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**In the Shadow of the War: Bolshevik Perceptions of Polish Subversive and
Military Threats to the Soviet Union, 1920-32**

Peter Whitewood

Abstract:

This article examines Soviet perceptions of subversive and military threats from Poland to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and early 1930s. Drawing on archival materials from the Soviet foreign ministry, Communist Party leadership and security organs, it shows how the Soviet leadership held exaggerated fears about Polish threats to the Soviet western border regions and military intervention. A pattern of misperception stemmed from the Bolshevik defeat to Poland in the 1919-1920 Soviet-Polish War, which rather than moderating the early Soviet regime ultimately encouraged more widespread use of state violence and provided further rationale for Stalin's 'Revolution from Above'.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Poland, war scare, industrialisation, collectivisation, Ukraine

At the end of the 1920s and early 1930s, Iosif Stalin and his inner circle were increasingly preoccupied with a potential military threat from Poland and the security of the Soviet Union's western border regions. The vulnerability of Soviet Ukraine was a special point of concern. On 11 August 1932, Stalin fired off a telegram to his close

ally Lazar Kaganovich warning of the risk of losing Ukraine to Poland. Highly critical of the local communist leadership, Stalin claimed that Polish subversives had infiltrated the party ranks and were taking advantage of ground-level discontents caused by the ongoing collectivisation drive. Stalin wanted new people brought into leadership positions, arguing that the Poles might open ‘a front inside (and outside) the party, against the party’ if the situation went from bad to worse.¹ Two years earlier, in September 1930, Stalin had expressed similar concerns to another close ally, Viacheslav Molotov, this time about the possible invasion of the Soviet Union by Poland and a coalition of hostile states.² During these same years, the Soviet political police amassed enormous files from investigations into Polish subversive operations that its agents claimed were active in Ukraine and coordinated by the Polish Military Organisation (POV). These supposed conspiracies apparently had the common goal of preparing the ground for an invasion that would see Ukraine passed from Soviet to Polish control.

Security anxieties about Polish subversion, the vulnerability of Ukraine and a possible invasion spearheaded by Poland had significant impact on the Soviet leadership in the 1920s. Perceived Polish subversive and military threats helped crystallise concerns about the international dangers facing the Soviet Union and cemented fears about a new war among the party elite. These security fears in turn emboldened the political police to launch widespread – and spurious – investigations into the POV in Ukraine. By the late 1920s, the OGPU was claiming that the POV planned to overthrow Soviet power in the republic and that preparations for war were continuous. Even though the POV was in fact long-defunct, the OGPU produced

¹ O. V. Khlevniuk et al. (eds.), *Stalin i Kaganovich perepiska. 1931-1936 gg.* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2001) 273-274.

² Lars T. Lih, Oleg V. Naumov and Oleg V. Khlevniuk (eds.), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov: 1925-1936* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 208.

masses of documentation on its supposed plots.³ Soon enough, the Soviet leadership would sanction increasingly radical countermeasures to protect the western regions from being subverted, including mass deportations.

In reality there was no credible military danger to the Soviet Union from Poland in the 1920s even after Józef Piłsudski returned to power in May 1926 through a coup d'état. The Soviet leadership was convinced otherwise for four key reasons. First, Stalin and his inner circle held a view of international affairs that judged the Soviet Union as encircled by hostile capitalist powers committed to its destruction; second, the Bolsheviks' understanding of the disastrous collapse of their offensive at the height of the Soviet-Polish War in summer 1920 had lasting impact; third, the vulnerability of the western border regions, and Ukraine in particular, solidified the credibility of a Polish threat; fourth, the Soviet political police (GPU/OGPU) sounded the alarm about subversive Polish threats to the western border regions – dangers supposedly foreshadowing a future invasion – unremittingly throughout the decade.

Recent research has underlined the centrality of the Soviet borderlands to Stalin's wider security policies.⁴ That the use of Soviet state violence in the interwar period overlapped with heightened concerns within Stalin's circle about foreign threats has also been recently demonstrated.⁵ This article, however, will underline how perceived Polish subversive and military threats not only became priority issues for the Soviet leadership in the 1920s and early 1930s, but contributed to the trajectory of the early Soviet state during this crucial transitional period. Not least,

³ Numerous such reports about Polish subversion and the POV can be found in the Archive of the State Security Services of Ukraine. See for instance, Derzhavnyi haluzevyi arkhiv sluzhby bezpeky Ukraïny (hereafter DHASBU), especially f. 13.

⁴ Alfred J. Rieber, *Stalin and the Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁵ David Shearer, 'Stalin at War, 1918-1953: Patterns of Violence and Foreign Threat', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 66/2 (2018) 188-217.

fears about Poland were inseparable from the decision to launch industrialisation, and with it the subsequent collectivisation of agriculture.⁶ Moreover, the Soviet leadership's perception of an existential threat from Poland and supporting capitalist countries throughout the 1920s and early 1930s encouraged the type of hard-line measures in the western border regions that foreshadowed the more extensive political violence of the late 1930s.

In the short-term, Polish victory in the 1919-20 war has been described as having an moderating effect on the early Bolshevik regime, in terms of providing further impetus behind the launch of the New Economic Policy, central to economic recovery after the civil war, and in pressuring the Bolsheviks to adapt to their international isolation with pragmatism in trade policy and diplomatic relations.⁷ While much of this remains true, this article will show that in the longer-term the opposite of moderation actually occurred. The Bolsheviks frequent misperception of the threat from Poland after the Soviet-Polish War, first stemming from a misunderstanding of the nature of the defeat, encouraged heightened fears about military and subversive dangers. A siege mentality quickly took hold. Above all, this provided further rationale for the radical transformation of the Soviet state in the late 1920s and, in the end, justified the increasing use of state violence.

The Aftermath of War and the Threat from Polish Subversion

⁶ The importance of the connection between the worsening international climate and the launch of industrialisation has previously been drawn by scholars, however, not specifically highlighting the centrality of the perceived Polish military threat to the Soviet Union in the 1920s. See for instance, R. W. Davies, *The Socialist Offensive: The Collectivisation of Soviet Agriculture, 1929-30* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1980) 37. See also David. R. Stone, *Hammer and Rifle: The Militarization of the Soviet Union, 1926-1933* (University Press of Kansas, 2000); Lennart Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine: Tukhachevskii and Military-Economic Planning, 1925-1941* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

⁷ For this suggestion see a classic work on the Soviet-Polish War, Norman Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War 1919-1920 and 'The Miracle on the Vistula'* (London: Pimlico, 2003).

To understand why such a fearful view of Poland gained currency among Stalin's circle by the end of the 1920s and early 1930s, it is necessary to go back to immediate aftermath of the Soviet-Polish War of 1919-20. Vladimir Lenin had hoped to use the war as a means of spreading revolution to the industrialised countries of Western Europe. This was regarded as critical to the survival of the October Revolution, which had unexpectedly taken root in Russia. The Bolsheviks were convinced that they would not last long without other international socialist allies. Yet the war against Poland was nothing short of a disaster. The Red Army's rapid and overstretched offensive towards Warsaw failed spectacularly in August 1920 and the counterattack by the Polish military was a blow from which there was no recovery. Critically, however, the Bolsheviks attributed this stunning defeat not solely to Polish military power or to their own strategic errors. They placed as much blame with the British and French governments, whom they believed had closely coordinated the war behind-the-scenes. Both governments had given differing amounts of material assistance to the Poles in 1920 (totalling no small contribution), but the Bolsheviks downplayed Polish agency while exaggerating the involvement of the Entente powers in the war. More often than not, Poland was characterised as a pawn in a worldwide capitalist conspiracy against the revolution.⁸ As we shall see, this became an entrenched pattern of thinking in party circles.

