

## Subversion in the Red Army and the Military Purge of 1937-38

Peter Whitewood

*This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in Europe-Asia Studies on 26/01/2015, available online:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668136.2014.990708>*

### Abstract

Stalin's purge of his military elite during 1937-38 is one of the most unusual events of the Great Terror. Why would Stalin execute his most qualified officers at the same time as defence spending was rising and World War approaching? This article argues that a long history of the Red Army being perceived as vulnerable to subversion is central to understanding this military purge. When faced with perceived plots in the military Stalin tended to lean towards restraint, but by 1937 he felt he could no longer hesitate, and finally cracked down on what he saw as a compromised army.

During 1937-38 Stalin purged his military, leading to the expulsion and execution of thousands of experienced officers. This purge began in June 1937 with a closed military trial of Mikhail Tukhachevskii and other senior officers, charged with membership of a 'Military-Fascist Plot.'<sup>1</sup> Striking out at the military elite when war was approaching was dangerous. In destroying his officer corps at a time of international crisis, Stalin risked fighting a costly war with a decapitated army. As such, the military purge is difficult to reconcile with the common argument that Stalin attacked the army elite to further consolidate his power.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, to explain such an action as the military purge requires an understanding of why Stalin thought

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<sup>1</sup> The other defendants included Iona Yakir, Ieronim Uborevich, Boris Feldman, Avgust Kork, Robert Eideman, Vitovt Putna and Vasily Primakov.

<sup>2</sup> That Stalin purged the Red Army in order to consolidate his power is an argument that dominated the post-war literature on the Soviet military and the Great Terror. For instance, in his influential work on the Red Army, John Erickson argued that by purging the military Stalin 'rid himself of the last potential source of leadership that could rival his own' (Erickson 1962, p. 465). Similarly, Robert Conquest argued that Stalin attacked the army to remove any possibility of a military coup (Conquest 2008, pp. 186-187). This explanation of the military purge can still be seen in more recent work. See for instance (Tucker 1990); (Nichols 1993) and (Ziemke 2004).

this was necessary, and that to do nothing was not worth the risk. Stalin would only take action against the army if he perceived it to be a threat and when he felt compelled to act. Starting from the Civil War this article will argue that a long history of perceived threats to the Red Army; from ‘military specialists’, the ‘Trotskyist Opposition’ and foreign agents, undermined Stalin’s trust in his military. Yet, Stalin consistently leaned towards restraint and resisted a serious crack down to improve army security. But in the face of a large spy scare in 1937 Stalin was forced to change his approach and was finally compelled to move against the army elite, taking drastic action which he saw as unavoidable.

### Army Subversion in the Civil War and the 1920s

The Red Army was perceived as a target of internal and external subversion from its formation in early 1918 and during the Civil War against the White forces. However, much of this was self-imposed. Due to a skills shortage in the new Red Army, War Commissar Leon Trotskii was forced to rely on officers from the old Imperial Army, so-called ‘military specialists’, who quickly came to dominate the higher ranks.<sup>3</sup> Even though political commissars flanked the military specialists and monitored their political reliability, many in the Bolshevik Party, including Stalin, distrusted the Imperial officers. Notably, fears of treachery were vocally aired at the Eighth Party Congress in March 1919.<sup>4</sup> Even Trotskii accepted that some military specialists would betray the Bolsheviks (Trotskii 1979, p. 10). Much of this distrust was driven by class prejudice. Military specialists were bourgeois, they were seen as outsiders, and some were undoubtedly hostile to the Bolsheviks. On a certain level, these fears of treachery were not entirely misplaced. Even though numerous military specialists such as a young Mikhail Tukhachevskii proved their loyalty throughout the Civil War, many did not. One of the most well-known military specialist betrayals was the mutiny of the first Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army, M. A. Murav’ev, in July 1918 (Ziemke 2004,

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<sup>3</sup> During 1918 75% of Red Army officers were from the former Imperial Army (Reese 1990, p. 40).

<sup>4</sup> For Stalin’s view of military specialists, see (Benvenuti 1988, p. 46) For the Eighth Party Congress, see *Vosmoi s’ezd RKP(b), Mart 1919 goda, prokoli* (Moskva, 1959).

pp. 38-39).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the newly formed soviet political police, the Cheka, worked hard to defend the army from military specialist betrayals. 'Special Departments' (*Osobie otdely*) were formed specifically to monitor 'counterrevolution' in the ranks. The political police were especially concerned that White counterrevolutionaries were infiltrating the Red Army by posing as military specialists. Reporting in 1919, the head of the Cheka, Feliks Dzerzhinskii, noted that Whites had managed to gain command positions in the Red Army (Plekhanov & Plekhanov 2007, p. 133). Indeed, that former Whites were even given the opportunity to serve in the Red Army only heightened these concerns.<sup>6</sup>

The Red Army was also perceived as a target of foreign agents. Indeed, the loss of secret military documents could be decisive to an outcome of a battle. Yet, the perception of this espionage threat was certainly larger than its reality. It needs to be emphasised that the Cheka actively searched to 'expose' foreign agents and beat confessions from the arrested. Not all the foreign espionage plots 'exposed' in the Red Army should be considered genuine.<sup>7</sup> In addition, as the army played such a key role in the Civil War, the Cheka may have been more attentive in searching for foreign agents in the military. The Red Army also deployed whole units of foreign volunteers, which constituted a potential internal security threat. An example of the Cheka's concerns about foreigners in the army can be seen in November 1920 when they requested that all non-party Estonians, Latvians, Finns and Poles be removed from their positions if they had access to secret materials (Sanborn 2003, p. 130; Zdanovich 2008, p. 535).

As such, during the Civil War the new Red Army faced a severe test not only in terms of building its strength from the ground-up and defeating the White forces, but also in combating a series of perceived internal and external threats. However, as noted, the reality of these threats is difficult to determine precisely as they were prone to exaggeration. Some military specialists did betray the Bolsheviks and some foreign agents were genuine, but class

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<sup>5</sup> For more on military specialist betrayal in the army, see (Voitikov 2010, p. 4, 346-47).

<sup>6</sup> Rossiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter RGASPI), fond 17, opis 109, delo 90, line 1.

<sup>7</sup> For espionage cases in the army, (Voitikov 2010, pp. 71-77, 164, 176, 313, 362). For political police suspicions that foreign governments were financing White groups, see (Voitkov 2010, p. 176, 289, 396; Kantor 2005, p. 147).

prejudice, the pressure of 'capitalist encirclement' and the violent interrogation methods used by the Cheka certainly exaggerated the scale of these threats. But importantly, it was this inflated picture of threat which was presented to the party leadership. Following Bolshevik victory in the Civil War the gulf between the perception and reality of threats to the army continued to grow.

The Red Army went through a period of demobilisation after the Civil War, meaning many military specialists were discharged from the ranks. However, large numbers remained in command positions due to a skills shortage. This continued use of military specialists was complicated by concerns that some were linked to the now exiled White forces, which were still regarded as a credible threat. On being driven from Russia, the Whites had dispersed throughout Europe. In 1924 General Peter Wrangel founded Russian General Military Union (ROVS) which shortly became the largest centre of the White movement. As the head of ROVS Wrangel intended to continue his fight from exile, though a change of tactics was necessary.

