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## Stalin's Purge of the Red Army and Misperception of Security Threats

In James Ryan and Susan Grant (eds) *Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism: Complexities, Contradictions and Controversies* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020)

**Peter Whitewood**

In June 1937 Iosif Stalin sanctioned an extensive purge of the Red Army that was not brought to a halt until November 1938. In total, approximately 35,000 army leaders were discharged from the ranks and tens of thousands of officers were arrested. Several thousand people were executed.<sup>1</sup> Even though over 11,000 military personnel were soon returned to the ranks, this was a shocking attack on the institution vital for Soviet defence. Indeed, the announcement of the most high-profile executions – that of Marshal of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Tukhachevskii, and seven other senior officers from the high command – sparked international scandal. Tukhachevskii and his co-defendants, Iona Iakir, Ieronim Uborevich, Boris Fel'dman, Robert Eideman, Avgust Kork, Vitalii Primakov and Vitovt Putna, were executed immediately after a closed military trial on 11 June that found them guilty of organising a 'military-fascist plot' inside the army. The group was said to have coordinated sabotage and espionage to ensure Soviet defeat in wartime. Another central member of the supposed conspiracy, Ian Gamarnik, first deputy People's Commissar for Defense, committed suicide before the sentences were announced, after it became clear that he too would be arrested. This group of officers was publicly presented as the nexus of a wider conspiracy in the Red Army that the military purge was intended to root out.

In reality, there was no foundation to these charges. There was no 'military-fascist plot' to weaken the Soviet state in a future war. Evidence supporting these accusations was secured by the NKVD using violence and torture. Moreover, the accompanying wave of denunciations that exploded from summer 1937 – netting countless additional victims – was the result of officers and soldiers denouncing one another under intense pressure. Some Red Army personnel undoubtedly denounced their comrades to save their own skins. Others were almost certainly taken in by press reports that their superiors were dangerous subversives and action had to be taken. The roles of naked careerism or personal animosity cannot be ruled out either. In any case, the damage caused to the Red Army by the military purge would not have been as extensive without this combination of pressure from above (from the NKVD) and from below (from denunciations).<sup>2</sup>

What impact the military purge had on the Red Army's disastrous performance in 1941 continues to generate debate, but nevertheless it remains remarkable that Stalin would attack his army in 1937 when it was increasingly clear that major war was on the horizon. Numerous explanations have been put forward to explain why Stalin undermined his military strength so precipitously. Most common is the view that Stalin launched a premeditated attack on the army simply to further increase his power. The argument goes that the military was the one institution that could have potentially curbed Stalin's insatiable lust for power and thus needed to be neutralized.<sup>3</sup> Central to this explanation is the NKVD's fabrication of a dossier of evidence (on Stalin's orders) showing a military conspiracy implicating the Tukhachevskii group. Yet the dossier story is based upon unreliable memoir accounts. Stalin also never once referred to such a

dossier in any key meeting when the 'military-fascist plot' was discussed at length. It seems strange that he would go to such lengths of having evidence fabricated with the express aim of giving credibility to planned executions in the army and then not bring this up.<sup>4</sup>

On the other end of the scale, some have claimed that a real plot existed inside the high command, but these arguments are difficult to take seriously and lack evidence.<sup>5</sup> More broadly, in general works on the Great Terror, the military purge is often presented as another manifestation of the wider tide of political violence that swept over the Soviet state during 1937-8. The Red Army, in this sense, was collateral damage; another institution into which a wave of terror spread.<sup>6</sup>

None of these explanations, however, provides a convincing explanation for Stalin's attack on the army. None sufficiently considers deeper motivations behind the military purge specific to the Red Army and its longer-term roots. Indeed, historians have typically explained the military purge and wider Great Terror by underling the importance of proximate and contingent events. These include the assassination of Sergei Kirov in December 1934, which stunned the leadership and set in motion a chain of arrests of former oppositionists.<sup>7</sup> Dramatic events abroad, such as civil war in Spain, have also been pointed to as fomenting concerns in Stalin's mind about a 'fifth column' in the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> Not discounting the importance of such central events of the 1930s to the Great Terror and military purge, this chapter points to other – and more long-standing – security anxieties that pre-date the 1930s and are as critical to explaining why Stalin attacked his army in 1937. Moreover, the often-neglected point about the military purge is that it put Stalin's power and position at risk. There was a real

prospect of him going to war with much-weakened defences. Any explanation of the military purge has to account for that risk.

This chapter will show that the key to understanding the purge of the Red Army is to see this as the culmination of long-standing security anxieties that surrounded the Soviet military from its very formation and that suddenly came to a head during the Great Terror. Equally important are Bolshevik perceptions of a threatening international environment throughout the 1920s and 1930s, which only exacerbated concerns about the reliability of their army. Security threats identified by the early Soviet and then Stalinist regimes could easily be exaggerated or entirely misperceived. As we will see, this frequent pattern of misperception had devastating consequences for the army. In the final analysis, the chapter will show that Stalin attacked the Red Army because he and those around him misperceived an extensive spy infiltration of the military in the summer of 1937 – what was taken to be a fifth column – in the context of looming war. Radical action was the only possible option. Stalin did not purge the army to further consolidate his personal power; this was a reactive decision to a misperceived threat, taken at the last moment. In this sense, this chapter will underline that even though Stalin had consolidated enormous levels of power by the 1930s, the events of the military purge demonstrated the weakness of his position.

Determining how a perceived military conspiracy emerged during the Great Terror and was taken seriously by the leadership raises questions about the limitations of source material. Specifically, political police interrogation transcripts and reports on confessions are some of the sources used in this chapter to show how the Red Army was identified as compromised by ‘enemies’.

There is a risk in assuming that such transcripts are nothing but fabrications of the NKVD and useful for little more than seeing the ideas imposed on victims by interrogators.