The armistice of October 1920 and subsequent peace negotiations between Soviet Russia and Poland did little to improve relations. Even after the Treaty of Riga was signed on 18 March 1921, mutual distrust and diplomatic tensions continued

⁸ Leon Trotsky frequently accused the Entente of driving Poland into war against Soviet Russia in his public speeches in 1920. See *How the Revolution Armed: The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky Vol. 3: Year of the Polish War 1920* (London: New Park, 1981). Also available: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1920/military/index.htm>.

unabated, especially concerning the border regions. For the Bolsheviks, and especially the Soviet political police, the Cheka, ongoing Polish subversion and infiltration of the western borderlands was a pressing issue. In the final months of 1920 Cheka agents reported at regular intervals on the activity of Polish spies, subversives and bandits, apparently supported by the Polish government and other hostile powers. At the end of 1920, Cheka agents judged the demarcation zone between Russia and Poland in the west as a hotspot of bandit activity.⁹

The Cheka's attentions focused on the Polish Military Organisation (POV), originally created by Piłsudski during the First World War to carry out sabotage and intelligence operations. The POV remained active in the western border regions until 1921 and, as far as the Cheka was concerned, represented a serious threat. Reports from Cheka operatives from early 1921 describe an apparent infiltration by the POV in Ukraine's major cities, with groups unearthed in Kiev, Odessa, Kharkov, Volyn, among other places.¹⁰ Polish agents were said to have coordinated espionage and planned uprisings to disrupt the Soviet rear.¹¹ In response, the Cheka carried out a series of operations from the end of 1920 and claimed major successes. The deputy of the Cheka's Special Departments on the southwestern front, for instance, confidently reported to Cheka leader, Feliks Dzerzhinskii, at the end of November 1920 about the crushing of POV organisations in the Kharkov, Poltava, Pavlograd and Aleksandrovsk regions.¹²

⁹ A. Berelovich and V. Danilov (eds.), *Sovetskaia derevnaia glaszami VChK-OGPU-NKVD. 1918-1939. Dokumenty i materialy*. t. 1. 1918-1922 (Moscow: Rosspen, 2000) 363-379.

¹⁰ S. A. Kokin, R. Iu. Podkur and O. S. Rubl'ov (eds.), *Sprava "Pol's'koi Organizatsii Viis'kovoï" v Ukraini. 1920-1938 rr.: Zbirnykh dokumentiv ta materialiv* (Kyiv: Holovna redkolehiia naukovo-dokumental'noi serii knykh "Reabilitovani istoriiei", 2011) 42

¹¹ Ibid., 38

¹² Ibid., 37

Despite these successes, there was no end to calls for further action to be taken against Polish subversives and spies.¹³ Complaints about bandit activity in the border regions, with Polish support, did not subside either.¹⁴ A likely reason behind the continuing focus on the border regions were Soviet reports that foreign powers were still financing hostile subversive operations. Indeed, in January 1921, a report from the Kiev military district claimed that the Polish government was planning to send 600 agents to Ukraine and that the Entente was involved.¹⁵ Later in June, Artur Artuzov, deputy head of the Cheka's Special Departments, reported to the Red Army leadership about operations carried out against anti-Soviet organisations headed by Russian counterrevolutionary Boris Savinkov. Savinkov had connections in Warsaw, but according to Artuzov, he also received funds from the Entente. As to the nature of the threat, Artuzov reported a familiar story: Savinkov's groups planned uprisings in Soviet territory, including the seizure of transport and communication points. The Red Army had supposedly been infiltrated. In the end, numerous arrests were made in the course of the Cheka's counter operations.¹⁶

Across the board in 1921, the Cheka claimed new discoveries of subversive groups and launched further investigations into POV activity in Ukraine.¹⁷ In June, to

¹³ A. A. Plekhanov and A. M. Plekhanov (eds.), *F. E. Dzerzhinskii – Predsedatel' VChK–OGPU, 1917–1926. Dokumenty* (Moscow: MFD: Materik, 2007) 258.

¹⁴ In April Dzerzhinskii instructed his subordinates to collect more information about the role of Poland, Romania and other powers in financing banditism. Viktor Chebrikov, *Istoriia sovetskikh organov gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti: uchebnik*. (Moscow: KGB, 1977) 174. See also Plekhanov and Plekhanov (eds.), *F. E. Dzerzhinskii*, 295.

¹⁵ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter RGASPI), f. 17, op. 109, d. 137, l. 1.

¹⁶ Aleksandr Zdanovich, *Pol'skii krest sovetskoï kontrrazvedki: pol'skaia liniia v rabote VChK–NKVD 1918–1938* (Moskva: Kraft+, 2017) 332–334

¹⁷ See investigation of the POV in Kharkov in March 1921, Kokin, Podkur and Rubl'ov (eds.), *Sprava "Pol's'koi Organizatsii Viis'kovoï" v Ukraini*. 59; an investigation in an organisation in May 1921, Chebrikov, *Istoriia sovetskikh organov gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*, 171; an investigation from June 1921, Berelovich and Danilov (eds.), *Sovetskaia derevnaia glaszami VChK–OGPU–NKVD*. t. 1, 449. On the Cheka's wider successes against insurgents in Ukraine in 1921, see Jan Jacek Bruski, *Between Prometheus and Realpolitik. Poland and Soviet Ukraine, 1921–1926* (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2016) 102.

support these efforts, the Communist Party of Ukraine called for the mobilisation of Poles into the Ukrainian Cheka.¹⁸ In August, the central Cheka leadership ordered that the western borders be strengthened.¹⁹ Evidently, despite the official peace with Poland enshrined in the Treaty of Riga – and the supposed crushing of the POV in early 1921 – there had been little reduction in Soviet concerns about Polish subversion.

The Soviet foreign ministry likewise saw Polish subversion of the western borderlands and Ukraine as a pressing problem. However, Soviet diplomats also recognised the risk of needlessly worsening diplomatic relations when the Treaty of Riga had only just been agreed. People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Georgii Chicherin, was mindful about restoring relations with Poland to help the struggling Soviet economy. He tended to downplay talk of a new war and emphasised instead the importance of creating lines of trade. In a letter to the Politburo from September 1921, for instance, Chicherin argued that there was no threat of another conflict with Poland and that the biggest danger was diplomatic rupture that would destroy the chance of securing transit rights.²⁰

Moreover, rather than present a one-sided picture of Polish hostility or the country as manipulated by the Entente, Soviet diplomats reported throughout 1921 on the Polish government's resistance to French efforts to exert control over its foreign policy. These reports made the repeated point that the French government had abandoned efforts to overthrow the Bolsheviks. The French aimed instead to create a

¹⁸ Iu. Shapoval, V. Prystaiko, and V. Zolotar'ov (eds.), *ChK – GPU – NKVD v Ukraïni: Osoby, fakty, dokumenty* (Kyiv: Abris, 1997) 226.

¹⁹ Plekhanov and Plekhanov (eds.), *F. E. Dzerzhinskii*, 334.

