

7. Consequences of Mass Massacre of the Soviet Elites

The Country after the Mass Massacre of Elites

The consequences of the massacre are revealed most clearly using the army as an example. The army was a complex, autonomous unit of the state and social system, tested by the war with Hitler's Germany that broke out soon after the massacre took place. As has been noted, its development was curtailed in the 1920s, and this changed only in the early 1930s in response to the rise of Nazi Germany and Japan as threats in Europe and the Far East. Red Army units began to multiply rapidly, as did their weapon systems. Demands increased for more, better educated army officers, and commanders originally focused on the Reichswehr expanded their international contacts.²⁰³ Soviet army officers began to take part in negotiations with diplomats and soldiers from a number of countries on a more regular basis. They acquainted themselves with the latest warfare technology and modified their notions of war. This deepened the gap between these professional commanders and Voroshilov, the People's Commissar at the ministry, prompting Stalin to reinforce his control over the armed forces. The People's Commissariat for Military and Navy Issues was replaced by the People's Commissariat for Defence, and the Military Revolutionary Council, a political entity which had co-decision powers over army expansion and deployment, was disbanded.

But these changes did not extinguish the tension in the armed forces. Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky, who had assumed significant authority during the civil war, grew in influence. A former official of the Guards, he provoked baseless hopes among those abroad, who saw him as a representative of prerevolutionary officials hoping to overthrow the Soviet regime. This gave rise to many 'soldier conspiracy' theories. Nazi intelligence made use of them in the 1930s to try to compromise the leading actors responsible for the Soviet military.²⁰⁴

203 Pechenkin A. A., *Voyennaya elita v 1935–1939 gg.* p. 13. and Khlevniuk O., *Chozjajin: Stalin i utverzheniye stalinskoy diktatury* (p. 291) indicate that from 1935 until 1938 the army grew by a half a million and consisted of 1.5 million soldiers; the costs the army incurred over the same period of time increased from 2.3 billion to 4 billion in 1937 and 6.9 billion rubles in 1938.

204 *Reabilitatsiya: Kak eto bylo*, Vol. II, 741–748 and 748–760, more recently see Kantor Yu., *Zaklyataya družhba*, pp. 133–199.

Stalin and the party leadership did not always see eye-to-eye on defence issues.²⁰⁵ But the conflict personified by Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky and K. Ye. Voroshilov seems to have been important for the future. Voroshilov favoured commanders who had served during the civil war, and underestimated the importance of modernized armed forces. Stalin was far from neutral; Voroshilov was a member of his political circle, a guarantee to Stalin that the army would remain under his control. Stalin probably also feared that the army and the head of the NKVD would join forces. Yezhov's agents forced 'evidence' of a military conspiracy out of Yagoda's NKVD members²⁰⁶, resulting in the arrests after intense interrogations in May 1937 of M. N. Tukhachevsky, Iona E. Yakir, Ieronim P. Uborevich, Avgust I. Kork, Robert P. Eideman and Boris M. Feldman.

For the Soviet armed forces, the trials against the army leadership bore grave consequences.²⁰⁷ Between 1937 and 1938, from 35,000 to 36,500 officials, depending upon the data used, were removed from their positions. Their fate during the Stalinist purges has recently been the focus of work by Aleksandr A. Pechenkin²⁰⁸, who says that from 1934–38, seven out of ten deputies to the People's Commissar for Defence were executed, and an eighth, Yan Gamarnik, shot himself. Three-quarters of department heads in the Commissariat were replaced in 1938–39. Of the thirteen heads of army units in the position in early 1937, twelve were executed. The same end awaited seven of their replacements. 100% of the deputies and auxiliary chiefs of military districts were replaced, as were 100% of district military chiefs of staff. At the peak of the army purge, from March 1937 until March 1938, forty-four commanders at the district level were ejected from the army, along with ninety-five division commanders, sixty-nine headquarters division chiefs, and 295 commanders and regimental staff officers.²⁰⁹ The losses

205 S. Minakov, *Voyennaya elita 20–30–ch rodov*, pp. 429–437.

206 *Reabilitatsiya: Kak eto bylo*, Vol. II (pp. 673–674). *Voyennyi soviet pri narodnom komissare oborony SSSR, 1.–4. iyunya 1937 g.: Dokumenty i materialy*, Moscow, ROSSPEN, 2008, p. 130. NKVD officials who testified against soldiers included Georgy (Yegor) A. Prokofiev, Mark I. Gay and Zakhar II. Volovich. Yagoda refused to provide any testimony.

207 Most members of the army tribunal, including 2 marshals, were also later executed. For detailed information see Litera Bohuslav, *Sovětská armáda a "Velký teror" 1937–1938*, pp. 239–266.

208 Pechenkin A. A. *Voennaya Elita SSSR v 1935–1939 gg.* pp. 98–132. However data on political officials and arrests that took place after people were released from the army is missing.