However, interrogation transcripts can help reveal more than just the agenda of the NKVD. When examined in conjunction with other materials, this can shed light on the dynamics inherent in the evolution of conspiracy theories. Notably, the same types of conspiracy theories are found in the public speeches and private correspondence of Stalin's inner circle. There was almost no difference in the manner in which Stalin and his associates communicated in public and in private. In his personal correspondence Stalin regularly detailed conspiracies where they did not exist.<sup>9</sup> In this way, as much as the leadership was influenced by the material results and confessions and conspiracies emerging from political police investigations, the conduct of the latter was heavily shaped from above. Recent research has laid bare the complexity of motivations and behaviours among local NKVD officers; their levels of belief in the various plots and conspiracies underpinning the Great Terror, and the importance of overwhelming pressure placed upon them to achieve results.<sup>10</sup> The evolving conspiracy theories underpinning the Great Terror were a product of mutually reinforcing interactions between a leadership and political police both predisposed towards seeing 'enemies' in their midst. Moreover, the charges against the senior officers in the supposed 'military-fascist plot' were not merely inventions of the NKVD. The charges were grossly exaggerated, but often based on real events then framed in conspiratorial terms. Even though there was no conspiracy in the Red Army, by 1937 the NKVD had a great amount of material to work with when putting together the 'military-fascist plot'.

### Civil war and military vulnerabilities

To understand how Stalin could so badly misjudge the threats facing the Red Army in 1937, we need to begin with the circumstances of its formation in 1918. After the Revolution, the Bolsheviks, critically, never wanted a standing army, which they saw as a tool of oppressive capitalist powers. A people's militia was seen as a more suitable means of defence for a socialist state. At the same time, however, the Bolsheviks were not blind to the need to protect the revolution and moves were made towards creating a new 'socialist' army in early 1918.<sup>11</sup> These efforts were set on a more conventional course as the realities of war sunk in. Unsuccessful peace negotiations with the German government in early 1918, the renewed advance of its armed forces and the signing away of vast expanses of territory in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, were difficult lessons for Vladimir Lenin. As well as underlining that salvation would not arrive in world revolution, humiliation at Brest-Litovsk provided further evidence that the nascent socialist state would not survive without a proper means of defence. As the former Imperial Army had been dismantled before the revolution, the Bolsheviks' new socialist army – the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army – would require serious reform.

The evolution of the Red Army into the mould of traditional standing army was highly controversial in party circles on ideological grounds. A deep and ongoing problem was the composition of the officer corps. The Bolsheviks were revolutionary – not militarily – minded. Lacking expertise in warfare they were forced to turn to former imperial officers – so called 'military specialists' – to

staff leading positions in the army (some of whom had to be coerced into serving). As a result, the majority of Red Army officers in the civil war had previous service in the former Imperial army. This was still approximately 30 per cent by the war's end.<sup>12</sup> This large number of military specialists created an immediate security problem because of questions about loyalty. Looking back on the civil war in 1923, Trotsky recalled:

Of the old officer corps there remained with us either the more idealistic men, who understood or at least sensed the meaning of the new epoch (there were, of course, a very small minority), or the pen-pushers, inert, without initiative, men who lacked the energy to go over to the Whites: finally, there were not a few active counter-revolutionaries, whom events had caught unawares.<sup>13</sup>

There were clear problems with employing military specialists who might switch sides or feed intelligence to the Whites. Trotsky, as a result, sanctioned punishments for the families of military specialists who betrayed the Bolsheviks.<sup>14</sup> Each military specialist was flanked by a Bolshevik political commissar, establishing a system of dual-command. However, these safeguards failed to mollify objections from within the party, which came to a head at the Eighth Party Congress in March 1919. Here Lenin was forced to defend the use of military specialists from the so-called Military Opposition, a group of party members concerned that, while necessary for the war, the former officers were ideologically closer to the Whites than Bolsheviks.<sup>15</sup> The Military Opposition's position gained support at the Congress and Trotsky was forced to give further



assurances that more controls would be introduced over military specialists and that political commissars would receive expanded powers. Even so, the principle of employing military specialists was not altered, doing little to ease distrust of the bourgeois outsiders. For Lenin, however, there was no other choice. As he remarked a few months later, 'If we do not take them into service and they were not forced to serve us, we would not be able to create an army.'<sup>16</sup>

The civil war did see significant mutinies by military specialists, such as by commander of the eastern front, Mikhail Murav'ev. However, in general terms there is evidence that former officers were in fact less likely to desert than communist Red Commanders.<sup>17</sup> Class prejudice was a central driver of suspicion towards military specialists. In April 1919 Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army, Ioakhim Vatsetis, complained to Lenin about hostility towards the General Staff: 'Former officers who are serving on our General Staff do not deserve this unjust attitude [...] Every commissar has a secret desire to catch our staff officers out in some counterrevolutionary attitude or treachery.'<sup>18</sup> A few months later, Vatsetis was falsely accused of working for the Whites.<sup>19</sup>

While Lenin and Trotsky were cautiously supportive of military specialists, other Bolsheviks like Stalin held similar attitudes to the political commissars that Vatsetis claimed were harassing the General Staff. During the so-called Tsaritsyn Affair of 1918, Stalin (who had been tasked to improve grain shipments from the North Caucasus to Moscow) rounded on the commanding military specialist Pavel Sytin, along with his two allies Kliment Voroshilov and Sergei Minin. Partly a challenge to Trotsky's central military leadership, the three dismissed Sytin and requested that Voroshilov be put in charge. Over the course of summer and autumn, Stalin made clear his distrust of military specialists,

referring to their incompetence and unsuitability for civil war combat.<sup>20</sup> Stalin called for limits on Trotsky's 'erratic commands', claiming that these risked 'giv[ing] the whole front into the hands of those deserving full distrust, the so-called military specialists from the bourgeoisie.'<sup>21</sup> In a letter to Lenin in October, Stalin and Voroshilov again criticized Sytin as 'a man who not only is unneeded at the front, but who is not worthy of trust and is therefore damaging. We of course cannot approve of the front going to ruin as a result of an untrustworthy general.'<sup>22</sup>

