military purge and why he still maintained this had been necessary. Of course, Molotov's words have to be treated with caution. It is understandable that he would seek to explain the military purge in a manner that exonerated him of personal responsibility. However, Molotov's self-justifying comments are revealing in certain respects. They are useful in drawing together some of the key arguments from this thesis explaining why Stalin gutted his officer corps only years before the outbreak of the Second World War. During his interviews with Chuev, Molotov presented a rationale for the military purge that on the surface is similar to the broader argument put forward in this thesis. Aside from recycling the details of the 'military conspiracy' and describing Tukhachevskii as a 'Rightist' who had been working for the Nazis, Molotov pressed that it had been correct to execute Tukhachevskii because he could not have been relied upon when the Second World War broke out. Molotov remarked: 'I consider Tukhachevsky a most dangerous conspirator in the military who was caught only at the last minute. Had he not been apprehended, the consequences could have been catastrophic.'¹ Indeed, in explaining the Great Terror in 1970 Molotov pointed to the dangers from a fifth column:

1937 was necessary. Bear in mind that after the Revolution we slashed right and left; we scored victories, but tattered enemies of various stripes survived, and as we were faced by the growing danger of fascist aggression, they might have united. Thanks to 1937 there was no fifth column in our country during the war.²

For Molotov, if the Terror had not been conducted and the military purge not initiated a fifth column could have had potentially disastrous consequences for the Soviet Union during war. Molotov saw Tukhachevskii as an unreliable fifth columnist. The stakes were very high and treachery in the army may have caused the defeat of the Soviet Union against Germany. In reference to Tukhachevskii and the other executed senior

¹ Feliks Chuev, *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics: Conversations with Feliks Chuev* (Chicago: I. R. Dee, 1993), p. 280.

² *Ibid.*, p. 254.

officers, Molotov insisted, ‘The main thing, however, is at the decisive moment they could not be depended on.’³ For Molotov, the military purge remained justified.

Even though his words must be treated with caution, Molotov’s comments do have some substance. The decisive factor in finally compelling Stalin to act against the Red Army in May 1937 was the perception that it was unreliable. The military purge was initiated in reaction to a perceived spy infiltration in the broader army and ‘evidence’ about a ‘conspiracy’ in the upper ranks. Stalin was now forced to take action whereas in the past he had shown hesitancy in cracking down on the army. Even though Stalin still wavered at the very last moment, and initially only transferred the majority of the senior officers named in the ‘military-fascist plot’, when further ‘evidence’ was finally obtained pointing to a military conspiracy in the upper ranks, he sanctioned the arrests of Tukhachevskii and the other officers. By early June the Red Army was seen as facing a severe crisis and mobilising the ranks for a major purge was Stalin’s response. How could Stalin fight the approaching war with an army he believed was heavily infiltrated by foreign agents with a conspiracy of leading officers? Indeed, there is nothing to suggest that the spy scare in the army in 1937 was cynically contrived. Stalin seems to have genuinely believed that the military had been infiltrated by foreign-backed ‘enemies’ who had managed to organise a conspiracy at the very heart of the army leadership.

Thus, the Red Army was not purged to further extend Stalin’s power or remove certain officers he believed could become a block to his political hegemony. The ‘military-fascist plot’ was not knowingly created for the purpose of furthering Stalin’s control over the army. The military purge was enacted in reaction to a perceived spy scare and Stalin acted at the very last moment. In this respect, this explanation fits with Molotov’s rationale for the military purge. By mid-1937 a fifth column was believed to be within the army. But of course the ‘military-fascist plot’ had little basis in reality. The alleged military conspiracy was almost entirely imaginary. Stalin misperceived the danger from the army in 1937. Part of the reason why can be found in Stalin’s own personal suspicions about hidden ‘enemies’ and his concerns about capitalist encirclement, but as this thesis has demonstrated, the Red Army itself had a long history of being perceived as easily susceptible to subversion. The military purge represented the culmination of a number of evolving perceived threats that had their origins in 1918.

³ Ibid.

These dangers had often been depicted in greater terms than their reality. By 1937 the gulf between the perception and the reality of threat had become even wider and impossible to ignore.

