

Lindsay Fincher

Professor Pollock

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An Army Without Leaders: The Purges of the Red Army Officer Corps, 1937-38.

“Do you really not see where this is leading? He will suffocate us all one by one like baby chicks. We must do something.” – Corps Commander Feldman

“What you are suggesting is a coup. I will not do that.” – Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky.¹

¹ Rapoport, Vitaly and Alexeev, Yuri. High Treason: Essays on the History of the Red Army, 1918-1938. Durham: Duke University Press, 1985. p. 283. Taken from a conversation between Tukhachevsky and Feldman that occurred at the end of 1936 or the beginning of 1937.

The casualty lists were enormous. Out of 16 Red Army commanders, only one remained. Sixty out of sixty-seven corps commanders were killed along with 136 of the 199 divisional commanders.² The Chief of the General Staff, the commander of the air force, the commander of the army, and the inspectors of the artillery and armor disappeared in less than a year. Ninety percent of general officers and eighty percent of colonels vanished. From 1937-38, over 36,000 Red Army officers were killed or imprisoned.³ Yet, this was not the result of a catastrophic war; instead, these officers, many of whom were loyal to the Soviet government, were imprisoned and executed based on orders issued by Stalin. The purge of the Red Army officer corps was a devastating blow to the security of the Soviet Union and severely undermined effective military mobilization for World War II.

Prior to the purges, the Red Army experienced a period of massive expansion and technical innovation, primarily due to a group of progressive minded officers that were intent on building the Red Army into the most powerful military on the European continent. Through the efforts of these officers, Russia's army was transformed from a militia of peasants into one of the world's largest and most technically advanced military organizations.⁴

In the mid-1930s, the Red Army slowly began to gain a small amount of independence from the stringent regulations of the Communist Party. In September 1935, a Council of Commissars issued a decree that established officer ranks, which until

² Suny, Ronald Grigor. The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. p. 264.

³ Garder, Michael. A History of the Soviet Army. New York, Praeger Publishers, 1966. p. 95.

⁴ Zaloga, Steven J. and Ness, Leland S. Red Army Handbook: 1939-45. Great Britain: Sutton Publishing, Ltd. 1998. p. v.

then were absent from the Red Army, mainly due to their use in the tsarist army.⁵ The most prestigious rank a Soviet officer could attain was that of Marshal of the Soviet Union, similar to the five star ranks bestowed upon American generals. In November 1935, five generals were promoted to be the first Marshals of the Soviet Union: Voroshilov, the Commissar for Defense, Blyukher, commander of the Far Eastern Army, Tukhachevsky, the Chief of the General Staff, Yegorov, the Tsarist General, and Budenny, the Director of Cavalry.⁶ After the Civil War, officers were no longer elected democratically by their men; instead, military training academies were established and young men were trained in leadership, military tactics, and strategy. Decorations and medals, items that were also reminiscent of the tsarist military, were reintroduced.⁷

The Red Army was at its greatest strength in the years preceding the purges. In the Constitution of 1936, Stalin proclaimed, "Universal military service is law. Military service in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army is an honorable duty of the citizens of the U.S.S.R."⁸ This led to a ten percent increase of recruits for the following year and a higher standard of officer candidates.⁹ The estimated manpower was over 1.5 million active duty soldiers and 2.5 million reservists. The number of infantry divisions increased to 100, Soviet factories produced over 9,000 tanks, and the Red Army held over 6,000 pieces of artillery. The training of the Red Army infantryman improved, making him a tough, disciplined, and knowledgeable professional soldier. The airborne infantry consisted of over 70,000 trained paratroopers, with half a million possible

⁵ Garder, p. 95.

⁶ O'Ballance, Edgar. *The Red Army: A Short History*. New York, Praeger Publishers, 1964. p. 118.

⁷ Labin, Suzanne. *Stalin's Russia*. London, The Camelot Press Ltd., 1949. p. 128.

⁸ "1936 Constitution of the USSR." Ed. Robert Beard. Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. 1996. <<http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/const/1936toc.html>>

⁹ Garder, p. 91.

reserves. The elite Red Air Force boasted over 10,000 aircraft and 16,000 highly trained pilots. The Red Navy, which had languished from neglect after the Kronstadt uprising, also began to develop strength in the early 1930s. Over 200 destroyers and 70 submarines were produced, and the Red Fleet gained prestige equal to that of the Red Army.¹⁰

In 1936, the Red Army proudly demonstrated its military capability to foreign guests in a massive military exercise that involved over 1,200 paratroopers, 5,000 airborne infantrymen, and enormous quantities of vehicles, weapons, and ammunition dropped to ground forces via aircraft.¹¹ Through years of hardship, sacrifice, innovation, and dedication, the USSR had finally established an efficient and well trained military power. The massive military machine that had taken years of hard work to build would soon find itself deprived of its greatest leaders as the purges that had become commonplace in Soviet politics spread to the military ranks, ending the careers of thousands of loyal Red Army officers.

Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, the Central Committees and Congresses intermittently ordered Party purges. In March 1921, the Tenth Congress passed a resolution authorizing the Central Committee to expel members from the Party. Several months later, the Party was purged of class enemies and other members deemed unreliable. In May 1924, the Thirteenth Congress authorized the Central Committee to screen and, if necessary, purge members of the administrative and educational cadres. In 1933, the Central Committee ordered yet another purge of the Party.¹² The purges were

¹⁰ O'Ballance, pp. 123-128.

¹¹ O'Ballance, p. 115.

¹² Brzezinski, Zbigniew K. The Permanent Purge: Politics in Soviet Totalitarianism. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956. "Appendix I. Some Important Dates in the History of the Soviet Purges."

imbedded in the Soviet political system, and often occurred after a group or Party faction was defeated. The purges of the mid 1930s, however, would grow increasingly violent and widespread, terrorizing hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens.¹³

On December 1, 1934, Leonid Nikolayev, a disenchanted member of the Communist Party, murdered Sergei Kirov, a popular member of the Politburo and fierce advocate of Leningrad's workers.¹⁴ That same day, Stalin issued a decree stating:

1. Investigative agencies are directed to speed up the cases of those accused of the preparation or execution of acts of terror.
2. Judicial organs are directed not to hold up the execution of death sentences pertaining to crimes of this category in order to consider the possibility of pardon, because the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR does not consider as possible the receiving of petitions of this sort.
3. The organs of the Commissariat of Internal Affairs are directed to execute the death sentence against criminals of the above mentioned category immediately after the passage of sentences.¹⁵

Kirov's murder was the catalyst for a growing repression of Stalin's political opposition and the affirmation of his ruling power. In August 1936, Lev Kamenev and Grigori Zinoviev, loyal companions of Lenin and leaders of the opposition to Stalin, were accused of forming a terrorist organization that had plotted to assassinate not only Kirov, but also Stalin himself. Both defendants confessed to their crimes after being tortured relentlessly. Although they were promised their lives in turn for their confessions, both men were executed.¹⁶ As the number of trials and executions rose, Stalin's hold on

¹³ Suny, pp. 254-260.

¹⁴ Conquest, Robert. *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. pp. 37-44.

¹⁵ Conquest, p. 41.

¹⁶ Suny, p. 262.

absolute power continued to grow, eliminating any possible challenge to his authority. The Red Army, which Stalin had mainly ignored while he concentrated on liquidating his political opposition, would be the next victim in the growing terror.

In order to bring control of the Red Army even closer to him, Stalin reintroduced the role of political commissars in May 1937. Originally introduced into the Red Army by Trotsky to watch over ex-Tsarist officers with Red Army command positions, political commissars were responsible for ensuring that soldiers were disciplined, had a high level of morale, and received political training. Commissars had an amount of command status equal to the commanding officer, and could veto that officer's decisions.¹⁷ Once Stalin had reintroduced the role of political commissars, he sought to eliminate any opposition within the group of officers that commanded the Red Army. Among these officers was Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky.

One of the most tragic figures of the Great Purges, Mikhail Tukhachevsky was an ingenious military leader who held the prestigious rank of Marshal of the Soviet Union. Tukhachevsky's relationship with Stalin was, at best, lukewarm, and they often clashed over military strategy and foreign policy.¹⁸ The mediocre relationship between Stalin and Tukhachevsky dates back to the Russo-Polish War of 1920. Stalin, who served as a member of the Revolutionary Military Council, was assigned to the administration of the Southwest front, while Tukhachevsky was given command of armies in the Western front. Commander in Chief Kamenev devised a plan that transferred units from the Southwestern command to the Western command to assist Tukhachevsky in his capture of Warsaw in August 1920. Stalin, however, was determined to capture Lvov, and the

¹⁷ Labin, Suzanne. Stalin's Russia. London, The Camelot Press Ltd., 1949, pp. 129-131.

¹⁸ Shukman, Harold, ed. Stalin's Generals. New York: Grove Press, 1993, p. 267.