Outside tussles in the party leadership over military specialists, the Bolshevik political police, the Cheka, made a priority of keeping an eye on former officers now occupying commanding positions. The struggle against counterrevolutionaries in the military was one of the Cheka's main priorities.<sup>23</sup> Cheka leaders, Feliks Dzerzhinskii and Genrikh Iagoda, complained about White counterrevolutionaries using positions inside the Red Army to damage the war effort.<sup>24</sup> Cheka operatives launched investigations into treacherous military specialists, uncovering strings of supposed plots.<sup>25</sup> The Cheka's involvement with the army only grew throughout the civil war. The number of Special Departments (*Osobye otdely* [OO]) tasked to monitor the Red Army increased, as did their budgets.<sup>26</sup> And it was not only infiltration of the army by White agents and treacherous military specialists that alarmed the Cheka, but also its subversion by foreign spies - a more pressing issue in the later 1920s and 1930s.<sup>27</sup> From the Cheka's point of view, the Red Army faced a risk of infiltration during the civil war irrespective of military specialists. Their mass employment only made matters worse.

### The 1920s: dangers in peacetime

Bolshevik victory in the civil war should have eased security anxieties surrounding the Red Army. The White armies were defeated and the immediate military threat to the Soviet state much reduced. Yet serious concerns about the army continued unabated. This was for several reasons. Most importantly, world revolution had not erupted as anticipated by the Bolsheviks in 1917. Because of this, they came to view their socialist state as surrounded by capitalist powers committed to its destruction. The unexpected economic stabilization of the West following the First World War and what the Bolsheviks took to be the fundamental incompatibility between capitalism and communism, for them, meant that a final war was inevitable. The Bolsheviks also never forgave the assistance given to the Whites by western powers in the civil war and were alert to the continued hosting of their forces abroad and the financial support provided to them. All of this helped sustain a sense of siege mentality and encouraged the misperception of existential threats to the Soviet Union in the interwar period.<sup>28</sup> In this context, it is easy to understand why the Bolsheviks continued to fear that their central means of defence – the Red Army – would be subverted by hostile forces.

Increasingly stringent controls were placed on the Red Army in the years after the civil war to protect it from the threat of subversion. In 1922, Trotsky prohibited soldiers from having contact with foreigners without first notifying a political commissar.<sup>29</sup> In 1926, under Voroshilov's military leadership, the families of soldiers were banned from having any contact with foreigners.<sup>30</sup> Supposed spies were discovered in the Red Army throughout the 1920s.<sup>31</sup> For

the most part these arrests were at relatively low level, yet the danger could easily ratchet up. In 1926 when Jozef Piłsudski returned to power in Poland, the OGPU reported an increase in Polish espionage and attempts to recruit within the Red Army.<sup>32</sup>

Security concerns common to the civil war continued in this climate of insecurity, especially the risk that unreliable military specialists might be recruited by foreign powers to subvert the army from within.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, despite efforts to replace military specialists with red commanders, they still occupied a sizeable number of commanding positions in the 1920s because of a skills shortage in the army.<sup>34</sup> The perception of the class enemy working within remained difficult to shift, especially as the Whites in exile held on to hopes of one day reversing 1917. The GPU/OGPU reported on various White schemes to infiltrate the Red Army and other Soviet institutions during this time.<sup>35</sup> Red Army personnel were likewise concerned about military specialists and possible connections to the exiled White movement. For instance, fourteen officers raised their fears in a letter to the Central Committee in February 1924 (which Stalin had distributed more widely).<sup>36</sup> Moreover, amnesties of White officers, running through 1920-3, while seen as a way of depriving the Whites of soldiers, in turn created further concerns for the GPU that subversives would infiltrate the Red Army under the guise of returning soldiers. A GPU circular from March 1923 noted that

the activity of Wrangel's intelligence and counterintelligence organs has increased on a large scale. A number of new intelligence institutions have opened, the main aim of which is the collection of

information about the Red army's condition and armament, as well as breaking down the morale of the latter through planting agents in commanding positions.<sup>37</sup>

The persistent climate of distrust towards military specialists in the 1920s had important consequences for the later 'discovery' of the 'military-fascist plot' in 1937. It reinforced a perception of the 'enemy within', which was seriously escalated during the Great Terror. However, it is important to stress that certain military specialists attracted more attention than others during these years. Tukhachevskii, the future leader of the supposed military-fascist plot, was the subject of feverish speculation in White émigré circles in the 1920s. Many Whites harboured hope that the young military specialist might become a 'Red Bonaparte' and unseat the Bolsheviks.<sup>38</sup> Evidently these rumours did nothing to halt Tukhachevskii's rapid rise in the Red Army. He reached the position of deputy chief of staff by November 1925. At this point, rumours of Tukhachevskii's disloyalty were simply seen as rumours (however much the Whites were taken in).

Another reason for the dismissal of rumours about Tukhachevskii was that many of these first originated with the GPU/OGPU and were used to entrap White counterrevolutionaries. For instance, in the long-running Trust Operation, coordinated by Soviet counterintelligence in the 1920s to gather information on White organizations in exile, Tukhachevskii's name (along with other senior officers) was circled among White emigres as a potential candidate for a military dictator. By trading on the speculation surrounding Tukhachevskii – and through creating a fictional counterrevolutionary organization called the Monarchist

Union of Central Russia – Soviet counterintelligence hit upon an effective way to make contact with White organizations to gather important intelligence. The Trust Operation was one of the most striking successes of Soviet counterintelligence before its final unmasking in 1927.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the obvious intrigue of the Trust operation, it is important to stress that rumours about disloyalty in the high command were never entirely forgotten. Intelligence reports were produced about White hopes of a military coup against the Bolsheviks and the faith they placed in Tukhachevskii.<sup>40</sup> Paperwork was filed in the usual way. Even if these reports were not taken seriously in the 1920s, there were two major consequences. First, they gave no respite to ongoing speculation about loyalties at the top of the army. Second, when the Great Terror erupted years later, long-filed reports of disloyalty in Tukhachevskii's circle added fuel to the fire at a time when the most tenuous of accusations achieved common currency.

