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TOWARDS A NEW HISTORY OF THE PURGE OF THE MILITARY, 1937-1938

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Abstract

The Great Terror was a defining moment of the Stalin era, indeed perhaps the defining moment of twentieth-century Russian history. The purge of the military is a striking subplot with the potential to unlock the mystery which still surrounds the Terror. Why did Stalin feel the need to decimate his general staff and officer corps on the eve of a world war at the same time as military spending was rising at a breakneck pace? Why destroy with one hand while building with the other? There is no adequate solution to this problem in the existing literature, and recent work does fully not take into account the great wealth of archival materials released in the last twenty years. This historiographical review will seek to evaluate the historiography of the military purge in showing how the literature has evolved, highlighting the diversity of approaches, where there is consensus, where unanswered questions remain and how it is now possible to advance a more comprehensive explanation of the purge of the military.

Throughout the 1930s and particularly during the Terror many members of the armed forces, in particular those of high rank, were expelled from the military and in some cases executed.¹ The most famous victim Marshal Mikhail Nikolaevich Tukhachevskii was executed after a closed military trial on 12 June 1937 to great international uproar. Today the military purge still has particular resonance and the decapitation of the red army is commonly seen as contributing to its poor performance in the early years of the Second World War. Yet even though the red army purges have now been examined from a number of standpoints, no adequate or convincing explanation as to why Stalin would destroy his military elite has been presented. The most common interpretation sees Stalin destroying and subduing his military in 1937 as part of his domination through terror.² A fabricated dossier, passed from abroad in 1937 which allegedly revealed a military conspiracy, is presented as providing Stalin the reason to eliminate several leading members of the red army command.³ However, this dossier has never been found in the archives. Such an interpretation of Stalin's removal of a section of the military elite was derived from sources including contemporary accounts, memoir materials and a restricted number of officially sanctioned documents. However, beyond questions of reliability a consequence of such a restricted source base focussing on the 1937 dossier has been the narrowing of the examination of the military purge to the Terror years, leading to it being named the so-called 'Tukhachevskii Affair.' With the opening of the soviet archives there is no reason to constrain analysis of the military purge to Terror years only, and released archival materials allow for a more sophisticated account of the military purge and one which indicates that the purge of the military elite was not initiated as a means to increase Stalin's power, but a reactive move borne from misperception and fear.

Since the founding of the red army there were many reasons for Stalin to doubt the loyalty of his armed forces and the military purge of 1937-1938 should be viewed not as one single affair surrounding an alleged dossier, but as the culmination of suspicions and doubts which gained currency in an atmosphere of high international and domestic tension seen in the Terror years. In particular, the secret police had the red army under surveillance since the Civil War and periodic purge activity was present within the military also from this point. A dynamic between the OGPU/NKVD, the red army and also international events is present from the end of the Civil War and has documented significance. The link between members of the red army and the Trotskyist political opposition of the 1920s has been shown definitively and the involvement of the military in the changing political climate from Lenin's death is a key issue. Conflicts between members of the command staff were common prior to the outbreak of the Terror and these must be examined in relation to the military purge. Such areas of analysis are vital towards a fuller understanding the military purge and any starting point must be 1917, taking a much broader focus than the narrow 'Tukhachevskii Affair', and bringing the study of interwar Party – military relations in line with an analysis of the political processes leading to the Terror

From 1937 numerous attempts have been made to explain the military purge, and following the June trial itself reaction was instant in the foreign contemporary press and speculation began. The Manchester Guardian argued that the purge was a response to an attempted military plot,⁴ yet not all newspapers were as definitive, but acknowledged Stalin's ambition for power.⁵ In memoir literature from individuals living in Moscow during the Terror, such as the journalist Walter Duranty, the military purge is presented as a reaction to the actual existence of a military conspiracy seeking to overthrow Stalin.⁶ A number of early historical works also

made an attempt at analysing the military purge with similar conclusions to those of the contemporary press and in memoir literature.⁷ In all, certain unifying themes appear in such early accounts of the military purge; Stalin's desire for power, his willingness to take extreme measures to safeguard this and speculation over a possible military conspiracy.⁸

The first serious attention given to the military purge was in the work of historians writing in the 1960s and 1970s in both English and Russian. Historians such as John Erickson, Robert Conquest, Adam Ulam and Lev Nikulin saw the military purge in a similar light, namely, that this was a move by Stalin as part of an escalation of terror to increase his power and to neutralize a potential threat.⁹ Yuri Petrov regarded the purge as a result of Stalin's abuse of power as a result of the growing cult of personality.¹⁰ In either case Stalin's power is the key theme, and the military were subjected to a dramatic purge, stamping out any possible independence. In this interpretation Stalin is portrayed as not reacting to real threats but acting decisively and pre-emptively against any possible challenge.¹¹ The story surrounding the fabricated dossier, the 'Tukhachevskii Affair', appears in all such works and relating memoir accounts of from individuals such as Czechoslovakian President Eduard Benes which provided the details of the story were taken at face value.¹² Indeed, the above historians examined the military purge following the revelations made during Khrushchev's anti-Stalin campaign, who himself gave a boost in credibility to the story when he acknowledged the dossier story in October 1961.¹³ Yet such a narrow focus on the 'Tukhachevskii Affair' neglects the importance of state-military relations prior to the escalation of the Terror.¹⁴ Further, the timing of the military purge and a comprehensive examination of the international context need more thorough attention than is given in the above works.¹⁵ Would Stalin really endanger his own position,

and the security of the Soviet Union in removing highly talented figures from the army in this dangerous context to subjugate the armed forces? A further question is how Stalin would find himself in such a position, if indeed he was such a meticulous planner, of having promoted to the highest ranks people who he did not fully trust. If Stalin aim was absolute control, why were the careers of Mikhail Tukhachevskii, Iona Yakir and Avgust Kork advanced to where they achieved high seniority?