From the early 1920s the Whites began to place more emphasis on covert operations and increased their attempts to forge contacts with the Red Army. The Whites targeted military specialists for recruitment and the counterintelligence department of ROVS paid particular attention to the Red Army officer corps (Karpenko *et al* 2000, p. 83). Soviet political police intelligence reports detail the alleged White attempts to subvert the Red Army. For example, in September 1921 a meeting of former officers in Petrograd was reported. According to the report, there was a discussion of the organisation 'of an "expedition" to Moscow' aiming to create subversive cells for infiltration into the Red Army, the Cheka and other soviet institutions (Zolotarev *et al* 1998, pp. 87-89). A GPU order on the struggle with counterrevolution from March 1922 highlighted that Monarchist and Kadet émigrés intended to use military specialists for espionage work (Zdanovich 2008, p. 377). Furthermore, on 24 March 1923 the GPU reported an increase in the size of Wrangel's intelligence network, which focused primarily on 'the collection of information about the Red army's condition and armament, and also the breaking down of morale (*moral'noe razlozhenie*) of the latter by way of planting agents in the command positions of units of the Red Army' (Kol'tyukov *et al* 2007, pp. 815-817). In addition, former White officers were still permitted to serve in the Red Army and a series of post-Civil War amnesties increased their numbers (Tynchenko 2000, p. 17). Thus the Whites could infiltrate agents into the Red Army under the guise of returning

soldiers. A GPU circular from 1923 pointed out that the 'Return to the homeland, undoubtedly, was used by Wrangel's counterintelligence for sending agents, organisers and spies to Russia' (Kol'tyukov *et al* 2007, pp. 803-804).

Again, it is difficult to accurately assess the actual scale of the White threat from such reports. The Whites certainly attempted to subvert the Red Army, but it seems they had limited success. From his examination of materials in the FSB Archive Aleksandr Zdanovich highlights that there were no mass arrests of military specialists during 1924-1930 (Zdanovich 2008, p. 383). The political police received intelligence about the White threat to the Red Army and military specialists were arrested as a consequence, but these were not large-scale operations (Goldin 2010, pp. 192-193; Tynchenko 2000, p. 454). As such, even though the political police regarded the Whites as a primary threat in the 1920s, especially to the Red Army, and they invested great time and resources in combating this threat, in reality there were only low numbers of related arrests. This suggests that the political police continued to inflate the White threat to the army (Goldin 2010, p. 187, 432).

The perceived White threat to the Red Army was also enhanced by soviet disinformation. Indeed, the Whites did not want to infiltrate the Red Army only due to its importance as a support of the Bolshevik government, but were actually optimistic that certain individuals from the High Command could be recruited. A military coup was regarded as not entirely unrealistic. The Whites displayed such optimism partly because the soviet political police spread rumours about a 'Russian Bonaparte' in the Red Army elite as part of entrapment operations in 1920s. These rumours were particularly concentrated around Tukhachevskii (Zdanovich 2008, p. 280). For example, the 'Trust Operation' spread false information that prominent officers, including Tukhachevskii, were members of a White counterrevolutionary organisation in order to entrap genuine counterrevolutionaries. The operation snared high-profile Whites, including General Aleksandr Kutepov, representing one of the political police's greatest successes of the 1920s.

However, an immediate consequence of such disinformation operations was that the atmosphere became awash with hearsay about betrayal in the Red Army, visible in White publications, intelligence reports and in the diaries of prominent White figures (Minakov

2005, pp. 89-93).<sup>8</sup> These rumours had great resonance outside of the Soviet Union and reinforced White hopes that prominent Red Army military specialists would defect. For example, an OGPU report from March 1924 described how a White officer Samoilov intended to make contact with Tukhachevskii to offer him a role in a military coup (Kol'tyukov *et al* 2010, pp. 421-422). As such, as effective as these rumours were in entrapping counterrevolutionaries, they could also increase the perceived White threat to the Red Army by encouraging Whites to make contact. The very same rumours could also return to the Soviet Union, reinforcing existing class prejudices and undermining party trust in the army elite. Importantly, the Bolsheviks saw their revolution in the context of past revolutions and particularly so the French Revolution. The Bolsheviks had been forced to maintain a large standing army, but were very conscious of the dangers of a 'Soviet Thermidor' and military dictatorship. In the 1920s such fears began to emerge at the fringes of the Bolshevik Party. In 1927 the 'Military Opposition' (the group most vocally against military specialists at the Eighth Party Congress) argued that employing military specialists was turning the army into an instrument for a 'Bonapartist coup'. Similarly, the oppositionist Grigorii Zinov'ev pressed that some military specialists were 'dreaming about a role of a Russian Chiang Kai-shek' (Voroshilov 1937, p. 149, 152). Thus, even though the political police sustained rumours about a 'Soviet Thermidor' for their own benefit, the rumours had an impact within the Soviet Union. For now alarmism about a military coup appeared confined to the fringes of the party, but in the 1930s similar rumours about army betrayal returned to the Soviet Union and played a role in undermining trust in the Red Army elite. It is important to emphasise that the Soviet political police were as responsible as anyone else in spreading rumours about disloyalty in the High Command. They perpetuated rumours which refused to dissipate, and in the end, undermined their own military.

After the Civil War foreign espionage remained a persistent problem for the Red Army and spies were 'exposed' at a low, but frequent, level in the 1920s. For example, in June 1924 the counterintelligence department of the Kiev OGPU arrested a group of men on charges of alleged espionage for Poland. The majority were military specialists who had served in the

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<sup>8</sup> For more on Tukhachevskii and the growth of the Napoleon legend, see (Minakov 2005, pp.71 – 98).

Red Army, and one was still employed (Viktorov 1990, p. 62).<sup>9</sup> When Jozef Pilsudski came to power in Poland in 1926 the OGPU recorded an increase in Polish espionage activity and attempts to recruit from within the Red Army (Zdanovich 2008, pp. 74-75). This activity was highlighted by the military procuracy, which noted in a report that during the period between October 1926 to October 1927: ‘...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 officer corps.’<sup>10</sup> Yet, it is important to note that the scale of this espionage activity at this time was probably very small. In 1927 the procuracy also detailed that ‘The penetration of foreign intelligence agents into the RKKA is on an insignificant scale...’<sup>11</sup> And again, as noted above, not all espionage cases would be genuine. The political police continued to actively seek out foreign agents and beat confessions from those arrested. As such, foreign agents were seen as having infiltrated the army, but the problem was not extensive, and the actual level of this threat was probably even lower.

Germany was regarded as an exception because of the 1922 Treaty of Rapallo. The close relations between the Bolshevik and German governments led to a military collaboration which gave officers from the Reichswehr relatively open access to the Red Army. As is well known, an exchange of officers formed a large part of the collaboration and nearly all members of the Red Army elite studied in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>12</sup> During the collaboration some level of intelligence gathering was inevitable on both sides. German representatives in the Soviet Union repeatedly sent information home from the soviet military press, observations from military manoeuvres and conversations with Red Army officers (Kantor 2009, p. 119). However, on 24 December 1928 the head of military intelligence, Yan Berzin, wrote to Voroshilov and downplayed the threat of German espionage. He noted that there was ‘no doubt’ that the Germans ‘have the task of economic, political and military information/espionage... But according to all information this espionage is not directed

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<sup>9</sup> For other espionage cases see, (Viktorov 1990, p. 66; Tynchenko 2000, p. 100; Zdanovich 2008, pp. 606-613); Rossiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv (hereafter RGVA), fond 4, opis’ 14, delo 84, line 111.

<sup>10</sup> RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 70, l. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 19, l. 110.

towards 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...<sup>13</sup> Importantly, this attitude towards German intelligence would change when Adolf Hitler came to power.

