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The Purge of the Red Army and the Soviet Mass Operations, 1937–38

PETER WHITEWOOD

THE purge of the Red Army launched by Iosif Stalin in early June 1937 can help explain his later sanction of the mass operations, a decision that finally pushed the political violence of the Great Terror towards the ordinary Soviet population. The ‘mass operations’ were large-scale campaigns of state repression, spanning from summer 1937 to autumn 1938, and marked the high point of the Great Terror. The first operation was launched on 30 July 1937 against former kulaks and other ‘anti-Soviet elements’; thereafter, similar operations targeted a range of different population groups, including national minorities such as Poles, Germans and Koreans. In total, the mass operations led to approximately 1.15 million people being sentenced by the NKVD and 683,000 executions, representing a significant acceleration of the Great Terror.¹ Notably, the purge of the Red Army immediately preceded this massive wave of violence. In May the NKVD arrested Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevskii and a group of other high-ranking officers and accused them of being the ringleaders of a fascist-backed ‘military conspiracy’. Soon after in early June, Stalin and the Red Army leadership called for an extensive purge of the military to root out any co-conspirators and arrests quickly spread throughout the officer corps. Just weeks later, the first mass operation began. As this explosion

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¹ See Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police: Public Order, Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926–1941*, Baltimore, MD, 2009, p. 3. For the national operations, see *Nakazannyi narod: po materialam konferentsii ‘Repressii protiv rossiiskikh nemtsev v Sovetskom Soiuze v kontekste sovetskoi natsional’noi politiki’*, ed. Irina Shcherbakova, Moscow, 1999; *Repressii protiv poliakov i pol’skikh grazhdan*, ed. A. E. Gur’ianov, Moscow, 1997; James Morris, ‘The Polish Terror: Spymania and Ethnic Cleansing in the Great Terror’, *Europe–Asia Studies*, 56, 2004, 2, pp. 751–66.

of repression inside the Red Army closely coincided with the first mass operation, this article will show why the military purge may have acted as the spark and had a transformative impact on the course of the Great Terror.

Before evidence of the mass operations was published in 1992, historians of the Great Terror typically concentrated on political elites rather than ordinary people.² Attention usually focused on the repression unleashed by Stalin within the Communist Party following the murder of the Leningrad Party First Secretary, Sergei Kirov, on 1 December 1934 and the three notorious show trials of the former political opposition held during 1936–38.³ But evidence of the mass operations now makes clear that ordinary people, rather than party elites, suffered the most during the Great Terror. In fact, due to the very large spike in arrests and executions from summer 1937, it has been argued that the Great Terror only really began with the first mass operation.⁴

Historians have been forced to reconceptualize the Great Terror to incorporate such widespread repression against ordinary Soviet citizens. Yet, despite the publication of a growing body of research, there is still little consensus about Stalin's motivations in sanctioning the mass operations. Historians agree that their objective was to destroy 'dangerous' and 'unreliable' population groups, but why Stalin perceived these to be a threat to his regime, and why he decided to take action against them specifically in summer 1937, remain disputed questions. There are related disagreements about whether the mass operations were connected to the earlier political repression within the Communist Party (and the nature of this connection) and what such widespread arrests and executions of ordinary people tells us about the nature of Stalinist totalitarianism.

The purge of the Red Army has been ignored in all recent research on the mass operations even though this began in early June 1937, only weeks before the first mass operation. As this article will show, the military purge was sparked by the Soviet leaders' misperception that the Red Army had been deeply infiltrated by foreign agents and that a conspiratorial military group was operating within the upper levels of the high command. Stalin sanctioned a purge in early June in order to remove what was believed to be

² Details of the first mass operation were first published in *Trud* on 4 June 1992. For the political context of the publication, see Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police*, p. 6ff.

³ From a large body of work, see Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties*, London, 1968, and Adam Ulam, *Stalin: The Man and his Era*, New York, 1974.

⁴ See Oleg Khlevniuk, *Master of the House: Stalin and His Inner Circle*, New Haven, CT, 2009, p. 167.

a 'fifth column' from the armed forces. In this respect, there are immediate similarities between the military purge and the mass operations: both were aimed at destroying what the Soviet leaders perceived to be dangerous and subversive groups posing an internal security threat. But examining the military purge alongside the mass operations can reveal far more than their surface level similarities. It can help reconcile currently conflicting historical accounts of the mass operations and contribute to our still incomplete understanding of why Stalin sanctioned such radical repression during summer 1937.

The debate about the mass operations (and the origins of the Great Terror) is extensive and complex and cannot be comprehensively covered here. This article engages with two prominent explanations of the mass operations: that the approaching World War is the best explanation for why Stalin felt the need to internally secure the Soviet Union with mass repression and, alternatively, that the mass operations were driven primarily by domestic political tensions. However, more broadly, it challenges interpretations that see the mass operations (and by extension the wider Great Terror) as a pre-emptive and carefully planned act.⁵ It must also be stressed that it is impossible to avoid some level of speculation in any account of the mass operations as important documents remain classified. With this in mind, the following article will demonstrate why it is likely that the military purge and the mass operations are connected and how the former may have acted as the catalyst for the latter.

Looming War or Election Panic?

One prominent explanation of the mass operations emphasizes the approaching World War as Stalin's primary motivation for unleashing mass repression. In this interpretation, during the course of 1937 Stalin came to believe that certain population cohorts, including kulaks recently returned from exile, criminals, religious believers and a number of national minority groups, were potential members of a fifth column that could turn against the regime during an invasion.⁶ Fearing for the security

⁵ For examples of recent work emphasizing Stalin's control of the repression of the Great Terror and the mass operations and which tend to see the violence as carefully premeditated, see *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, ed. Stéphane Courtois, Cambridge, MA, 1999; *Stalin's Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union*, ed. Barry McLoughlin and Kevin McDermott, Basingstoke, 2002; *Stalin's Terror: Revisited*, ed. Melanie Ilič, Basingstoke, 2006; Paul Gregory, *Terror By Quota: State Security from Lenin to Stalin (An Archival Study)*, New Haven, CT, 2009.

⁶ Oleg Khlevniuk, 'The Objectives of the Great Terror, 1937-1938', in Julian Cooper (ed.), *Soviet History, 1917-53: Essays in Honour of R. W. Davies*, London, 1995, pp. 158-76;

of the Soviet Union at a time of future war, Stalin decided to launch a series of mass operations to neutralize this potential internal threat. The mass operations were thus a prophylactic response to a perceived danger from ‘unreliable’ population cohorts at a time of approaching conflict. They were carefully controlled and administered and brought to an end after they had accomplished their goal of destroying any ‘dangerous’ population bases. Accordingly, one historian has emphasized how the mass operations were representative of the Stalinist regime’s high level of totalitarian control.⁷

Moreover, following the line that the threat of war sparked the mass operations, David Shearer and Paul Hagenloh have shown that they did not represent a drastic change in the style of repression deployed by the regime. There is continuity in the type of policing operations used by the Stalinist regime from the late twenties. Mass operations were deployed against different ‘socially marginal’ groups during the collectivization and dekulakization campaigns, and later in the mid-thirties against juveniles and criminals. Even though the use of mass operations came under fire in early 1937, and was even criticized by Nikolai Ezhov, the head of the NKVD, for being a too blunt instrument,⁸ a few months later they were deployed once again; only this time on an even larger scale. In this respect, the use of mass operations during 1937–38 represented a return to already established policing practices. For Shearer and Hagenloh, the threat of war was the decisive factor in compelling Stalin to turn to them once again.⁹

By contrast, rather than point to the threat of war, another prominent interpretation of the mass operations has emphasized domestic factors as their primary cause. Arch Getty focuses on the structures and tensions within the Soviet political system and sees Stalin’s decision to launch the mass operations as one revealing a lack of control, rather than representing the actions of an assured totalitarian regime.¹⁰ Specifically, Getty argues

Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*. See also, Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Voices of the Dead: Stalin’s Great Terror in the 1930s*, New Haven, CT, 2007, and ‘Accounting for the Great Terror’, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 53, 2005, 1, pp. 86–100.

⁷ See Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, esp. pp. 201–02.

⁸ ‘Materialy fevral’skogo-martovskogo plenuma TsK VKP(b) 1937 goda’, *Voprosy istorii*, 10, 1994, pp. 15–16.

⁹ See David R. Shearer, ‘Crime and Social Disorder in Stalin’s Russia: A Reassessment of the Great Retreat and the Origins of the Mass Repression’, *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 39, 1998, 1–2, pp. 119–48, and *Policing Stalin’s Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924–1953*, New Haven, CT, 2009; Paul Hagenloh, ‘Socially Harmful Elements and the Great Terror’, in Sheila Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Stalinism: New Directions*, London, 2000, pp. 286–308, and *Stalin’s Police*.