Further questions were raised over the above accounts of the military purge by historians reassessing the Cold War interpretation of the Terror in the 1980s and early 1990s. Arch Getty viewed the military purge as a problematic historical episode with a lack of convincing evidence,¹⁶ and he questioned the events leading to the June trial noting that there seemed a certain amount of indecision over what to do with the generals under suspicion.¹⁷ Similarly Gábor Rittersporn noted that it was an unusual move to transfer the suspect Tukhachevskii to head the Volga Military District on the 11th May, as ‘this was hardly the usual treatment of dangerous conspirators.’¹⁸ Both Getty and Rittersporn argue for an element of uncertainty in Stalin’s actions and importantly that there is little indication of a well-designed intrigue.

With the release of archival materials from the opening of the soviet archives in the early 1990s more narrowly focused studies of the red army throughout the Terror period began to appear, such as from Roger Reese, Oleg Suvenirov and Sergei Minakov, and all have broadened the analysis of the military purge beyond the ‘Tukhachevskii Affair.’¹⁹ From the perspective of political and social history Reese argues that a practice of purging (*chistki*) had already been established throughout the 1920s and 1930s within the military with the aim of improving ideological conformity and removing class aliens and socially harmful elements.²⁰ Such a distinction between *chistki* and the repression in the Terror was first seen in the work of Arch Getty.²¹

Reese elaborates that within the climate of fear seen throughout the Terror and the mass denunciation seen in the search for “enemies of the people”, this activity spread quickly through the red army as ‘the rank and file were conditioned through *chistki* to see class enemies and wreckers in all walks of life.’²² An established internal practice of army purging transformed into a vehicle of mass denunciation in 1937. As such, Reese places focus on the lower ranks and how the individuals responded to the call to root out ‘enemies of the people.’

Oleg Suvenirov traces the purge prior to 1937 seeing the military purge as a broader series of events than the narrow focus of the ‘Tukhachevskii Affair’ and he provides a detailed documentation of military arrests from the early 1930s. Suvenirov raises a number of significant issues, such as the prevalence of accusations of spies in the military, the number arrested over accusations of espionage and that the number of spy-groups uncovered by the OGPU increased during the early 1930s.²³ He highlights an increase in purge activity following the Kirov assassination in 1934 which he estimates as a following wave of tens or hundreds of military arrests, and consequently the extent to which the military’s fate was tied to political events is touched upon.²⁴ The role of People’s Commissar for Defence Kliment Voroshilov is shown in that he had to approve all military arrests during the Terror and is directly implicated in the scale of the military purge.²⁵

From a perspective of civil-military relations Sergei Minakov takes the October revolution as a starting point. Minakov describes how Tukhachevskii was regarded as a ‘Bonapartist’ figure in White émigré circles and that such groups held out hope for a future military coup.²⁶ The disinformation campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s which consistently presented Tukhachevskii as a counter-revolutionary are highlighted and power relations between the key figures in the military and the regime are presented

as contributing to a perception of factionalism in the red army elite.²⁷ According to Minakov in the context of the Terror such power struggles and rumours of Tukhachevskii's 'Bonapartism' were all construed and perceived as a military conspiracy. Minakov is clear in noting the absence of any evidence of an actual military plot in 1937, however, he argues that the regime acted preventively on rumour in line with how its perception of state-military relations changed during the Terror.²⁸

From the above historians only Minakov attempts to answer the question of why Stalin would purge his military elite. Reese and Suvenirov explore the dynamics of the purge process, showing that the tide of denunciation could not have been wholly directed by Stalin and highlight purge activity prior to the 'Tukhachevskii Affair', but they do not convincingly point to why the purge process began. Reese only speculates over Stalin's possible desire to subjugate the military.²⁹ Yet Minakov's work is flawed by a number of conclusions based on unreliable or insufficient evidence.³⁰ Minakov highlights dissatisfaction of certain members of the high command towards Voroshilov and that they tried to have him replaced, but this is founded on weak evidence and is an issue needing further exploration.³¹ Minakov emphasizes the particular context of the Terror and he notes that this allowed rumour to be perceived as reality, and thus the regime perceived counterrevolution in the military based on army factionalism and myths surrounding Tukhachevskii as a Bonaparte; but there is far more to be explored here. The question is what specifically would lead Stalin to perceive rumour as reality, and what events and processes led to a change of perception toward the military elite? To answer this question the influences to Stalin's worldview need examination.

Newly released document collections containing archival material have provided a sense of Stalin's thought processes and the nature of his decision making.³² A number of themes stand out which all have importance and relevance in examining the military purge. Firstly, from reading Stalin's personal correspondence with his closest subordinates Kaganovich and Molotov it is clear that international affairs occupied him greatly and that he was concerned over both espionage and changes in the international situation. Archival materials show that Stalin was directly fed information by the OGPU/NKVD concerning counter-revolutionary plots and espionage and this is now well documented particularly through the Lubianka series of documents and a number of recently published works. All show that such secret reports were sent directly to Stalin.³³ Yet, it is how Stalin perceived such reports of anti-soviet activity, which is of greater significance. Indeed, Stalin can be seen to perceive reports of counterrevolutionary activity through the lens of foreign policy. The Nakhaev affair is a good example of an anti-soviet action which revealed Stalin's preoccupation with foreign espionage. In August 1934, Nakhaev, an artillery Division Chief of Staff within Osoaviakhim, attempted an uprising against the regime, however due to its small size it was quickly put down. Stalin received direct communication of this event from Kaganovich, and pressed the point that Nakhaev had to be working for foreign powers. In a letter to Kaganovich Stalin wrote 'The Nakhaev affair is about a piece of scum. He is, of course (of course!), not alone. He must be put up against the wall and forced to talk – to tell the whole truth and then severely punished. He must be a Polish-German (or Japanese) agent.'³⁴ The charge of being an agent for foreign powers was subsequently added to Nakhaev's indictment, and it has also been argued that this gave a signal to the OGPU/NKVD that Stalin desired the routing out of foreign agents present in the Soviet Union.³⁵