A final threat identified to the Red Army in the 1920s was domestic: the minority of officers and soldiers who supported Trotsky's political opposition to the party majority. As Trotsky was head of the Red Army until he was pressured to resign in January 1925, it is unsurprising that he attracted a number of military supporters who also shared his objections to the restrictions on democratic practices and the so-called bureaucratization of party life overseen by the party majority. This small group of Trotskyist officers was by no means a threat to the stability of the army and was presented as a lower-order danger. Reports from the Political Administration of the Red Army (PUR), for instance, frequently described Trotsky military supporters as representing only a small minority and estimated their impact on the ranks as limited.<sup>41</sup>

PUR was of course accountable for political reliability in the Red Army and had a vested interest in presenting a harmonious picture. There were some who disagreed with their assessment. The OGPU was more concerned about the dangers posed by Trotskyist officers in the second half of the 1920s. In the peak year of the United Opposition's activity, for instance, in November 1927, head of the OGPU, Viacheslav Menzhinskii, sent alarmist messages to Stalin warning about a potential Trotskyist coup d'état with military involvement. Menzhinskii claimed that officers were working with Trotsky to overthrow the party majority. Indeed, the OGPU had arrested a group of men operating an illegal Trotskyist printing press only two months before, one of whom, when interrogated, claimed that he was part of a military group planning a coup inspired by Pilsudski.<sup>42</sup> In his November letters to Stalin, Menzhinskii ramped up the drama, claiming that the opposition's 'secret combat organization' was carrying out propaganda in the Red Army, which had been 'partly contaminated and [...] the commanders now are often not reliable in the full sense of the word.' Menzhinskii was clearly pushing for a crackdown on the army in his appeals to the General Secretary.<sup>43</sup> But Stalin rejected the OGPU view and favoured restraint. In his reply to Menzhinskii, Stalin argued that the countermeasures already taken had made it difficult for the opposition to make inroads into the army.<sup>44</sup> There would be no military crackdown.

Menzhinskii may have failed to convince Stalin of the threat in 1927, but the OGPU continued to pay close attention to Trotsky's sympathizers in the army. Even after Trotskyists were brought back into the party fold, after recanting their 'political errors' at the end of the 1920s, the OGPU maintained observation nonetheless. A surveillance file, for instance, was opened on future 'member' of

the military-fascist plot Vitalii Primakov in the early 1930s, which expressed doubts about the sincerity of his break with Trotsky.<sup>45</sup> The OGPU continued to make arrests in the army on charges of Trotskyism throughout the early 1930s as it did across other Soviet institutions.<sup>46</sup> Trotskyism in the Red Army, in this sense, remained a live issue for the political police, even if former Trotskyist officers were now making their way back into central party and military positions, some with glowing endorsements from Voroshilov and Stalin.<sup>47</sup> It is highly likely that some military Trotskyists simply went along with the requirement to recant past political affiliations without fundamentally changing their views. There is evidence that former Trotskyist officers continued to meet in secret in the years before the terror.<sup>48</sup> The OGPU did not entirely imagine underground Trotskyist activity in the early 1930s.<sup>49</sup> However, it was only after the murder of Sergei Kirov in 1934 that Trotskyism in the Red Army became an increasingly pressing issue.

### The Great Terror and Military Purge

For many in the party and political police, the Red Army had proved itself vulnerable to internal subversion on several fronts in the years after the civil war. 'Unreliable' military specialists continued to staff senior positions; there was a risk of infiltration by foreign agents; a core of hostile Trotskyist officers had raised fears in some quarters about a military coup. In reality, while these security threats existed on a certain level, they were magnified by the isolated position of the Soviet Union in the world and by a shared understanding among senior Bolsheviks about the dangers of capitalist encirclement. With the political



police already pushing conspiracy theories about potential coups emanating from the military in the 1920s, this foreshadowed exactly how the political violence of the 1930s would be justified.

At the same time, it would be wrong to see a rising wave of repression in the Red Army that culminated in the military purge of 1937. Arrests came in peaks and troughs. Despite the security anxieties surrounding the army in the 1920s, there were few arrests of supposedly subversive infiltrators.<sup>50</sup> During the early 1930s, the situation was very different. The collectivization drive sparked major instability in the lower ranks as peasant soldiers discovered how their families had been dispossessed of their lands.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, the OGPU 'unmasked' what it said was an extensive military specialist conspiracy in the officer corps during 1930-1, with apparent ties to the British and Polish governments. This subversive organization was supposedly planning a coup. At the upper end of estimates, 10,000 people were arrested as part of the investigation, given the name Operation Springtime.<sup>52</sup> Notably, Tukhachevskii was interrogated about his possible role in the conspiracy after his name was mentioned during the interrogation of another military specialist. Tukhachevskii was said to be sympathetic to the Right Deviation and – reminiscent of the rumours about him abroad – the leader of a conspiracy planning a military takeover.<sup>53</sup> Menzhinskii wrote to Stalin in September 1930, urging immediate action against the 'whole insurgent group', yet Stalin once again showed restraint, waiting two weeks to act and delaying discussion for a meeting of the Politburo in October.<sup>54</sup> Following a face-to-face meeting with Tukhachevskii in the same month, Stalin dismissed the allegations, later pronouncing him '100% clean' in a letter to Molotov.<sup>55</sup>

Too much emphasis should not be put on Stalin's dismissal of the accusations against Tukhchevskii. He still accepted the premise of the wider military specialist plot in the Red Army uncovered by the OGPU. Several thousand military specialists were arrested and charged with working with foreign powers and carrying out sabotage. Moreover, these exact accusations would reappear in 1937 with the key difference that they would be levelled not at the distrusted military specialist outsiders, but at the bulk of the officer corps, including its upper establishment. A radical increase in political tensions inside the Communist Party was responsible for initiating this shift in focus.