¹⁰ J. Arch Getty, ‘“Excesses Are Not Permitted”: Mass Terror and Stalinist Governance in the Late 1930s’, *Russian Review*, 61, 2002, 1, pp. 113–38 (pp. 115–16).

that Stalin sanctioned the mass operations as a means to secure the support of local party leaders who had become increasingly concerned that they would lose their positions during forthcoming elections to the Supreme Soviet in 1937. This new legislative body was to be elected on an open franchise and local party bosses feared that they would lose out to various 'anti-Soviet elements' that had become increasingly active during the year. According to Getty, local party leaders eventually convinced Stalin of the danger posed by a large pool of 'anti-Soviet elements' in the summer of 1937 and he then sanctioned a campaign of mass repression against these internal 'enemies'. In contrast to the accounts of the mass operations that emphasize the looming war, Getty characterizes these as an irrational and chaotic strike against the Soviet population. The mass operations were neither long planned nor well prepared and were prompted by a sudden fear within upper party circles that 'anti-Soviet elements' would gain too great an influence during the elections to the Supreme Soviet, leading to a possible loss of control in the countryside.¹¹

None of the above accounts, however, provide a definitive explanation of the mass operations. For instance, while it is certainly correct to highlight local party leaders' concerns about 'anti-Soviet elements' in the run-up to the Supreme Soviet elections, this does not entirely explain why Stalin launched mass repression against specific national minority groups. It is here the future threat of war seems the most likely explanation.¹² On the other hand, there are clear problems with the argument that the threat of war sparked the mass operations. When the kulak operation began at the end of July 1937, the Soviet Union was not facing any immediate foreign threat. Japan invaded China during the same month, marking the start of the Sino-Japanese War, but this was not a pressing danger to the Soviet Union. The Japanese armed forces were now entangled in China, removing one potential military threat to the Soviet Union for the time being. In this sense, if the threat of war really was the primary catalyst of the mass operations, the timing is not adequately explained. Why did Stalin turn to mass repression in summer 1937 and not earlier or later in the year? As

¹¹ See J. Arch Getty, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939*, New Haven, CT, 1999, pp. 444-90; Getty, "Excesses Are Not Permitted", pp. 117, 127. For another account of the mass operations which downplays the threat of war, see Marc Junge and Rolf Binner, *Kak terror stal bol'shim: sekretnyi prikaz no. 00447 i tekhnologiia ego ispolneniia*, Moscow, 2003. Junge and Binner argued that the mass arrests and executions of marginal groups during 1937-38 represented the Stalinist regime's attempt at social engineering.

¹² Shearer emphasizes this point, see *Policing Stalin's Socialism*, p. 298.

stressed by Getty, why did Stalin not deploy the mass operations during 1938 in response to international events posing a far greater security threat to the Soviet Union, such as Hitler's annexation of Austria?¹³

It is here that examining the mass operations in the context of the military purge can provide further answers and help reconcile conflicting accounts. The significance of the military purge is in the high level of damage that Stalin caused his armed forces, but also in how he completely misperceived the danger. The discovery of the 'military-fascist plot', which formed a central justification for the military purge, had almost no basis in reality. There was no 'fifth column' and no conspiracy in the high command, but the Red Army was purged anyway. As detailed below, there is much to suggest that Stalin truly believed that this action was unavoidable based on the 'evidence' he received during the first half of 1937 concerning an apparent spy infiltration of the Red Army. And in the same sense, in order to explain the mass operations, it is necessary to try and understand how the Soviet leadership could radically misperceive threats and how this could lead to cycles of mass repression. The misperceived 'fifth column' in the Red Army 'discovered' in summer 1937 was regarded as an extremely serious problem by the regime and one requiring a swift and decisive response. But it is not out of the question that the 'exposure' of the 'military-fascist plot' acted to shock Stalin into finally taking radical action against already identified 'suspicious' population groups, providing the trigger for the mass operations. It may have been the 'exposure' of the 'military-fascist plot' that finally compelled Stalin to order the repression of former kulaks and 'anti-Soviet elements' that had been the object of so much concern from local party bosses in the first half of 1937 and against national minorities over the coming months. In this respect, like the military purge, it is entirely possible that the decision to launch the mass operations was similarly taken at the last minute, lacked adequate preparation and may have been born of panic. If the military purge did act as the trigger, the mass operations were launched primarily in response to a misperceived threat, and one shaped by both domestic political tensions and the regime's perception of the external foreign threat.

¹³ Getty emphasizes this point in 'Pre-election Fever: The Origins of the 1937 Mass Operations', in James Harris (ed.), *The Anatomy of Terror: Political Violence under Stalin*, Oxford, 2013, pp. 216–35 (p. 218). As Getty notes, from the chronology of international events, these only threatened the Soviet Union when the mass operations were on the wane in 1938.

A 'Fifth Column' in the Red Army and the Military Purge

The most common explanation of the military purge continues to emphasize that Stalin wanted to further consolidate his power over the Red Army and that he viewed Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevskii and several other senior officers as potential challengers. Those who support this view have argued that Stalin and the NKVD subsequently, and knowingly, had the group arrested on fabricated charges of participation in a military conspiracy. The officers, including Tukhachevskii, Ieronim Uboevich, Iona Iakir, Boris Fel'dman, Avgust Kork, Robert Eideman, Vitalii Primakov and Vitovt Putna, were then put on trial on 11 June. All were found guilty of being leading members of a so-called 'military-fascist plot' and immediately executed. Stalin then ordered a massive purge of the armed forces to complete this consolidation of power.¹⁴ Since the opening of the Russian archives, however, it has been possible to examine the military purge in greater detail and it has been made clear that this was much more than a simple consolidation of power from above. Roger Reese, for instance, showed how routine purges carried out by army party organizations before the Great Terror established a practice of internal purging which helped drive the political violence between 1937–38.¹⁵ The military purge had a more complex internal dynamic than is suggested by the common label of the 'Tukhachevskii Affair'. However, while we now have a better understanding of the dynamic behind the military purge, explanations of why Stalin sanctioned it in June 1937 are less developed.¹⁶ This article will argue that the decision was driven above all by a misperception that the Red Army posed a serious threat to the regime. During mid 1937 the Soviet leaders came to believe that a fifth column of

¹⁴ See John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918–1941*, London, 1962; Conquest, *The Great Terror*. For more recent arguments that Stalin was motivated to purge the Red Army through a desire for subservient officers, see Iuliia Kantor, *Zakliataia družba: sekretnoe sotrudnichestvo SSSR i Germanii v 1920–1930-e gody*, St Petersburg, 2009; Nikolai Cherushev, *1937 god, byl li zagovor voennykh?*, Moscow, 2007; A. A. Pechenkin, *Gibel' voennoi elity, 1937–1938 gg.*, Moscow, 2011.

¹⁵ Roger Reese, 'The Red Army and the Great Purges', in Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning (eds), *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 198–214.

¹⁶ Sergei Minakov is one of the few historians who have put forward an alternative explanation of the military purge moving beyond the established version focusing on Stalin's desire for more power. According to Minakov, there was a genuine conspiracy within the Tukhachevskii group to unseat Kliment Voroshilov as head of the Red Army and the military purge was the regime's response. This argument, however, does not account for why the military purge reached such a large scale beyond the small group of supposedly traitorous officers and the work suffers from circumstantial evidence. See *1937. zagovor byl!*, Moscow, 2010.

foreign-backed 'enemies' had infiltrated the army. The military purge was launched to destroy this internal danger. In this respect, rather than being one part of a carefully orchestrated plan to further increase Stalin's control over the state, the purge of the Red Army was reactive, it was in response to a misperceived threat from foreign agents, and the decision to sanction such an attack on the institution most important for the regime's defence was probably made at the last moment.

The concern held by the regime that foreign agents would attempt to infiltrate the Red Army dates back to its formation in early 1918. Once the Bolsheviks had created their armed forces, this generated a whole host of new security concerns, one of which was the potential danger of infiltration by spies. Military intelligence was of high value for all countries during the interwar period and it needed to be safeguarded. Thus, over the next two decades, the political police kept the Red Army under close observation and frequently 'exposed' foreign agents and various spy rings apparently hidden in the ranks. These arrests never achieved a large-scale until 1937 and neither were they all genuine.¹⁷ Officers and soldiers who had relatives abroad could quite easily be arrested under the label 'foreign agent'. Troops stationed in the border regions, in particular, were believed to be under greater risk of infiltration. Nevertheless, regardless of the actual truth behind the arrests, the impression that hostile governments were actively undermining the Red Army was sustained over the twenties and thirties, and the danger from foreign agents remained a persistent low-level issue.