Such counterrevolutionary actions and plots, both real and fabricated, were 'revealed' by the OGPU/NKVD within the red army long before the well-known 'Tukhachevskii Affair' of 1937. Stalin was informed about military plots and espionage consistently throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Such an example was the military plot 'uncovered' in the Ukrainian Military District in February 1931.³⁶ Suvenirov as noted has tracked a series of alleged counterrevolutionary groups revealed by the OGPU/NKVD from the early 1930s.³⁷ The Party leadership would be alert to such counterrevolutionary groups within the red army and as such the military, like other spheres of soviet society, was not free from real or fabricated anti-soviet agitation prior to the Terror. Concern over counter-revolutionary groups and espionage activity within the red army was shown in strong terms on the part of the secret police and has seen more in-depth analysis in *Organi gosudarstvennoi bezopastnosti i Krasnaia armiia: deyatelnost organov VChK – OGPU po obespecheniiu bezopastnosti RKKA (1921-1934)* by A. A. Zdanovich. Here Zdanovich clearly demonstrates the complex relationship between the OGPU/NKVD and the red army, in particular the secret police's continual search for counter-revolutionary groups and the exposure of plots within the armed forces, sharpening especially in years of crisis such as during the collectivisation campaign.³⁸ Zdanovich notes that the OGPU were the permanent monitors of the mood in the red army, looking for any anti-Party feeling and that they aimed to stop any manipulation of the troops.³⁹ A key element of Zdanovich's argument is the links between the hunt for counterrevolutionary groups within the red army and the changes in the international situation, in the context of foreign espionage. Published OGPU circulars show that great attention was paid to troops stationed on the border regions, as these would be most susceptible to penetration by spies.⁴⁰ Further Zdanovich argues that in periods of

crisis, for example through a worsening international situation or domestic strain caused by collectivisation, concern over the reliability of the red army grew.⁴¹ Such concern led to increased OGPU/NKVD activity within the troops.⁴² Zdanovich thus demonstrates that there is a clear link between the international situation and action taken towards the red army and that for much of the 1920s and early 1930s the level of trust towards the military was not high. The rank-and-file and those of higher rank were kept under observation, which increased at times of crisis; a sign of a lack of trust in the army, the institution so vital for defence. Consequently, any examination of the military purge of leading military figures in 1937 must take such a link into account, how changing domestic and international events altered perceptions of Army loyalty. Such a consideration is especially important as the international situation continued to deteriorate throughout the 1930s.

Stalin's attitude towards senior military figures can be seen through an analysis of changing domestic political policy and the changing political climate needs to be examined in relation to the red army. It has been well established that certain leading military figures arrested in 1936 later to be put on trial in June 1937 had at a time been supporters of the Trotskyist opposition in the 1920s.⁴³ Yet the role of 'Trotskyist' officers such as Primakov and Putna has not been examined fully in relation to the 1937 purge, and to what extent a link exists between the arrests in 1936 and those in 1937. Indeed, it has also shown how members of the high command who had supported Trotskii had been kept under very close observation for a long period of time.⁴⁴ The OGPU had in 1927 tried to piece together a Trotskyist military conspiracy, using supposed links with Trotskyist underground pamphlet materials, however the evidence for such a plot was not strong enough and even Menzhinskii, the head of the OGPU, was sceptical.⁴⁵ Again it would be unlikely Stalin was unaware

of such surveillance and thus raises questions as to what caused the decision to arrest those already under observation and what the contribution was of the arrests in autumn 1936 to the later main military purge trial in 1937. By 1936 both Primakov and Putna were both well-travelled having occupied positions as military attaches in various countries and at the time of his arrest Primakov held a high-ranking position as the deputy commander of the Leningrad Military District. Indeed, for men who had been under observation and suspicion, both had been given a great deal of responsibility during their military service. After the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in September 1931, red army strength was reinforced in the Far East from early 1932. Interestingly Putna was recalled from Berlin, where he had been a military attaché, to command a new maritime province.⁴⁶ It can be said that this shows a level of trust towards this former supporter of the opposition, stationing him in such a tense and sensitive area. The question over the regime's level of trust in those military figures, those who at one time supported the political opposition is an interesting one. Clearly they received responsibility after recanting their support for Trotskii, but this oppositionist association in the end brought their arrest. To truly appreciate what happened to such officers, the political processes which led to the arrests of former supporters of the opposition in 1936 need to be aligned with where this support had manifested in the red army. Unfortunately Zdanovich's study does not go beyond 1934, however, it highlights that the political reliability of senior military figures was a constant concern for the OGPU/NKVD.

However, it was not only the former Trotskyist officers were tainted by oppositional activity and those who had kept a distance from Trotskii were still at risk of association with opposition. In the summer of 1930 Tukhachevskii was implicated in oppositional activity by two of his associates from the Civil War, I. Troitskii and N.