Southwestern front command attacked Lvov with the units that were supposed to be transferred to Tukhachevsky. Kamenev demanded that the armies be reassigned to Tukhachevsky's control, but Stalin refused to sign the order prepared by Southwestern front Commander Egorov. Without the signature of a political commissar such as Stalin, the order had no effect, and Polish forces overwhelmed Tukhachevsky's armies. The Central Committee removed Stalin from the front, and the order to transfer units was finally signed by political commissar Berzin. The additional units were too late, though, and the Polish Army took advantage of the Soviet's strategic errors and launched a counteroffensive strike that pushed the Red Army out of the western parts of the Ukraine and Belorussia. Stalin's removal from the front and his unsuccessful bid for reelection to the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic marked the end of his career in military affairs for several years.¹⁹ In a 1921 speech to the Tenth Party Congress, Stalin blamed the Western front administration for the defeat in Poland, while Tukhachevsky himself insinuated in his 1923 Moscow lectures that the Southwestern front was partly responsible.²⁰

Although the Russo-Polish War was considered a failure, Tukhachevsky gained valuable command experience and was able to demonstrate his exceptional military abilities to Soviet officials. As a member of the Red Army, Tukhachevsky attended numerous elite military academies and learned from the brightest military instructors in Russia. He would later combine his experience and education in the development of advanced military doctrines.²¹

¹⁹ Rapoport, pp. 40-42.

²⁰ Seaton, Albert and Joan. The Soviet Army: 1918 to the Present. New York: Nal Books, 1986. p. 55.

²¹ Seaton, The Soviet Army, p. 52-53

Since the end of World War I, the strategies and military doctrine of the Red Army most resembled that of the Tsarist military. Tukhachevsky recognized a need for a total modernization of the Red Army, and began working on various strategies to attain this. He would eventually produce one of the most advanced ideas ever achieved in military history: the Soviet Theory of Deep Operation.²² This advanced military strategy consisted of two phases: the breach of the enemy's defenses by the combined efforts of infantry, artillery, tanks, and aviation, and the subsequent exploitation of that breach by masses of tanks, motorized infantry, and cavalry. Paratroopers would also deploy to the rear of the enemy forces to provide support and surround the enemy forces, thus blocking a possible retreat.²³ Tukhachevsky and his fellow officers also studied the effects of air power and mechanized forces in the development of modern warfare, and invested heavily in these branches of the Red Army. Tukhachevsky preferred an offensive strike, and believed that defensive operations should be avoided if possible.²⁴ They advocated mechanization of the cavalry, the development of a large independent tank force, and the use of paratroopers to occupy strategically valuable territory. The mechanization of the Red Army proved to be a serious source of conflict between Tukhachevsky and Stalin. Stalin detested any ideas initiated by Tukhachevsky's group of progressive minded officers, and preferred his antiquated military views that stemmed from his experience in the Civil War. Stalin also surrounded himself with Buddeny and Voroshilov, two advisors that emphasized the supremacy of the horse and cavalymen over mechanization

²² Shukman, p. 270.

²³ Tyushkevich, S.A. The Soviet Armed Forces: A History of Their Organizational Development. Published under the auspices of the United States Air Force, 1978. p. 212.

²⁴ Dallin, Alexander, ed. Civil-Military Relations in the Soviet Union. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992. p. 45.

and tanks.²⁵ Above all, Stalin believed that mechanization would lead to militarism, which he perceived as a direct threat to his power. Tukhachevsky's group of progressive officers also advocated creative thinking among the officer corps, which Stalin feared would create independent minded officers that might disobey his orders and directly challenge his authority over the Soviet Union.²⁶ The issue of mechanization, however, was not the only source of conflict between Tukhachevsky and Stalin.

The Spanish Civil War marked the first serious disagreement between Stalin and Tukhachevsky. Tukhachevsky opposed sending regular Red Army troops to assist the Republican fighters and instead favored deploying Red Army reserve units. Tukhachevsky felt that the regular Red Army units should continue training in preparation for a full-scale conflict. There were still certain aspects of the army that he wanted to improve, and the deployment of reserve cadres would allow him to continue perfecting a standing army. In addition, the Red Army's strength and effectiveness would be severely reduced if regular troops were sent to Spain and the USSR was forced to rely on reserve troops for home front protection. Reserve troops usually lacked the proper training that regular troops received, and often were not prepared to repel a foreign invasion. This disagreement between Stalin and Tukhachevsky further weakened their already tense relationship.²⁷

Stalin was also highly envious of the honors and admiration bestowed upon Tukhachevsky by Lenin, Trotsky, and the Soviet citizens.²⁸ Tukhachevsky had a keen awareness of foreign policy, and was highly suspicious of Germany's intentions towards

²⁵ Shukman, p. 265.

²⁶ Shukman, p. 265.

²⁷ Garder, p. 94.