The Red Army faced one final threat during the 1920s from the so-called ‘Trotskyist Opposition’. This differed to the above threats: it was internal and could potentially spread from one army party organisation to another. When Trotskii went into political opposition in 1923 he garnered some support from a number of senior officers, military specialists and from individuals within the army Political Administration (PUR) (Hincks 1992, p. 143; Zdanovich 2008, p. 287, 323).<sup>14</sup> This support was denounced by the party. For example, in January 1924 the Central Control Commission criticised Trotskii’s ally and head of PUR, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, for trying ‘to raise the military workers against the leading organs of the party and all the party as a whole’ (Karyaeva *et al* 1981, p. 184). Antonov-Ovseenko was quickly replaced as head of PUR by Andrei Bubnov. However, generally, PUR consistently made little of Trotskii’s influence in the army.<sup>15</sup> For example, a 1927 PUR report downplayed the Trotskyist influence in the ranks, describing its presence as ‘insignificant’ and constituting only 0.25% of the army party organisations. According to PUR, these organisations were secure.<sup>16</sup> Of course, PUR was responsible for the political reliability of the army and had an incentive in downplaying the Trotskyist influence. The new head of the army, Kliment Voroshilov, also publicly downplayed their impact.<sup>17</sup> For instance, in a speech on 10 January 1927 Voroshilov praised the military for having stood firm in the face of the oppositionist threat, making an

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<sup>13</sup> RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 295, l. 75.

<sup>14</sup> Trotskii’s military supporters included Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, the head of PUR, N. Muralov, commander of the Moscow Military District (MVO) and S. Mrachkovskii, the commander of the Volga Military District (PriVO). A number of other officers also joined the opposition, notably Vitaly Primakov and Vitovt Putna.

<sup>15</sup> RGVA, f. 33988, op. 3, d. 69, l. 133; RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 51, ll. 21-24.

<sup>16</sup> RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 227, ll. 190-191. The report does note that a few military districts are absent from the figures, see RGVA, f. 9, op. 26, d. 446, ll. 12-25.

<sup>17</sup> Voroshilov became Peoples’ Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs in 1925 following the death of Mikhail Frunze.



analogy to an exam which the party organisations had ‘passed brilliantly’.<sup>18</sup> However, Voroshilov too had an interest in promoting the political stability of the army. He was ultimately responsible for stability in the ranks.

The political police held a very different view of the Trotskyist threat. They were far more concerned about their agitation in the ranks, despite the relatively small number of Trotskyists. The political police received regular reports of illegal propaganda work within the army and took action. From December 1925 to February 1928 211 supporters of the ‘Opposition’ were expelled from the party and the army (Zdanovich 2008, pp. 323-324). In 1926, Trotskii was joined by Zinov’ev and Lev Kamenev in forming the ‘United Opposition’ and 1927 was the peak year of their activity. In October 1927 all three were expelled from the Central Committee and later expelled from the party. In 1927 the Trotskyist officers, Primakov and Putna, also lost their commands and were sent overseas on diplomatic assignments.

In November 1927 the opposition planned demonstrations on the anniversary of the Revolution, but the political police had received information that the opposition’s ‘combat organisation’ were planning a coup. Apparently 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 Stalin praised the counteractions taken by the head of the OGPU, Vyacheslav Menzhinskii (Reiman 1987, pp. 124-126). In this respect, it appears that Stalin believed the coup attempt was genuine and, importantly, the army was central to the supposed plot. According to Menzhinskii, the coup preparations coincided with vigorous agitation within the army and he was pessimistic about its reliability, writing in a letter: ‘...the army today, unlike before, has 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’ (Reiman 1987, p. 125). Not only does Menzhinskii’s letter demonstrate the disparity between Voroshilov’s public and private views about army reliability, but Menzhinskii stressed that he had pointed to the negative affect of oppositionist agitation several times, but this had not always met with the ‘desired results’ (Reiman 1987, p. 125). It is likely that Menzhinskii had not been given the go-ahead in the past to crack down on oppositionists in the military. Stalin perhaps had not

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<sup>18</sup> RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 186, ll. 1-18.

believed this necessary and his opinion had not changed in November 1927. The evidence about Stalin's view of this alleged coup attempt is fragmentary. Important documents such as his correspondence with Menzhinskii about the event are likely to be classified and inaccessible. Such documents would more clearly reveal Stalin's private opinion. However, it does seem probable that Stalin did not share the concerns of the political police about the supposed coup attempt. Indeed, in a letter to the Central Committee Stalin noted that he could not 'fully share the very pessimistic viewpoint of the GPU Collegium' regarding the oppositionist threat to the army (Reiman 1987, p. 125). Indeed, as there was no crack down on the military, it seems Stalin had not been convinced by Menzhinskii. This was not the only time that the political police had failed to be convincing about oppositionist threat to the army. In 1927 the OGPU also revealed an alleged underground Trotskyist printing house and arrested those responsible. During the investigation one Trotskyist gave testimony that he was linked with a group of military men who were planning a coup. However, this time, even Menzhinskii was not convinced and requested a more detailed report (Zdanovich 2008, pp. 320-322). No charge of a military coup was made.

Thus, a suspected 'oppositionist coup' had been foiled in November 1927, but Stalin had not 'fully' agreed with the OGPU about the oppositionist threat to the army. Stalin appears to have been conscious of the danger and does not seem sceptical about the coup attempt itself, but he favoured restraint. This was not a crisis point. The Trotskyist influence in the ranks was minor and the army was not overwhelmed, thus a serious crack down was not required. For now the army would remain under police observation and arrests for Trotskyism would continue. For example, Sergei Mrachkovskii was arrested in Moscow in early 1928 under suspicion of illegal Trotskyist activity, but also of being part of a military group in the capital (Zdanovich 2008, p. 324). However, the alleged role of members of the army in the 'oppositionist coup' of November 1927 would not be forgotten. Suspicions and doubts surrounding its political reliability would linger. This perceived Trotskyist threat added a further reason for Stalin to have nagging doubts about army loyalty, building on the already identified external threats from the Whites and foreign agents. Yet, none of these perceived threats had created a crisis in the army, despite the tendency of the political police to inflate the danger. But in 1930 the 'exposure' of a large alleged foreign-backed military specialist plot firmly reinforced the perceived vulnerability of the Red Army.