Kakurin. The OGPU was piecing together a military conspiracy and had arrested a number of military men in a wider sweep of the red army academies. This was part of the OGPU operation '*vesna*' which targeted ex-tsarist officers, so-called 'military specialists, serving in the red army. Military specialists since their introduction in the ranks had caused anxiety for the Party, and there had been numerous questions raised over their loyalty.⁴⁷ As part of *vesna* Troitskii and Kakurin were arrested. Both gave testimony which implicated Tukhachevskii in a military plot looking to overthrow the regime. Stalin, however, was unconvinced of Tukhachevskii's involvement in any kind of plot describing him as 'clean.'⁴⁸ Two years later as part of the case against the Smirnov-Eismont political oppositionist group of 1932 Politburo stenograms show that Tukhachevskii's name is mentioned within a denunciation of Eismont. In this denunciation Eismont was accused of inquiring over the mood of Tukhachevskii, hinting indirectly at the nature of his attitude towards the regime.⁴⁹ Two years earlier in similar denunciation of the Syrtsov-Lominadze oppositionist group the name another senior military figure later to be sentenced with Tukhachevskii, Ieronim Uborevich, is mentioned as part of the case against Syrtsov. In his denunciation Resnikov accuses Syrtsov of describing Uborevich as ambitious and a 'thermidor.'⁵⁰ The question here is not only why both Tukhachevskii and Uborevich's names appear in the denunciations, but how this matter was resolved and what happened to both men as a result of these incidents? In both cases Tukhachevskii and Uborevich's names are associated with unreliability and it is implied that they were possible figures who could be relied upon to carry out a military coup. Indeed, even if little came in terms of arrests, it is unlikely that Stalin would not forget that these names had come up in both opposition cases. Consequently, the question of military involvement with the opposition is crucial and requires a broad analysis taken from

Lenin's death. A number of officers were involved in the Trotskyist opposition in the 1920s, and in the early 1930s both Tukhachevskii and Uborevich associated in the case against oppositionists and Tukhachevskii in a counterrevolutionary plot. It is worth noting that concurrent to these events, in the early 1930s, Tukhachevskii had won Stalin's trust in implementing his army modernisation plan and had secured a promotion, despite earlier attempts by the OGPU to link him to oppositional activity. Interestingly, it was not only those military leaders who were purged who came under a cloud of suspicion. In a letter to Stalin from 1 February 1923, Voroshilov questioned Semen Budennyi's loyalty, the famed cavalry leader and one of the few military leaders to survive the Stalin era. Voroshilov raised the concern that as Budennyi was so popular with the peasants, that in the event of an uprising, he may side with the peasantry in a revolt. As such, it seems nearly all military leaders, even those close to Stalin, fell under suspicion at one time or another.⁵¹

A further angle to be explored is what attitudes senior military figures held towards the widening repression under Stalin against former oppositionists or against supposed "enemies of the people." Such a question challenges to a certain extent the Cold War era interpretation of the military purge which saw motivation for Stalin's purge of the military as a move to destroying a potential force which could stop the escalation of Terror. Certain red army leaders were in fact quite hard-line when it came to supporting Stalin's treatment of former oppositionists and willingly accepted the rhetoric of enemies of the people. Seen in a 'Protocol of the meeting of the Commission of the Central Committee on the matter of Bukharin and Rykov' 27 February 1937, concerning the punishment to be metered to both enemies of the people, Iona Yakir, later to be purged in June 1937, voted for the death penalty.⁵² As such, only four months prior to Yakir's arrest, he was actively taking a very strong

line on the repression of the former opposition. Other senior military figures can also be seen as agreeing with the regime's rhetoric of enemies of the people. For example, in a letter to Voroshilov, Tukhachevskii notes that problems in the power industry were not the result of poor work or inertia, but a consequence of sabotage and wrecking.⁵³ A similar example concerns Uborevich. After the arrest of General Mikhailov for the crime of wrecking in industry in 1928, in a letter to Menzhinskii Uborevich proposes setting up a troika to report back to the Central Committee about wrecking activity in industry.⁵⁴ The question is presented of how closely did the Red Army follow the Stalin line over repression, and as such, further questions emerge over why they were purged in 1937. If individuals such as Yakir did not protest against executing former oppositionists, what caused Stalin to perceive him as a threat to his power?

In contrast to this acceptance of the regime's rhetoric over enemies of the people, there was a certain degree of disbelief in the plots regularly 'unmasked' by the secret police. The OGPU/NKVD had a long history of working up and revealing 'plots' in all areas of soviet society and the army did not escape this attention. Yet the extent to which these plots were given credibility and how they were perceived is an important issue.⁵⁵ There was a certain amount of scepticism to the plots revealed by the Secret Police in certain periods and this was prevalent also within the soviet high command. Notably, in a letter to Mikhail Tomskii on 2 February 1928 concerning the Shakty Trial, Voroshilov questioned whether the OGPU was perhaps fabricating the case to an extent.⁵⁶ Voroshilov's attitude to counterrevolution is crucial as from May 1934 Voroshilov had gained control of sanctioning each arrest in the military, an event itself which can be seen as distrust in the cases being presented by the OGPU.⁵⁷ As noted by Suvenirov during the Terror Voroshilov freely sanctioned the arrest of