From its very formation in early 1918 the Red Army was seen as vulnerable to a number of threats that evolved broadly in response to what were identified as dangers to the Soviet Union by the Bolshevik Party leadership and political police. During the Civil War the chief threats to the Red Army were seen as from betrayals by military specialists, the White forces and foreign agents. These were all external threats and the political police were concerned about the 'enemy' within and the possible infiltration of the army. Following the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War, the chief threats to the army remained military specialists, the Whites in exile and foreign agents, but the political turmoil of the 1920s produced a new internal threat to the military from the 'Trotskyist Opposition'. However, these dangers could be exaggerated. Despite the low number of arrested military specialist traitors, Whites and foreign agents, and an absence of any immediate danger since the close of the Civil War, the army was nevertheless depicted by the political police as easily susceptible to subversion. There were even some alarmist fears about an approaching 'Bonapartist' coup. The situation changed in 1930 and the political police must have felt vindicated with the 'exposure' of a very large military specialist 'conspiracy' during operation *vesna*. This military specialist 'plot' was nearly entirely fabricated and it represented a culmination of the fears of the political police about military specialists and foreign agents. It reinforced how the Red Army was seen as vulnerable to counterrevolutionaries, and in this case, from foreign-backed military specialist traitors. The 'exposure' of this plot would have had a lasting impact on perceptions of army vulnerability and strengthened the political police's position. In addition, as there was so much upheaval in the rank-and-file at the same time as operation *vesna* because of widespread hostility to collectivisation, the entire army was going through a period of crisis. This was a tipping point for the Red Army. The early 1930s were a stark reminder that the army was susceptible to subversion and infiltration at all levels and that 'enemies' could easily get inside the ranks. In the years after operation *vesna* there were no mass arrests in the Red Army until the Terror, but this period was not primarily characterised by a lull in arrests. The perceived threats to the army continued to evolve. The White threat faded away and was replaced by heightened concerns about foreign agents in 1933, a likely consequence of the worsening international situation.

The threat from ‘hidden Trotskyists’ continued to cause the political police concern. The latter danger was pushed to the fore following the Kirov murder in December 1934 when members of the former political Opposition became the scapegoats and were quickly seen as posing a serious internal threat. During the resulting crack down the army was also affected when former Trotskyists in the ranks came under pressure. This culminated in the arrests of several senior former Trotskyist officers, including Putna and Primakov, in the summer and autumn of 1936. Attentions were now firmly turned towards the Red Army and there were calls from the political police and from within the army leadership to root out the remaining hidden Trotskyists. Yet, the charge of Trotskyism was not enough to draw a wide circle of officers into the expanding arrests, despite the pressure being applied by Ezhov. For more senior officers such as Tukhachevskii to be affected, the oppositionist ‘conspiracy’ had to be developed further by Ezhov. It was the perceived foreign threat and building spy scare in 1937, driven forward primarily by Ezhov, which provided the vehicle for Tukhachevskii and members of the army elite to be incriminated. During the second half of 1936, Ezhov developed the already established Trotskyist threat to the military to include links to foreign agents and espionage in line with how he was drawing connections between the different former oppositionist groups and fascist states. This allowed the scope of the arrests in the army to widen during 1937. Indeed, the army was an obvious choice for Ezhov to draw into his broader vision of a ‘conspiracy’ inside the Soviet Union. He had inherited thick files full of compromising information on senior officers since becoming head of the political police in September 1936. As soon as Ezhov started pushing the danger from foreign agents, particularly in early 1937, this provided the opportunity for a spy scare to build in the army and for Ezhov to capitalise on twenty years’ ‘evidence’ of army vulnerabilities, particularly to foreign agents. Thus, the perceived threats to the Red Army had finally taken a form that put the entire high command in danger and Ezhov’s broadening investigation into the former oppositionist ‘conspiracy’ culminated in the incrimination of Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers.

There were certainly some genuine spies in the Red Army at this time, but the spy threat which peaked in 1937 was an extreme exaggeration of this danger. In addition, as much as Ezhov’s search for a conspiracy of former oppositionists from 1936 was crucial to the military purge, without the army’s long history of perceived vulnerabilities, Tukhachevskii may never have been incriminated. Consequently, it is how perceived threats to the Red Army evolved and developed that is crucial to

understanding the military purge. The key point is to see the deeper reality behind the rationale for the military purge that Molotov put forward in the 1970s and understand that the Red Army was a very fertile ground for a perceived military conspiracy to take root. The final spy scare in 1937, that was so crucial in creating the conditions for the 'military-fascist plot' to be pieced together by the political police, had evolved from twenty years of the Red Army being seen as vulnerable to various 'enemies' and 'counterrevolutionaries'. The reliability of the army had been under question ever since its very formation in 1918, from the stability in the lower ranks to the loyalty of its most senior officers. In 1937 Stalin was compelled to act against the Red Army in response to what he saw as the pressing danger from foreign agents, but the long history of the Bolsheviks seeing their army as easily susceptible to subversion was crucial in allowing such a large spy scare to develop in the ranks in the first place, but also in giving this new danger credibility.