²⁸ Shukman, p. 264.

the Soviet Union. After Hitler's rise to power, Tukhachevsky demanded an end to the co-operation between the Red Army and the German Reichswehr. He also published an article in which he claimed that Hitler was deceiving the USSR and was moving towards an invasion of Soviet territory.²⁹

Unfortunately, Tukhachevsky's promising military career was ended prematurely by fabricated evidence and accusations of collaboration with the Germans. The evidence that led to Tukhachevsky's arrest was the "red folder", a forged collection of incriminating documents that originated in Germany. There are currently two plausible theories regarding the history of the "red folder." The first, transcribed by Victor Aleksandrov, claims that NKVD agent Nikolai Skoblin, acting on orders from NKVD chief Nikolai Yezhov, informed the Czechs that several Trotskyites were collaborating with the Germans in staging a Tukhachevsky led coup d'état. Skoblin wished to provide Stalin with documentary evidence, and collaborated on the fabrication with Reinhard Heydrich, head of the German Security Police. In reality, Skoblin, a former commander of White Armies during the Civil War, despised the Soviet government and predicted that Hitler would be tempted to attack a leaderless Red Army. On Christmas Eve of 1936, Hitler approved the Skoblin-Heydrich plan, and a team of forgers began work on the documents. By mid-April, the documents were ready, and NKVD deputy L.M. Zakovsky paid the Germans 200,000 marks for the "red folder." Several days later, the evidence implicating Tukhachevsky was in Stalin's hands.³⁰

The second version of the account, as told by Robert Conquest, claims that at the end of 1936, Hitler and Himmler discussed incriminating Tukhachevsky in a treasonous

²⁹ Shukman, p. 267

³⁰ Rapoport, pp. 259-261.

plot against the Soviet government. In January 1937, Nazi officials informed Czech President Beneš of the plot, who then passed the information to Stalin. After the initial accusations against Tukhachevsky were made, the Nazis began work on documentary evidence consisting of forged letters exchanged between Tukhachevsky and members of the German High Command. The documents were completed in early May, and sent to Beneš, who informed Stalin of their existence on May 8.³¹

On May 11, Tukhachevsky was relieved of his post as first deputy people's commissar and transferred to the command of the Volga military region. Tukhachevsky was perplexed by this transfer and confronted Stalin, who informed him that his reassignment was due to his association with several purged party members. Stalin reportedly assured Tukhachevsky that "we trust you. It would be better for you to leave Moscow temporarily, and when the rumors die down, we will bring you back." When Tukhachevsky arrived at his new command on May 26, he was arrested.³²

After his arrest, Tukhachevsky was interrogated, and by May 29, confessed to espionage, contacts with the German high command, and involvement in a military conspiracy to take control of the government. He did not confess to these charges without being tortured, though, as several pages of his testimony were stained with his blood.³³

On June 11, Tukhachevsky stood trial with seven other officers: Army Commanders Iakir, Uborovich, and Kork, and Corps Commanders Primakov, Putna, Feldman, and Eideman. All had been accused of conspiring to stage a military coup in

³¹ Conquest, Robert. The Great Terror: A Reassessment. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. pp. 198-199.

³² Rapoport, p. 241.

³³ Conquest, p. 200.

cooperation with the Germans. Little evidence was needed in this trial, as the accused had already confessed to their crimes after being told that confessions would save their lives.³⁴

It is highly doubtful that Tukhachevsky ever committed any of the crimes that he admitted to in his confession. Tukhachevsky was primarily a military man and had little interest in politics. He loved the military and wanted to make his service in the Red Army a life-long career. He joined the Bolshevik Party in 1918 with the belief that it was the best way to further his military career. His supervisors recognized his superior military abilities and he became one of the most trusted military officers. He fought well in the Civil War and assisted in suppressing popular uprisings at the request of his superiors. He was widely admired throughout the country, earned numerous military decorations, and held the highest positions in the Red Army. Tukhachevsky invested large amounts of work in the technical and strategic operations of the Red Army and was determined to mold it into a highly advanced military. He dedicated his entire life to Russia and the Red Army, and now he was forced to confess that he had spent years collaborating with the Germans and other oppositionists to destroy it. The events of the past weeks stunned Tukhachevsky, and during his trial he would remark “It seems to me as if all this were a dream.”³⁵

After 20 years of service to his country, Tukhachevsky and his fellow officers were found guilty of treason and sentenced to death. Before his execution,

³⁴ Conquest, p. 202-3.

³⁵ Rapoport, pp. 287-90.