thousands of military men on charges lacking any foundation. The question is why did this change occur and why did Voroshilov lose his earlier scepticism? In the Military Soviet of October 1936 it was acknowledged that fascist elements were active in the red army in schools and in commanding positions.⁵⁸ Yet in contrast to the secret police's appraisal the overall reliability of the red army was still held at a high level.⁵⁹ Indeed, a few months later at the February-March Plenum of 1937 Voroshilov noted that within the red army there were a smaller number of enemies of the people revealed relative to other sectors and institutions, but that increased vigilance was still required. Voroshilov noted that the Soviet Union sends its best people to the military. However, more ominously Molotov in his Molotov's speech noted that the army would now be subject to a thorough checking.⁶⁰ At a later meeting of military leaders in March 1937 Voroshilov gave a long report noting that the army was by no means clean from enemies of the people. Voroshilov seems to have taken a stronger line here from the February-March plenum regarding enemies yet to be unmasked with the ranks of the red army. Indeed, a commander from the Belorussian Military District, I. P. Belov, speaking at the same meeting, argued that the already arrested military men must still have a nest within the army, and one which the NKVD must uncover and that the army must help them do this.⁶¹ As such the attitudes of senior military figures must be seen alongside the shifting perceptions of the regime over counterrevolution and enemies of the people and changes concerning the general line.

A well-noted key event in the studies of the Terror is the exchange of Genrikh Yagoda for Nikolai Ezhov as People's Commissar of Interior Affairs.⁶² This change affected the red army directly as Ezhov was far more active in working up plots than his predecessor.⁶³ Within the materials detailing the process of rehabilitation of those purged under Stalin, an episode is presented showing the contrast between Ezhov and

Yagoda. Between 1932-33 compromising materials were received from Germany against senior military figures such as Tukhachevskii, Bliukher, Kamenev and Budennyi, and these materials were sent to Yagoda.⁶⁴ Crucially however Yagoda was well aware of the secret police's long history of spreading disinformation campaigns implicating military figures in supposed plots in order to gain information of genuine émigré underground organizations. In this particular episode Yagoda realized that the agent passing the information from Germany was a double-agent, and so the materials were dismissed.⁶⁵ However, when Ezhov replaced Yagoda, further information was received from this same source shortly after the February-March Plenum of 1937 and was directed to Ezhov. However, in stark contrast to Yagoda Ezhov argued that the materials proved undoubtedly that a Trotskyist group existed in the military.⁶⁶ As such Ezhov's ascendancy to the position of People's Commissar for Internal Affairs had implications for increased NKVD activity within the red army and such a picture would be presented directly to Stalin. The impact of Ezhov has been examined in relation to the Terror as a whole, and it is clear that Ezhov had a strong hand in building the case against the military leaders who were executed in June 1937. Throughout the first six months of 1937 Ezhov sent Stalin details of those who had been arrested in the military on charges of counterrevolution leading to the main June 1937 trial which revealed a widespread military conspiracy.⁶⁷ However Ezhov's role earlier in 1936 is also significant, when he was given sanction to arrest former supporters of the opposition, leading to the arrest of Trotskyist officers Primakov and Putna which turned attention to the red army.

As shown, published archival materials already allow a deeper and more rounded examination of the military purge in the areas of international relations, politics, intelligence and OGPU/NKVD activity. Such areas of analysis move the study of the

military purge in line with explanations of the Terror as a whole and the forces driving this. The military purge was only one part of the Terror and the degree to which differing sectors of soviet society were interlinked should not be underestimated. Indeed, purge activity in the military should be seen as part of the same wider process occurring within the Party and industry, and not viewed in isolation. Ezhov's rise shows this, as his activity touched upon and affected all spheres of soviet society. At the February-March Plenum it was announced that enemies of the people had been found in the Party, in industry, and now it was time for the military to be thoroughly checked. The purge of the military must be seen as being driven by the same processes which pushed forward the escalating Terror, even if the red army was a particular institution with its own particular responsibilities. However, in looking to answer why the military elite were purged in 1937 Stalin's perception of events must be assessed and how his individual interpretation of the intelligence materials he received changed his perception of his army high command.

It is apparent that a practise of observation of the red army had been established from the end of the Civil War and Stalin received reports of plots and intrigues within the military at regular intervals. High profile military figures such as Tukhachevskii and Uborevich had figured in cases against the opposition in the early 1930s, but Stalin had not acted at this time, he still clearly had a level of trust in both men and indeed had discarded the OGPU attempt to implicate Tukhachevskii in 1930. Though Stalin would be unlikely to forget that both Tukhachevskii and Uborevich had been tainted by oppositional activity and associations. Ezhov's rise in the mid-1930s is significant as he was more inclined to accept evidence against the military elite and sent Stalin details of arrested military men. Stalin at this time had a growing concern over spies and foreign espionage relating to the worsening international situation in

the build-up to war. Further, in such a period of high international tension it would not be unusual to question the reliability of the armed forces, the body that would defend the country if war came. The arrests of those who had previously supported Trotsky's opposition in the 1920s within the Party, industry and army in summer 1936 are significant as this turned serious attention towards the red army. Ezhov believed there were more enemies of the people yet to be exposed after the arrest of the Trotskyist officers and in the February-March Plenum of 1937 Molotov declared that the army would be checked. It is here that as the military were put under strong pressure by the NKVD in 1937 and past oppositional associations, disputes and antagonisms between the military elite and the regime from the revolution would surface, but be seen in a new light, one of opposition.