### Operation *vesna* and the Growing Espionage Threat

Alongside continued observation of army Trotskyists the political police had initiated closer surveillance over military specialists in 1926. This was in response to the worsening international climate, particularly the perceived threat from Britain and the possibility of war. Fears of a conflict with Britain were rife in 1927 when a war scare swept through the Soviet Union. In August 1928 the political police received intelligence that the British planned to use the poor relations between the Soviet Union and Poland to stoke a conflict, in provoking an uprising in Ukraine led by members of the then obsolete Ukrainian People's Republic. The plan purportedly included using Red Army troops who had turned against the Bolsheviks. Yet, the operation was apparently postponed when Pilsudski fell ill in 1929 (Zdanovich 2008, pp. 385-386). Even though it is very difficult to authenticate this intelligence, the political police acted on it. Arrests were made in Ukraine, and the OGPU searched for hidden double-dealers (*dvurushniki*) supposedly working for Polish intelligence. A number of the arrested were officers of the former Imperial Army, who, as Zdanovich notes, had links with retired or still serving Red Army officers. Surveillance of the Red Army was then set up under an operational name of '*vesna*'. The arrested former Imperial officers gave 'evidence' about an alleged counterrevolutionary organisation in the S. Kamenev Military School and within other civil education institutes (Zdanovich 2008, p. 387). Operation *vesna* expanded throughout 1930 with many arrests of military specialists in Moscow in August and spreading to Kiev and Leningrad. A large number of the arrests were confined to military specialists working in the academies, but some reached directly into the army itself. In early 1930, Tukhachevskii, at the time the commander of the Leningrad Military District, came under close police scrutiny when two military specialists from the Frunze Military Academy, N. Kakurin and I. Troitskii, were arrested. During interrogation in August both implicated Tukhachevskii as supposedly being sympathetic to the Right Deviation and portrayed him as the head of a Right-led conspiracy (Artizov *et al* 2003, p. 598). Stalin wrote to his ally Sergo Ordzhonikidze on 14 September about the case:

...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 sovkhozes, the Bolshevik tempos of development of industry.<sup>19</sup>

However, as he had done in 1927, Stalin hesitated again. He met with Ordzhonikidze and Voroshilov and conducted a face-to-face confrontation with Tukhachevskii, Kakurin and Troitskii. Stalin later wrote to Vyacheslav Molotov on 23 October, 'With regard to the case of Tukhachevskii, he turned out to be 100% clean. This is very good.' (Kosheleva *et al* 1995, p. 231). Stalin seemingly had been convinced of Tukhachevskii's innocence.

In February of 1931 operation *vesna* reached its apogee and took on an all-Union level (Zdanovich 2008, p. 390). This meant that for the first time an extensive plot had been 'exposed' within the Red Army, with links to foreign governments and which supposedly aimed to overthrow the soviet regime. During the operation thousands of military specialists were discharged from the Red Army and its military academies on charges of being monarchist and White counterrevolutionaries, who conducted sabotage and espionage.<sup>20</sup> This supposed 'plot' was on a much larger scale to the threats from Whites and foreign agents of the 1920s. However, the majority of the arrested were military specialists working in the academies, thus army outsiders. In addition, the Cultural Revolution of the late 1920s and early 1930s, a time when pre-revolutionary specialists faced harassment from younger revolutionary communists, is impossible to separate from operation *vesna*. Class warfare and the previous trials of specialists working in industry (such as the Shakhty trial of 1928) form an important background to the persecution of military specialists in 1930.<sup>21</sup> Despite this, however, *vesna* would not be forgotten. It was regarded as a large counterrevolutionary plot by the political police. Stalin was closely involved in investigating Tukhachevskii's incrimination, and his comments about a 'military dictatorship' suggest that he perceived a credible threat. The case would thus have a sustained impact. Even though Stalin was convinced of Tukhachevskii's innocence, and had showed the same hesitance to act as in 1927,

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<sup>19</sup> *Voennyi arkhiv Rossii*, 1 (1993), p. 248.

<sup>20</sup> Estimates vary on the number of military specialists removed during the operation. Typically historians estimate approximately 3000, however Tynchenko has argued a possible 10,000, see (Tynchenko 2000, p. 3).

<sup>21</sup> For more on the Cultural Revolution see (Fitzpatrick 1978).

suspicious around him and the wider army would linger and may never have been entirely dispelled. The political police would certainly, at least by now, have a growing file on Tukhachevskii. Such files only ever got thicker.

During the late 1920s many former army Trotskyists returned to the ranks after recanting their past opposition, but the perceived threat from Trotskyists remained a simmering issue in the military. Active Trotskyist ‘agitation’ was still a cause of arrest and discharge, but the political police also had lingering suspicions about those army Trotskyists who had recanted their ‘political errors’.<sup>22</sup> For example, in August 1933 they created a file on the former Trotskyist Primakov, at that time the deputy commander of the North-Caucasian Military District. The file noted that ‘[I]n June 1928 he gave a declaration about breaking with the opposition of a double-dealing (*dvurushnicheskogo*) character, having actually maintained his Trotskyist positions.’ (Zdanovich 2008, p. 325).<sup>23</sup> Following the assassination of the Leningrad Party boss Sergei Kirov in December 1934, which was initially blamed on Zinov’ev’s supporters, the former political opposition came under increasing pressure. The number of arrests increased dramatically (Khaustov & Samuelson 2009, p. 93). The army was not insulated from these political pressures and the military experienced an increase in arrests of former oppositionists and a nine-fold increase in ‘counterrevolutionary crime’ during 1934-35.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, during 1935 the military procuracy highlighted the convictions of a number of Trotskyist ‘double-dealers’; those who had publicly recanted but who were apparently still active Trotskyists.<sup>25</sup>

Later in May 1935, alongside the party, the army conducted the Verification of Party Documents (*proverka*). The *proverka* aimed to improve the chaotic state of party record keeping but also weed out inadequate party members and others deemed ‘enemies’. Overall, the army party organisations expelled 7783 people during the *proverka* (approximately 9%). The most common reason for expulsion was hiding social origins.<sup>26</sup> Trotskyism and

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<sup>22</sup> For Trotskyist cases, see RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 16, l. 1; f. 37837, op. 10, d. 20, ll. 131-132; f. 37837, op. 21, d. 52, l. 46, 48; d. 39, l. 32.

<sup>23</sup> For OGPU suspicions of other former army Trotskyists, see (Zdanovich 2008, p. 326).

<sup>24</sup> RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 281, l. 144; f. 37837, op. 21, d. 107, l. 14, 16.

<sup>25</sup> RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 1684, ll. 33-36.

<sup>26</sup> RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 872, l. 85.

Zinov'evism were lower down the list, totalling just 261 expulsions. For espionage the number was lower at 114.

On 26 June 1935 Yan Gamarnik, the head of PUR, gave a speech in the Belorussian Military District (BVO) and discussed the *proverka*. Gamarnik remarked that the *proverka* showed that people were still being studied 'very badly' in the army.<sup>27</sup> Despite Trotskyists and spies being on the lower end of expulsions, Gamarnik highlight them specifically: 'Amongst those now exposed and excluded from the party are clear enemies – spies, white guards, Trotskyists, of whom we had not revealed before the *proverka* of party documents...The *proverka* of party documents helped us to identify the enormous quantity of people who we did not know earlier or knew poorly.'<sup>28</sup> In a speech in February 1936 Gamarnik discussed the *proverka* again, commenting: '...we found real enemies, who deceived us, who got into the army using false documents. We revealed spies in the army....much to our shame we are still allowing such scum into the army.'<sup>29</sup> And on 1 April Gamarnik gave a similar speech to the Moscow Garrison, arguing that the army had 'to close all gaps for the enemy...all the doors and windows were wide open and any clever person, any clever crook, was able to infiltrate anywhere...'<sup>30</sup> Thus, according to Gamarnik, self-policing in the military was inadequate and this gave the opportunity for dangerous 'enemies', such as foreign agents, to infiltrate into the ranks. However, crucially, at this stage Gamarnik remarked that the number of spies discovered in the army was 'not large.'<sup>31</sup>

Gamarnik's concerns that Trotskyists and foreign agents were easily able to infiltrate into the ranks were in line with those in the party and the political police. In September 1931 the Japanese invaded Manchuria, which raised the possibility that the Soviet Union would be forced to fight a war on two fronts. Hitler's coming to power in January 1933 brought a formal end to the Treaty of Rapallo and Germany had now become a potential enemy. The spy threat to the Soviet Union was becoming a growing problem and a very large increase in the number of 'exposed' foreign agents was reported in 1933 in general terms, and this was also the case in

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<sup>27</sup> RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 15, l. 39.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 263, l. 42.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., l. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, l. 81.

the army.<sup>32</sup> By the mid-1930s there are visible concerns from the political police about the danger from foreign agents. Nikolai Ezhov, who became head of the NKVD in September 1936, reported to Stalin in the summer of 1935 that foreign agents had infiltrated the Party. In February 1936 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 in the Soviet Union (Jansen & Petrov 2002, pp. 41-42). As the international situation continued to deteriorate, these concerns about an espionage threat only increased (Getty & Naumov 2008, pp. 184-186; Chase 2002, p. 134).