Therefore, viewing the military purge through the evolution of the perceived threats to the army also explains its timing. Admittedly, it is very difficult to know the precise point Stalin decided to move against the army. But why the direct incriminating testimony against Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers emerged in April and May 1937 is likely because this was when the wider perceived spy threat to the army peaked. This would focus political police attentions on the army even further, and particularly on the military elite, whose members almost all had connections to Germany from the 1920s. The persistent rumours running into early 1937 about a secret connection between the Red Army and Germany would have only added to growing suspicions and focused political police attentions further. Under pressure from an already identified broader spy infiltration in the ranks, Stalin was then compelled to take some action in light of the 'evidence' pointing to a military conspiracy, beginning with the transfer of Tukhachevskii on 10 May. But importantly, there are no indications that the military purge was long planned or premeditated. This was a last minute response to an exaggerated perceived threat. Furthermore, the scale of the resulting military purge quickly reached a level that was unforeseen. The rank-and-file responded to calls to root out the hidden 'conspirators' with an immediate explosion of denunciations, leading to thousands of unfounded discharges and arrests throughout the entire Red Army. The military purge was chaotic. There are strong suggestions that ordinary soldiers were panicked by the arrests of their superiors and this drove a wave of baseless denunciations as mutual trust was undermined. Central control had to be re-established

in early 1938 when it became quickly apparent that the Red Army was subject to a large surge of groundless accusations, discharges and arrests. In the mid-1970s even Molotov admitted that the military purge lost control: ‘Did everyone who was charged or executed take part in the conspiracy hatched by Tukhachevsky? Some were certainly involved. Others might have been implicated by mistake. There could have been sympathizers among them. It was different with each individual.’⁴

Yet, despite Stalin acting against the Red Army at the very last moment, there are some suggestions that he had more developed suspicions about a possible conspiracy in the army before May 1937. In Dimitrov’s diary an entry from 11 November 1937 recorded that Stalin had said the following about the plans of the former oppositionist ‘conspirators’:

We were aware of certain facts as early as last year and were preparing to deal with them, but first we wanted to seize as many threads as possible. They were planning an action for the beginning of this year. Their resolve failed. *They were preparing in July to attack the Politburo at the Kremlin.* But they lost their nerve... (Emphasis in original)⁵

Of course, Stalin no doubt wanted to portray himself as anticipating the larger ‘conspiracy’ of former oppositionists and traitorous officers in good time. He would want to maintain confidence in his leadership. Yet, this thesis shows that there is little indication that the ‘military-fascist plot’ had been anticipated. Stalin’s vacillations in early May demonstrate this clearly. In addition, during the June 1937 Military Soviet many participants, including Stalin, seemed genuinely surprised and made references to how everyone had trusted the main conspirators, particularly Iakir. But Stalin’s comments relayed by Dimitrov are still telling. They are a reminder that even if a ‘military conspiracy’ came as a surprise in May 1937, it is very likely that Stalin did have growing suspicions about the Red Army before this point. It is certain that these suspicions were more concrete in early 1937, particularly at the February-March Plenum when Molotov called for a close verification of the military. However, Stalin’s suspicions and doubts about the Red Army would have stretched back further to the early 1930s to the military specialist ‘conspiracy’ ‘exposed’ during operation *vesna*. These doubts probably go back further to 1927 when Stalin believed the army

⁴ Ibid., p. 280.

⁵ *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933-1949*, ed. by Banac, p. 70; Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 446.

Trotskyists had played a part in the political Opposition's alleged coup attempt. Stalin's suspicions about the loyalty of the command can be seen as early as the Civil War in regard to his low opinions of military specialists. As such, Stalin experienced numerous nagging doubts about the Red Army since its formation. But it was probably only after the arrests of the former Trotskyist officers in mid-1936 that Stalin began to take these concerns much more seriously. Within a climate of rising political repression, the arrests of Putna, Primakov and the other former Trotskyist officers provided 'evidence' of a Trotskyist military organisation directly linked to the Zinoviev-Kamenev Counterrevolutionary Bloc. This was a decisive moment. Yet it certainly remains very unlikely that Stalin anticipated the 'military-fascist plot' in the form it eventually took. It is doubtful he suspected at any point before 1937 that a group of his most senior officers would turn out to be 'foreign agents' who were part of an extensive 'military-fascist plot'. This could be partly why he seemed to require stronger 'evidence' of their guilt and why he hesitated at the very last moment in early May. Even though Stalin seems to have begun to align more closely with Ezhov's views about the danger of hidden 'enemies' in the army during early 1937, the scale of the perceived spy infiltration and the nature of the 'conspiracy' in the upper ranks would have been a shock.