Tukhachevsky uttered these last prophetic words: “You are shooting not us, but the Red Army.”³⁶

The purges did not stop in the summer of 1937; instead, they spread to the lower ranks and swept thousands of experienced leaders out of the army. In an August 1937 meeting with the Red Army’s political officials, Stalin called for the elimination of “enemies of the people” within the Red Army. The Commissar of Defense issued an edict to the Red Army that declared that anyone who had contacts with spies was to confess and anyone who had any knowledge about spy activity was to report it immediately.³⁷ The atmosphere of the corps was one of suspicion and self-preservation, and men often accused other officers of treason in order to save themselves.³⁸ Men with foreign contacts were most suspect, including those that were sent to Spain to assist the Republicans. There was no set criteria for arresting “enemies of the people”, so officers who failed to meet the expectations of their commanders, were of a certain national origin, or were suspected of having connections with purged officers could be arrested. Red Army Colonel General A.T. Stuchenko recalled an incident in which Nikolai Shevdov, a former student of the Elizavetgrad Cavalry School, boasted to his comrades that he had once drank tea with Shmidt, the school director and renowned hero of the Civil War. When Shmidt was later arrested, Shevdov also found himself under suspicion, and his comrades reported him to the Party Bureau for his alleged connections with “enemies of the people.”³⁹ Colonel I.T. Starinov, who had spent a tour of duty training

³⁶ Rapoport, p. 3.

³⁷ Medvedev, Roy. Let History Judge. New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1971. p. 210.

³⁸ Dunn, Walter S. Hitler’s Nemesis: The Red Army, 1930-1945. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1994. p. 13.

³⁹ Bialer, Seweryn. Stalin and his Generals: Soviet Military Memoirs of World War II. New York: Western Publishing Company, 1969. p. 81.

soldiers in Spain, returned to Moscow shortly after the arrest of Tukhachevsky and the other military leaders. He was shocked to learn that several of his comrades had been arrested for treason and those that had not been arrested yet would not speak to him for fear of association. Starinov himself was summoned by the NKVD for a three-hour interrogation that focused on his role in training partisan detachments. The NKVD officer that interrogated Starinov released him due to his excellent combat record, but warned him that there was a possibility they could meet again. Starinov claimed that he “was suddenly frightened, frightened as I had never been either on the battlefield or behind enemy lines. At war I had risked my own life; here everyone dear, everything sacred, was in danger.”⁴⁰ Although officers that had worked alongside Starinov in training activities were now considered enemies of the people, Starinov was saved from further investigation by the intervention of Marshal Voroshilov. Thousands of officers were not as lucky as Starinov, and were either executed or sent to prison camps. Evsevii Karpovich Afon’ko witnessed first hand how NKVD officers tortured prisoners into confessing imaginary crimes, and then implicated their fellow comrades, who were soon arrested, beginning another sick cycle of false incrimination. Afon’ko, who was eventually sentenced to eight years for “espionage for an unknown state”, wrote desperate letters to Stalin informing him of these crimes against the prisoners. Years later, Afon’ko would tell Starinov “I stopped writing to the ‘great leader’. I stopped because I realized that Stalin knew exactly what was going on.”⁴¹

Many of the purged officers were battle-hardened veterans of the Civil War who joined the Communist Party, but cared little about politics and more about advancing

⁴⁰ Bialer, p. 72.

⁴¹ Bialer, pp. 65-77.

their military careers. They often considered Stalin to be no greater than themselves because they had fought alongside one another in the Civil War. Because they had earned their positions due to their own dedication and loyalty, these men owed nothing to Stalin. Stalin then found it advantageous to replace the purged officers with young aspiring Communist officers. These young officers would owe their whole career to Stalin, and would thus be more inclined to follow any order he issued. Because of their age, these officers were often more immature than their predecessors and certainly less educated and experienced. By purging the military leadership of the progressive minded officers that he so despised, Stalin was able to form the military's strategy and development to his liking.⁴²

After purging the military leadership, Stalin surrounded himself with men that were more inclined to share his ideas of antiquated warfare. Marshals Kulik and Budyenny dismissed the ideas of modern warfare and weapons, and instead preferred the tactics and weapons that were used during the Civil War. Kulik preferred towing artillery guns with horses instead of trucks and balked at the design of the new artillery pieces because they were ugly. Budyenny, a cavalry officer during the Civil War, preferred a horse cavalry to tanks. They dismissed the ideas of tank divisions, which were crucial to Tukhachevsky's theory of deep operation, and instead divided them amongst the infantry divisions.⁴³

No division of the military escaped the purges. Support divisions such as the medical corps and the design and engineering branches were mercilessly purged of so-called traitors. The Chief of the Red Army Medical Administration, M.I. Baranov,

⁴² Hart, B.H Liddell, ed. The Red Army. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1956., p. 71.