At the same time as concerns were growing about foreign agents, rumours began to surface about the disloyalty of certain members of the military elite, in particular Tukhachevskii. These rumours were reminiscent of those spread by the political police in the 1920s, but now the army elite were linked to Nazi Germany. For instance, in December 1935 the head of military intelligence, S. P. Uritskii, noted an alleged 'secret connection' between some German officers and the Red Army (Samuelson 2000, p. 210). Around the same time a Russian journal in Czechoslovakia, *Znamia Rossii*, reported that an illegal underground organisation was operating in the Soviet Union which included members from the Red Army High Command (Lukes 1996, p. 507). A military intelligence report from 17 May 1936 detailed alleged comments from Hermann Göring saying that he had met with Tukhachevskii in Berlin and that the latter had raised the possibility of resuming the military collaboration between the two countries (Kantor 2009, p. 253). These rumours would only further reinforce already existing suspicions surrounding the Red Army and the military elite. However, for now, there was little indication of a danger of arrest. Tukhachevskii's career continued to advance. He became a Marshal of the Soviet Union in 1935 and Voroshilov's first deputy in April 1936. The careers of the others who would also be put on trial in June 1937, such as Uborevich and Eideman, also progressed. Indeed, Voroshilov lobbied Stalin for their promotions in 1936.<sup>33</sup> Thus, rumours about the military elite persisted and they were surely kept under closer observation, but there was little danger of arrest at this time. However, increasing political

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<sup>32</sup> RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 178, ll. 2-4.

<sup>33</sup> RGVA, f. 4, op. 19, d. 18, l. 176, 179.

tensions during 1936 brought a sequence of arrests within the party and military which would eventually endanger the entire Red Army.

#### The Arrest of the 'Trotskyist Military Centre'

In January 1936 one of Trotskii's associates, Valentin Ol'berg, who had arrived to Russia from Germany, was arrested. Ol'berg's arrest led to a series of arrests and the 'exposure' of an alleged major counterrevolutionary group. The investigation into the Kirov assassination was later reopened. This time the former oppositionists Zinov'ev and Kamenev were forced to give confessions of their supposed terrorist activity, of murdering Kirov and to describe their plans to assassinate other party leaders (Getty & Naumov 1999, pp. 247-260). Zinov'ev, Kamenev and another fourteen defendants were subsequently put on trial in August and all were executed. Importantly, the trial had raised alleged links between the defendants and the Nazis. As Germany was now most dangerous international threat, this raised the seriousness of the 'exposed' counterrevolutionary group. Old accusations of being an oppositionist now had new and a more dangerous implication of working with a hostile fascist enemy.

This move against former oppositionists affected the Red Army directly. From the Ol'berg arrest there were numerous connections to former military Trotskyists and several were arrested, for either belonging directly to the Zinov'ev-Kamenev group or for membership of a separate 'Trotskyist Military Centre'. In the summer and autumn former army Trotskyists, including Mrachkovskii, Putna and Primakov, were arrested. The 'exposure' of ties between the defendants at the August trial and serving men in the Red Army was a far more serious than the earlier arrests for army Trotskyism. Now a group of officers were supposedly complicit in a plot to assassinate leading party figures. The existence of a 'Trotskyist Military Centre' gave form to what had previously been a relatively disparate string of arrests for Trotskyism in the military. In addition, the idea of a military plot was also beginning to take shape. One of the defendants of the August show trial, Isak Reingol'd, a former Trotskyist and Chairman of the Cotton Syndicate, had given 'evidence' that power could be seized by the counterrevolutionaries through a 'military plot' (*voennyi zagovor*).<sup>34</sup> From the investigation

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<sup>34</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 93, l. 43.



into the 'Zinov'ev-Kamenev Counterrevolutionary Bloc', a number of former Trotskyists who had recanted years before and had been working in party positions were now arrested. These included Karl Radek and Grigorii Sokol'nikov, a senior journalist and first deputy people's commissar for light industry, respectively. With further arrests of other senior former Trotskyists, such as the deputy people's commissar for heavy industry, Georgy Piatakov, the foundations were laid for the second show trial in January 1937.

The 'evidence' extracted from these men continued to incriminate other army officers. In December Radek testified to the existence of a military plot, which included some of the already arrested army Trotskyists. Sokol'nikov, who was arrested a month before the August show trial, gave evidence in December about supposed preparations for treachery by the Trotskyist officers during the outbreak of war (Khaustov & Samuelson 2009, p. 108). In addition, there was a call from within the Red Army elite to root out the Trotskyist 'conspirators'. On 22 August Semen Budennyi sent a letter to Voroshilov with his impressions of the August show trial and called for a thorough investigation into the Red Army. Budennyi singled out the command in particular and argued that the officers were susceptible to counter-revolutionary influence. Budennyi's intervention is important. He was Voroshilov's close ally and Stalin's old comrade from the Civil War and his voice would carry weight (Budennyi was one of the very few senior officers unaffected by the military purge). Indeed, Budennyi was probably trying to influence Stalin or make a clear signal that he saw a threat within the military. Budennyi's letter was later forwarded to Stalin, Ezhov and A. A. Andreev on 1 September.<sup>35</sup>

The political police also matched Budennyi's call and declared that the Red Army should be searched more thoroughly. As the new head of the NKVD, Ezhov signalled his intentions early on. Just prior to his appointment in September Ezhov sent a letter to Stalin discussing the August trial and mentioned that there must still be Trotskyist officers unexposed within the Red Army (Jansen & Petrov 2002, p. 49). Thus, with Ezhov at the helm of the NKVD and Budennyi calling for an investigation into the officer corps, two powerful influences coincided to expand the investigation of the 'Trotskyist Military Centre' deeper into the Red Army. Indeed, at an NKVD conference later in December Ezhov again reiterated the dangers of

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<sup>35</sup> RGVA, f. 4, op. 19, d. 16, l. 262, 265.

hidden enemies within the Red Army, arguing that they had more opportunities to cause harm in the military than in industry (Jansen & Petrov 2002, p. 69).