In early 1937, however, there are clear indications that foreign espionage and sabotage were beginning to be seen as the most dangerous threats to the Red Army. This eclipsed the already recognized threat posed by former Trotskyists serving in the ranks, who, since the murder of Sergei Kirov, had been regarded as the chief internal security threat to the military. Indeed, during summer and autumn 1936, the Red Army had faced increasing scrutiny from the NKVD after several serving middle-rank former Trotskyist officers were connected to the group of former political oppositionists sentenced to execution following the first Moscow show trial, having been found guilty of serious counterrevolutionary state crimes, including Kirov's murder.¹⁸ Subsequently, and following his appointment

¹⁷ See a Military Procuracy report detailing the low incidence of alleged foreign agents in the Red Army in 1927, in Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv (hereafter, RGVA), f. 4, op. 14, d. 70, l. 1. An increase in the number of spies 'exposed' in the Red Army was recorded by the OGPU in 1933, see RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 178, ll. 2–10.

¹⁸ For detail on these incriminations, see Cherushev, *1937 god*, pp. 96, 101; *Lubianka: Stalin i VChK-GPU-OGPU-NKVD, ianvar' 1922 – dekabr' 1936*, ed. Khaustov et al.,

as head of the NKVD in September 1936, Ezhov put the Red Army under pressure to try and flush out the remaining Trotskyist 'enemies' he was convinced were still unexposed in the ranks.¹⁹ The number of arrests in the military for 'Trotskyist counterrevolution' soon began to climb throughout the second half of 1936 as more 'enemies' were steadily 'discovered'.²⁰ The Red Army, in this sense, could not avoid being drawn into the increasing political repression throughout 1936. Domestic tensions were reflected in the military as much as they were in other Soviet institutions.

But during the first few months of 1937 the focus of the NKVD's investigation into the Red Army began to shift further towards uncovering foreign agents. It is difficult to pinpoint the underlying causes of this shift for certain, but the worsening international situation during the mid thirties no doubt played an important role. Notably, the signing of the anti-Comintern pact between Germany and Japan in November 1936 sent a clear and hostile message to the Soviet Union. This stronger emphasis on the threat from foreign agents was particularly visible during the second Moscow show trial in January 1937, which provided the background to the shift in the direction of the NKVD's investigation into the Red Army. Indeed, the charges against this second group of former political oppositionists at the January show trial claimed that they were not just Trotskyist counterrevolutionaries but were apparently working on the direct orders of foreign governments.²¹ The NKVD was also trying to make wider connections between domestic 'Trotskyist counterrevolutionaries' and foreign governments at this very time. This can be seen in an NKVD directive published on 14 February 1937 which drew attention to the 'terrorist, diversionary and spy activity' of German Trotskyists, supposedly on the orders of the Gestapo.²² In general terms, the perceived threat from hostile governments, and particularly from fascist regimes, loomed much larger in early 1937.

Moscow, 2003, pp. 764–65. The officers linked to the former political oppositionists on trial were Vitovt Putna, Vitalii Primakov, Dmitri Shmidt, Sergei Mrachkovskii, M. Ziuk, S. A. Turovskii and B. I. Kuzmichev. Mrachkovskii was not only linked to the former oppositionists, but also stood trial.

¹⁹ For Ezhov's suspicions of unexposed Trotskyist counterrevolutionaries in the military in September and December 1936, see documents printed in Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov, *Stalinskii pitomets* – *Nikolai Ezhov*, Moscow, 2008, pp. 251, 269.

²⁰ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 107, l. 14.

²¹ *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre*, Moscow, 1937.

²² N. Okhotin and A. Roginskii, 'Iz istorii "nemetskoi operatsii" NKVD 1937–1938 gg.', in Shcherbakova (ed.), *Nakazannyi narod*, pp. 35–75 (p. 40).

This shift in the parameters of the political repression within the Communist Party appears to have shaped the concurrent repression within the Red Army. For example, as the second show trial was underway, several foreign agents and spy rings were ‘exposed’ in the military.²³ In one case from the end of January, Ezhov sent a note to the head of the Red Army, Kliment Voroshilov, concerning an ongoing investigation into a Trotskyist group detained since November 1936 and which included several officers. In January, Ezhov now reported that it had been ‘fully established’ that one was a German spy.²⁴ It seems that Ezhov had added a new charge of espionage against what had been previously identified as a straightforward Trotskyist group.²⁵

That the perceived espionage threat to the military was becoming more pronounced can also be seen in the steady stream of reports and rumours filtering into the Soviet Union during early 1937 suggesting that certain members of the high command were disloyal and secretly connected to the German government. For example, in January, *Pravda*’s Berlin correspondent contacted his editor, Lev Mekhlis, concerning a supposed secret connection between the Red Army elite and the Nazis. Tukhachevskii was singled out for particular suspicion. During the same month, Artur Artuzov, the former head of the foreign department of the NKVD, contacted Ezhov about ‘wrecking’ that had also, apparently, been carried out by Tukhachevskii.²⁶ Finally in March 1937, according to NKVD information, the French Minister for War, Édouard Daladier, had supposedly spoken to the Soviet ambassador about a possible German-sponsored coup in the Soviet Union making use of members of the Red Army high command hostile to Stalin. Apparently, following a military coup, a new Soviet government would then ally with Germany against France.²⁷ Of course, it is entirely possible that the German government was purposely spreading rumours about disloyalty in the Red Army as a means of undermining Stalin’s trust in his own military. Disinformation was widely practised throughout the interwar period.²⁸ It is also unclear

²³ RGVA, f. 37837, op. 21, d. 99, l. 16; f. 33987, op. 3, d. 851, ll. 39–40, 134.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 50.

²⁵ March 1937 had also seen a significant increase in the number of counterrevolutionaries ‘discovered’ in the Leningrad Military District, including foreign agents. See V. S. Mil’bakh, A. M. Grigorian and A. N. Chernavskii, *Politicheskie repressii komandno-nachal’stvuiushchego sostava, 1937–1938: Leningradskii voennyi okrug*, St Petersburg, 2013, pp. 82–83.

²⁶ ‘M. N. Tukhachevskii i “voenno-fashistskii zagovor”’, *Voенно-istoricheskii arkhiv*, 1, 1997, pp. 149–255 (p. 255).

²⁷ *Reabilitatsiia: kak eto bylo*, ed. A. Artizov et al., 3 vols, Moscow, 2000–04, 2, p. 601.

²⁸ For more on possible German disinformation attempts, see ‘M. N. Tukhachevskii i

how seriously the NKVD took these rumours about disloyalty in the army. But even so, within what the regime took to be a worsening international climate, it would be unusual if the NKVD did not increase their attention on the high command, even just as a precaution.

At the same time as these rumours filtered into the Soviet Union, senior members of the military elite began to talk more openly about the dangers posed to the Red Army by foreign agents. In a speech given to an audience of military party members on 13 March 1937, Ian Gamarnik, the head of the Political Administration of the Red Army (PUR), was frank about the extent to which the military had been infiltrated by spies: 'Comrades, the Japanese-German Trotskyist agents, spies and wreckers are in a full range of our army organization, in the staffs, the institutions, the academies, the military-training institutions.'²⁹ And a week later, in a speech in Leningrad on 20 March, Gamarnik returned to this theme and spoke again about the espionage threat:

There is no capitalist country that would not practise espionage, wrecking and counterintelligence work in another capitalist country. These are the laws of capitalism [...]. And it is quite natural and understandable that if one capitalist country is sending agents and spies to another capitalist country, it would be incomprehensible, strange, foolish, it would be naive, if we did not think that each capitalist country is attempting to get agents, spies inside our country, it would be naive to think that each capitalist country does not have its own agents and spies inside our country.³⁰

In reference to the Red Army specifically, Gamarnik added:

The evidence of wrecking and espionage is not small [...]. We know that Trotskii gave a direct order to his agents from abroad to create a Trotskyist terrorist cell in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, and Hitler and Trotskii gave an order to organize subversive cells in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army in peace time, which prepared the defeat of the RKKA in the future approaching war.

Gamarnik noted that the People's Commissariat of Defence was required to report to the Central Committee about this issue within one month.³¹

"voenno-fashistskii zagovor", *Voенно-istoricheskii arkhiv*, 2, 1998, pp. 3–123 (pp. 15–20).

²⁹ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 319, l. 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, ll. 73–74.

³¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 75, 84.