⁴³ Dunn, p. 30.

deputy chief B.A. Reiner, the heads of the Main Administration, the head of the Kirov Military Medical Academy, and thousands of medical personnel were removed at a time in which medical training and preparation should have been of paramount concern to the army. Few of the medical doctors and nurses that served during World War II had any wartime experience. The faculties of military medical schools were purged, so prospective medical doctors received only sub par training. By 1940, only 28 percent of the Army's medical doctors had training in clinical work or disease treatment. Of the 140,796 medical doctors in the USSR, 68 percent were women, who, although skilled, were subject to insensitive treatment by their male counterparts and commanders. The USSR was already experiencing a shortage of medical personnel, and this would only grow once war commenced. Training a military medical doctor required more time than the training of a military officer, so efforts to speed up the production of military doctors resulted in doctors that were far below the required standards. Until the outbreak of war, three military medical schools produced a combined total of 2,400 assistant doctors annually. The two-year courses at medical schools were shortened to one year at the beginning of the war to fill the already understaffed medical corps with physicians. In the beginning 1941, the Red Army had only 6,000 doctors with one or more years of military experience. Upon shortening the medical school courses, the Army received 21,406 medical school graduates, none of whom had a full understanding of the medical knowledge required for combat situations. Surgeons are often considered the most critical types of doctors during wartime, but the Soviet Union had only 12,560 surgeons. Overall, the Red Army lacked over 20,000 qualified medical doctors.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Sella, Amnon. The Value of Human Life in Soviet Warfare. London and New York: Rutledge Press, 1992. pp. 38-40.

The Red Army increased from 1.5 million to approximately 5 million soldiers from 1938 to 1941. Because the army was rapidly expanding, industry was unable to keep up with the demand. Soviet industry still produced obsolete weapons as late as 1941, while scientists and engineers tried desperately to improve them. By 1941, 78 percent of Russian aircraft and 50 percent of tanks were obsolete⁴⁵. The army's mechanization program was in shambles as tanks, guns, and aircraft stumbled off the assembly line and into the hands of inexperienced coordinators. Units that desperately needed equipment remained undersupplied while other units were inundated.⁴⁶ With over 9,500 aircraft, the USSR was considered the largest air force in the world, yet most of these aircraft were obsolete and suffered from extended use.⁴⁷

The lack of modern equipment was due in part to the purge of defense industry workers. Andrei Tupolev, leading Soviet aircraft designer and recipient of five Stalin prizes, was arrested in October 1937. Tupolev's aircraft designs established over seventy-eight world records and contributed significantly to the development of the Red Army's air force. After his arrest, Tupolev confessed that he had been a French spy since 1924, believing that his confession would prevent the arrest of his wife and removal of his children. He was given a fifteen-year prison sentence and instructed to design a new bomber in his prison lab.⁴⁸ It was difficult for these imprisoned specialists to work effectively on new weapons and war machines, as they did not have access to important scientific data or the latest technology. They also understood that mistakes would be

⁴⁵ Dunn, p. 15.

⁴⁶ O'Ballance, p. 132.

⁴⁷ Glantz, David M. and House, Jonathan M. When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler. Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1995, p. 37.

⁴⁸ Laqueur, Walter. Stalin: The Glasnost Revelations. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990.

regarded as sabotage and failure to produce results would prolong their sentences and deprive them of the few comforts they had.⁴⁹

Even when new equipment was developed, it proved to be ineffective in the hands of inexperienced military officers. The MiG-3 fighter and Il-2 ground attack airplane, both advanced forms of aircraft, entered service in the spring of 1941. There was a considerable lack of pilots that were trained in the operation of these planes, and this was due in part to Red Air Force commanders' fears that any training accidents would be deemed sabotage and they would be classified as "enemies of the people." At the time of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, Soviet pilots had on average less than four hours of flight time in their aircraft.⁵⁰

The Soviets realized that the lack of officers could have a disastrous effect on the expanding Red Army. E.A. Schadenko, the chief of the Red Army Cadres Directorate, reported to the People's Commissariat of Defense that by 1938, the Red Army experienced a shortage of 93,000 officers.⁵¹ The Red Army promoted over 39,000 officers from 1937-1938, filling key command positions with inexperienced junior officers. After the Army's widespread promotions, the average age of regimental commanders was 29 to 33 years, divisional commanders 35 to 38 years, and 40 to 43 years for corps and army commanders. Academies that were responsible for training military leaders were ordered to release their classes so that the students could fill vacancies created by the purges.⁵² Colonel Stuchenko, who had seen some of his greatest instructors arrested while he studied at the Frunze Military Academy, graduated six

⁴⁹ Bialer, p. 77.

⁵⁰ Glantz, Titans, pp. 38-39.

⁵¹ Glantz, David M. Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War. Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1998. p. 36.