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When Leningrad Party Boss, Sergei Kirov, was gunned down outside his office in the Smolny Building on 1 December 1934, the Red Army like other Soviet institutions was subjected to increasing scrutiny. As is well known, Kirov was killed by a lone assassin – disgruntled party member Leonid Nikolaev – but Stalin pointed the finger at the former political opposition, sparking an investigation that would later culminate in the show trials of the 1930s. For the army, this meant growing OGPU attention on the small number of former Trotskyist officers in the ranks. However, alongside a steady number of arrests in the military from this point on, connections emerged between some former Trotskyist officers and the senior oppositionists arraigned at the August 1936 show trial.<sup>56</sup> This group of former Trotskyist officers – including future ‘members’ of the military-fascist plot, Putna and Primakov – was rounded up and arrested in the summer of 1936 and accused of participating in a

counterrevolutionary military organization connected to the alleged main oppositionist conspiracy soon to be publicized by the first show trial. But momentum did not stop there. Under the leadership of Nikolai Ezhov – a dyed-in-the-wool conspiracy theorist – the NKVD turned increasing attention to the military in the aftermath of the first show trial. Ezhov was clear in personal communication to Stalin in September 1936 that there were undiscovered Trotskyists in the army. Later in December, at an NKVD conference, he remarked:

I think we have still not fully investigated the military Trotskyist line.

[...] We opened a diversionary-wrecking organization in industry.

What grounds are there to believe that it is impossible to carry out diversionary acts in the army? There are more opportunities here anyway than in industry, not fewer.<sup>57</sup>

Ezhov's growing interest in the Red Army (alongside calls from senior officers themselves to investigate more closely) saw rising numbers of arrests going into early 1937.<sup>58</sup> In this way, the arrest of the small group of former military Trotskyists in summer 1936 was a key moment for the later military purge. Yet a question remains: how did these arrests spread to Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers soon to be accused of coordinating the military-fascist plot? Tukhachevskii had not supported Trotsky in the political struggle after Lenin's death. There was little to tie him to the arrests among the former military Trotskyists. Moreover, while he certainly had a strained personal relationship

with Voroshilov, Stalin had personally vouched for Tukhachevskii in 1930 when he could easily have had him arrested.

What left Tukhachevskii fatally exposed was a shift in the parameters of the conspiracy narrative that was driving forward the Great Terror in 1937. At the outset of the growing arrests from the Kirov murder, former oppositionists were accused of participating in secret opposition networks and planning terrorist attacks. In the first few months of 1937, however, the investigations and associated conspiracies underpinning the terror took on a stronger international dimension. The former opposition was now said to be working hand-in-hand with foreign powers, particularly Germany and Japan. This shift was likely a consequence of Ezhov's conspiratorial thinking. Before taking over leadership of the NKVD, Ezhov had invested efforts in safeguarding the Soviet Union from espionage and had been closely involved in scrutinising Soviet citizens working abroad.<sup>59</sup> His expanded powers as NKVD head gave him more influence from 1936. Ezhov put more resources into investigating political and counterrevolutionary crime than his predecessor Iagoda, who had paid more attention to policing the social order.<sup>60</sup> Outside of Ezhov's efforts, threatening international events such as formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis in October 1936, the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1936 and the ongoing risk that the Spanish Civil War might become a flashpoint for world conflict, undoubtedly contributed to this shift in emphasis in the terror. All of this put the wider Red Army in danger. Arrests could now quite easily spread beyond circles of former Trotskyists, and a narrative quickly emerged that the army was under threat from foreign agents. Clear indications of this shift can be seen in the second show trial of January 1937, when the defendants were accused not

simply of being dangerous former oppositionists, but also of working for fascist powers.<sup>61</sup> One month later at the February-March Plenum of the Central Committee, Stalin pointed to a wide array of dangers posed by fascist agents, supposedly working with Trotsky and his supporters.<sup>62</sup> At one point at the plenum Stalin chose to underline the danger with a telling military reference:

In order to win a battle during war, this may require several corps of soldiers. But in order to thwart these gains at the front, all is needed are several spies somewhere on the staff on the army or even on the staff of the divisions, who are able to steal operative plans and give these to the enemy.<sup>63</sup>

Ezhov echoed Stalin's comments about the threat from spies and saboteurs, arguing that not enough was being done to expose them. He also made reference to a possible palace coup or military plot in the upper ranks.<sup>64</sup> Yet head of the army Voroshilov struck a markedly different tone. Downplaying the danger to the military, he claimed that very few enemies had been revealed in the army, which only accepted the 'best cadres'.<sup>65</sup> Voroshilov was certainly right on the numbers. It was only in April that the NKVD's investigation into the military started showing real dividends.<sup>66</sup> But Voroshilov was clearly striking the wrong tone and his efforts to downplay the perceived threat to the military did not succeed. Indeed, Molotov was most clear in calling for a thorough checking of the army, even though there were, as yet, only 'small signs' of sabotage. For Molotov, it was natural to scrutinize the military: 'If we have wreckers in all sectors of the economy, can we imagine that there are no wreckers in the military? It would be

ridiculous. The military department is a very big deal, and its work will be verified very closely.’<sup>67</sup>