We cannot say for sure what event would trigger Stalin's sanction of the arrest of Tukhachevskii, but it is possible to understand the influences to his perception of the military elite and how these changed in before the outbreak of the Terror. With this in mind, such an explanation of the military purge can be advanced which goes beyond Stalin's strive for greater power and beyond the focus on the "Tukhachevskii Affair". In an atmosphere of growing spy-mania, international tension and an ever active secret police 'revealing' cases of counterrevolution, Stalin would question the reliability of his military, especially in light of compromising associations and rumours surrounding members of the high command since the Civil War. As Stalin became more convinced of, and endorsed, Ezhov's visions of a widespread conspiracy in soviet society throughout 1936 the military became embroiled in the wider Terror and those who were perceived as compromised individuals were purged. Such a hypothesis requires further research and a firmer grounding in archival material, but would achieve the drawing closer of the purge of the military elite to the

domestic and international events which were so vital in driving the Terror as a whole. Such an explanation of the military purge would show, importantly, that if Stalin acted as a result of his suspicions, this would not be an action with the intention of acquiring more dictatorial power and that the move against the military should not be regarded as a meticulously planned action, but more a panicked move from a misperception fuelled by the NKVD, international crisis and fear of counterrevolution within the army high command.

¹ Roger Reese has looked in detail at the numbers discharged from the army and notes that during the Terror 34,301 service men were discharged from the army, air force and from the political administration. See Reese, 'The impact of the Great Purge on the red army: wrestling with hard numbers', *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 19 (1992) p. 7

² See, E. Wollenberg, *The red army* (London, 1938); Leonard Shapiro, in B. H. Liddell Hart ed., *The soviet army*, (London, 1957), ch.6; J. A. Armstrong, *The politics of totalitarianism: the Communist party of the Soviet Union from 1934 to the present* (New York, 1961); J. Erickson, *The soviet high command: a military-political history, 1918-1941* (London, 1962); E. O'Ballance, *The red army* (London, 1964); R. Kolkowicz, *The soviet military and the Communist party* (Princeton, 1967); M. Mackintosh, *Juggernaut: a history of the soviet armed forces* (London, 1967); P. W. Blackstock, 'The Tukhachevsky Affair', *Russian Review*, 28 (April, 1969) pp. 171-190; R. Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's purge of the thirties* (London, 1973); A. Ulam, *Stalin: the man and his era* (New York, 1974); V. Rapoport and Y. Alexeev, *High treason: essays on the history of the red army, 1918-1938* (Durham [N.C.], 1985); V. S. Antonov and E. G., Plimak, 'Taina 'Zagovora Tukhachevskogo'' *Otechestvennaia Istorija*, 4 (1998) pp. 123-138; R. C. Tucker, *Stalin in power: the revolution from above, 1928-1941* (New York, 1990); D. Volkogonov, *Stalin: triumph and tragedy* (London, 1991); S. Naveh, 'Tukhachesky' in H. Shukman ed., *Stalin's generals* (London, 1993); T. M. Nichols, *The sacred cause: civil-military conflict over soviet national security, 1917-1992* (N.Y.; London 1993); S. J. Main, 'The arrest and 'testimony' of marshal of the Soviet Union M. N. Tukhachevsky (May-June 1937)' *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 10 (March 1997) pp. 151-195; E. F. Ziemke, *The red army 1918-1941: from vanguard of world revolution to US ally* (London, Portland, Or., 2004)

³ For a full account of the details surrounding the creation of the dossier of fabricated evidence, differing versions are described by Conquest in *The Great Terror*, pp. 296-302; Erickson, *The soviet high command*, pp. 456-457; Blackstock, 'The Tukhachevsky Affair', pp. 171-190; R. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia* (New Haven, London, 1996), p. 56

⁴ The Manchester Guardian, 3 July 1937, 'The Purge of the Eight Russian Generals', p. 16

⁵ See for example The New York Times, 26 June 1937, 'Many Doubts Rise in Russia on Guilt of Eight Generals', p. 1

⁶ W. Duranty, *USSR* (Melbourne, London, 1945), p. 222

⁷ For early analyses of the army purge, see Wollenberg, *The red army*; Berchin and Ben-Horin, *The Red Army* (London, 1942); Shapiro, in *The soviet army*

⁸ It is worth noting that this interpretation of the military purge has lasted beyond the Cold War era, see Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, pp. 374-383, 434-438

⁹ See Erickson, *The soviet high command*, p. 465; Conquest, *The Great Terror*, p. 284; Ulam, *Stalin*, pp. 457-458, Nikulin, *Marshal Tukhachevskii*, (Moskva, 1964), p. 192

¹⁰ Yu. Petrov, *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo v sovetskoi armii i flote, 1918 – 1961* (Moskva, 1964), p. 298

¹¹ See for example, Conquest, *The Great Terror*, p. 235

¹² In his memoirs Czechoslovakian President Eduard Benes describes how secret negotiations between Hitler and Tukhachevskii aimed at overthrowing the soviet regime. According to Benes this information was transferred second-hand through Count Trauttmannsdorff, a high official of Hitler. Benes' account is of obvious dubious reliability but had great significance influence in later historical scholarship, being used as evidence of provocation either by the NKVD or Germany with the aim of removing the soviet high command, see E. Benes, *Memoirs of Dr Eduard Benes: from Munich to new war and new victory* (London, 1954), p. 20. However, for the various discrepancies in Benes' account, see I. Lukes, 'The Tukhachevsky Affair and President Edvard Benes' Diplomacy and Statecraft, 7 (Nov., 1996) pp. 505 - 529

¹³ T. H. Rigby ed., *The Stalin dictatorship: Khrushchev's 'secret speech' and other documents* (Sydney, 1968), p. 99