In this respect, the military purge of 1937-38 can only be fully understood if Stalin's attitude toward the Red Army is explored. Even though much of the evidence used for assessing his relationship with the military has been indirect, owing to the still large amount of classified materials in Stalin's personal archive and inaccessible political police documents, this thesis suggests that Stalin was never comfortable with his army. He could not fully trust his army and was plagued by nagging doubts about its reliability. However, at the same time he knew that the Red Army was an indispensable support of his power and vital for the defence of the Soviet Union. Consequently Stalin was reluctant to crack down on the army without very good reason and he leaned towards restraint. For example, Stalin accommodated large numbers of military specialists in command positions into the early 1930s, despite the political police's concerns about their loyalty. Stalin knew he needed their expertise. Indeed, he forged a working relationship with Tukhachevskii, the one person in the army subject to the most persistent rumours about their disloyalty. Stalin recognised talent when he saw it, but he never trusted the military specialists as much as he did the red commanders. He did not value Tukhachevskii's loyalty as highly as Voroshilov or Budennyi's. Stalin surely kept

a close eye on the military elite, but there was no strong case against them until 1937. In addition, Stalin would have been well briefed about the political police's concerns about the subversive activity of various different 'enemies' against the Red Army. He knew that the political police were alarmed about possible infiltration. But Stalin did not share their views entirely. The Trotskyist presence in the army during the 1920s reveals a divergence between Stalin and the political police, and demonstrates how he was reluctant to crack down on the military without being absolutely certain of the danger. Despite Menzhinskii's urging of more repressive measures in 1927 to resolve the problems with army reliability he associated with Trotskyist agitation, Stalin ruled that this was not necessary. He was not compelled to act against the army at this point. Stalin did not doubt the basis of the alleged oppositionist coup of 1927, but he did not want a crack down. Similarly in 1930 during operation *vesna* Stalin hesitated when sent the information about the 'military specialist plot'. He needed more time to think over and check Tukhachevskii's incrimination. In the end, and after being closely involved with the investigation itself, he was convinced of Tukhachevskii's innocence. There was no reason to attack the army elite at this time and arrest Tukhachevskii who was a valuable asset to the still inexperienced Red Army. But it is very likely that Stalin harboured some suspicions about Tukhachevskii nevertheless and he would certainly never forget how a very large 'plot' supposedly sponsored by hostile capitalist countries had been 'exposed' within the Red Army. This would create further suspicions and nagging doubts about the reliability of the military as a whole. Stalin hesitated once again years later during the February-March Plenum of 1937. Even though Trotskyists were being discovered in the military at a growing rate, the verification of the Red Army promised by Molotov was to be put off until a later time. It seems that Stalin wanted to proceed with caution and investigate carefully. The army was too important to attack without a very good reason. Stalin knew that war was approaching and did not want to undermine his strength. However, as soon as the spy threat peaked in May 1937 and coincided with the incriminations of Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers, even though he still hesitated at the very last moment, by the end of May Stalin was finally compelled to order a serious crack down.

As such, the military purge highlights the different priorities between Stalin, Voroshilov and the political police, who all responded differently to the growing mass of rumours, hearsay and reports about disloyalty in the army. Institutional interest was important in influencing how army vulnerabilities were defined. Stalin had particular

priorities as General Secretary. He needed to prioritise the defence of the Soviet Union in the face of what he saw as ‘capitalist encirclement’ and the looming war. The Red Army had to be militarily strong and in a condition to fight a major conflict. Stalin thus made compromises on the type of officers used in the army for this purpose. Yet, Stalin’s ability to compromise clashed with the priorities of the political police. They were primarily concerned with the ‘exposure’ of enemies and providing the internal security of the army. From the early 1920s the political police displayed greater concern than Stalin and Voroshilov about threats to military reliability and saw these in more threatening terms. When Ezhov headed the political police from September 1936 he pushed harder than others for a deeper scrutiny of the Red Army. It seems he was looking to expose some form of organised military conspiracy as early as 1936. The increasingly frequent mention of a ‘military plot’ within interrogation testimony at this time suggests this. The political police were also less resigned to having those with compromised pasts serving in the Red Army. As shown, they were alarmed about military specialists, and particularly former Whites, serving in the ranks during the 1920s. In the 1930s they kept a close watch over some of the former Trotskyist officers despite Voroshilov having given individuals like Primakov and Putna his full endorsement following their recantations in the late 1920s. It is almost certain that Ezhov had more developed suspicions about Tukhachevskii and the other members of the ‘military-fascist plot’ before Stalin did in 1937.