Gamarnik's comments about the espionage threat can be set alongside those of other senior military figures. During the same meeting of military party members on 13 March, for instance, Voroshilov mentioned the destruction of military machinery and transport that had led to several deaths. He claimed that Japanese agents were to blame. Voroshilov also pointed to the large number of accidents recorded in the military, apparently also caused by 'enemies', and he wanted each incident carefully investigated. At the same meeting, the commander of the Moscow Military District, Ivan Belov, argued that the Red Army was an 'attractive object for all counter-intelligence agents' and claimed that there was an unexposed 'nest' of enemy officers in the ranks. Notably, Voroshilov used this meeting to call for a stronger internal scrutiny of the army to expose any hidden 'enemies', remarking that the Red Army should be 'utterly and completely clean'.³²

During this same March meeting several of the speakers raised the problem of the poor security of secret documents, again suggesting that the espionage threat was becoming a priority for the military elite. Gamarnik criticized what he regarded as loose talk about the contents of secret files and complained that documents were being left in public.³³ The Chief of the General Staff, Aleksandr Egorov, pointed to the disappearance of 'a colossal number of critical documents' and criticized the army for its complacency.³⁴ Another officer, B. I. Bazenkov, remarked: 'There is not a month when in any department of the NKO [People's Commissariat of Defence] some kind of secret document is not lost.'³⁵ The Red Army had always struggled with the security of its secret documents, but with increasing attention now being given to foreign agents in early 1937 further preventative measures were needed.³⁶ As such, just days before this March meeting, Gamarnik had signed a secret order concerning 'enemies' supposedly working in the clerical and technical offices in a

³² Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter, RGAPSI), f. 74, op. 2, d. 117, ll. 51, 58, 485.

³³ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 319, l. 6.

³⁴ RGVA, f. 4, op. 14, d. 1820, l. 170.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 247.

³⁶ On document security in the Red Army, see Aleksandr Zdanovich, *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti i krasnaia armia*, Moscow, 2008, pp. 483–524. One story of a serious intelligence leak comes from the account of Polish intelligence agent from November 1936. According to this agent, a group of Red Army men illegally copied the mobilization plan for the Western Border regions and the most senior of the group then fled to Poland. The mobilization plan later apparently surfaced in the British press. See, *Sovetsko-pol'skie otnosheniia v politicheskikh usloviakh Evropei 30-kh godov XX stoletia*, ed. E. Durachinski and A. N. Sakharov, Moscow, 2001, pp. 67–68.

range of army staffs and institutions. 'Enemies' were apparently handling secret documents and this was going unchecked by the NKVD. Gamarnik ordered that all technical and clerical staff needed to be checked within a one-month period and those exposed as untrustworthy discharged from the army.³⁷ Later on 20 March, Voroshilov also published an order concerning document security. This recounted an episode when a secret military document had been left in a drawer in one of the rooms of the National Hotel a month before on 3 February. An investigation had found that Pavel Dybenko, the commander of Volga Military District, was responsible and he later received a reprimand. Voroshilov ordered a review of how documents were stored and noted that the case was not an isolated incident.³⁸

Clearer indications that the Red Army was in the grip of a growing spy scare can be seen just one month later. On 21 April, Iakov Alksnis, the head of the air force, sent Voroshilov a report on proposed measures to prevent wrecking and espionage in his organization. The following day a similar report was sent by Vladimir Orlov, the head of the Red Navy. The latter noted that the search for wreckers and spies was underway in the navy, already resulting in forty-three discharges.³⁹ It is almost certain that Voroshilov had requested these reports, indicating that the threat from hidden wreckers and foreign agents in the Red Army was moving up his agenda. He was laying the groundwork for serious countermeasures to be taken against infiltrated 'foreign agents'.

It was within this atmosphere of an increasing spy scare in the military that the first directly incriminating 'evidence' emerged against Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers who would later be put on trial and executed for their supposed leadership of the 'military-fascist plot'. The first piece of 'evidence' came in late April from the confessions of a small number of arrested NKVD officers: M. I. Gai, G. E. Prokofiev and Z. I. Volovich. All had been allies of Genrikh Iagoda, the former head of the NKVD, and were arrested as part of a purge of the political police undertaken by Ezhov when he took over as leader. The testimony from the NKVD men claimed that Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers were linked with the now disgraced former NKVD chief Iagoda and that they had planned a coup and carried out espionage.⁴⁰ And the case against the Tukhachevskii group was quickly assembled soon after with additional

³⁷ RGVA, f. 4, op. 15, d. 12, l. 16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 28.

³⁹ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 965, ll. 88–101.

⁴⁰ *Reabilitatsiia: kak eto bylo*, ed. Artizov et al., 2, p. 602.

supporting ‘evidence’. Between 8 and 10 May a brigade commander, M. Ie. Medvedev, who had already been arrested for supposed membership of a ‘counterrevolutionary group’, provided more material. Medvedev similarly claimed that Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers were leading members of a conspiratorial military organization.⁴¹

Importantly, the ‘evidence’ incriminating Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers given by the arrested NKVD officers and Medvedev was undoubtedly obtained using forced confessions and it is not out of the question that Ezhov was looking to expose some kind of ‘military plot’ in the early months of 1937. Indeed, an NKVD directive published on 2 April (before the incriminating ‘evidence’ against the Tukhachevskii group was obtained) had already warned about the dangers to the army from foreign intelligence. This noted that German espionage had increased in the Soviet Union and that the infiltration of the Red Army was a key goal of German agents, alongside creating subversive cells in industry and preparing acts of terrorism.⁴² With a spy scare growing in the Red Army during this time, alongside persistent rumours from abroad purporting a secret link between the high command and the Nazis, Ezhov may well have pushed harder in trying to find any connection between military figures and ‘foreign agents’. If so, he got the ‘evidence’ he wanted from the arrested NKVD officers and Medvedev. Moreover, the direction of the NKVD’s efforts will also have been influenced by Stalin’s speech to the February–March Plenum, given just one month before. Here he stressed the dangers of sabotage and espionage carried out by foreign fascist ‘enemies’ and domestic Trotskyists and highlighted the continued threat posed by the capitalist encirclement of the Soviet Union.⁴³

Consequently, as the perceived spy threat to the Red Army and rumours about its unreliability steadily gained more prominence during March and April, it is likely that the NKVD started to pay it even more attention. This left the high command in a very vulnerable position. All the members of the military elite, including the soon to be arrested Tukhachevskii group, had spent time in Germany training with the Reichswehr in the twenties and early thirties. Connections and friendships had been established at that time.⁴⁴ But these past associations would look highly suspicious in

⁴¹ ‘Delo o tak nazyvaemoi “antisovetskoi trotskistskoi voennoi organizatsii” v krasnoi armii’, *Izvestiia TsK*, 4, 1989, pp. 42–73 (p. 47).

⁴² Okhotin and Roginskii, ‘Iz istorii “nemtskoi operatsii”’, p. 41.

⁴³ ‘Materialy fevral’sko-martovskogo plenuma TsK VKP(b) 1937 goda’, *Voprosy istorii*, 3, 1995, pp. 3–10.

⁴⁴ Under interrogation in September 1946, the German military attaché General-Major

1937. As such, it is the underlying spy scare in the military, which grew throughout the early months of 1937, that is the most likely factor behind the timing of when the incriminating testimony against Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers first appeared, beginning with the ‘evidence’ extracted from the arrested NKVD men at the end of April.

The growing spy scare in the Red Army soon came to a head on 10 May when Voroshilov sent a long report to Stalin and Viacheslav Molotov entitled, ‘Measures for the exposure and the prevention of wrecking and espionage in the RKKKA’. In this report Voroshilov detailed the serious infiltration now facing the Red Army:

The wrecking and espionage activity of the Japanese-German-Trotskyist agents has touched [*zadela*] the Red Army. Acting on the instructions of intelligence agents of the imperialist states, the malicious enemies of the nation — the Trotskyists and Zinovievites — have penetrated their vile designs into the Red Army and have already managed to inflict considerable damage in various domains of military construction.

Voroshilov proposed a series of measures to combat this infiltration of foreign-backed enemies. Alongside calling for a general increase in levels of ‘vigilance’, he wanted widespread checks carried out on all officers in all areas of the Red Army and Navy. Emphasis would be placed on investigating political pasts.⁴⁵ Moreover, officers with access to secret documents were to be singled out for more intensive scrutiny. Voroshilov also recommended a strict procedure for checking all accidents and so-called ‘extraordinary incidents’ to look for evidence of spies and saboteurs.⁴⁶ Voroshilov’s report thus clearly shows that a comprehensive verification of the Red Army was needed to combat a perceived threat from wreckers and foreign agents. The army was understood to have been compromised by ‘enemies’ who had already managed to cause ‘considerable damage’ to the military capability of the Soviet Union.