The presentation and acceptance of a subversive threat to the Red Army at the February-March Plenum had immediate impact. Soon enough, senior military leaders were openly talking about spy networks. Voroshilov also quickly scrambled to change his line. Dropping any effort to shield his institution, he now argued in a speech in March, given to the Red Army *aktiv*, that not a single enemy could be permitted in the army and that it needed to be ‘utterly and completely clean.’<sup>68</sup> At the same meeting, his deputy Gamarnik proclaimed: ‘the Japanese-German Trotskyist agents, spies, and wreckers are in a full range of our army organization.’<sup>69</sup>

It was only a matter of time before the investigation swung towards the high command. As we have seen, Tukhachevskii had already been subject to rumours about his disloyalty and similar hearsay circled again in early 1937. Soviet intelligence agents and diplomats reported conversations abroad of plots and military conspiracies, of supposed connections between the Soviet high command and the Nazis.<sup>70</sup> Old and newly-emerging rumours would appear more credible than they once did in light of the growing security concerns surrounding the army. Moreover, as we have also seen, Tukhachevskii had narrowly avoided arrest as a counterrevolutionary back in 1930. It is no wonder that he fell under the NKVD’s gaze in spring 1937 when the parameters of their Great Terror broadened beyond the former political opposition.

However, the key moment that explains the timing of Tukhachevskii’s arrest in May 1937 and the subsequent explosion of the military purge was the ‘discovery’ of a supposedly extensive spy infiltration in the army that same

month. On 10 May Voroshilov reported to Stalin about a serious infiltration, admitting that the army had been significantly compromised by foreign agents at all levels. Sabotage and espionage were widespread. According to Voroshilov, serious damage had already been done and urgent action was needed, particularly the scrutiny all officers in all areas of the army.<sup>71</sup> This report coincides exactly with the first action taken against Tukhachevskii and the group of senior officers who would be presented as the leaders of the military-fascist plot one month later. Tukhachevskii was demoted the very day that Voroshilov sent his report to Stalin. In this way, it is likely that the unearthing of this supposed 'spy infiltration' gave Stalin the push he needed to have Tukhachevskii arrested and launch a devastating purge of the Red Army. And the spy scare itself was an extension of the rising security concerns surrounding the Red Army evident from earlier in the year. Moreover, Stalin seems to have had espionage firmly on his mind at this time, having written a long article for *Pravda*, published also in May, which underlined the threat from fascist agents to the Soviet state.<sup>72</sup> But still, it was a major risk to launch a destabilising purge of the army when the country was gearing up for war. Stalin had exercised restraint in the past when he rejected Menzhinskii's call to crackdown on the army in 1927 and when he let Tukhachevskii off the hook in 1930. Stalin would not attack his army without good reason. During the first months of 1937, he probably waited to see what came up in the NKVD's investigation into the military, but as soon as Voroshilov reported on an extensive spy infiltration in May – affecting all levels of the army – there was no other choice but a mass purge. How could he go to war with an army compromised in such a way? The gamble of a purge could not be avoided.

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Stalin attacked his army because of a spy scare in the military in summer 1937. This spy scare was given credibility because the Red Army had been judged as vulnerable to subversion for nearly two decades. Long-standing security concerns had circled the army since its formation: from 'unreliable' military specialists to spies, foreign saboteurs and domestic Trotskyists. Supposed 'military conspiracies' of different stripes had been 'exposed' in the twenty years before the 1937 purge. There was rarely a moment from its formation in 1918 that the Red Army was not subject to questions about its reliability. These long-standing security concerns came to a dramatic head during 1937. In the aftermath of the Kirov murder, the arrests of a small group of former Trotskyist officers in 1936 swung attentions more firmly towards the army. This gave the NKVD an opening to scrutinize the military more deeply. As the parameters of the terror widened in 1937, this then provided the opportunity and momentum for arrests to move beyond the danger of Trotskyism. In this respect, the Great Terror alone was not enough to spark the military purge; nor were long-standing security concerns that had trailed the army since 1918. It was a combination of long-standing anxieties about the reliability of the military and the sudden eruption of political violence in the Great Terror that left the Red Army fatally exposed.

This explanation of the military purge has implications for how we understand the nature of Stalin's power. From the late 1920s, Stalin spearheaded a radical transformation of Soviet military and industrial power in anticipation of



major war with the capitalist world. However, at the same time, Stalin and his circle could easily exaggerate or totally misperceive security threats to the Soviet state, causing the regime to lash out in unpredictable ways. As this chapter has shown, the Red Army fell victim to such misperceived conspiracies in 1937, doing much to severely destabilize the institution critical for defence. Stalin exercised vast control over the Soviet state by the 1930s, but did much to undermine its strength through misperceiving the nature of security threats. In this way, Stalin's ability to build with one hand and destroy with the other defined the nature of his power.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger R. Reese, 'The Impact of the Great Purge on the Red Army: Wrestling with the Hard Numbers', *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 19, no. 1-3 (1992): 71-90; 'M.N. Tukhachevskii i "voenno-fashistskii zagovor"', *Voенно-istoricheskii arkhiv* (1998): 113-17.

<sup>2</sup> A meeting of the Political Administration of the Red Army in August 1937 reported that 'Hundreds and thousands of eyes are now looking at the troops for the intrigues of enemies. The troops and commanders are writing hundreds, thousands of letters about faults, failures.' Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv (hereafter RGVA), f. 9, op. 29, d. 318, l. 11.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Leonard Schapiro, 'The "great purge"', in *The Red Army*, ed. B. H. Liddell Hart (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1957); John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: a Military-Political History* (London: Macmillan, 1962); Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (London: Macmillan, 1968). For a more recent example, see E. A. Rees, *Iron Lazar: a Political Biography of Lazar Kaganovich* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), 202.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the dossier, see Peter Whitewood, *The Red Army and the Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Soviet Military* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 4-6. The same objections apply to the version of the story that claims the Gestapo fabricated the dossier to fool Stalin into beheading his army.