²⁰ Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter AVPRF), f. 4, op. 52, d. 55273, p. 341, l. 22.

barrier against the spread of Bolshevism, comprising Poland and the Little Entente.²¹ Soviet diplomats in general terms had a more nuanced understanding of the Polish government's relationship with the Entente and appreciated its reluctance to be drawn into anti-Soviet actions it could not afford to sustain. This was in striking contrast to the perspective held by the Cheka, which saw the Entente as working hand-in-hand with Poland in carrying out subversive anti-Soviet operations in advance of an invasion. The differing judgements could spark tensions between the two. In July 1921, the foreign ministry protested to the Central Committee about the Cheka's increased policing of the western borders as an unnecessary complication in Soviet-Polish relations.²² Even so, despite looking to improve diplomatic and trade relationships, Chicherin nevertheless took a firm stance against Polish-sponsored bandit activity in the western border regions and this was a common complaint in diplomatic notes to the Polish government in the early 1920s, especially as information about subversive organisations with connections to Poland filtered in.²³

Like the foreign ministry, Soviet military intelligence was less concerned than the Cheka about the threat from Poland in the early 1920s. It rightly recognised that the Poles could not launch a war without major assistance from more powerful countries and that this would be an unpopular move at home. However, military

²¹ AVPRF, f. 4, op. 32, d. 52482, p. 209, l. 49. On reports that France showed willingness to acknowledge the Soviet government, see f. 4, op. 32, d. 52482, p. 209, ll. 55-56. It must be noted, however, that some reports to Chicherin did underline the possibility that France would try to push Poland and Romania into war against Soviet Russia, but this went against the grain of the majority of diplomatic communications. See AVPRF, f. 4, op. 32, d. 52482, p. 209, l. 60. On French plans for buffer states in Eastern Europe, see AVPRF, f. 4, op. 32, d. 52511, p. 210, l. 13.

²² AVPRF, f. 4, op. 52 d. 55273, p. 341, ll. 12-13.

²³ Among many examples, see Bruski, *Between Prometheus and Realpolitik*, 122; Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv (hereafter RGVA), f. 33987, d. 1, d. 460, ll. 68, 71; Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh orhaniv vlady ta upravlinnia Ukraïny (hereafter TsDAVO), f. 4, op. 1, d. 29, l. 26. Berelovich and Danilov (eds.), *Sovetskaia derevnaia glaszami VChK-OGPU-NKVD*. t. 1, 449. The threat of war was raised by Soviet diplomats as part of protests against Polish-sponsored banditism. Soviet diplomats in Ukraine, for instance, complained to their Polish counterparts that they would not consider the Treaty of Riga fulfilled unless those trying to start war (the Polish government in sponsoring banditism) were stopped. TsDAVO, f. 4, op. 1c, d. 31, l. 3.

intelligence still judged Polish support of anti-Soviet groups in threatening terms and as one part of Piłsudski's long-term scheme to bring Lithuania, Belorussia and Ukraine into closer union with Poland as buffer states. Moreover, despite not estimating war as imminent, military intelligence still accepted that major conflict between Soviet Russia and Poland was inevitable at some point in the future (and that the latter was actively preparing for this).²⁴ In this respect, even though there were different judgements on the severity of the Polish military threat between these Soviet institutions, all continued to see the subversion of Soviet territory as a persisting problem. Ongoing tensions surrounding the Polish government's support of guerrilla groups in the border regions only added fuel to the fire. And among competing appraisals about the imminence of new war, the Cheka continued to push the most alarmist scenarios.

The Soviet and Polish governments soon struck agreements ostensibly ending Polish support of anti-Soviet groups in Ukraine and the border regions on the condition that the Bolsheviks fulfil the Treaty of Riga (namely, pay any gold promised to Poland and allow re-evacuation commissions to start work).²⁵ However, this agreement, formalised in the Dąbski-Karakhan protocol of 7 October 1921, quickly floundered. Just eight days later, Special Plenipotentiary to Poland, Lev Karakhan was again complaining to Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Konstanty Skirmunt, that Savinkov was still in Poland.²⁶ The Soviet Ukrainian government also complained about persistent anti-Soviet activities of other Ukrainian nationalist leaders, including Symon Petliura and Stanisław Bułak-Bałachowicz and called on the

²⁴ Plekhanov and Plekhanov (eds.), *F. E. Dzerzhinskii*, 344-5; M. Ul', V. Khaustov and V. Zakharov (eds.), *Glazami razvedki. SSSR i Evropa, 1919-1938 gody: sbornik dokumentov iz rossiiskikh arkhivov* (Moscow: ISTLIT, 2015) 83-89; RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 2422, l. 15.

²⁵ Bruski, *Between Prometheism and Realpolitik*, 127.

²⁶ *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*. t. 4 (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1960) 430.

Polish government to take action.²⁷ Then in November, Yuriy Tiutiunnik, leader of the so-called Ukrainian National Army, launched an insurgent operation into Soviet territory. Soviet troops easily quashed Tiutiunnik's forces, but the affair did little to inspire confidence that the Poles were living up to their side of the bargain.²⁸ Indeed, the Bolsheviks claimed to have documents revealing Polish support given to Tiutiunnik and the existence of a Polish espionage network in Ukraine.²⁹ The Soviet political police later went on to report further discoveries of anti-Soviet groups coming from Polish territory and spy networks, apparently supported by Poland, in 1922 and 1923.³⁰ The Bolsheviks, of course, were hardly innocent in this. Soviet support was given to guerrilla groups in the contested border regions, especially in Galicia, prompting complaints from the Polish government and further souring relations.³¹

To further combat Polish subversion, the Bolshevik Polish Bureau, responsible for agitation and education among Poles living in Soviet territory, increased its activity. The Polish Bureau had previously argued that more attention be given to the borderlands in view of the large Polish populations and entrenched Catholicism.³² In 1922, thousands more newspapers and propaganda brochures were now printed.³³ Yet in early 1923, the Polish Bureau was still identifying problems, claiming that counterrevolutionary activity remained a serious threat in the borderlands. The

²⁷ Ibid., 452.

²⁸ Bruski, *Between Prometheism and Realpolitik*, 128.

²⁹ TsDAVO, f. 4, op. 1c, d. 31, l. 3; *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*. t. 4, 529.

³⁰ See G. N. Sevost'ianov et al. (eds.) *"Sovershenno Sekretno": Lubianka Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922-1934 gg.)* t. 1, ch. 1 (Moscow: Nauka, 2001) 163, 302, 358, 372; *ibid.*, t. 1. ch. 2, 788, 928, 947; *ibid.*, t. 2, ch. 1, 69; *ibid.*, t. 3, 247.

³¹ AVPRF, f. 122, op. 5, d. 4, p. 20, ll. 50-53. In autumn 1922, relations between Russia and Poland worsened because of the Soviet support given to guerrilla groups in Galicia. Polish troops were subsequently deployed. Bruski, *Between Prometheism and Realpolitik*, 198-199. See also RGVA, f. 33988, op. 2, d. 533, l. 326.

³² RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 1631, l. 1.

³³ RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 2426, l. 20.

majority of Polish schools had apparently fallen under counterrevolutionary influences.³⁴ It expressed alarm in particular about the activity of catholic priests, characterised as becoming ‘more secret, more planned and consequently more dangerous’.³⁵ On a certain level, the Polish Bureau was probably lobbying for funding in making these claims: it argued that wherever its presence was not felt, there had been a rise in counterrevolutionary activity.³⁶ But it was not alone in raising the alarm. The political police reported a similar picture: that Polish populations in the western regions remained hostile to Soviet power and rumours were being spread about an imminent Polish invasion.³⁷ Yet their response was unsurprisingly more hard-line. In March 1923, on the basis of worsening relations with Poland during the revolutionary crisis in Germany, the west and southwestern border regions were purged of ‘harmful elements’ that might support enemies of Soviet power. Poles were specifically targeted.³⁸ At the end of 1923, factories close to the border employing Polish workers were scrutinised after being judged focal points for counterrevolutionary activity.³⁹ Supposed Polish counterrevolutionary groups were also rounded up. Foreshadowing the more extensive investigations of the late 1920s, the Ukrainian GPU uncovered what it claimed to be another Polish Military Organisation connected to the Polish diplomatic missions in Kiev and other cities, totalling around 400 people.⁴⁰

³⁴ RGASPI, f. 63, op. 1, d. 554, l. 17.