Finally, Voroshilov also had different priorities in relation to the Red Army and his were born from self-interest. Voroshilov was responsible for the political reliability of the army and this led him to downplay instability and ‘enemies’ in the ranks. This thesis has argued that Voroshilov behaved in this way not only to cover his own back, but because he did not have any credible solutions to the numerous problems with army self-policing. He frequently labelled such problems as merely the consequence of ‘weak vigilance’ rather than get to the real cause of why ‘enemies’ were going undiscovered in the ranks. It was only just before the start of the military purge in May 1937 that Voroshilov finally provided a more detailed assessment of the problems within the officer corps, commenting specifically that ‘familiness’ had allowed ‘enemies’ to gain positions in the upper ranks. Indeed, there are numerous indications that some officers tried to avoid looking for dangerous political ‘enemies’ and foreign agents and instead made what seem like conspicuous displays of ‘vigilance’ by making high numbers of groundless discharges. The accusations that some officers ruled a *bat’kovshchina*

suggests that they had built systems of alliances and close supporters, who closed ranks when under pressure to find ‘enemies’. Crucially, it was Voroshilov’s inability, or perhaps reluctance, to tackle these deeper problems with army self-policing which partly explains why the political police’s view of the Red Army vulnerability achieved dominance in 1937. It is likely that there was some tension between Voroshilov and the political police about army vulnerabilities since the 1920s. PUR and the political police also typically differed in their estimations of threats to the military. But Voroshilov’s inability to resolve problems with army political reliability gave the political police more freedom and space to act. Indeed, during 1935-36 Gamarnik made frequent complaints that the military was not finding hidden enemies independently and that it took separate party purges, the *obmen* and *proverka*, to actually ‘expose’ these. The officer corps was not giving the impression that they had the ability or even the desire to find the ‘enemies’ within the ranks. This undermined Voroshilov’s repeated protests that the Red Army was loyal and that it worked hard to insulate itself from ‘enemies’. This failure in army self-policing would help push Stalin towards endorsing Ezhov’s more pessimistic view of army reliability and towards accepting that a deeper investigation into the military was required. Consequently, as much as Ezhov carries a great deal of responsibility for the military purge in pushing for a deeper investigation into the Red Army, Voroshilov’s own failings are also important. But it was Stalin who gave the final sanction for the arrests and approval for a military purge. He could have rejected the ‘evidence’ against Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers, but by May 1937 he perceived the risk of not taking action as far too great.



Even though this thesis has examined the military purge by focusing on broader evolving perceptions of the Red Army, Stalin’s attack on the military in 1937 cannot be understood without a substantial consideration of Tukhachevskii’s role. His name certainly should not be given to the military purge, but Tukhachevskii managed to attract more suspicions and doubts about his loyalty than any other person in the army elite. In the 1920s he was the hope of White circles that he would challenge the Bolshevik regime. For many outside of the Soviet Union, if anyone was going to challenge Stalin, it would be Tukhachevskii. The rumours were so potent that Tukhachevskii’s name was used by the Soviet political police as part of their

entrapment operations in the 1920s. Even inside the Soviet Union it seemed to be an unspoken assumption that Tukhachevskii could be disloyal. His name had a habit of surfacing in political police investigations into 'counterrevolutionary' groups. Indeed, there seemed to be a certain acceptance within party circles that Tukhachevskii was potentially unreliable. Importantly, any such rumours and hearsay about Tukhachevskii would be kept in an expanding police file. However, these rumours about Tukhachevskii's disloyalty were unsubstantiated. There is nothing to suggest that he entertained ideas about seizing power or was ever sympathetic to the political Opposition. What Tukhachevskii did have was an ambition for power within the Red Army. It is very likely that he felt he was the better qualified than Voroshilov to lead the army. As such, even though Tukhachevskii was not a 'Russian Bonaparte', and there is nothing to suggest he conspired to have Voroshilov removed from the army leadership, his ambitions may have given this impression. Tukhachevskii had a particular vision about where he saw the direction of army modernisation and attracted the hostility of his colleagues. Because the military elite consisted of an awkward mixture of professional officers, such as Tukhachevskii, and Stalin's political allies, such as Voroshilov and Budennyi, this created the conditions for conflict about modernisation and rearmament. The tense clashes over the role of the cavalry and Staff power in the late 1920s and early 1930s revealed the fault lines in the upper military elite. These often lined up Voroshilov and Budennyi against Tukhachevskii and differing sets of supporters. Yet, Stalin recognised Tukhachevskii's talent. In 1931 when Japan invaded Manchuria, Stalin endorsed Tukhachevskii's vision of rapid military expansion despite being well aware of the clashes in the military elite and Tukhachevskii's ambitions for greater power in the army. Even though it would antagonise Voroshilov and Budennyi, Stalin promoted Tukhachevskii. There is no doubt that Tukhachevskii's behaviour and the rumours about him played a large part in adding to the suspicions Stalin held about the army elite. Stalin surely had more developed suspicions about Tukhachevskii during the months before the military purge when rumours were circling about a link between the army leadership and the Nazis. Indeed, these rumours often mentioned Tukhachevskii. But as demonstrated in this thesis, understanding the military purge requires an explanation that goes far beyond appreciating Tukhachevskii's relationship with Voroshilov and Stalin's opinions of him. The military purge affected thousands and was an attack on the entire Red Army. For nearly twenty years the military was seen as exposed to differing perceived threats and by 1937 this had culminated in a spy

scare. This long history of evolving perceived threats was far more important to the military purge than Tukhachevskii's particular role.