The political clamp down on former Trotskyists in the party and the expanding counterrevolutionary conspiracy produced an increase in the number of arrested former army Trotskyists. Between 1 August and 31 December 1936 there were 212 arrests for 'counterrevolutionary Trotskyism' in the military, of which 32 were from the officer corps. The number of such arrests from January to 1 August 1936 was 125 with six from the officer corps. From 1 January 1937 to 1 March 1937 the pace of arrests seen in the latter half of 1936 was maintained with 125 further arrests made with forty-three from the officer corps.<sup>36</sup> This was not a dramatic increase in number, but it does show that as the political repression gathered pace within the party, it was impossible to ignore the Trotskyist 'enemies' in the army. However, importantly, these arrests had not fully broken into the wider ranks in the latter half of 1936. Many of the arrested were from the military academies. In addition, former Trotskyists, such as Primakov and Putna, were too much in the minority and not from the upper ranks to cause a real crisis. The military elite were for now unaffected by the expanding political arrests. It seems that neither Budennyi's letter nor Ezhov's call to investigate the military had led to Stalin taking a firmer line. As the arrests were only few in number and did not touch the upper ranks, Stalin perhaps was not too alarmed just yet. The Red Army was far from being destabilised. As such, it is likely that Stalin sanctioned Ezhov to carry out a deeper investigation of the army, to explore the extent of the perceived Trotskyist infiltration, but he would wait and see what 'evidence' was found. Yet, importantly, even though the rumours suggesting disloyalty within the military elite had not subsided, the charges would need to move on from 'Trotskyist counterrevolution' in order to affect the upper ranks. There would need to be a new and more widely applicable conspiracy to create a more serious crisis in the Red Army and compel Stalin to take firmer action. This new conspiracy began to emerge during the last few months of 1936 as the charge of Trotskyism began to align with the charge of foreign espionage. It was this that provided the opportunity for the perception of a serious military plot to develop, and at the very last moment, provide the momentum to affect a much wider circle of officers.

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<sup>36</sup> RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 107, l. 14.

### The Foreign Espionage Scare and the 'Military Fascist Plot'

On 29 September the Politburo issued an order 'About the relations to the counterrevolutionary Trotskyist-Zinov'evite elements' which argued that these 'elements' should be regarded as 'Intelligence agents, spies, subversives and wreckers of the fascist bourgeoisie in Europe' (Khaustov & Samuelson 2009, p. 93). The message was clear: domestic counterrevolutionaries were actively engaged in espionage and wrecking for hostile international powers. This focus on foreign agents was undoubtedly fuelled by the worsening international situation. On 25 October the Rome-Berlin Axis was formed and a 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 Oleg Khlevnyuk has shown, Stalin received reports of a fifth column within the Republican forces (Khlevnyuk 2000, p. 164). With an 'exposed' 'Trotskyist Military Centre' within the Red Army this Spanish example would reinforce the dangers of a compromised military. At a meeting of the Military Soviet of October 1936 P. A. Smirnov, the head of PUR in the LVO, noted that a number of foreigners from Poland and Finland had managed to infiltrate the ranks in his district and in the BVO. Smirnov argued that these individuals had been sent by 'fascist elements' (Knyaz'kov *et al* 2009, p. 354). Thus, the 'enemy' was already perceived as having begun to infiltrate the ranks and foreign agents sent by hostile fascist countries were regarded as a real danger. Internal Trotskyists were increasingly not the only pressing threats to the Red Army.

The second Moscow show trial was held in January 1937 of the 'Anti-Soviet Trotskyite-Centre'. The trial thrust the perceived threat from foreign agents clearly into the open. The seventeen defendants were charged, alongside preparing acts of terrorism, with wrecking and sabotage, and working on the orders of Trotskii, Germany and Japan to overthrow Soviet power. The defendants were not only linked to foreign fascist powers, but supposedly working on their direct orders (Chase 2002, pp. 238-239). Thus, the danger from foreign agents was as prominent as the internal oppositionist threat. This growing perceived threat from foreign agents can also be seen clearly in the Red Army. In early 1937 there were a series of arrests of soldiers with supposed links German intelligence agents and different spy networks were

supposedly ‘discovered’ in the military.<sup>37</sup> Some of the alleged German agents were soldiers who had been arrested for Trotskyism in 1936, but were now newly ‘exposed’ as foreign agents.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, a new round of reports and rumours about a secret link between the Red Army elite and Germany emerged in early 1937. In mid-January *Pravda*’s correspondent in Berlin sent a letter to the paper’s editor noting a link between the Red Army High Command and the Nazis, and Tukhachevskii was named specifically.<sup>39</sup> On 29 December a Polish Communist Tomas Dombal’ was arrested by the NKVD for espionage. During his interrogation in January 1937 Dombal’ confessed to being part of the Polish Military Organisation and that he had gathered information on the condition of the Red Army. Dombal’ noted that he had spoken with members of the army elite, in particular Tukhachevskii (Kantor 2005, p. 366). In addition, in January, Ezhov received a letter from the former head of the INO NKVD, A. Artuzov, about alleged ‘wrecking activity’ supposedly led by Tukhachevskii. At this time the INO NKVD were planning to collect material on members of the High Command and pay closer attention in Moscow and beyond in order to ‘expose’ ‘fascist groups among the army men.’<sup>40</sup> In March 1937 during an official conversation with the Soviet Ambassador Vladimir Potemkin, the French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier apparently spoke about plans of certain circles in Germany to prepare a coup in the Soviet Union. These plans allegedly involved using members from the Red Army High Command who were hostile to the Soviet Government.<sup>41</sup> It is not entirely out of the question that the German government was spreading such rumours as disinformation in order to undermine Stalin’s trust in his military, but on any case, the rumours were accumulating and the Red Army elite were certainly now under increased observation.

The 1937 February-March Plenum of the Central Committee was a turning point for the Red Army and led to a strengthening of the investigation into ‘counterrevolution’ in the ranks. The Plenum acted as a forum during which the former members of the Right Deviation, Nikolai Bukharin and Alexei Rykov, were denounced for their links to the former oppositionists

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<sup>37</sup> RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 99, l. 16; f. 33987, op. 3, d. 851, ll. 39-40, 134.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 50.

<sup>39</sup> *Izvestiia TsK*, 4 (1989), p. 61.

<sup>40</sup> *Voennyi arkhivi Rossii*, p. 255.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 601.

already executed on charges of terrorism, sabotage and espionage (Getty & Naumov 1999, pp. 367-369). Voroshilov took part in the attacks on both men; however, concerning the Red Army, he tried to downplay the danger of the enemy within. Voroshilov argued that the threat from Trotskyists was only minor and most had already been expelled. He commented: ‘..in the army at this present time, happily, not that many enemies have been revealed.’ Voroshilov added that the party sends the ‘best of its cadres’ to serve in the army. Voroshilov did concede that it was possible that there were more enemies in the military than were known currently, but the thrust of his speech was that the Red Army was secure and remained politically reliable.<sup>42</sup> Voroshilov had to protect his own position and his defence of army reliability is understandable. However, Molotov was not reassured by Voroshilov’s speech and called for a thorough checking of the Red Army. Molotov agreed that there were only ‘small signs’ of sabotage and espionage in the military, but he argued that if the problem was ‘approached carefully’ more enemies would be revealed. Molotov argued that ‘if we have wreckers in all sectors of the economy, can we imagine that wreckers are only there. It would be ridiculous. The military department is a very big deal, and its work will not be verified (*proveryatsia*) now, but later on, and it will be verified very closely.’<sup>43</sup>

Molotov’s intervention is significant. He would not have argued that the army needed closer attention without Stalin’s direction. 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 hesitated. Stalin wanted the military investigated, but not urgently. The proposed verification was not to be launched immediately. Perhaps more ‘evidence’ of ‘counterrevolution’ was needed, or maybe Stalin was just being cautious. Perhaps, the Red Army was too important to shake-up without certainty. Stalin would not crack down on the military until he felt compelled to, and this point had not been reached yet. The number of arrested former Trotskyists in the ranks was still relatively small and they had only ever been a minority in the Red Army during the 1920s. Consequently, despite Voroshilov’s assurances that it contained only very few ‘enemies’, he was unable to shield the army. But for now, even

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<sup>42</sup> *Voennyi arkhiv Rossii*, p. 153.