<sup>5</sup> Valentin Leskov, *Stalin i zagovor Tukhachevskogo* (Moscow: Veche, 2003). Only marginally more convincingly, Sergei Minakov argues there was a real military plot, but only to unseat head of the army, Kliment Voroshilov. *1937. zagovor byl!* (Moscow: Iauza; Eksmo, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Service, *Stalin: a Biography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2004); Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Rather than concentrate on the shorter-term proximate causes behind the Great Terror, other scholars see significance in longer-term patterns of state violence and in the efforts of the security apparatus to police the social order predating the turmoil of the 1930s. See David R. Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924-1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) and Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police: Public order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926-1941* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009). While recognizing the importance of longer-term trends, this chapter argues that contingent events are central to the outbreak of the military purge.

<sup>8</sup> See in particular Khlevniuk, *Stalin*, 150-162. For a recent interpretation of the Great Terror that emphasizes its longer roots, see James Harris, *The Great Fear: Stalin's Terror of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> See Sarah Davies and James Harris, *Stalin's World; Dictating the Soviet Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> See Lynne Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> There was also criticism of a proposed people's militia as the majority of the Russian population were peasants and not more reliable urban workers. Mark von Hagen, 'Civil-military Relations and the Evolution of the Soviet Socialist State', *Slavic Review* 50, no. 2 (1991): 271.

<sup>12</sup> A. G. Kavtaradze, *Voennye spetsialisty na sluzhbe respubliki sovetov, 1917-1920 gg.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1988), 224.

<sup>13</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky*, vol. 1, 1918: *How the Revolution Armed* (London: New Park, 1979), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Roger R. Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience: a History of the Soviet Army, 1917-1991* (London: Routledge, 2000), 22.

<sup>15</sup> *Vos'moi s'ezd RKP(b), mart 1919 goda: protokoly* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1919), 154.

<sup>16</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 39 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1969), 313.

<sup>17</sup> See Orlando Figes, 'The Red Army and Mass Mobilisation during the Russian Civil War, 1918-1920', in *Warfare in Europe, 1919-1938*, ed. Geoffrey Jenson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 326.

<sup>18</sup> V. P. Butt, *The Russian Civil War: Documents from the Soviet Archives* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 104.

<sup>19</sup> *F. E. Dzerzhinskii: predsedatel' VChK-OGPU 1917-1926: dokumenty*, ed. A. A. Plekhanov and A. M. Plekhanov (Moscow: MFD, Materik, 2007), 130-2.

<sup>20</sup> I. V. Stalin, *Collected Works*, vol. 4 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), 120; *Bol'shevistskoe rukovodstvo. perepiska, 1912-1927*, ed. A. V. Kvashonkin et al. (Moscow: Rosspen, 1996), 40.

<sup>21</sup> Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter RGASPI), f. 558, op. 11, d. 5410, l. 1.

<sup>22</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1139, l. 67.

<sup>23</sup> Viktor Chebrikov, *Istoriia sovetskikh organov gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti: uchebnik* (Moscow: KGB, 1977), 24.

<sup>24</sup> *Arkhiv VChK: sbornik dokumentov*, ed. Vinogradov et al. (Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2007), 131-3; *Dzerzhinskii*, ed. Plekhanov and Plekhanov, 133.

<sup>25</sup> On White agents discovered in the army, see RGVA, f. 9, op. 28, d. 297, ll. 8-25; op. 9, d. 229, l. 272; Chebrikov, *Istoriia sovetskikh organov*, 13-101.

<sup>26</sup> In 1920, the OO received one third of the Cheka's entire yearly budget. George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police Force: The All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-revolution and Sabotage (December 1917 to February 1922)* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 207.

<sup>27</sup> For cases of supposed foreign agents discovered in the army, see S. S. Voitkov, *Otechestvennye spetssluzby i krasnaia armia, 1917-1921* (Moscow: Veche, 2010), 71-7, 164, 289, 313, 362.

Military specialists were also accused of working with foreign powers, see Aleksandr Zdanovich, *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti i krasnaia armia* (Moscow: Kuchkov Pole, 2008), 510-11.

<sup>28</sup> For a fuller discussion, see James Harris, 'Intelligence and Threat Perception: Defending the Revolution, 1917-1937' in *The Anatomy of Terror: Political Violence under Stalin*, ed. James Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 29-43.

<sup>29</sup> Joshua Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905-1925* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 128.

<sup>30</sup> Zdanovich, *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*, 493.