However, where Tukhachevskii's particular experience is important is in showing that for some victims of the Great Terror, the reasons why they were arrested or executed can be dated back to 1917. Why Tukhachevskii became one of the public representatives of wider 'conspiracy' during the Great Terror was not just because he was a prominent officer who was implicated in a military 'conspiracy', but because he had a compromised past, full of rumours about his disloyalty. These rumours persisted into 1937 by which point the rising political repression and emerging spy scare made Tukhachevskii an easy target for the political police. Ezhov was finally able to capitalise upon the growing file full of rumours and hearsay the political police undoubtedly had collected on Tukhachevskii since he joined the Red Army. Until 1937 Tukhachevskii remained out of danger as the 'evidence' was never strong enough against him and there was no compelling reason to have him arrested. However, the rumours left a continual drip of nagging doubts that Stalin was forced to accept for the sake of maintaining army expertise. By mid-1937, with a spy scare in the ranks and 'evidence' of a 'conspiracy' in the upper ranks, Stalin could no longer ignore the large file of compromising material on Tukhachevskii.

Yet, Tukhachevskii would not be alone in having such a police file growing with pieces of compromising information and rumour. Many other senior officers in the army were certainly in the same position. Other senior officers had been subject to speculation in White circles in the 1920s and their names also used in the Soviet entrapment operations. The military elite as a whole attracted various rumours, particularly during the 1930s when the political police received reports about a supposed link with the Nazis. Furthermore, outside of the Red Army there would be a very large mass of officials working in key institutions who all had some kind of stain on their past record. But as in the military, compromises needed to be made to ensure qualified people were occupying key positions. Stalin must have known this situation was not perfect and that such people could be untrustworthy. This would create many nagging doubts for Stalin about the people working under him, but it was unrealistic to exclude such large numbers of people from ever working again. So compromises were maintained. During the Terror, individuals with black marks on their records were easily arrested. Yet once the wave of arrests began, neither Stalin nor the political police could be certain that all suspicious individuals had been found. Keeping tabs on

everyone with some kind of compromised past over a twenty year period was impossible. Therefore an immediate search for hidden ‘accomplices’ was necessary. This is clear for the Red Army in the aftermath of the June 1937 military trial. In this sense, to understand the fates of many victims of the Great Terror it is necessary to look previous to 1937 and before other recognised landmarks in the history of the Terror, such the crack-down on the former Opposition after the Kirov assassination and even before Stalin’s rise to power in the late 1920s. For some of the Terror’s most well-known victims, such as Tukhachevskii, it was as early as 1917 when the Bolsheviks first seized power that their previous pasts immediately became a liability and would later be used to help justify their execution.

The Bolshevik regime’s attempt to keep a close observation over ‘suspicious’ individuals such as Tukhachevskii was a characteristic of totalitarian rule. The regime was not only highly concerned about the loyalty of prominent and powerful figures such as Tukhachevskii, but this extended to wider population. It expended manpower and resources to carefully monitor ‘anti-soviet’ feeling within the different sections of Soviet society. However, it was the failure to monitor potential ‘enemies’ to a level which gave the regime confidence that left a deep sense of vulnerability. When major crises hit the regime, such as the ‘military-fascist plot’ in the Red Army, this lack of confidence about who was an ‘enemy’ and who was loyal left anyone with the slightest incrimination in danger of arrest. Lacking confidence in the loyalty of the Soviet society, Stalin could take no chances and his calls to the Soviet masses to help ‘expose’ hidden ‘enemies’ allowed waves of repression to gather their own momentum and break from the regime’s control, destabilising the Soviet state. The Stalinist regime’s attempts to control and monitor the Soviet population were indisputably totalitarian, but its failure to this comprehensively left it fragile and vulnerable to outbreaks of violence driven by officially endorsed conspiracy theories. In this sense, the regime could easily undermine its own stability and power.