<sup>43</sup> For Molotov’s comments, see *Izvestia TsK*, p. 45.

though the military was firmly in Stalin's focus, there would be no mass purge and a cautious approach was being taken.

The change in line towards the Red Army is visible following the Plenum during Voroshilov's speech to a group of military party members on 13 March. Voroshilov now spoke in terms much closer to Molotov's position. He no doubt realised that he had to do more, or be seen to do more, to expel 'enemies' from the ranks. Stalin had signalled this was the case and Voroshilov fell into line. So in his speech he detailed how deeply the 'Fascist-Trotskyist bands' had penetrated into the soviet state. Voroshilov pressed the need for people in the army to keep an eye on each other.<sup>44</sup> For the first time Voroshilov also articulated the danger from foreign agents in very clear terms, showing that the danger from spies was gaining currency. Voroshilov mentioned a series of fires which had resulted in several deaths and damage to machinery and transport and noted: 'I am absolutely convinced that it is the work of Japanese spies, it is work of Japanese agents.'<sup>45</sup> Referring to the already arrested Trotskyist officers, Voroshilov now argued that their arrests did not mean the army was free from enemies. He called for a full cleansing, arguing that not one enemy could be permitted and 'the army should be utterly and completely clean.'<sup>46</sup> In a contrast to his Plenum speech, Voroshilov now pushed for a prophylactic purge against 'enemies' who remained unrevealed within the ranks.

Voroshilov was supported by other senior military figures during the meeting. Referring to the Trotskyist Military Centre, Budennyi argued that '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-Zinov'evite trial, Mrachkovskii plainly said that we have a direct order from Trotskii to plant groups in the RKKA.'<sup>47</sup> The commander of the MVO, I. Belov, argued similarly that the Red Army 'is a very attractive object for all counter-intelligence agents' and called upon the military to assist the NKVD in finding the counterrevolutionary 'nest' within the ranks.<sup>48</sup> Gamarnik highlighted the scale of the apparent infiltration into the Red Army by foreign 'enemies', but in a striking difference to his speeches of previous years, he now saw this

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<sup>44</sup> RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 117, l. 42, 47.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 51.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 58.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 448-449.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 485.

infiltration in larger 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.’ Gamarnik added that just one spy could cause ‘incalculable disasters’.<sup>49</sup>

Later on 20 March in a speech to the Leningrad *aktiv*, Gamarnik again pressed the danger posed to the army by foreign agents: ‘it would be naïve to think that each capitalist country does not have its own agents and spies inside our country.’ Gamarnik continued: ‘The evidence of wrecking and espionage is not small’, and that, ‘We know that Trotskii 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 Trotskii gave an order to organise such subversive cells in the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army...’<sup>50</sup> Thus, the scale of the threat from foreign agents was now perceived on a much larger scale than before, and it had become a chief concern for Gamarnik and presumably Voroshilov. As detailed above, in 1936 Gamarnik had pointed to this espionage threat to the military, but he had also emphasised its small scale. In 1937 this had changed and the broader threat to the Soviet Union from foreign agents was now being presented as a primary danger and Stalin was pressing for a deeper investigation into the army. The principle perceived threats to the Red Army were now from both Trotskyists and foreign agents.<sup>51</sup>

Stalin signalled his growing distrust of the officer corps at the end of March when the Politburo ordered that any senior officer who had been expelled from the party for political reasons was to be discharged (Khlevnyuk 2009, p. 180). Stalin was indicating that the political reliability of the officer corps was on his agenda. The situation became far more serious for the Red Army in April when Ezhov made several arrests within the NKVD which provided the first incriminations against the High Command. The arrested included M. I. Gai, the head of the Special Department, G. E. Prokof’ev, a former deputy of Ezhov’s predecessor, Genrikh Iagoda, and the deputy of Special Department Z. I. Volovich. Under interrogation at the end of

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<sup>49</sup> RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 319, ll. 2-4.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 74-75, 84.

<sup>51</sup> In a further sign that the espionage threat was becoming more threatening, throughout the first half of 1937 there were a number of articles in *krasnaya zvezda* about espionage, see 28 March 1937; 20 April 1937; 23 April 1937; 24 April 1937; 28 April 1937; 14 May 1937; 28 May 1937.

April, Gai, Prokof'ev and Volovich gave incriminating testimony against certain members of the military elite. Tukhachevskii, Uborevich, Yakir, Kork, Eideman and a number of officers were linked a number of already arrested 'conspirators' from the political police, including Iagoda. The group apparently planned a 'Palace coup' and espionage (Artizov *et al* 2003, p. 602). This was the first time that direct testimony had been given against the members of the military elite who would be put on trial in June. As noted above, the political police had a long history of working-up 'plots' against the Red Army. During the 1920s they had regarded the military Trotskyists in much more threatening terms than anyone else and they had inflated the threats from the Whites and foreign agents. Members of the political police actively searched for 'plots' and 'counterrevolution' in the military and even when arrested this remained familiar territory. M. Gai was also the head of the Special Department and was in close contact with the military elite (Khaustov & Samuelson 2009, p. 114). Presumably 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 a conspiracy which would heavily undermine it.

A day before Gai gave testimony against Tukhachevskii, the Politburo cancelled the latter's trip to Britain to attend the coronation of King George VI which was later publicised on grounds of ill health. In fact, on the 21 April Ezhov had warned Stalin, Molotov and Voroshilov that there was a chance of a German terrorist attack against Tukhachevskii if he attended the coronation. However, there is nothing to suggest that this is anything more than a fabrication.<sup>52</sup> The cancellation of the trip to Britain does not mean that there was a solid case against Tukhachevskii, but it strongly suggests that a focused investigation was underway or at least Ezhov and Stalin were increasingly suspicious.

At the beginning of May Stalin signalled again that the political reliability of the army needed further strengthening and the Politburo passed a resolution ending single military and political command and reinstated the influence of the political commissar. The officers were testing Stalin's instinct for restraint. Further damaging testimony against the military elite arrived in early May. Ie. Medvedev, a brigade commander, was arrested on 6 May and accused of membership of a counterrevolutionary group. Between 8 and 10 May he gave testimony

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<sup>52</sup> *Izvestiia TsK*, p. 45.



that he had been a member of a Trotskyist military organisation which included Tukhachevskii, Feldman, Kork, Yakir, Putna and Primakov. The 'evidence' from Medvedev had serious consequences. On 10 May Tukhachevskii was removed from his position and Kork was arrested on 14 May. Putna was re-interrogated on 14 May and Feldman arrested the following day.<sup>53</sup> Yakir was removed from his position on 20 May and Uborevich was transferred to command the troops in the remote Central Asian Military District. However, again these transfers suggest an element of caution. Only Kork and Feldman were arrested immediately, despite the accumulating incriminating 'evidence' against the group of senior officers. This suggests a level of uncertainty from Stalin over their guilt or over how to next proceed. Importantly, there is little to indicate that these men had been targets for arrest for a long period of time or that there was a well-thought-out plan.

There is a question of what prompted the incriminating 'evidence' against the military elite in April and May? It seems that Ezhov had come to believe there were hidden counterrevolutionaries in the Red Army and the February-March Plenum had endorsed Molotov's case that the military needed closer scrutiny. But there was an underlying danger which provided the urgency to do this. The spy threat to the military which had been building throughout 1937 was pushed to the fore at precisely the point that 'evidence' was received against Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers. It has to be strongly emphasised that charges of espionage and wrecking featured heavily in the final indictments at the June military trial.