It is important to stress that Voroshilov’s May report to Stalin and Molotov stands in clear contrast to how he had previously defended the Red Army during the February-March Plenum a few months earlier. At

Karl Spalcke commented that he had been on good terms with Iona Iakir during the collaboration of the twenties. Iakir had apparently given him a cigarette case. See *Tainy diplomatii Tre't'ego reikha: germanskie diplomaty, rukovoditeli zarubezhnykh voennykh missii, voennye i politseiskie attashe v sovetskom plenu, dokumenty iz sledstvennykh del, 1944–1955*, ed. V. S. Khristoforov et al., Moscow, 2011, pp. 698–700.

⁴⁵ RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 965, l. 65.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, ll. 65, 72, 81.

that time, Voroshilov had emphasized the reliability of the military and argued that the leadership, officer corps and PUR had worked hard to remove any subversives over the previous twenty years.⁴⁷ But Voroshilov's performance had not been convincing. Molotov called for a thorough checking of the Red Army at the Plenum, commenting that, given enough attention, even more 'enemies' would be found.⁴⁸ Without Stalin's backing it is unlikely Molotov would have issued this demand. Stalin must have had doubts about Voroshilov's account of army reliability. Indeed, Voroshilov's case had probably been undercut by Ezhov's investigation into the military, ongoing since mid 1936, which had succeeded in turning up a steadily increasing number of supposed 'Trotskyist counterrevolutionaries'. This can only have weakened Voroshilov's position at the Plenum. Consequently, following the Plenum and facing greater pressure to find even more 'enemies' in the army, Voroshilov had little choice but to redouble his efforts. It is not clear whether he did this reluctantly. He may have been swept along by the growing spy scare that gripped the army in the first half of 1937 and realized that he had no choice but to follow Stalin's lead. Or Voroshilov, perhaps, sincerely came to believe that foreign agents had compromised the army. Either way, his 10 May report to Stalin and Molotov on foreign agents in the military represents the culmination of these renewed attempts to find more 'enemies'.⁴⁹

Importantly, Voroshilov's May report coincided with the very first serious action Stalin took against the senior officers incriminated as members of the 'military-fascist plot'. Before this point, Stalin had not taken any action against the group, despite the damaging 'evidence' already collected by the NKVD from late April. Indeed, the day before he sent his 10 May report about foreign agents in the military to Stalin and Molotov, Voroshilov sent a letter to the Politburo requesting sanction for several transfers and promotions in the military elite. These received Politburo

⁴⁷ 'M. N. Tukhachevskii i "voenno-fashistskii zagovor"', *Voenna-istoricheskii arkhiv*, pp. 153–65.

⁴⁸ 'Delo o tak nazyvaemoi "antisovetskoi trotskistskoi voennoi organizatsii"', p. 45.

⁴⁹ There is evidence that Voroshilov was dejected following the 'exposure' of the 'military-fascist plot', suggesting that his renewed efforts to find more 'enemies' in the ranks following the February-March Plenum were carried out reluctantly. In an outline of his speech intended for the June 1937 Plenum of the Central Committee, there is a line that did not make it into the final version where Voroshilov wrote that the discovery of the military plot 'means that our method of work, our whole system for running the army, and my work as People's Commissar, has utterly collapsed'. Voroshilov, clearly, felt the military plot had undermined his authority and he seems to have taken little pride in its 'exposure'. See David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941*, New Haven, CT, 2012, p. 190.

approval on 10 May and included the demotion of Tukhachevskii from deputy to the head of the Red Army to the lower position of commander of the Volga Military District.⁵⁰ In requesting Tukhachevskii's transfer it is likely that Voroshilov understood that he had to take some kind of action in light of his report outlining an extensive spy infiltration of the Red Army. He would already have known about the specific 'evidence' gathered by the NKVD against Tukhachevskii and the other senior officers, and this put him in a difficult position. How could the head of the Red Army not have known his deputy was a spy? And the wider spy infiltration identified in his own report raised the stakes further. Requesting that Tukhachevskii be transferred acted to distance Voroshilov from the incriminated officers and provided a clear signal that he was taking decisive action in defence of the Red Army.

As the Politburo quickly approved the transfer, Stalin seemingly agreed that some action now needed to be taken concerning Tukhachevskii's incrimination. And it is likely that the impetus behind Stalin's decision stemmed from having received Voroshilov's report about the infiltration of foreign agents in the army. This was sent to Stalin on the very day that the Politburo considered and approved Tukhachevskii's transfer. The spy infiltration identified by Voroshilov was an additional pressure to the reports already coming from the NKVD about a military 'conspiracy' in the high command and it probably provided the final push for Stalin to take action against the incriminated senior officers.⁵¹ Indeed, soon after Tukhachevskii's transfer, similar measures were taken against the other named military 'conspirators'. On 14 May Avgust Kork, the head of the Frunze Academy, was immediately arrested. The following day, Boris Fel'dman, the deputy commander of the Moscow Military District, was also arrested. Iona Iakir, the commander of the Kiev Military District, was

⁵⁰ 'Delo o tak nazyvaemoi "antisovetskoi trotskistskoi voennoi organizatsii"', p. 49.

⁵¹ It is of course possible that Stalin had ordered Voroshilov to include Tukhachevskii's transfer in his 9 May letter to the Politburo in the first place. This would mean that his decision to transfer Tukhachevskii was not primarily influenced by receiving Voroshilov's report on spies dated the following day. But at the same time, it is entirely possible that Stalin was already aware of the contents of the report that Voroshilov was compiling in early May before he received the final product. Thus, the Politburo decision to transfer Tukhachevskii was still prompted by the perceived spy threat to the Red Army, even if Stalin was behind the initial transfer request. Stalin and Voroshilov were close allies and it would be unusual if they did not share important information about a widespread spy infiltration of the military. Without documents showing the precise timeline of events, however, it is impossible to understand this connection for certain. But it remains likely that Voroshilov's final May report had significant impact on the action taken by the regime against the officers incriminated in the 'military plot'.

removed from his position on 20 May and transferred to command the Leningrad Military District. Ieronim Uborevich, the commander of the Belorussian Military District, was also transferred to command the troops in the remote Central Asian Military District. Both officers were arrested on 22 May, alongside Robert Eideman, the head of the Society to Assist Defence, Aviation and Chemical Development. Tukhachevskii was also formally arrested on 22 May. By the end of the month, all of the arrested officers had confessed to their membership of a military group headed by Tukhachevskii. On 26 May Tukhachevskii himself gave testimony, admitting that he was the leader of an ‘anti-Soviet military-Trotskyist plot’.⁵² The arrested officers were accused of working on the orders of hostile foreign governments to undermine the Red Army and the defence industry to ensure that the Soviet Union would be vulnerable during an invasion.

In this respect, the broader threat from foreign agents identified in Voroshilov’s report is likely to have been the decisive factor in pushing Stalin to finally take action against the incriminated members of the high command, beginning with Tukhachevskii’s transfer on 10 May. Indeed, it does appear that Stalin was focused on the danger from spies, particularly German agents, at this very time. For instance, in early May he personally edited a long *Pravda* article describing the methods of recruitment used by foreign intelligence agents. This article noted that before the First World War, German intelligence, apparently, had a list of 47,000 civilians living in Russia, France and Britain that it could call upon as agents. The article emphasized the present danger from fascist agents and described espionage as a ‘continuous secret war’ led by an ‘army of spies’.⁵³ Other newspaper stories published during the summer similarly focused on the threat posed by foreign agents.⁵⁴ Moreover, according to V. K. Vinogradov, Stalin apparently told Voroshilov and Ezhov in May that their biggest enemy was now the German intelligence service.⁵⁵ He also remarked in May that

⁵² Transcripts from Tukhachevskii’s interrogation have been shown to be blood-spattered, suggesting the NKVD beat a confession from him. See ‘Delo o tak nazyvamoii “antisovetskoi trotskistskoi voennoi organizatsii”’, p. 50.

⁵³ See RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 203, ll. 62–88.

⁵⁴ See the *Pravda* articles ‘Podryvnaia rabota iaponskoi razvedki’, published on 9 July and ‘Shpionskii internatsional’, published on 21 July. Both can be found in Stalin’s personal papers. See RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 203, ll. 95–100. The Red Army newspaper, *Krasnaia zvezda*, also published a series of articles on espionage between March and May 1937.