The approach of this thesis has been to place an examination of the military purge within the literature on the Great Terror published since the opening of the Soviet archives. With only few exceptions, there has been little analysis about how the growing

political repression in the 1930s was manifested in the Red Army.⁶ This thesis has demonstrated that the army was very sensitive to the changes in the broader conspiracy narrative which defined the Great Terror. For example, following the Kirov assassination in December 1934 there was an increase in political arrests in general terms as Stalin clamped down on the former political Opposition. The Red Army likewise saw an increase in political arrests. Later in 1936, when former Trotskyists and members of the former Opposition were the focus of Stalin and the political police's attention, the Red Army also saw an increase in arrests of former Trotskyists. The investigation into the first show trial in August 1936 was a turning point for the Red Army when alleged links were drawn between the Zinoviev-Kamenev Counterrevolutionary Bloc and senior officers in the army. Most importantly, as the broader conspiracy narrative of the political repression in the Bolshevik Party evolved into 1937 and gradually took on a more pronounced international dimension, placing greater emphasis on the perceived threat from foreign agents, this was also reflected in the military. In addition, Ezhov's role in the Great Terror is well documented and this thesis has shown his importance to the military purge. The wider point to emphasise is that the Red Army was not in a vacuum. It was closely integrated to the Bolshevik Party and it was very receptive to how perceived threats were defined by Stalin. External pressures such as the party repression directly shaped the repression in the army. The military purge was certainly a culmination a number of perceived threats specific to the Red Army that stretched back to 1918, but it was also the product of a specific series of political events which were crucial in raising political tensions inside the Bolshevik Party. How the broader external conspiracy narrative that defined the Great Terror developed from 1934 is inseparable from the military purge.

In addition, there is an important question about the role played by the military purge to the Great Terror itself. The Red Army did not just reflect the changing broader conspiracy narrative that defined the Great Terror and the military purge would directly contribute to it. Once the military plot was 'exposed' in June 1937, this would have firmly reinforced and heightened the perceived danger from foreign-backed counterrevolutionaries to the Soviet Union. The impact of the 'military-fascist plot' had an influence which went far beyond the confines of the Red Army. In terms of the course of the repression in 1937 Getty describes the arrests of Tukhachevskii and the

⁶ Exceptions include Reese, 'The Red Army and the Great Purges', and Suveniurov, *Tragediia RKKK*.

other senior officers in May as a ‘watershed’ moment. According to Getty, this was ‘the first repression of large numbers of people who had never been overt oppositionists and had always sided with Stalin in various party disputes.’ He argues that the military purge ‘triggered a nationwide explosion of terror directed at leading cadres in all fields and at all levels’.⁷ The military purge firmly took the growing repression outside the confines of the former political Opposition. When Tukhachevskii’s execution was publicised this created widespread confusion and a loss of morale in both the army and wider society.

Furthermore, soon after the initiation of the military purge Stalin approved a series of mass operations starting in early August targeting the broader Soviet population. These included the mass operation based on Order 00447, which targeted kulaks, criminals and other ‘anti-soviet elements’. Later operations during the end of 1937 and in early 1938 targeted ‘anti-soviet elements’ within suspicious foreign nationalities, such as Germans, Poles and Koreans. The Great Terror now moved into the wider Soviet population. The mass operations saw the arrests of tens of thousands by list, many of whom were executed after a judgement by extra-legal troika. Execution quotas were used throughout. Almost half of the victims of the Great Terror are accounted for in these operations. These mass sweeps of the Soviet population are still a disputed part of the history of the Great Terror. How the process of repression in the Bolshevik Party became such a widespread repression of the Soviet population remains contested. The extent that there are linkages between the party repression and mass operations and the nature of these connections is disputed.⁸

⁷ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, pp. 447, 451.

⁸ The mass operations are seen as a break in the style of repression, moving to large sweep operations against population cohorts, rather than targeting individuals. However, the transition from the party Terror to the mass operations is disputed. Getty argues that Stalin launched the mass operations out of a ‘blind rage and panic’, through a fear that they were losing control of the countryside to ‘enemies’ and ‘anti-soviet elements’. This was not a targeted repression, but an indication that the regime had lost control and represented a sharp change in the style of repression, see *The Road to Terror*, pp. 480-481. Other historians, such as Hagenloh has disputed Getty’s explanation, arguing that the mass operations were not an extension of the repressions with the Bolshevik Party representing a break with previous repressive practices, but were non-political operations that had deeper roots in ‘the histories of Soviet policing, social engineering, and state violence stretching back to the very beginnings of the Bolshevik regime’. As such, the mass operations were not an ‘abrupt change in policy’ but represented a culmination of Soviet policies towards groups who were perceived as dangerous, see Hagenloh, pp. 6, 283-284. Khlevniuk has argued that the mass operations are a sharp break with previous repressions in the Bolshevik Party, seeing the initiation of the mass operations as the start of the Great Terror. Khlevniuk argues that the mass operations were launched in response to concerns about a fifth column inside the Soviet Union in the face of looming war, see *Master of the House*, pp. 179, 201.