It is clear that Voroshilov had been preparing to address the espionage threat to the Red Army at least from April. On 21 April he received a report from the head of the air force, Ya. I. Alksnis on the measures needed to combat the espionage threat.<sup>54</sup> This was followed a day later by another report from the head of the Navy, Vladimir Orlov, which again addressed exposing wreckers and spies. Orlov argued the need to check the officer corps, the central apparatus and all industrial failures to find evidence of wrecking. This process was already underway in the navy, with forty three discharges already made.<sup>55</sup> On the same day a similar

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>54</sup> RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 965, l. 88.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 101.

report was also sent to Voroshilov from the army medical services.<sup>56</sup> Voroshilov had clearly solicited these reports and it seems that exposure of spies and wreckers was now a priority. On 10 May, the very day of Tukhachevskii's transfer, Voroshilov sent a report to Stalin and Molotov emphasising the scale of the espionage threat 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 Zinov'evites – have penetrated their vile designs into the Red Army and have already managed to inflict considerable damage in various domains of military construction.' Voroshilov called for an army-wide verification of all officers.<sup>57</sup> What once had been a minor spy threat in 1936 was now seen in much larger proportions and had merged with the established internal Trotskyist threat. Crucially this spy scare erupted before the key arrests were made for the 'Military Fascist Plot'. Furthermore, as the threat encompassed German spies, this was particularly dangerous for the military elite. Nearly all had spent extended periods in Germany training with the Reichswehr in the 1920s. Contacts had been established and relationships forged. Alongside the persistent rumours over a secret link between the Red Army and the Germans, Ezhov would have little difficulty stitching together a 'conspiracy'.

However, the case against Tukhachevskii and the other officers still needed strengthening. Feldman provided this on 19 May when he agreed to give 'evidence' about the existence of Trotskyist military plot within the Red Army headed by Tukhachevskii. On 22 May Tukhachevskii, Eideman, Yakir and Uborevich were arrested. On 24 May Tukhachevskii was expelled from the Party and on 29 May he gave 'evidence' about his participation in the plot. Gamarnik committed suicide on 31 May, most likely due to his close association with the now arrested Yakir.<sup>58</sup> On 11 June the guilty men put on trial in a closed Military Court and the following day Tukhachevskii, Yakir, Uborevich, Kork, Feldman, Eideman, Primakov and Putna, were executed. Over the next two years a purge swept through the Red Army causing

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., l. 110.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Yakir even visited Gamarnik the day before his arrest, see RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 313, l. 1.

over 30,000 arrests and discharges in reaction to the exposure of this 'Military-Fascist Plot' (Reese 1992, p. 7).

This article has shown that espionage threat which built throughout 1937 was the driving force behind the military purge. Since its creation in 1918 the Red Army was a perceived target of internal and external subversion, from military specialists, Whites, foreign agents and Trotskyists. As far as the regime was concerned, alleged coup attempts had been foiled in 1927 and 1930 but Stalin had hesitated on both occasions. In 1927 he had not fully shared Menzhinskii's pessimism over the oppositionist danger to the army, and during operation *vesna* in 1930 he had not sanctioned Tukhachevskii's arrest. Military specialists, the outsiders, had formed the bulk of the arrests in 1930. However, suspicions surrounding the Red Army lingered and neither of the supposed 'plots' would be forgotten. Political tensions then increased from the Kirov assassination. With the arrests of the Zinov'ev-Kamenev Counterrevolutionary Bloc and the concurrent arrests of the army Trotskyists in 1936, attentions turned towards the military. Ezhov's promotion as head of the NKVD focused this attention more sharply. However, the Trotskyist threat was never enough to bring mass arrests into the army. Trotskyists were too small in number and of too low rank. But as the prominence of the foreign threat grew during 1936 and 1937 this gave the opportunity for the already identified Trotskyist 'conspiracy' to gain an international dimension. The 1920s rumours of a 'Soviet Bonaparte', of betrayal within the military elite contributed to undermining trust in the Red Army. But in the 1930s the connection was to Germany rather than the exiled Whites. Such rumours, spread by the political police in the 1920s, contributed to undermining trust in the Red Army elite in the long run. Irrespective of the particular link, they sustained an image of a disloyal High Command. However, it was the threat to the army from foreign agents which was the key factor in 1937. By April the Red Army was perceived as compromised by foreign agents. When Ezhov had extracted 'evidence' against Tukhachevskii from several arrested military and NKVD officers which detailed a 'plot' in the upper ranks, Stalin could no longer hesitate. He could not fight a war with an army infiltrated by spies and with a conspiracy in the military elite. It was now too risky not to act against the Red Army, even at a time of approaching conflict (and perhaps precisely because of this). Thus, the espionage threat to the Army in 1937 is the most likely reason that Stalin finally changed

course and sanctioned the arrest of Tukhachevskii and the other officers and ordered a purge of the Red Army.

To understand the military purge it is necessary to understand how it was perceived. From the formation of the Red Army in 1918, the political police tended to inflate the threats to the military, while PUR and Voroshilov downplayed these. Stalin hesitated and resisted a major crack down until 1937. The twenty years before the military purge saw a battle between different appraisals of threat. By the mid-1930s Ezhov was beginning to push for a deeper investigation into the army while Voroshilov continued to defend its reliability. As soon as Stalin signalled that he agreed with Ezhov about the need to investigate the military at the February-March Plenum, Voroshilov scrambled to change his line and worked to discover hidden 'enemies' in the ranks. However, even though there was no immediate purge at this point, without Voroshilov's previous defence of its reliability the military was increasingly open to incrimination. Some historians have argued that Ezhov followed Stalin's orders very closely and that he had little independence of action. This article argues that Ezhov was one of first senior party figures to begin pushing for an investigation into the Red Army in 1936 and that Stalin did not take any serious action until May 1937. Indeed, Stalin delayed a firm response even after the February-March Plenum. It is possible that Ezhov was following Stalin's direct orders to the letter and that the General Secretary had instructed him to proceed with caution. However, it is perhaps more likely that Ezhov was trying to uncover 'evidence' of a conspiracy in the military in order to convince Stalin that serious action needed to be taken. Both Stalin and Ezhov had different priorities. Ezhov was primarily concerned with the 'exposure' of 'enemies', whereas Stalin needed to preserve the security of the Soviet Union, but this also required preserving the stability of the military. Thus, Stalin may have waited to see what Ezhov discovered and given him freedom to pursue his investigation, and as shown, by 1937 the 'evidence' of subversion in the army provided by the political police finally compelled Stalin to act.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> For the view that Ezhov was carefully directed by Stalin, see Jansen & Petrov (2002) and Khaustov & Samuelson (2009). For an alternative argument that Ezhov had more independence from Stalin see Getty & Naumov (2008).

As such, Stalin did not sanction a purge of the military because it was a too powerful institution which could potentially challenge his power. This is too difficult to reconcile with the danger posed to the Soviet Union's security from such a loss of vital experience. Stalin purged the military due to its perceived vulnerability to subversion, a trait that had a long history and nearly twenty years of 'evidence' of infiltration in support. This long history of subversion was vital in not only adding credibility to the much wider spy threat which erupted inside the army in April to May 1937, but it was this final subversive threat which finally compelled Stalin to act against an army long affected by internal and external threats, and a military elite long surrounded by rumours of betrayal.

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