³⁵ RGASPI, f. 63, op. 1, d. 363, l. 57.

³⁶ RGASPI, f. 63, op. 1, d. 360, l. 1; d. 363, ll. 22-25.

³⁷ Sevost'ianov et al. (eds.), *“Sovershenno Sekretno”: Lubianka Stalinu o polozhenii v strane*, t. 1, ch. 1, 230. For general war rumours among ordinary people, see *ibid.*, t. 1, ch. 2, 613, 808. The political police noted that the closer to the Romanian and Polish borders, the more numerous and better-armed the bandit groups. See *ibid.*, t. 1, ch. 1, 177.

³⁸ A. A. Kol'tiukov et al. (eds.), *Russkaia voennaia emigratsiia 20-kh- 40-kh godov XX v.; Dokumenty i materialy*, t. 4 (Moscow: RGGU, 2007) 808.

³⁹ TsDAVO, f. 2, op. 2, d. 905, ll. 1, 6.

⁴⁰ DHASBU, f. 13, ark. 162, t. 8, ll. 2-6.

The political police would claim further victories as it turned greater attention to tackling Polish subversion. By autumn 1923, the Ukrainian GPU reported on having almost completely eliminated organisations headed by Petliura, Tiutiunik and Savinkov, all of whom had received Polish backing. Its operatives made further ‘discoveries’ of supposed Polish espionage organisations apparently working together with French counterintelligence.⁴¹ It must be stressed that these were not totally imaginary threats. The Polish government did sponsor anti-Soviet activity in the borderlands. The Polish Second Department, responsible for intelligence, ran operations under the cover of Polish diplomatic representation. It also maintained contacts with anti-Soviet groups in Ukraine, often without the knowledge of the Polish government.⁴² But the Bolsheviks overestimated the scale of the threat. In early 1925, for instance, Polish intelligence officials reported on ninety Poles and Ukrainians arrested in Ukraine for their political views or anti-Soviet activities. The Soviet authorities had accused ninety per cent of espionage. Yet Polish intelligence regarded less than half of these charges as accurate.⁴³ Polish intelligence was undoubtedly active in Ukraine in the 1920s, but the formal charges of espionage levelled in this case were over twice as high.

Taken together, the events of the early 1920s should have given some pause for thought within the Soviet leadership and security apparatus about the nature of Polish subversive and military threats. As we have seen, the Cheka had already claimed a series of victories against the POV in 1920 and 1921; agreements had been struck (however imperfectly) between the Soviet and Polish governments on ending

⁴¹ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 87, d. 177, ll. 89-129.

⁴² In February 1924, Polish intelligence reported on its connections to an anti-Soviet group comprising 1600 active members, the leaders of which were former tsarist officers. RGVA, f. 308, op. 3, d. 39, l. 61.

⁴³ RGVA, f. 308, op. 3, d. 133, l. 10. Polish intelligence believed some of the number to be Soviet provocateurs.

support of guerrilla organisations; the Soviet foreign ministry expressed frequent doubts about Polish military aggression in the early 1920s. Even the most dramatic international event of this period, the revolutionary crisis in Germany in 1923, failed to spark war between Soviet Russia and Poland as predicted by several senior Bolsheviks.⁴⁴ The Polish government went on to formally recognise the Soviet Union at the end of 1923.

Yet rather than change minds on the nature of the Polish threat, the opposite occurred. Polish subversive threats continued to be presented in heightened terms and countermeasures were stepped up from 1924. The Polish consulate in Kiev, for instance, reported on intensified GPU surveillance in early 1924 and judged this ‘feverish activity’ as accelerated from the Soviet centre.⁴⁵ In April 1924, Dzerzhinskii called for more vigilance against spies from Poland, Romania, Latvia and Estonia.⁴⁶ Soviet Military intelligence pointed to higher levels of Polish-supported bandit activity in 1924 and efforts to foment anti-Soviet moods in the border regions.⁴⁷ In June, the Politburo called for stronger defence of the border regions and enhanced the OGPU’s presence.⁴⁸ It was given almost four million rubles to improve border security in July 1925. The perceived military threat was never far behind. For instance, claiming that Ukraine would be the bridgehead in a war between Poland, Romania and the Soviet Union, Stalin’s ally, Lazar Kaganovich, called in June 1925 for stronger counter-diversionary work by the Ukrainian GPU during a meeting of the Politburo of the Communist Party of Ukraine.⁴⁹ These security fears were a legacy of

⁴⁴ For war fears in 1923, see David R. Stone, ‘The prospect of war? Lev Trotskii, the Soviet army, and the German revolution in 1923’, *The International History Review* 25/4 (2003) 15.

⁴⁵ RGVA, f. 308, op. 3, d. 39, l. 45.

⁴⁶ Plekhanov and Plekhanov (eds.), *F. E. Dzerzhinskii*, 544.

⁴⁷ Ul', Khaustov and Zakharov (eds.), *Glazami Razvedki*, 179.

⁴⁸ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 2, ll. 148-150.

⁴⁹ Shapoval, Prystaiko and Zolotar'ov (eds.), *ChK –GPU–NKVD v Ukraïni*, 232.

the disastrous war against Poland a few years earlier, sustained by what the Bolsheviks took to be an ongoing battle against Polish subversion, regarded by many as the first step towards all-out military conflict.⁵⁰

The reality was that the efforts of the Polish Second Department were limited without formal support from the Polish government; the POV was no longer active, and there was no chance of an invasion of the Soviet Union in the 1920s. In this way, the Bolsheviks overestimated the true nature of the Polish threat. It was not until Piłsudski returned to power in Poland in May 1926 that serious thought was given in Polish political circles to liberating Ukraine, and even so, war still remained a distant possibility.⁵¹

The Piłsudski coup d'état

As far as the Soviet leadership was concerned, Piłsudski's return to power in May 1926 heightened the Polish military threat to the Soviet Union and especially to the western border regions. Piłsudski was a long-standing proponent of creating a federation of borderland states under Polish control. For this reason, the leadership was deeply concerned about his return to power, which contributed to a war scare that erupted across the Soviet Union in 1927. Moreover, in the months leading up to the May 1926 coup d'état, there had been no respite in warnings from the OGPU about the pressing danger of Polish subversion. For example, in April second deputy of the OGPU, Genrikh Iagoda, wrote to Stalin about Polish intelligence agents supposedly

⁵⁰ Vested interests were probably also at play. The Cheka had an interest in presenting heightened threats at a time when some Bolsheviks had questioned its position in the Soviet state. See David R. Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924-1953* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 96.

⁵¹ Bruski, *Between Prometheism and Realpolitik*, 188.

working on the orders of the British government and carrying out a widespread diversionary campaign on Soviet territory.⁵² Dzerzhinskii suggested in the same month that Poles not be employed in the most important sectors of the economy.⁵³

Following Piłsudski's return to power, the OGPU reported an increase in Polish espionage across the board.⁵⁴ Ominously, it also judged his return as giving a boost to Ukrainian nationalists – now styled as potential fifth columnists.⁵⁵ In July 1926, OGPU leaders decided to concentrate efforts on the renewed Polish threat to the western borderlands and to work with military intelligence in preparing for war. Dzerzhinskii also personally impressed upon Stalin what he saw as the stark reality of the military threat, warning that Piłsudski was planning to seize Belarussia and Ukraine.⁵⁶ Notably, the political police argued that the British government was supporting these efforts.⁵⁷ Throughout July – the last month Dzerzhinskii's life – he maintained focus on the military danger from Poland. To Iagoda, he suggested moving political police archives to Moscow as they lay too close to the increasingly threatened border. Whiteguards and bandits also needed to be excised from the area.⁵⁸ An OGPU order from 17 July called once gain for Poles to be removed from work in military industry.⁵⁹ Just days before he died, Dzerzhinskii was raising questions about diversionary groups and the importing of necessary defence materiel in the event of war.⁶⁰ Yet in contrast to the early 1920s, Dzerzhinskii was no longer such an outlier in

⁵² V. N. Khaustov, V. P. Naumov, and N. S. Plotnikova (eds.), *Lubianka. Stalin i VChK-GPU-OGPU-NKVD, ianvar' 1922–dekabr' 1936* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond "Demokratiia", 2003) 117.