This thesis suggests that the repression in the party and the mass operations are directly connected, and the military purge provides the link. When the military ‘conspiracy’ was ‘exposed’ in mid-1937, this moved the growing repression beyond a focus on the former Opposition and reinforced the perceived threat from foreign agents in a very dramatic fashion. A conspiracy in the Red Army was extremely serious and it seems to have genuinely alarmed Stalin. This would highlight the danger of hidden foreign agents in even starker terms. The infiltration of the Red Army by foreign agents provided further ‘evidence’ of an already established danger of capitalist encirclement. It reinforced the threat of war and how the Soviet Union was perceived as vulnerable to the subversive activity of the capitalist states. It is reasonable to argue that as a ‘fifth column’ had been ‘exposed’ in the Red Army Stalin felt compelled to sanction the later mass operations against suspect groups, such as kulaks, criminals and national groups, throughout the Soviet Union. He may have perceived these groups as part of the same fifth column in light of the ‘military-fascist plot’. If so, the next step for Stalin was to move beyond the Red Army and broaden the repression within the Soviet population and initiate the mass operations to remove any possible danger that the ‘exposed’ fifth column extended to suspicious population groups. As Stalin’s response to the military ‘conspiracy’ had been hesitant, last minute and reluctant, it seems reasonable to suggest that the initiation of the mass operations stemmed from similar impulses, and perhaps even panic. In this way, the military purge transformed the scale and the targets of the Great Terror and it was the decisive factor in pushing the violence towards the Soviet population. Thus, this analysis of the military purge reaffirms that the political repression in the Bolshevik Party during 1936 was not a separate process to the mass operations. The Great Terror was a series of discrete, but still connected, waves of state violence. But importantly, while Stalin instigated the mass operations and was closely involved in their planning, these were not initiated from a position of strength. It is far more likely that the ‘exposure’ of the ‘military-fascist plot’ panicked Stalin about a possible fifth column existing also in wider society and he launched the mass operations in reaction to this. Rather than see the coming threat of war and take a considered decision to remove any potentially unreliable individuals from the population, as to not take any chances about a possible fifth column, the ‘military-fascist plot’ in the Red Army instead compelled Stalin to attack the Soviet population at the very last moment. Consequently, while the carefully planned mass operations do give every indication of a

high level of totalitarian control on the surface, they more represent the deep sense of vulnerability that existed within the Stalinist regime.⁹

Finally, the examination of the military purge in this thesis suggests that to gain a fuller understanding of the broader processes that drove the Great Terror it is necessary to try and understand Stalin's worldview and how he defined threats to his regime and his personal power. Most importantly, Stalin misperceived the international situation and he held an incorrect view of the reliability of his own key power bases such as the Red Army. Stalin expected an inevitable war but he did not fully trust his means of defence. He was plagued by doubts about the reliability of the army, from whether he could trust his most senior officers to how easily it seemed the ranks could be infiltrated by various 'enemies'. However, these concerns were based on threats that could be exaggerated by a number of influences, including the methods used by the political police, the Bolsheviks' distrust of standing armies, the particular composition of the army command and Stalin's personal concerns about capitalist encirclement and subversion by foreign agents. Consequently, Stalin attacked the Red Army in reaction to imaginary threats such as the 'military-fascist plot'. He acted from a position of weakness. As a dictator Stalin could build up the power of the Red Army to enormous levels to prepare for the inevitable war, but at the same time he easily undermined his own strength by lashing out at misperceived 'conspiracies' and 'plots' within the ranks. Stalin's ability to build with one hand and destroy with the other defined the nature of his power.

Thus exploring how Stalin perceived the world is central to understanding the use of state violence in the 1930s. Stalin's misperception of threats led him to attack the military, the institution he needed the most in the build-up to war. While it is indisputable that Stalin wanted to retain his power, and this remains a key motivation behind the Terror, it is crucial to try and understand what Stalin believed put this at risk. Only examining the influences to Stalin's worldview will do this. Finally, this analysis of the military purge demonstrates that to reach a better understanding of how Stalin perceived threats and why he used state violence so frequently, the Great Terror also has to be seen more broadly than is usually the case in the literature. This thesis argues that the explosion in violence of the mid-1930s can be explained by seeing the Terror as the culmination of a long history of Stalin's nagging doubts and suspicions about the

⁹ For the argument that the mass operations are representative of a high level of totalitarian control, see Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*.

reliability of different groups and institutions in the Soviet system that date back to the Revolution, and which by 1937 had become too much to ignore when the regime experienced a period of extreme crisis.

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