¹⁴ It is worthy to note that the cited historians do point to events prior to the 1930s such as the failed campaign against Poland in 1920 and the supposed bad feeling that this produced between Stalin and Tukhachevskii, however the dossier remains the key evidence. For Erickson's appraisal of the Poland campaign, see *The soviet high command*, pp. 93-108

¹⁵ Recently more attention is being paid to foreign policy, and in particular intelligence, as influences to Stalin's actions and how these informed his policy, see J. Harris, 'Encircled by enemies: Stalin's Perceptions of the capitalist world, 1918 – 1941', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30 (June 2007) , pp. 513 – 545

¹⁶ J. A. Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: the soviet Communist party reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 168

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 167

¹⁸ G. Rittersporn, *Stalinist simplifications and soviet complications: social tensions and political conflicts in the USSR, 1933-1953* (Chur, Reading, 1991), p. 140

¹⁹ See R. Reese, 'The red army and the Great Purges' in eds., J. A. Getty and R. T. Manning, *Stalinist Terror: new perspectives* (Cambridge, 1993); *Stalin's reluctant soldiers: a social history of the red army, 1924-1941* (Lawrence, Kans., 1996); *The soviet military experience: a history of the soviet red army, 1917-1991* (London, 2000); *Red commanders: a social history of the soviet army officer corps, 1918-1991* (Lawrence, Kans., 2005); O. Suvenirov, 'Repressii v partiorganizatsii RKKA v 1937-1938' *voprosy istorii KPSS*, 6 (1991) pp. 17-31; *Tragediia RKKA, 1937-1938* (Moskva, 1998) S. Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov* (Moskva, 1995); *za otvorotom marshalskoi shineli* (Orel, 1999); *Stalin i ego marshal* (Moskva, 2004)

²⁰ Reese, in *Stalinist Terror*, p. 203

²¹ See Getty, *The origins of the Great Purges*, pp. 38 - 57

²² Reese, in *Stalinist Terror*, p. 211

²³ Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKA*, p. 51

²⁴ Ibid., p. 51

²⁵ Ibid., p.71, p. 95, p.98

²⁶ S. Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov*, pp. 82-83

²⁷ The relationships and conflicts between members of the red army high command are only partially considered in studies on the military purge. Studies examining red army development and modernisation highlight this area has been looked at in far more detail, yet this has an obvious contribution when analysing purge activity within the military. See D. R. Stone, *Hammer and rifle: The militarization of the Soviet Union, 1926-1933*, (Lawrence, Kans, 2000); L. Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's war machine: Tukhachevskii and military economic planning, 1925-1941* (Basingstoke, 2000); R. W. Harrison., *The Russian way of war: operational art, 1904-1940* (Lawrence, Kans., 2001)

²⁸ Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov*, pp. 702 - 712

²⁹ Reese, in *Stalinist Terror*, p. 212

³⁰ For criticism of Minakov's work see A. A. Zdanovich, *Organi gosudarstvennoi bezopastnosti i krasnaia armiia: deiatel'nost organov VChK – OGPU po obespecheniiu bezopastnosti RKKA (1921-1934)* (Moskva, 2008) p. 281 and L. Samuelson and V. Khaustov, *Stalin, NKVD i repressii, 1936-1938 gg.* (Moskva, 2009), p. 21

³¹ Minakov points to a letter sent in order to get Voroshilov replaced, however this is based on poor evidence. As noted, the inner-relationships of the red army high command are a significant issue and one which needs more robust analysis. L. Samuelson has noted that the evidence for this affair is scattered, see Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's war machine: Tukhachevskii and military economic planning, 1925-1941*, p. 157

³² See A.V. Kvashonkin ed., *Sovetskoe rukovodstvo perepiska, 1928-1941*, (Moskva, 1999); R. W. Davies, O. V. Khlevniuk, E. A. Rees, L. P. Kosheleva, L. A. Rogovaia eds., *Stalin-Kaganovich correspondence, 1931-36*, (New Haven, 2003); L. T. Lih, O. V. Naumov, and O. V. Khlevniuk et al. eds., *Stalin's letters to Molotov, 1925-1936* (New Haven, 1995)

³³ See V.N. Khaustov, V.P. Naumov, N.S. Plotnikova eds., *Lubianka: Stalin i VChK-GPU-OGPU-NKVD, ianvar 1922-dekabr 1936* (Moskva, 2003); G.N. et al. eds., *"Sovershenno sekretno": Lubianka-Stalinu o polozenii v strane (1922-1934 gg.)* (Moskva, 2001); Samuelson and Khaustov, *Stalin, NKVD i repressii, 1936-1938 gg.*

³⁴ *Stalin-Kaganovich correspondence, 1931-36*, p. 248

³⁵ Zdanovich, *Organi gosudarstvennoi bezopastnosti i krasnaia armiia*, p. 326

³⁶ Khaustov, Naumov and Plotnikova eds., *Lubianka: Stalin i VChK-GPU-OGPU-NKVD, ianvar 1922-dekabr 1936*, p. 262

³⁷ Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKA*, pp. 45-59

³⁸ Zdanovich, *Organi gosudarstvennoi bezopastnosti i krasnaia armiia*, p. 137

³⁹ Ibid., p. 109

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 682. Concern over border districts appears to be a constant concern for the secret police. In March 1937 in a speech to the *akhtiv* of the GUGB NKVD Ezhov highlighted the danger of border districts being used by Japan to attack the Soviet Union. In April 1937 groups of NKVD officers were directed to the Far East and Siberia under the command of L. G. Mironov to flush out spies and Trotskyists working on the railways and in the army, see Samuelson and Khaustov, *Stalin, NKVD i repressii, 1936-1938 gg*, p. 78