⁵³ Zdanovich, *Pol'skii krest*, 140-141

⁵⁴ Aleksandr Zdanovich, *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti i krasnaia armiia: Deiatel'nost' organov VChK-OGPU po obespecheniiu bezopasnosti RKKA (1921-1934)* (Moscow: Kulikovo Pole, 2008) 74-75.

⁵⁵ Iurii I. Shapoval, 'Vsevolod Balickij bourreau et victim', *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 44/2-3 (2003) 68.

⁵⁶ Zdanovich, *Pol'skii krest*, 357-360; RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 726, ll. 55-56ob.

⁵⁷ DHASBU F. 13, ark 445, l. 1; Plekhanov and Plekhanov (eds.), *F. E. Dzerzhinskii*, 664.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 665.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 666.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 668.

worrying about new war. On 12 July, a meeting of political police, foreign ministry and military leaders all agreed that the threat of war had significantly increased with Piłsudski's return to power.⁶¹

Individuals within the Soviet foreign ministry now appraised the threat of Polish attack more seriously. In notes sent to Stalin on 25 July 1926, Semion Aralov, founder of Soviet military intelligence and member of the Collegium of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (NKID), claimed that Piłsudski was carrying out preparatory military work for attacks on the borders with the assistance of Ukrainian émigré and bandit groups. All of this, once again, was apparently under the guiding hand of the British government. Aralov argued that the border regions be strengthened (though, he stressed that this not be done too provocatively otherwise war might arrive sooner than later). Other priorities, according to Aralov, were the isolation of Poland from its Baltic neighbours and the improvement of Soviet-Polish economic ties.⁶² Another leading member of the Collegium, Boris Stomoniakov, in early 1927 stressed the importance of a public demonstration that Piłsudski's politics were of war, not peace.⁶³ The foreign ministry would soon scramble to secure a non-aggression pact with Poland; negotiations that failed deliver anything until 1932.

With tensions running high, the security of the border republics was once again on the agenda. In August 1926, war alarm tests were conducted twice in Belorussia.⁶⁴ In early September, the Ukrainian GPU, having evidently tested the temperature among the local population, produced a new circular on separatism in the republic. Ukrainian separatists, while harbouring some ill-feeling towards Poland,

⁶¹ RGASPI, f. 76, op. 3, d. 364, l. 72.

⁶² M. M. Narinskii and A. V. Mal'gina (eds.), *Sovetsko-pol'skie otnosheniia v 1918-1945 gg. Sbornik dokumentov v chetyrekh tomakh. t. 2 1926-1932* (Moscow: Aspekt Press, 2017) 47.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶⁴ Bruski, *Between Prometheus and Realpolitik*, 273.

apparently saw the country as their means of achieving their independence.⁶⁵ The political police continued to report on local rumours about a forthcoming war against Poland.⁶⁶

With concerns about future war rising across several Soviet Commissariats, the inadequacy of Soviet defences was becoming increasingly stark. In December 1926, Red Army Chief of Staff, Mikhail Tukhachevskii, underlined this in a report to the Politburo, stating that in terms of mobilisation readiness ‘Neither the Red Army nor the country is prepared for war.’⁶⁷ One month later in January 1927, the Politburo discussed convening a secret session in February to examine a report on the threat of war – and corresponding plans for war – produced by head of the Red Army, Kliment Voroshilov.⁶⁸ Shortly afterwards, at the February Plenum of the Central Committee, Voroshilov spoke about Soviet military preparations, yet was criticised for not speaking sufficiently on how *all* Soviet industry and the economy could be adapted to the needs of war.⁶⁹ Serious thought was evidently being given to future improvements in Soviet defences across the board and how to mobilise the entire state for the approaching conflict. Yet there were serious challenges and no quick solutions. During 1927-28 Soviet intelligence produced *The Future War*, a study that concluded that war in the west against a coalition headed by Poland was the most likely scenario. Yet the authors of the report estimated that it would take five to ten years before the Red Army had sufficient resources to fight a mobile campaign against Poland.⁷⁰ And

⁶⁵ Shapoval, Prystaiko and Zolotar’ov (eds.), *ChK –GPU–NKVD v Ukraïni*, 254.

⁶⁶ On war rumours, see Sevost’ianov et al. (eds.), “*Sovershenno Sekretno*”: *Lubianka Stalinu o polozhenii v strane*, t. 4, ch. 1, 638 and *ibid.*, t. 4, ch. 2, 718.

⁶⁷ N. S. Simonov, ‘“Strengthen the defence of the land of the Soviets”: the 1927 ‘war alarm’ and its consequences’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 48/8 (1996) 1357. In April 1927 Tukhachevskii called for detailed study of the Western theatre of war, see Evgenii Gorbunov, *Stalin i GRU* (Moscow: Iauza, Eksmo, 2010) 73.

⁶⁸ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 4, l. 42.

⁶⁹ Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin’s War Machine*, 39.

⁷⁰ Lennart Samuelson, ‘Mikhail Tukhachevsky and War-Economic Planning: Reconsiderations on the Pre-war Soviet Military Build-up’, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 9/4 (1996) 810

with state budgets constrained, the Red Army had failed to secure the funds that it deemed necessary for 1927-28.⁷¹

Within this growing clamour about a military threat from Poland, it is important to note the dissenting voices. While senior figures in the Soviet foreign ministry now more strongly expressed concerns about a Polish military threat, deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Maksim Litvinov, held a different view. On two separate occasions in early 1927 he argued with Stalin that there was in fact no threat of war from Poland and that the country should not be regarded as a 'plaything' of the west. Litvinov rightly argued there was no reliable information that the British government was pushing Poland into war.⁷² Not all accepted the growing narrative about the threat from Piłsudski's Poland.

Stalin was left unconvinced by Litvinov. He saw an international conspiracy against the Soviet Union and believed major war inevitable.⁷³ This had become an established theme in his public speeches in the second half of the 1920s. Yet critically, Stalin doubted the imminence of any conflict. At the Fifteenth Party Conference in November 1926, he proclaimed that it was unclear whether capitalist powers were yet in the position to launch an attack, even though 'the capitalists are not asleep; they are doing their utmost to weaken the international position of our republic and to prepare the way for intervention.'⁷⁴ Stalin was clearer in March 1927 that war would not arrive in the immediate future. In a speech given to a meeting of railway workers, he remarked: 'The majority of questions boil down to one: shall we have war this year, in the spring or autumn of this year? My reply is that we shall not

⁷¹ Stone, *Hammer and Rifle*, 43-63.

⁷² Michael Carley, *Silent Conflict: A Hidden History of Early Soviet-Western Relations* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 275; Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin, Vol. I: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* (London: Penguin, 2014) 622-623.

⁷³ Ibid. 622-623.