⁵⁵ V. K. Vinogradov, ‘Tret’ia reforma organov bezopasnosti (1934–1941)’, in V. K. Bylinin et al., *Trudy Obshchestva izucheniia istorii otechestvennykh spetssluzhb*, 4 vols, Moscow, 2006–07, 2, p. 93. Hiroaki Kuromiya and Georges Mamoulia point to documents showing that Germany and Japan did increase joint military intelligence activity against the Soviet

the Soviet military intelligence apparatus had fallen into the ‘hands of the Germans’.⁵⁶

But there are also indications that the spy threat to the Red Army specifically had been on Stalin’s mind in the early months of 1937. During a speech to the February-March Plenum, for example, Stalin made a military reference to highlight the danger from foreign agents:

In order to win a battle during war, this may require several corps of soldiers. But in order to thwart these gains at the front, all is needed are several spies somewhere in the staff of the army or even in the staff of the divisions, who are able to steal operative plans and give these to the enemy.⁵⁷

A month later in March, the head of the Communist International, Georgi Dimitrov, recorded in his diary that Stalin had received two Spanish writers and discussed the Spanish Civil War. Notably, according to Dimitrov, Stalin had commented that the General Staff of the Republic forces was unreliable and remarked, ‘there has always been betrayal on the eve of an offensive by Republic[an] units’.⁵⁸ It is very possible that Stalin was thinking similarly about the reliability of his own armed forces.

Stalin’s own concerns about foreign agents no doubt lent credibility to the reports he received from Voroshilov about the infiltration of

Union following the signing of the anti-Comintern Pact. This led to a formal agreement of 11 May 1937 between Germany and Japan for the exchange of military intelligence concerning the Soviet Union. Stalin’s concerns about German and Japanese intelligence activity against the Red Army were thus not unfounded, if still exaggerated. See H. Kiroimiya and G. Mamoulia, ‘Anti-Russian and Anti-Soviet Subversion: The Caucasian-Japanese Nexus, 1904–1945’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61, 2009, 8, pp. 1415–40 (pp. 1426–27).

⁵⁶ Document printed in Jansen and Petrov, “*Stalinskii pitomets*”, p. 291. Khaustov and Samuelson also highlight large numbers of arrests beginning at the end of April 1937 due to ‘evidence’ that Soviet military intelligence had been, apparently, infiltrated by foreign agents. There were over 300 arrests, including the deputy head of military intelligence, Artur Artuzov. See Vladimir Khaustov and Lennart Samuelson, *Stalin, NKVD i repressii 1936–1938 gg.*, Moscow, 2010, pp. 199–220.

⁵⁷ ‘Materialy fevral’sko-martovskogo plenuma TsK VKP(b) 1937 goda’, *Voprosy istorii*, 3, 1995, pp. 13–14.

⁵⁸ *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933–1949*, ed. Ivo Banac, New Haven, CT, 2003, p. 60. A few months before in December 1936, Stalin had also received a forwarded letter from the Soviet trade representative in Spain, Artur Stashevskii, who remarked that a fascist organization existed in the Republican high command that was carrying out sabotage and espionage. And in February 1937, the deputy Chief of Soviet military intelligence also reported that unreliable officers were in the Republican army and carrying out acts of sabotage. See documents printed in *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Ronald Radosh et al., New Haven, CT, 2001, pp. 92, 131.

foreign agents in the Red Army and the 'evidence' collected by the NKVD against the Tukhachevskii group. Facing an increasing amount of material purporting to show that the army had been compromised, by early May Stalin must have felt some kind of action needed to be taken against Tukhachevskii and the incriminated officers. But this still leaves unexplained why he hesitated and, in the majority of cases, had the officers implicated in the 'military-fascist plot' transferred in the first instance and arrested over a week later. It was only Kork and Fel'dman who bypassed an initial transfer and were immediately arrested on 14 and 15 May. One explanation for this hesitation may have been that Stalin felt he needed to be more certain about the basis of the 'plot' in the high command before he had all of the incriminated officers arrested. The infiltration of the Red Army by 'foreign agents' as identified in Voroshilov's 10 May report was dangerous enough, but if there was also a conspiracy within the military elite, this greatly raised the seriousness of the situation. This would mean that foreign-backed 'enemies' had not only infiltrated the Red Army but they had also established a conspiracy at the highest level. This would no longer just be a case of military espionage but perhaps an attempt to seize control of the Red Army. If this were the case then Stalin's response would need to be severe. It would create huge upheaval inside the institution most vital for defence at a time of looming war, leaving the Soviet Union temporarily in a more vulnerable position.

Consequently, it is likely that Stalin wanted to personally verify the case against the Tukhachevskii group.⁵⁹ And there is evidence that he did become closely involved in the investigation into the 'military-fascist plot', indicating that he wanted to make certain of the reality of charges himself. Stalin received Ezhov regularly at the height of the investigation between 21 and 28 May and there is material to suggest that he was involved even

⁵⁹ Stalin had done this before in 1930 when Tukhachevskii was incriminated in the OGPU's operation *vesna* that 'exposed' a major military conspiracy among former imperial officers serving in the Red Army. On receiving news that Tukhachevskii had been incriminated as a counterrevolutionary on 10 September 1930, Stalin initially hesitated. He wrote to Sergo Ordzhonikidze two weeks later noting that the truth of Tukhachevskii's incrimination 'could not be excluded' but that it was 'necessary to think about this carefully'. Stalin postponed the issue until October when a face-to-face confrontation between Tukhachevskii and his accusers was arranged. Following this, Stalin was satisfied that Tukhachevskii was innocent, commenting to Molotov that he was '100% clean'. Stalin decided to tread carefully in 1930 and may have chosen to do so again in 1937 when the stakes were even higher. For details of the Tukhachevskii's incrimination, Stalin's initial reaction, and his final verdict, see RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 778, ll. 34, 38, and *Pis'ma I. V. Stalina V. M. Molotovu, 1925–1936 gg.: sbornik dokumentov*, ed. L. Kosheleva et al., Moscow, 1995, p. 231.

earlier in the month.⁶⁰ But once additional ‘evidence’ about the ‘military conspiracy’ in the high command had been extracted at the end of May (most likely from Kork and Fel’dman who had been immediately arrested and from former Trotskyist officers imprisoned since 1936) Stalin did not hesitate any longer. His suspicions had now been confirmed and he fully believed that there was a military plot within the army elite, or he believed the ‘evidence’ to a great enough extent that it was too risky not to take any further action. How could he fight the coming World War with an army that was infiltrated by spies with a military conspiracy in the high command? It is also possible that Stalin interpreted this military plot as the first move by hostile foreign governments against the Soviet Union, possibly foreshadowing a future invasion. In any case, Stalin was reacting to a misperceived danger and not acting pre-emptively. Thus, it is likely that Stalin waited until the very last moment until he was certain of the basis of the ‘military-fascist plot’, but once he had sufficient ‘evidence’ this meant taking no further action was impossible. He then sanctioned the arrests of the remaining members of the Tukhachevskii group, taking place from the 22 May.

In early June an extraordinary meeting of the Military Soviet was convened to discuss the ‘exposed’ military conspiracy. With Stalin and Ezhov present, it was here that calls were made to root out the remaining ‘conspirators’ in the ranks. In his speech, Voroshilov spoke about the need to purge the military: ‘to sweep out with an iron broom not only all this scum, but everything that recalls such an abomination [...]. It is necessary to purge the army literally up to the very last crack [*shchelochek*], the army should be clean, the army should be healthy.’⁶¹ Stalin stated in his speech that the Nazis had financed the military plot and he repeatedly accused the arrested officers of being German spies.⁶² One week after the Military Soviet, and after being forced to sign confessions admitting to working on the orders of Germany and Japan in planning to overthrow the government, a closed military trial sentenced the incriminated Tukhachevskii group

⁶⁰ ‘Delo o tak nazyvaemoi “antisovetskoi trotskistskoi voennoi organizatsii”’, pp. 48–51. Stalin’s participation in the investigation of the high command can also be seen a few weeks earlier. On 8 May, Primakov sent a letter to Ezhov in which, after nine months of denying his participation in any military conspiracy, he finally relented. However, in his letter Primakov indicated that Stalin himself had been involved in his interrogation. As the letter is dated to the 8 May, Stalin probably had some involvement in the wider investigation from at least this time. See ‘M. N. Tukhachevskii i “voenno-fashistskii zagovor”’, *Voenna-istoricheskii arkhiv*, pp. 180–81.