⁵² Glantz, Stumbling Colossus, p. 29.

months ahead of time with the guarantee that he would be called in to take the state military examinations a few months later.⁵³

It was not until the Russo-Finnish war that the Soviet leadership and high command of the Red Army realized that their military forces were unable to sustain an effective campaign against an enemy force. The Red Army launched its offensive land, sea, and air operations against Finnish troops on November 30, 1939, claiming that Finnish artillery had attacked Mainila, a small Soviet frontier village.⁵⁴ The Russo-Finnish War would prove to be a disastrous event for the Russians. Outbreaks of mutiny were reported among infantry divisions that were exhausted by a sequence of unsuccessful attacks on fortified Finnish positions, and the 163rd Infantry Division lost large number of troops in a battle near Suomussali. The Finns also succeeded in penetrating Soviet territory south of Kandalaksha in their counter attack between the Eighth and Ninth armies.⁵⁵ Paratroopers were rarely used, and the decision to deploy small quantities of tanks to infantry divisions turned out to be flawed, as Soviet troops, incapable of withstanding enemy fire, left their formations and exposed the tanks to Finnish artillery fire.⁵⁶ It was not until the Red Army's death toll reached 200,000 that measures were taken to deal with the deficiencies of the troops and the officers who led them. Many of the officers that were arrested but not executed in the purges were released and put on active service. Former officers of the Tsar's Imperial Army, once branded traitors, were even welcomed into the Red Army.⁵⁷ The Red Armies of the northwestern front finally succeeded in capturing Viborg after a general offensive

⁵³ Bialer, p. 82.

⁵⁴ Hart, p. 80.

⁵⁵ Garder, p. 102.

⁵⁶ Dallin, p. 45.

⁵⁷ Garder, p. 103.

supported by a powerful air force was launched in February 1940. On March 13, Finland signed a treaty that ceded Viborg and Karelia to the USSR. Unfortunately, this victory cost the Red Army over 230,000 troops and exposed the weaknesses of the Red Army for the entire world to see. It was a humiliation for Stalin and his commanders, who expected to conquer Finland in less than two weeks. Even though the Soviets deployed more than 1.5 million well-equipped troops to the Finnish front, it took the Red Army over three months to subdue less than 200,000 poorly equipped Finnish soldiers.⁵⁸ It was a rude awakening for the Red Army, which had thought of itself as infallible.

In May 1940, Marshal S.K. Timoshenko replaced Voroshilov as commissar of defense. Before resigning his position, Voroshilov presented Timoshenko with an *akt o prieme*, a formal document detailing the current state of the Red Army. From this document, Timoshenko learned that he was inheriting a military force in complete disarray. The document scornfully disparaged the status of the Red Army, claiming that the Army lacked an operational war plan and control over operational training in military districts was deficient. The document also noted that the army had a shortage of command personnel, particularly in infantry units, and that the training of the command personnel was of low quality. Timoshenko introduced a set of reforms designed to eliminate the problems born of the purges.⁵⁹

The Soviet Union desperately tried to correct the problems that had arisen during the Russo-Finnish War. Over 4,000 officers that had been dismissed from the Army during the purges were brought back into service. A new disciplinary code was introduced that demanded absolute obedience from enlisted personnel and asserted an

⁵⁸ Kolkowicz, Roman. The Soviet Military and the Communist Party. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967. p. 62.

⁵⁹ Glantz, Stumbling Colossus pp. 37-39.

officer's authority over his troops.⁶⁰ The institution of military commissars, which had been reintroduced in May 1937, was abolished in August 1940 and officers were given greater freedom from party politics in their military decisions.⁶¹ The military leadership realized the need for officers, and began to establish military schools with training periods from two to three years. The number of military training schools increased from 49 to 114, and the number of graduates increased from 36,085 to 169,620.⁶² Enlisted men increasingly obtained officer rank through junior commander courses that last for several months, and some were even awarded direct commissions, thereby omitting the required training courses.⁶³ Although these newly commissioned officers filled numerous vacancies, they had no combat experience, often a prerequisite for talented and effective commanders.

Of course, military and political leaders around the world were well aware of the ineffectiveness of the Red Army. The Germans took great interest in the elimination of the officer corps, and General von Beck, chief of the German General Staff, said that the Red Army "could not be considered an armed force, for the bloody repressions had sapped its morale and had turned it into an inert military machine."⁶⁴ Upon reading a report from his Moscow military attaché, Franz Halder, chief of the German general staff, commented that the Red Army would "need twenty years to recover their previous level."⁶⁵ Allies of the Soviet Union, particularly France, were under the impression that the Red Army's commanders were no longer trustworthy due to the alleged betrayal of

⁶⁰ O'Ballance, p. 155.