⁷⁴ I. V. Stalin, *Works*, vol. 8 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1954) 277.

have war this year, neither in the spring nor in the autumn.’⁷⁵ Even so, the wider danger from the capitalist world remained unaltered. In May, at a Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, Stalin proclaimed that a ‘universal campaign against the Communists’ was already underway.⁷⁶ This message was echoed by Stalin’s close allies. At around the same time, Kaganovich once again railed against Piłsudski, accusing him of waging a war ‘against Moscow for the attachment of Ukraine to European culture’, remarking that Polish fascism was backed by foreign imperialism.⁷⁷

In this respect, Stalin’s view about the imminence of war against Poland was similar to that held by Soviet military intelligence, who expected rising tension and hostility with Poland after Piłsudski’s return to power – and appraised the country as the ‘most probable adversary’ in a future war – but did not see conflict breaking out imminently, certainly not in 1927.⁷⁸ Indeed, Stalin was highly critical of the ‘repeated prophecies’ of the political opposition (coming from Grigorii Zinoviev in particular) which regularly broadcast the imminence the war, something that Stalin labelled as the ‘hysteries of our opposition’ in October 1927.⁷⁹ Yet Stalin’s vision of future war was still significantly further away from the likes of Litvinov who had harboured doubts about the very nature of the international capitalist conspiracy against Soviet power. This was something Stalin was adamant existed.

It is also clear that the events of mid-1927 further cemented Stalin’s views about the prospects of future war. Diplomatic relations with Britain suddenly

⁷⁵ Stalin *Works*, vol. 9, 173.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁷⁷ L. S. Gatagova, L. P. Kosheleva and L. A. Rogovaia (eds.), *TsK RKP(b) – BKP(b) i natsional’nyi vopros, kniga 1 1918-1933 gg.* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2005) 486-93.

⁷⁸ Jonathan Haslam, *Near and Distant Neighbours: A New History of Soviet Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 38-9; Ul’ Khaustov and Zakharov (eds.), *Glazami Razvedki*, 242.

⁷⁹ Stalin, *Works*, vol. 10, 206. Voroshilov likewise stated in a speech in November that while relations with England and Poland were naturally worse after Voikov’s murder, war was not about to start. RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 10, l. 52.

worsened following the British raid on the Soviet trade delegation and All-Russian Cooperative Society in London in May 1927, which the British authorities said revealed evidence of Soviet subversive activities. Moreover, the assassination of Soviet Special Plenipotentiary to Poland, Petr Voikov, by a White Monarchist a few weeks later, concentrated Stalin's mind on the military threat from Poland and Britain. In a letter to Molotov sent on 8 June, the day after the assassination, Stalin wrote that he felt the 'hand of England' in Voikov's murder and speculated that the British government wanted to spark war between the Soviet Union and Poland.⁸⁰

Such a conspiratorial gut reaction was not confined to Stalin and can be seen across the wider party and among the Soviet population. On 17 June, the first secretary of the Communist Party of Belorussia (a republic that would be directly threatened by another war with Poland), argued in a secret report that the Voikov murder was evidence that 'England is putting together a bloc of anti-Soviet states, particularly states that border the USSR - Poland, Lithuania, Romania, Finland, and others, by organizing and supporting fascist, monarchist, and White guard organizations and enticing them to attack the USSR.'⁸¹ More broadly, during the summer, the Polish Bureau reported on the temporary panic sparked by the Voikov murder among Polish populations in the border regions.⁸² It would soon call for stronger agitation, especially in the borders, to help explain the current crisis and the preparations taken in anticipation of the 'imperialist war'.⁸³ The Ukrainian GPU likewise recorded comments on the ground in the aftermath of the Voikov murder, in which comparisons were made to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and reported

⁸⁰ RGASPI, f. 588, op. 11, d. 71, l. 2.

⁸¹ Quoted in Per Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarussian Nationalism, 1906-1931* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014) 285.

⁸² RGASPI, f. 63, op. 1, d. 357, l. 61.

⁸³ RGASPI, f. 63, op. 1, d. 357, l. 54.

local concerns about war against Poland and Romania.⁸⁴ At the same time, the OGPU made further ‘discoveries’ of dangerous subversives and spies that supported the growing narrative of a joint Polish and British threat. In the same month that Voikov was murdered, for instance, the OGPU reported on supposed British espionage carried out in Leningrad, where British and Polish agents had apparently recruited saboteurs to assist in the forthcoming invasion.⁸⁵ Even the previously doubtful Litvinov now alluded to forces of ‘militant imperialism’ trying to complicate relations between the Soviet Union and other countries.⁸⁶

Despite all of this, there were still glimpses of a counter-narrative. On 14 June 1927, N. D. S. Sokolov, a member of the Soviet diplomatic mission in Poland, reported that Piłsudski had given assurances there had not been a single attempt by the British to push Poland into taking action against the Soviet Union. He wrote that Piłsudski in fact expressed interest in the continued existence of the USSR.⁸⁷ However, this counter-narrative evidently gained little traction with the Soviet leadership and did little to dampen down the perceived threat from Poland in the aftermath of the Voikov murder. Indeed, at the same time that these reports were sent to Stomoniakov at the foreign ministry, the Soviet government announced a Defence Week, involving a series of military manoeuvres. On 27 June, the Politburo decreed that head of the government, Aleksei Rykov, raise the question of immediate preparations to ‘to further strengthen the country’s defence’.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ TsDAVO, f. 413, op. 2, d. 4, l. 1.

⁸⁵ A. M. Plekhanov, *VChK-OGPU v gody novoi ekonomicheskoi politiki, 1921-1928* (Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2006) 62, 285

⁸⁶ Litvinov made this point in a note to Stanisław Patek in the aftermath of the Voikov murder. See Vladislav Goldin, *Rossiiskaia voennaia emigratsiia i sovetskie spetssluzhby v 20-e godu XX veka* (St Petersburg: Poltorak, 2010) 440-1.

⁸⁷ Narinskii and Mal’gina (eds.), *Sovetsko-pol’skie otnosheniia v 1918-1945 gg.*, t. 2, 173, 175.

⁸⁸ Simonov, “Strengthen the defence of the land of the Soviets”, 360.

The ‘Revolution from Above’

In October 1928 Stalin launched the industrialisation of the Soviet Union, embodied in the first Five-Year Plan. The Plan would radically boost Soviet economic output, and especially in heavy industry and defence. The later collectivisation of agriculture, formally begun in November 1929, sanctioned widespread state grain requisitions from the peasantry and the reorganisation of their lands to fuel breakneck economic growth. Stalin would forever transform the Soviet Union through this radical programme of state expansion.