⁶¹ *Voennyi soviet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR: 1–4 i iunia 1937 goda: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. K. M. Anderson et al., Moscow, 2008, p. 77.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 128–31; 136–37.

to death on 11 June. One person who almost certainly would have stood trial alongside them was Gamarnik, but he committed suicide on 31 May following his own incrimination in the ‘military plot’. That Tukhachevskii and the other officers were sentenced by a closed military trial and were not made to endure a public show trial suggests that Stalin was responding to what he saw as a pressing danger. There was little time to arrange an elaborate show trial and make the defendants perform public displays of guilt and repentance. Stalin must have been alarmed at the scale of the ‘fifth column’ in the Red Army and felt that he had to launch a purge immediately.

The military purge advanced quickly throughout June as a wave of discharges and arrests hit the Red Army. In the nine days after the military trial, 980 senior officers had been arrested as members of the ‘military-fascist plot’. At the June Plenum of the Central Committee, Ezhov detailed that this number now stood at 1,100.⁶³ Both the NKVD and PUR were closely involved in the investigation into the now exposed ‘military plot’ and a surge of denunciations erupted from within the ranks as the arrests gathered momentum. At a meeting of political workers in August 1937, the new head of PUR, P. A. Smirnov, commented that more than ten thousand letters had already been received relating to the ‘military-fascist plot’.⁶⁴ By the time the military purge was brought to a halt in November 1938, approximately 35,000 army leaders had been discharged from the ranks and nearly 10,000 were arrested. Even though over 11,000 victims were eventually reinstated, this still represents a highly destabilizing and concentrated attack on the Red Army. The number of soldiers from the lower ranks discharged or arrested during 1937–38 is unknown, but they were certainly not insulated from the purge.⁶⁵

The Mass Operations

When the first mass operation targeting former kulaks and ‘anti-Soviet elements’ was ordered by the regime on 30 July, this was just weeks after the start of a military purge intent on destroying a ‘fifth column’ in the Red Army. Without access to currently classified documents concerning the preparation of the mass operations it is impossible to know for certain if the military purge was the primary catalyst. But it does seem that, as

⁶³ ‘Delo o tak nazyyvaemoi “antisovetskoi trotskistskoi voennoi organizatsii”’, p. 57.

⁶⁴ RGVA, f. 9, op. 29, d. 318, l. 22.

⁶⁵ For different estimates of the number of victims, see ‘M. N. Tukhachevskii i “voenno-fashistskii zagovor”’, *Voенно-istoricheskii arkhiv*, pp. 113–17; Roger Reese, *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers: A Social History of the Red Army, 1925–1941*, Lawrence, KS, 1996, pp. 75, 143, 210; Pechenkin, *Gibel’ voennoi elity*, pp. 148–56.

far as the regime was concerned, the 'military-fascist plot' was a stark demonstration of how the Soviet Union could be subverted by hostile foreign governments. And if they had managed to establish a fifth column inside the Red Army, the regime surely feared it would be a much easier task to infiltrate already discontented and unreliable population groups such as former kulaks and criminals.

From examining events immediately after the start of the military purge, it is clear that the regime was making preparations for a crackdown on 'unreliable' population groups with the justification that they were linked to foreign agents. On 17 June, for instance, the head of the Western Siberian UNKVD, Sergei Mironov, sent a report to Robert Eikhe, the head of the party in Western Siberia, detailing that he had uncovered a large 'Kadet-Monarchist and Socialist Revolutionary organization' apparently acting on the orders of Japanese intelligence agents. Mironov also noted that branches of the organization were hidden in other cities in the region and planned to revolt against the regime.⁶⁶ As Hagenloh notes, what Mironov found particularly alarming about this organization was that it supposedly had a supporting base among the kulaks and 'anti-Soviet elements' in West Siberia. Mironov thus drew a direct connection between the activity of foreign agents and 'anti-Soviet elements' resident in the population.⁶⁷ In response, on 28 June, Stalin ordered the establishment of an extra-judicial troika in the region to execute the members of this conspiracy.⁶⁸

It is not out of the question that the 'exposure' of the 'military-fascist plot' pushed NKVD operatives like Mironov towards trying to make links between already recognized domestic 'subversive groups' and 'foreign agents'. In this way, the military purge transformed the scale and the targets of the Great Terror and was a decisive factor in pushing the violence towards the ordinary Soviet population. However, it is unlikely that Mironov was acting solely on his own initiative in making these wider connections. During the summer of 1937 numerous articles had appeared in the Soviet press about foreign espionage. Indeed, the *Pravda* article on foreign agents that Stalin personally edited in May claimed that spies were trying to recruit unreliable individuals from the within the population.⁶⁹ Thus, in making connections between foreign agents and

⁶⁶ Khaustov and Samuelson, *Stalin, NKVD i repressii 1936–1938 gg.*, pp. 332–35.

⁶⁷ Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police*, p. 245.

⁶⁸ See *Tragediia sovetskoi derevni: kollektivizatsiia i raskulachivanie: dokumenty i materialy v 5 tomakh, 1927–1939*, ed. V. Danilov, R. T. Manning, L. Viola, 5 vols, Moscow, 1999–2006, vol. 5, book 1, p. 258.

⁶⁹ RGASPI, f. 588, op. 11, d. 203, l. 62.

domestic subversive groups, it was likely that Mironov was also responding to ‘signals’ from above.

Further signals from above can be seen a week after Mironov’s report when the June Plenum of the Central Committee convened between 23 and 29. There is no direct transcript for the Plenum, but summary of Ezhov’s speech exists. And according to this summary, Ezhov spoke about the existence of a widespread ‘fascist anti-Soviet’ conspiracy inside the Soviet Union which affected not only the military, but the party, the defence industry, transport and agriculture. Ezhov ranked the various strands of this conspiracy by order of importance and the ‘military-fascist plot’ came at the top of his list, followed by a plot ‘exposed’ in the NKVD and eleven other sub-strands. Ezhov sketched out a vision of a wide-ranging conspiracy, involving Rightists, Trotskyists, Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, supported by Germany, Japan and Poland and their respective intelligence services. These conspirators apparently planned to overthrow the regime by rising up during an invasion and through leading a campaign of sabotage and terrorism. Importantly, Ezhov noted that these enemies were recruiting supporters among kulaks, White Guards, criminals and other subversive elements in the population.⁷⁰ As such, Ezhov was conceptualizing a much broader conspiracy than had been recently ‘exposed’ in the Red Army. Like Mironov, he was making further connections between ‘suspicious’ groups in the population and the activity of foreign agents, and the scale of this imagined conspiracy was quickly growing.

It was not long after that the regime took serious action against the identified subversive groups in the population. One month after the June Military Soviet which had called for a purge of the Red Army, and just days after the June Plenum where Ezhov had described his vision of a widespread conspiracy, the concrete preparations for the first mass operation began. On 3 July Stalin sent a telegram to all regions calling for the registration of all former criminals and kulaks recently returned from exile and the reestablishment of extra-judicial troikas to arrest and execute those deemed to be the most dangerous.⁷¹ This was the start of the mass repression against ‘anti-Soviet elements’. Stalin ordered estimates to be compiled of the number of formerly exiled kulaks and criminals in each region.⁷² On 31 July NKVD operational order No. 00447 was sent to all regions which formed the basis of the first mass operation. This was

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 306–08.

⁷¹ Danilov et al., *Tragediia sovetskoi derevni*, vol. 5, book 1, p. 258.

⁷² Hagenloh, *Stalin’s Police*, pp. 245–46.

not just targeted at kulaks but included a range of 'anti-Soviet elements', including White Guards, religious figures and other 'criminal elements'. The order accused these groups of being the 'chief instigators' of anti-Soviet crimes and sabotage. They needed to be eradicated 'once and for all'.⁷³

In this respect, there is a case to be made that the 'discovery' of the 'military-fascist plot' encouraged the NKVD to seek out other foreign-backed conspiracies in other Soviet institutions and across the ordinary population. After finding 'evidence' of more dangerous 'conspiracies', this soon led to the launch of the mass operations. Indeed, it appears that it was only after the start of the military purge that Ezhov began visualizing a much broader conspiracy involving large numbers of 'suspicious' population groups supposedly supported by foreign powers. Notably, the 'conspirators' involved in the 'military-fascist plot' had been accused of planning to make a move against the regime during an invasion. The domestic base of dangerous 'anti-Soviet elements' highlighted by the NKVD during June apparently planned the same thing. These were almost identical dangers, suggesting the 'military-fascist plot' may have served as a model.