⁶¹ Glantz, Titans p. 23.

⁶² Glantz, Stumbling Colossus p. 39.

⁶³ Reese, Roger R. Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers: A Social History of the Red Army 1925- 1941. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996. p. 162.

⁶⁴ Glantz, Stumbling Colossus pp. 31-32.

⁶⁵ Laqueur, p. 90.

military secrets to Germany by Tukhachevsky and his fellow conspirators. The subsequent purge of the lower level officer command confirmed French suspicions of widespread chaos, and by the eve of World War II, French confidence in the Red Army was completely eliminated.⁶⁶ Guy La Chamber, the French air minister, had expressed dissatisfaction with the Soviet military as early as May 1938:

The Russians killed every airplane engineer and constructor they had. They have no new planes and the best they have are imitations of American models four or five years old...In addition, the officers' corps of the Russian Air Force had been annihilated so completely that the Russian Air Force could not be considered an effective fighting force in spite of the numbers of planes it contained.⁶⁷

Czech President Edvard Beneš no longer considered the Red Army as “an effective force for Western actions” and gave up the idea that Russia could be counted on as a valuable ally in the impending war.⁶⁸ William C. Bullitt, the first American ambassador to the Soviet Union, remarked that among French military and political officials, “the belief now is widespread that the military power of the Soviet Union has been so greatly impaired that in an emergency, the Soviet Union either would not, or could not give France serious armed aid.”⁶⁹ A Latvian intelligence report correctly stated “the Soviet Regime realizes that it cannot become involved in a war and will make unlimited concessions to prevent a major war at this time.”⁷⁰

On June 22, 1941, the Germans launched Operation Barbarossa, a massive military invasion of the Soviet Union. The Red Army, which was still reeling from the

⁶⁶ Hochman, Jiri. The Soviet Union and the Failure of Collective Security, 1934-1938. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984. pp. 132-34.

⁶⁷ Hochman, p. 136.

⁶⁸ Hochman, p. 136.

⁶⁹ Hochman, p. 137.

⁷⁰ Glantz, Stumbling Colossus, p. 31.

effects of the purges, lost 2.1 million soldiers in the first four months of combat.⁷¹ The Red Army was wholly unprepared and needed more time to fill the void of leadership that had been created during the great purges. The purges produced an officer corps that was fearful of showing any instances of independent judgment or creative thinking, qualities instrumental to taking action when under fire.⁷² Although the Soviet Union had a tremendous amount of manpower, there is no substitute for qualified leaders, highly trained troops, and effective weapons in combat. Throughout World War II, the poorly trained and led Soviet military would struggle in its battles with Hitler's highly efficient armed forces. Had the Red Army not been purged of some of its best and brightest officers, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of soldiers' lives may have been spared.

⁷¹ Dunn, p. 35.

⁷² Glantz, Titans, p. 33.

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Bibliographic Addendum

Many the sources that I used were secondary, as there are not many first hand sources that have been translated into English, and since I lack an understanding of the Russian language, I could not read those that were published in Russian. One source I did use, Stalin and His Generals, was a compilation of the translated memoirs of former Red Army officers. The first two chapters were dedicated to the purge period and years directly following the purges. I found this particular resource to be extremely valuable in understanding how the purges instilled an overwhelming sense of fear throughout the officer corps.

David Glantz, one of the foremost experts on Soviet participation in World War II, provided invaluable information in his books Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War and When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler. This information included assessments of Red Army strength before the war and the suggestion that the German High Command knew that the Red Army had been severely weakened by the purges. Many other articles that Glantz had written about the Soviet Army and World War II were often cited in other sources that I used in this paper.

There was a discrepancy between how the “red folder” came into existence, so I felt it best to provide both accounts (Victor Aleksandrov and Robert Conquest).

The reviews of Mikhail Tukhachevsky are generally positive, although one author (Rapoport) did note that he assisted in suppressing uprisings at the request of his superiors, which does portray him as a military officer eager to please his supervisors for the sole purpose of advancement in the ranks.

Many of the books on the Soviet military were based on archival documents from the Soviet Union and German documents captured after WWII.

The Soviet publication The Soviet Armed Forces: A History of Their Organizational Development provided an excellent overview of the Soviet's military strategy, but as I expected made no mention of the purges of the Red Army. Their only mention of Tukhachevsky was that he was an exceptional military commander that contributed to the development of the Soviet military's strategies.

For information on the purges in general, I used a combination of sources by Suny, Conquest, and Brzezinski to provide a general overview of the events.

Overall, the sources I used were in general agreement with each other. With the exception of the history of the "red folder", there was no visible contradictory information in the various sources I used for my research.