Scholars have pointed to a combination of motivations behind the launch of industrialisation and collectivisation. These include a growing conviction among the Soviet leadership that the New Economic Policy was not delivering sufficient levels of economic growth in the late 1920s; to highlighting the poor harvests between 1927 and 1928 that encouraged greater state control over the market; to the leadership’s basic ideological conviction that building socialism necessitated a large state-owned industry. The perception of a threatening international situation in the late 1920s was also a powerful motivation and has been highlighted as such in the literature.⁸⁹ This article argues more specifically that the long-standing perceived threat from Poland is underestimated as a key influence on the Stalinist regime’s growing belief that industrialisation and collectivisation were essential to the survival of the Soviet Union in future war. Indeed, as Nikolai Simonov underlined, the significance of the 1927 war scare – of which future war against Poland was a central concern – lies in the way this laid bare the Soviet Union’s military and economic weaknesses, which would

⁸⁹ See Davies, *The Socialist Offensive*; Stone, *Hammer and Rifle*; Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin’s War Machine*.

become severe problems should the international situation suddenly worsen. This necessitated rapid improvements to economic and military power and a new relationship between the state and the peasantry (which formed the bulk of the Red Army and produced vital food supplies). From 1928, the Stalinist regime thus led the country into a ‘preparatory period for war.’⁹⁰ Lennart Samuelson has similarly argued that while steps had already been taken to improve Soviet defence capabilities and that Bolshevik priorities had turned towards creating a modern defence industry before 1927, the war scare shaped the perception of future war from being ‘an ideological ‘inevitability’ to a ‘threatening reality’’, even though conflict was still not judged as imminent.⁹¹

In the year of the launch of the first Five-Year Plan in 1928, Soviet diplomats continued to judge the possibility of war against Poland as highly credible. In January 1928, Dmitri Bogomolov, Soviet Ambassador to Poland, wrote to Boris Stomoniakov to argue that while he believed that Piłsudski did not have a fixed plan of attack in mind, the latter regarded a strong army as an essential component of a strong state. Notably, Bogomolov likened Piłsudski to a temperamental child, who loved to play games with soldiers. An unexpected attack therefore could not be ruled out.⁹² Two months later when the foreign ministry received information that Piłsudski was considering promoting Stanisław Patek as head of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and in turn removing August Zaleski, this generated further apprehension. For Stomoniakov, Zaleski had been a restraining force on Piłsudski, holding him back

⁹⁰ Simonov, “Strengthen the defence of the land of the Soviets”.

⁹¹ Samuelson, ‘Mikhail Tukhachevsky and War-Economic Planning’, 813; Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin’s War Machine*, 34.

⁹² Narinskii and Mal’gina (eds.), *Sovetsko-pol’skie otnosheniia v 1918-1945 gg.*, t. 2, 226. Stomoniakov did not agree with Bogomolov that France was pushing Poland into war, see *ibid.*, 277. Bogomolov would continue to write about the risk of war against Poland, see his report from April: Iu. V. Ivanov, *Ocherki istorii rossiisko (sovetsko)-pol’skikh otnoshenii v dokumentakh. 1914–1945* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2014), 157.

from impulsive actions. His removal would be viewed as evidence of growing militarism in Poland (though on the other hand, Stomoniakov also noted that the Polish government was still seeking a sizeable loan from the United States, which would dissuade it from impulsive military action).⁹³ Even so, Poland remained seen as a direct military threat in 1928 and was discussed as such by the Politburo in April.⁹⁴

Stomoniakov then wrote to Bogomolov in May on the Polish military threat in reference to apparently trustworthy information purporting to show that the Polish government saw declaration of Western Ukraine as an independent republic, and its inclusion in federation with Poland, as a step towards future war. This development would apparently be supported by Winston Churchill, whose anti-communist beliefs the Bolsheviks were keenly aware.⁹⁵ One month later, Bogomolov wrote to the NKID Collegium on this point: 'If Poland decides on a military adventure against us, it will be carried out under the slogan of 'freedom' for Ukraine, and for this, she must first create and strengthen her Ukrainian rear in Western Ukraine.'⁹⁶ The potential threat to Ukraine was reiterated by the Foreign Department of the OGPU later in August. In a report sent to the senior party leadership, the OGPU argued that Piłsudski's primary goal was the seizure of Ukraine and that an attack was being prepared. Once again it was the British who would apparently simultaneously carry out a naval blockade.⁹⁷ As had been true during the 1919-1920 Soviet-Polish War, Ukraine was still regarded the vulnerable point where an attack would come.

⁹³ Narinskii and Mal'gina (eds.), *Sovetsko-pol'skie otnosheniia v 1918-1945 gg.*, t. 2, 291

⁹⁴ O. N. Ken and A. I. Rusapov, *Politbiuro TsK VKP(b) i otnosheniia SSSR s zapadnymi sosednimi gosudarstvami (konets 1920-1930-kh gg.): problem, oput, kommentarii* (St Petersburg: Evropeiskii Dom, 2000) 82.

⁹⁵ Narinskii and Mal'gina (eds.), *Sovetsko-pol'skie otnosheniia v 1918-1945 gg.*, t. 2, 303.

Stomoniakov, however, suggested that Piłsudski's ill-health cast doubt on this plan. The Soviets were well-aware of the 'campaign' in the Polish press for the separation of Ukraine from the Soviet Union. See *ibid.*, 319.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁹⁷ Ul', Khaustov and Zakharov (eds.), *Glazami Razvedki*, 261; Shearer, 'Stalin at War, 1918-1953', 193-4.

While Stalin remained convinced that war was not imminent, during 1928 his mind, along with other senior Bolsheviks, had turned towards the building up of reserves in the Soviet Union. In a speech given to the July 1928 Plenum of the Central Committee, Stalin directly referred to possible war against Poland and the need for additional grain reserves:

First, we are not guaranteed against military attack. Do you think it is possible to defend the country, not having any reserves of bread for the army?...Can we, in the event of an attack by our enemies carry out a war with the Poles at the front and with men in the rear for the sake of getting an emergency supply of bread for the army? No, we cannot and should not. To defend the country, we must have known reserves to supply the army, at least for the first six months.⁹⁸

The 1928 harvest, however, like the crop of the previous year, was poor, magnifying a growing grain crisis and food supply problem.⁹⁹ The interlinked dangers of war – primarily foreseen against Poland – and declining agricultural yields concentrated minds on pushing through the grain requisitions that would lead to collectivisation.

Two years later in 1930 Stalin now saw the military threat from Poland in more pressing terms. He ordered Tukhachevskii to plan for war and in a letter to Molotov from September argued that Poland was putting together a coalition with the

⁹⁸ V. P. Danilov, R. Manning and L. Viola (eds.), *Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni: kollektivizatsiia i raskulachivanie: dokumenty i materialy v 5 tom., 1927-1938 gg.*, t. 1 (Moscow: Rosspen, 1999-2004) 327. Voroshilov proclaimed in a speech to a military audience in March 1928 that there was no imminent danger of war but that new methods were being used by hostile countries, including economic blockade. It is no surprise that the leadership started to think more seriously about the self-sufficiency of the Soviet Union. RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 12, l. 37.

⁹⁹ Davies, *The Socialist Offensive*, 41-42.

Baltic States which threatened Leningrad and right-bank Ukraine. Military reserves needed to be increased and ‘considerable funds’ set aside to ensure Soviet victory. Stalin suggested such funds could be found in increased vodka production.¹⁰⁰ One month later, and after receiving interrogation transcripts from the OGPU investigation into the so-called Industrial Party, a group accused of carrying out espionage and sabotage, Stalin questioned political police head, Viacheslav Menzhinskii, as to why the 1930 intervention had not yet occurred. The timing of an intervention had featured in the testimony of one Professor Leonid Ramzin and Stalin demanded that this be a focus of questions in future interrogations, particularly why the intervention in 1930 had been postponed and whether this was because neither Poland nor Romania were ready to attack. With this information, Stalin believed it was possible to run a Comintern campaign to ‘head off the interventionists for one to two years’.¹⁰¹ As it had been true in the past, Stalin’s strategy was to play for time.