⁴¹ Suvenirov notes an OGPU order no. 25/00 from February 1930 which mandated the arrest of Kulaks who tried to establish links with the red army, *Tragediia RKKA*, p. 61

⁴² Zdanovich, *Organi gosudarstvennoi bezopastnosti i krasnaia armiia*, p 299, p. 308

⁴³ See for example Conquest, *The Great Terror*, p. 185

⁴⁴ Zdanovich has highlighted that as early as August 1933, three years before his arrest, an OGPU file was prepared on Primakov, and that in the late 1920s the OGPU had become aware of a Trotskyist military group in Moscow, comprising of Primakov, Dreitser, Okhotnikov, Bulatov, Kuzmichev and headed by Mrachovskii, p. 325 and p. 316. Indeed, Zdanovich has also shown that the OGPU collected materials on Tukhachevskii as early as after the failed Poland campaign in 1920, see *Organi gosudarstvennoi bezopastnosti i krasnaia armiia*, p. 285

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 319 - 322

⁴⁶ J. Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the threat from the east, 1933-41* (Basingstoke, 2001), p. 27

⁴⁷ For the most dramatic clashes over the use of military specialists within the red army see, *Vosmoi s'ezd RKP(b), Mart 1919 goda, prokoli* (Moskva, 1959). Zdanovich has noted that operation *vesna* was instigated at a time when the OGPU were concerned over information they had received of a possible British inspired insurrection in the Ukraine which would use counterrevolutionary groups within the red army. A number of military specialists and their acquaintances were arrested in the reaction to this information as part of the operation named *vesna*, which soon evolved into a wider All-Union *chistki* of military specialists as slight links were drawn between other military districts, see Zdanovich, *Organi gosudarstvennoi bezopastnosti i krasnaia armiia*, pp. 387 - 397

⁴⁸ L. Kosheleva...et al. eds., *Pisma I.V. Stalina V.M. Molotovu: 1925-1936 gg.: sbornik dokumentov*, (Moskva, 1995), p. 231. Interestingly, Oleg Ken has discovered that even after Stalin's pronouncement that he believed Tukhachevskii to be 'clean' from any participation in a military conspiracy, Voroshilov still sent to Stalin compromising information concerning Tukhachevskii. This highlights the poor relations which existed between the two men, see O. Ken, *Mobilizatsionnoe planirovanie i politicheskie resheniia, konets 1920 – seredina 1930-kh* (Sankt-Peterburg, 2002), p. 131

⁴⁹ K.M. Anderson. et al. eds., *Stenogrammi zasedanii Politbiuro TsK RKP(b) - VKP(b) 1923-1938 gg.*, (Moskva, 2007), III, p. 568

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 211

⁵¹ *Voennii arkhivi Rossii*, 1 (1993), p. 408

⁵² J. A. Getty and O. V. Naumov eds., *The road to terror: Stalin and the self-destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939*, (New Haven, 1999), p. 412

⁵² Quoted in Zdanovich, *Organi gosudarstvennoi bezopastnosti i krasnaia armiia*, p. 433

⁵³ Quoted in Ibid, p. 433

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 431

⁵⁵ There are only a small number of studies on the accuracy of the intelligence which Stalin received, but they show that this was far from accurate. See C. Andrew and J. Elkner 'Stalin and foreign intelligence' *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 4 (2003), pp. 69 – 94

⁵⁶ O. Mozokhin, *Pravo na repressii: vnesudebnie polnomochiia organov gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti, 1918-1953* (Moskva, 2006), p. 87

⁵⁷ *Lubianka: Stalin i VChK-GPU-OGPU-NKVD, (ianvar 1922-dekabr 1936)*, p. 262

⁵⁸ A. S. Kniazkov et al. eds., *Voennii sovet pri narodnom komissare oboroni SSSR, oktiabr 1936 g.: dokumenty i materialy*, (Moskva, 2009), p. 354

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 377

⁶⁰ Samuelson and Khaustov, *Stalin, NKVD i repressii*, p. 109. For Voroshilov's comments to the February-March plenum see, *Voennii arkhiv Rossii*, pp. 5-27

⁶¹ Suvenirov, *Tragediia RKKA*, pp. 58-59

⁶² In September 1936 Ezhov formally took Yagoda's position, however, his influence in directing the actions of the NKVD had been growing prior to his formal appointment, see, M. Jansen and N. Petrov, *Stalin's loyal executioner: people's commissar Nikolai Ezhov, 1895-1940* (Stanford, 2002) and J. A. Getty and O. Naumov, *Yezhov: the rise of Stalin's "Iron Fist"* (New Haven, London, 2008)

⁶³ From early 1935 Ezhov began writing a book on counterrevolutionary activity "From Factionalism to Open Counterrevolution," which gradually evolved into a tract arguing that oppositionist groups were preparing terrorist acts against the state as Ezhov investigated oppositionist activity, see J. A. Getty and O. Naumov, *Yezhov*, p. 154. Jansen and Petrov have noted that Ezhov was convinced that there was a Trotskyist plot to be revealed within the Red Army. In the Autumn of 1936 he was sure that unexposed officers remained in the ranks, see Jansen and Petrov, *Stalin's loyal executioner*, p. 49

⁶⁴ A. Artizov, Yu. Sigachev, I. Shevchuk, V. Khlopov eds., *Reabilitatsiia: kak eto bilo – fevral 1956 – nachalo 80-kh*, (Moskva, 2003), II, p. 600

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 600

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ See Samuelson and Khaustov, *Stalin, NKVD i repressii*, pp. 108-120