- <sup>31</sup> For espionage cases, see Boris Viktorov, *Bez grifa "sekretno": zapiski voennogo prokurova* (Moscow: Iurid. litra, 1990), 62, 66; Zdanovich, *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*, 606-13.
- <sup>32</sup> Zdanovich, *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*, 74-5.
- <sup>33</sup> The military procuracy made this danger clear in 1927. See RGVA, f. 4 op. 14, d. 70, ll. 1, 14-15.
- <sup>34</sup> Erickson, *Soviet High Command*, 191.
- <sup>35</sup> For such reports from the early 1920s, *Russkaia voennaia emigratsiia 20-kh-40-kh godov: dokumenty i materialy*, vol. 1, bk. 2, ed. V. A. Zolotarev et al. (Moscow: Geia, 1998), 87-9; Zdanovich, *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*, 337.
- <sup>36</sup> RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 186, ll. 34-5; *Krasnaia armia v 1920-e*, ed. Sergei Kudriashov et al. (Moscow, 1997), 86.
- <sup>37</sup> *Russkaia voennaia emigratsiia*, vol. 4, ed. A. A. Kol'tiukov et al. (Moscow: RGGU, 2007), 815-17.
- <sup>38</sup> On White interest in Tukhachevskii as a 'Red Bonaparte' see Sergei Minakov, *Stalin i zagovor generalov* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2005), 71-98.
- <sup>39</sup> M. N. Tukhachevskii i 'voenno-fashistskii zagovor' *Voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv* 1 (1997), 229-35.
- <sup>40</sup> For such an OGPU report on White interest in Tukhachevskii as a military dictator, see *Russkaia voennaia emigratsiia*, vol. 5, ed. A. A. Kol'tiukov et al. (Moscow: RGGU, 2010), 421-2.
- <sup>41</sup> RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 227, ll. 190-1; f. 33988, op. 3, d. 69, l. 133; RGASPI, f. 74, op. 2, d. 51, ll. 21-4.
- <sup>42</sup> The case was later discussed at the joint plenum of the Central Committee in October but no further action was taken. Iurii Fel'shtinskii and Georgii Cherniavskii, *Lev Trotskii. Kniga tret'ia. Oppozitsioner, 1923-1929 gg.* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2012), 238, 267-8; Zdanovich, *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*, 320-2.
- <sup>43</sup> Michel Reiman, *The Birth of Stalinism: the USSR on the Eve of the "Second Revolution"* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 125.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.
- <sup>45</sup> Zdanovich, *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*, 325-6.
- <sup>46</sup> See RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 178, l. 55; d. 16, l. 1; f. 37837, op. 10, d. 20, ll. 131-2; op. 21, d. 52, ll. 46, 48; d. 39, l. 32.
- <sup>47</sup> In 1928, Vitovt Putna, exiled as military attaché because of his support of Trotsky, received Stalin's enthusiastic support in returning to the central military apparatus. In a letter Stalin pressed that 'we will do everything possible' [to help Putna]. Voroshilov described him as 'one of the best of our commander-party men'. Putna was later arrested in 1936. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 11, d. 36, l. 17; f. 74, op. 21, d. 42, l. 91.
- <sup>48</sup> Primakov admitted in 1936 that he had secretly met with other former Trotskyists. 'Delo o tak nazyvaemoi 'antsovetskoi trotskistskoi voennoi organizatsii' v krasnoi armii', *Izvetsiia TsK* 4 (1989), 44. Putna met with another former Trotskyist, Efim Dreister, in London. RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 872, l. 76.
- <sup>49</sup> On Trotskyist networks, see J. Arch Getty, *Origin of the Great Purges: the Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 119-28.
- <sup>50</sup> Outside the minority of military Trotskyists, the Military Procuracy noted in 1927 that 'the infiltration of foreign agents into the RKKA is on an insignificant scale'. RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 70, l. 1.
- <sup>51</sup> On the Red Army and collectivization, see in particular Nonna Tarkhova, *Krasnaia armia i stalinskaia kollektivizatsiia, 1928-1933 gg.* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2010).
- <sup>52</sup> Iaroslav Tynchenko, *Golgota russkogo ofitserstva v SSSR, 1930-1931 gody* (Moscow: Moskovskii obshchestvennyi nauchnyi fond, 2000), 3.
- <sup>53</sup> 'M. N. Tukhachevskii i "voenno-fashistskii zagovor"' (1997), 247. The evidence against Tukhachevskii was highly likely to have been obtained through torture.
- <sup>54</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 778, ll. 34, 38.
- <sup>55</sup> *Pis'ma I. V. Stalina V. M. Molotovu: 1925-1936 gg.: sbornik dokumentov*, ed. L. Kosheleva et al. (Moscow: Rossiia molodaia, 1995), 231.
- <sup>56</sup> For statistics on growing arrests for political crimes in the army in the mid-1930s from the Military Procuracy, see RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 281, l. 144.
- <sup>57</sup> For Ezhov's September letter to Stalin, see Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov, *'Stalinskii pitomets' - Nikolai Ezhov* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2008), 251; for his December comments, see 269.
- <sup>58</sup> Semen Budennyi wrote to Voroshilov in August 1936 calling for investigation of the army in light of the first show trial. See RGVA, f. 4, op. 19, d. 16, l. 265.

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- <sup>59</sup> J. Arch Getty and Oleg Naumov, *Yezhov: the Rise of Stalin's "Iron Fist"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 182-4; Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926-1941* (Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009), 230.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 234-5.
- <sup>61</sup> William Chase, 'Stalin as Producer: the Moscow Show Trials and the Construction of Mortal Threats', in *Stalin: a New History*, ed. James Harris and Sarah Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 226-48.
- <sup>62</sup> 'Materialy fevral'skogo-martovskogo plenuma TsK VKP(b) 1937 goda', *Voprosy istorii* 3 (1995), 3-10.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.
- <sup>64</sup> *Tragediia sovetskoii derevni: kollektivizatsiia i raskulachivanie: dokumety i materialy v 5 tomakh, 1937-1939*, vol. 5, bk. 1, ed. V. Danilov et al. (Moscow, 2004), 162-4; 'Materialy fevral'skogo-martovskogo plenuma TsK VKP(b) 1937 goda', *Voprosy istorii*, 4-5 (1992), 10.
- <sup>65</sup> 'M. N. Tukhachevskii i 'voenno-fashistskii zagovor'' (1997), 157.
- <sup>66</sup> Vladimir Khaustov and Lennart Samuelson, *Stalin, NKVD i repressii 1936-1938 gg.* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2010), 113.
- <sup>67</sup> 'Delo o tak nazyvaemoi 'antisovetskoii trotskistskoii voennoi organizatsii'', 45.
- <sup>68</sup> RGASPI, f. 4, op. 14, d. 1820, ll. 448-9.
- <sup>69</sup> RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 319, l. 2.
- <sup>70</sup> 'Delo o tak nazyvaemoi 'antisovetskoii trotskistskoii voennoi organizatsii'', 61.
- <sup>71</sup> RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 965, ll. 65-81.
- <sup>72</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 203, ll. 62-88.