Alongside providing momentum behind the first Five-Year Plan and the collectivisation drive, the perceived military threat from Poland, and especially to Ukraine and the western borderlands, encouraged a surge in repression on the ground. As shown above, the regime had for a long time made connections between the dangers of sabotage and subversion and preparations for an invasion of the Soviet Union. And before Stalin’s attentions fell on the investigation into the Industrial Party in 1930, these same connections were made during the high-profile Shakhty case of 1928. In March of that year, Genrikh Iagoda made clear to Stalin that an associated counterrevolutionary organisation to the Shakhty conspirators had been operating in Don Basin Coal Administration and directed from Poland and Germany. Its activity

¹⁰⁰ Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin’s War Machine*, 135; Naumov, Khlevniuk and Lih (eds.), *Stalin’s Letters to Molotov*, 208.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

was supposedly tied to a future military intervention.¹⁰² Then at a plenum of the Central Committee in April 1928, Aleksei Rykov ‘fully confirmed’ a connection between the Shakhty case and Polish intelligence.¹⁰³ One year on from the Shakhty case, the OGPU launched a similar investigation into the so-called Union for the Liberation of Ukraine, an organisation it claimed was closely linked to Petliurite groups supposedly planning uprisings to assist a Polish intervention. The culmination was a show trial of predominately Ukrainian intellectuals.¹⁰⁴

Ukraine suffered devastating consequences from the connections increasingly drawn between internal subversion and a forthcoming invasion. As we have seen, since the Soviet-Polish War, the Bolsheviks saw the republic as a focal point for subversives of various kinds and as the point where a new Polish attack would come. It remained at the centre of political police attentions for this reason. In 1930, the year during which Stalin’s mind was fixed on a possible war against Poland and a coalition of border states, the OGPU conducted widespread searches and arrests in Ukraine of groups supposedly with connections to Poland. 12,000 people were arrested across the year and accused of belonging to counterrevolutionary groups and preparing ‘armed revolution’.¹⁰⁵ Further cases of Polish espionage were recorded. The threat of Polish intervention was a prominent theme in OGPU reports on local counterrevolutionary organisations throughout 1930 and 1932.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² David Shearer and Vladimir Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubianka: a Documentary History of the Political Police and Security Organs in the Soviet Union, 1922-1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 72.

¹⁰³ V. P. Danilov et al. (eds.), *Kak lomali NEP: stenogrammy plenumov TsK VKP(b) 1928-1929 gg. v 5-ti tomakh. Tom 1. Ob’edinennyi plenum TsK i TsKK VKP(b) 6-11 Aprelia 1928 g.* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond “demokratiia”, 2000) 156-7.

¹⁰⁴ Volodymyr Prystaiko and Iurii Shapoval, *Sprava ‘Spilky Vyzvolennia Ukrainy’: Nevidomi Dokumenty i Fakty* (Kyiv: Intel, 1995) 160, 352.

¹⁰⁵ Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin’s War on Ukraine* (London: Penguin, 2017) 152-3, 160.

¹⁰⁶ Elena Borisenok, *Fenomen Sovetskoi Ukrainizatsii, 1920-30-e gody* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Evropa”, 2006) 198; “Sovershenno Sekretno”: *Lubianka Stalinu o polozenii v strane*, t. 9, 432-445; *ibid*, t. 8, ch. 2, 1531-47. DHASBU, f. 13, 1068, ll. 1-61.

The OGPU also escalated the nature of its operations from 1930. In March, the border zones of right-bank Ukraine and Belorussia were purged of supposed spies, kulaks and counterrevolutionaries. Those of Polish nationality were targeted.¹⁰⁷ A central reason behind this repression were concerns that ‘kulak disturbances’ might encourage a Polish intervention and that counterrevolutionary kulak groups – carrying out espionage and subversion – were trying to ensure its success and the separation of Ukraine from the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁸ As shown at the outset of this article, this threat remained at the forefront of Stalin’s mind, who complained to Kaganovich about the possibility of losing Ukraine to Poland in August 1932. At the end of that year, Vsevolod Balitskii, head of the Ukrainian GPU, reported to Stalin about the existence of a ‘widespread Polish-Petliurite insurgent underground’ in Ukraine, which Stalin then had circulated among the party leadership.¹⁰⁹ Further cleansing operations of the western borders soon followed in March 1933, supposedly revealing counterrevolutionary groups organised by the Polish and Finnish general staffs and operating in strategic positions, such as railroad junctions and defence installations.¹¹⁰ In July 1933, Balitskii again reported to Stalin on the subversive operations against the POV in Ukraine, the central organisation in these supposed conspiracies, showing the long-lasting imprint of this perceived subversive threat.¹¹¹ Indeed, operations

¹⁰⁷ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 8, ll. 109-10. Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin’s Special Settlements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 28; Viola, *The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside: The War Against the Peasantry, 1927-1930*: vol 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 215.

¹⁰⁸ Ken and Rusapov, *Politbiuro TsK VKP(b) i otnosheniia SSSR s zapadnymi sosednimi gosudarstvami*, 514-515; “Sovershenno Sekretno”: *Lubianka Stalinu o polozhenii v strane*, t. 8, ch. 2, 1258-1344. In June 1930, the Ukrainian OGPU reported on a large counterrevolutionary organisation in Kharkov that supposedly aimed to overthrow Soviet power in Ukraine and transfer the republic to Poland. The OGPU noted that the Polish second department was carrying out constant intelligence in Ukraine in preparation of war. See DHASBU, f. 13, ark 124, ll. 32, 115. For similar see, DHASBU, f. 13, ark 90.

¹⁰⁹ Yuri Shapoval, ‘Vsevolod Balytsky and the Holodomor of 1932-33’. <https://holodomor.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Shapoval-article-translated-BK-ekm-emy-done-1.pdf>, 8.

¹¹⁰ Shearer and Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 114.

¹¹¹ DHASBU, f. 13, ark. 180, t. 4, l. 30.

against the POV would continue into 1934.¹¹² Tens of thousands of Poles and Germans were later sent away from the border regions to Central Asia in 1935 in a further round of deportations.¹¹³

At the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Ukraine in 1934, Balitskii proclaimed that a dangerous bloc of Ukrainian nationalists, backed by German and Polish fascism, had been crushed. Yet according to him, the separation of Ukraine from the Soviet Union remained the goal of Ukrainian counterrevolutionary groups, which saw the republic as a bridgehead 'on which the struggle against the Soviet government will develop'.¹¹⁴ In this way, despite the upsurge in state violence and mass deportations carried out on the ground in the early 1930s, Ukraine maintained its status as a vulnerable republic. This view was fuelled by the sudden and widespread popular backlash against grain requisitions and collectivisation from the late 1920s, but it was also a consequence of a perception of sustained Polish subversive and military threats stretching back ten years to the Soviet loss of the 1919-20 war. The threat of a new war reared its head on regular occasions in the 1920s and the Soviet leadership saw a perpetual Polish subversive threat to the western border regions. And from the competing voices that tried to assess the nature of the true danger from Poland – from the foreign ministry, military intelligence and political police – Stalin's view by the end of the 1920s was centred on war with capitalism being inevitable, if not in the imminent future, and that Poland was a direct military threat. This not only required the Soviet Union to quickly build its grain reserves but also strengthen its military power for the future war, giving further weight to the decision to turn away from NEP and towards industrialisation and

¹¹² Ibid., I. 92.

¹¹³ James Morris, 'The Polish Terror: Spy Mania and Ethnic Cleansing in the Great Terror', *Europe-Asia Studies* 56/5 (2004) 757.

¹¹⁴ See Holodomor Studies 3, no. 1-2 (2011) 189.

collectivisation. At the same time, the perceived threat to the western regions from Polish subversion led the OGPU to dramatically escalate its operations, opening the way for the use of mass deportations, methods that would be deployed again more lethally during the late 1930s.

The loss of the Soviet-Polish War was therefore not an event that moderated the early Bolshevik regime in any meaningful sense. The reverse was true. The stunning loss of this conflict in 1920, and the manner in which the Bolsheviks then interpreted Soviet-Polish relations in the context of what they saw as capitalist encirclement and anticipated future war, was a key factor in encouraging the transformation of the state through industrialisation and collectivisation and the use of increasingly repressive practices in this important transitional period.

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