* * *

As detailed above, identifying the military purge as the catalyst for the mass operations can reconcile current conflicts in literature. This article supports scholars who have argued that the external foreign threat is central to understanding the launch of the mass operations, but it demonstrates how this can be the case even though there were no genuine and pressing international dangers facing the Soviet Union during summer 1937. What matters is not the real international events of the mid-to-late thirties (which only began to threaten the Soviet Union's security in 1938), but how the Soviet leaders perceived, or more accurately, radically misperceived, foreign threats. The 'military-fascist plot' was interpreted as a strike on the Soviet Union by Germany and Japan, despite it having little basis in reality. From the perspective of the Soviet leaders, they were under attack. The foreign threat appeared very real during summer 1937 despite the reality of events.

But this examination of the military purge departs from those who have highlighted the threat of war as the decisive factor behind the mass

⁷³ For Order No. 00447, see Danilov et al., *Tragediia sovetskoi derevni*, vol. 5, book 1, pp. 330–37.

operations in one crucial respect. It suggests that the mass operations were not a well-planned prophylactic cleansing undertaken by the Soviet Union in anticipation of future war. Instead, Stalin appears to have responded quickly to a misperceived danger, sparked by the ‘discovery’ of a ‘fifth column’ in the military just weeks before the start of the mass operations. Stalin’s response to the ‘military-fascist plot’ appears hesitant, last-minute and almost reluctant. He vacillated over the arrests of the Tukhachevskii group and seems to have waited for more ‘evidence’ of their guilt before sanctioning further action beyond transfers. Launching a wave of repression inside the Red Army was not an action undertaken lightly, and Stalin, presumably, wanted to make sure that the case was credible. Yet when he had sufficient ‘evidence’ in late May of the extent of the spy infiltration in the Red Army and of the military ‘conspiracy’ in the high command, Stalin faced little choice but to opt for an extensive purge. And as the military purge gives every indication of being a last-minute decision, it is reasonable to suggest that the mass operations stemmed from a similar impulse, and perhaps even from a sense of panic. From the regime’s point of view, if hostile governments had infiltrated the Red Army, where else could their agents be? It is in this respect that the military purge may have sparked the mass operations.

It must be noted, however, that there is some evidence that can be interpreted as the regime moving towards the use of mass repression before the start of the military purge, suggesting that the mass operations had a deeper level of planning in advance of the discovery of the ‘military-fascist plot’. As Shearer notes, the NKVD had created organized and well-staffed operation sectors better suited to conducting mass repression in the outlying areas of the Soviet Union already in April 1937. During the same month the Politburo created an emergency council including Stalin, Ezhov, Molotov, Voroshilov and Lazar Kaganovich that could take quick decisions and bypass formal Politburo procedure. The NKVD was also made directly responsible for combating ‘socially dangerous elements’ in April and its Special Board had its powers expanded.⁷⁴ The picture, however, is by no means clear. At the same time, as Gábor Rittersporn has highlighted, the number of prison wardens was fixed at a too low-level during May 1937 and there were not enough camps to accommodate the coming spike in the prison population. The Procuracy was also putting pressure on the NKVD to try and curb its extra-judicial powers at this time, which does not suggest that official sanction of an unprecedented

⁷⁴ Shearer, *Policing Stalin’s Socialism*, pp. 328–29.

level of these powers was just around the corner.⁷⁵ Most importantly, at the 1937 February-March Plenum, Ezhov explicitly criticized the use of mass operations as an ineffective tool for finding the most dangerous hidden 'enemies' because they were too geared towards policing the social order.⁷⁶ Finally, the bulk of the preparations for the kulak operation were rushed through in the weeks leading up its launch in early August. None of this suggests that careful planning lay behind the mass operations.

It is of course possible that the Soviet leaders had been laying the groundwork for action to be taken against 'anti-Soviet elements' on some level in April 1937, but at the same time they were unprepared for the enormous scale of the mass operations. If so, it is possible that the 'exposure' of a 'military plot' in the high command in May, accompanied by the 'discovery' of a broad spy infiltration of the Red Army, compelled a radicalization of these earlier measures. The regime had to quickly expand its penal system, reestablish extra-judicial troikas, revert to mass policing campaigns, and do this within a matter of weeks. The timing of the 'discovery' of the 'military-fascist plot', and how almost immediately afterwards the NKVD began to sound the alarm about large numbers of subversive groups within the population, suggests they are linked. Facing a 'fifth column' in the Red Army served to highlight sharply how the regime was surrounded by 'unreliable' population groups. Consequently, the mass campaign-style policing methods, rejected just months before, needed to be urgently reinstated. In this way, the mass operations are unlikely to have been long planned, but more a kneejerk response to a perceived internal danger.

But this explanation of the mass operations does not entirely discount interpretations of the mass operations that focus on domestic factors. Indeed, there is little to suggest that Stalin believed that the 'military-fascist plot' extended beyond the Red Army. It does not seem that he feared that the arrested military conspirators had large numbers of co-conspirators, involved in the very same plot, hidden in other institutions outside of the Red Army. If Stalin had believed this it seems strange that he did not order the first mass operation to target German and Japanese national minorities, rather than kulaks and 'anti-Soviet elements'. The 'military-fascist plot' was supposedly directed by Germany and Japan after all. Stalin did take some action against German nationals outside of the Red Army

⁷⁵ Gábor Rittersporn, 'Terror and Soviet Legality: Police vs Judiciary, 1933-1940', in Harris (ed.), *The Anatomy of Terror*, pp. 182-83.

⁷⁶ 'Materialy fevral'skogo-martovskogo plenuma TsK VKP(b) 1937 goda', *Voprosy istorii*, 10, 1994, pp. 15-16.

following the start of the military purge. On 20 July he ordered the arrest of all Germans working in the defence, electrical and chemical industries, as well as German refugees. At the same time, the NKVD began targeting Soviet citizens who had been in contact with German nationals.⁷⁷ But a dedicated mass operation against ethnic Germans living in the Soviet Union was not launched until February 1938.⁷⁸ Similarly, the Harbin mass operation, which looked to uncover Japanese agents, only began in late September 1937.⁷⁹

It is more likely, therefore, that the military plot ‘exposed’ in the Red Army was understood as being largely self-contained and confined to the military, but that it compelled the Soviet leaders into finally taking action against other already recognized ‘suspicious’ population groups. Kulaks were an obvious place to start. The military purge had highlighted how vulnerable the Soviet Union was to infiltration, and former kulaks, as a group, were without question deemed to be less loyal than serving military officers. Indeed, as Getty has emphasized, in the months before the start of the mass operations the rhetoric within party circles about the threat posed by former kulaks and other ‘anti-Soviet elements’ had been raised to a fever pitch because of the planned open elections to the Supreme Soviet. Fearing the loss of their positions, local party bosses tried to get Stalin to change his mind about the new voting procedures and sent in alarmist reports warning how ‘counterrevolutionaries’ would gain influence in the elections.⁸⁰ The ‘exposure’ of the ‘military-fascist plot’ perhaps explains why Stalin finally decided to heed the warnings of his subordinates during the summer, where he appears to have ignored these before. The ‘discovery’ of a military plot by the NKVD might have convinced Stalin that action did in fact need to be taken against the kulaks, who now represented an increasingly dangerous and unreliable population group at a time when it had been proven that foreign governments were strengthening their efforts to undermine the Soviet Union. In this way, both the external foreign threat and domestic political factors contributed to the mass operations, but the discovery of a ‘fifth column’ in the Red Army compelled Stalin to act.

Finally, highlighting the possible connections between the military purge and the mass operations suggests that there was a direct line running through the earlier political repression within the Communist

⁷⁷ Okhotin and Roginskii, ‘Iz istorii “nemetskoi operatsii”’, pp. 37–38.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

⁷⁹ Shearer, *Policing Stalin’s Socialism*, p. 349.

⁸⁰ Getty, “‘Excesses Are Not Permitted’”, p. 126, and ‘Pre-election Fever’, pp. 228–30.

Party and the later mass repression of ordinary people during 1937–38. It is very unlikely that the military purge would have been launched without the earlier arrests of former Trotskyist officers incriminated during the NKVD's investigation of the former political opposition preceding the first show trial in 1936. These particular arrests focused NKVD attentions more firmly on the Red Army and led to a concerted investigation into 'Trotskyist counterrevolution' in the ranks. As detailed above, the scope of this investigation shifted in focus during early 1937 towards 'exposing' ties between foreign agents and former Trotskyists in the military. This new line of investigation led to the 'discovery' of the 'military-fascist plot'. As such, without the earlier political repression within the Party that grew over the course of 1936 (and which itself stemmed from the Kirov murder of December 1934), the military purge might never have happened. There were certainly the right preconditions for mass repression to erupt in the Soviet Union during the mid-to-late thirties, but without the trigger of the military purge, the mass operations may never have been launched in summer 1937.