209 Between 1937 and 1938, 78 people at the rank of "Comcor" or the corresponding were stripped of their positions, 58 of whom were arrested; 229 at the rank

were extraordinary and the experience and knowledge sacrificed irreplaceable. Marshall Aleksandr M. Vasilevsky, Stalin's closest army collaborator, told the writer Konstantin Simonov, 'You say without the defeats of 1937 there would have been no defeats of 1941. I would go further. Without 1937, there would have been no war of 1941. A great part of Hitler's ... decision for war came from his assessment of the extent to which cadres had been massacred ... There were a number of divisions under the command of captains because all the higher ranks had been arrested, no exception.'²¹⁰

We have detailed how a substantial part of Stalin's intent was to place large administrative units with lingering traces of independence under his control. Changes prepare the way for the adoption of the Stalin Constitution of 1936, concentrating power in the hands of a tight circle of people, Stalin's core in the Politburo. And the same applies to the rights of national units, whose competencies were cut to benefit the power centre, and to the internal structure of the government, where many bodies that allowed individual ministries to resolve mutual issues within the government were scrapped.

The work carried out by the people's commissariats also suffered heavily. We have already touched on the fate of the People's Commissariat for Heavy Industry (known until 1932, as VSNCh). Kaganovich, who took over another key commissariat, the Commissariat for Transportation, six months after Ordzhonikidze's death, undertook vigorous purge that 'reduced' its leading cadres. Afterwards, in January 1939, Stalin divided up the rest of the commissariat, placing it under several different ministries and thereby getting rid of what remained of those who had overseen industry in the USSR.²¹¹ Other ministries were similarly cleansed. The 'Trotskyite Trials' and the arrests that accompanied them rounded up people's commissars, their deputies, heads of economic units, and directors of large enterprises and construction projects. Stalin also tried to place individual economic sectors under the control of the party apparatus. Party bodies were thus granted broad rights to assign key positions within the ministries, as well

of "Comdiv" or corresponding, 125 of whom were arrested; 543 at the rank of "Combrig" or corresponding, 251 of whom were arrested; at the rank of colonel or corresponding, 1,871, of whom 832 were arrested; and over 35,000 people in ranks ranging from junior lieutenant to major stripped of their positions, 6341 of whom—17.8%—were arrested.

210 Simonov K., *Stalin i voyna*, in: Simonov K., *Izbrannoye*, Yekaterinburg, U-Faktoriya, 2005, p. 619.

211 *Reabilitatsiya: Kak eto bylo*, Vol. II, pp. 580–585. Chaustov V./Samuelson L., *Stalin, NKVD i repressii*, pp. 315–317 and 319.

as to intervene in the work of individual ministries, enterprises, agricultural machine and tractor stations, and state and collective farms. The ongoing terror continued to impact the ability of these institutions and enterprises to behave rationally. Only in autumn 1938 did some relief come.

Data on the intensity of the terror at lower levels of the social hierarchy is also chillingly revealing. In 1937, 353,074 ordinary citizens were sentenced to death. In 1938, it was 328,618 people. That means in 1937, 970 people were executed each and every day, and in the following year 900 people per day. By comparison, in 1935 in 1936, there had been three to four executions per day, also, of course, not a negligible number.²¹²

Some Russian historians positively evaluate the growth in industrial production and improved agricultural indicators during the final five-year plan before the war. They also highlight the success in manufacturing weapons systems and increasing the army's combat capabilities. Other authors are more reserved.²¹³ When the negotiations which took place at the Eighteenth Conference of the VKS/b in February 1941, the final such conference before the war, are taken into account, we must conclude that in actuality, production and administration in many areas of civic life were less than satisfactory. Descriptions of the pre-war economy and pre-war social life reveal that economic disproportion had deepened. They register rapid growth in the production of armaments and machinery, but point to inadequate performance in light industry, agriculture, and civil construction. The growth of heavy industry and the manufacture of armaments continued at the expense of the population's basic needs. Another source of suffering was that after the defeat of France and England in mid-1940, the USSR had re-established an eight-hour working day and a seven-day workweek.²¹⁴ Harsh punishments were imposed for work absences or breaches of work discipline.

The positive aspects we have noted about the Soviet Union in the 1930s were in many respects still present on a surface level in Soviet life right up to the outbreak of war. But these phenomena were belied by the 1937–38 terror and its impact not only on the mood of the inhabitants, particularly city dwellers, but on the pace of progress itself. People pulled together in an outsize exertion of national strength, but its duration was short and, because of the mistakes Stalin had made in the first five-year plan, could not resolve the USSR's modernization problems. The country's transformation into a modern nation, one with developed industry

212 Barsenkov / Vdovin, *Istoriya SSSR*, p. 256.

213 Barsenkov / Vdovin, *Istoriya SSSR*, pp. 283–288; cf. Hildermeier M., *Geschichte der Sowjetunion* pp. 481–487 and 487–493.

214 Until that point, there had been a 7-hour workday and 6-day workweek in the USSR.

and a developed society, was underway but far from complete. The USSR was not ready for a conflict the size of World War II. And the 1937–38 terror had weakened the country, hampered its ability to defend itself and brought staggering losses of territory, people, and material assets during the war's first two years in 1941 and 1942.

USSR on the Brink of War

The threat of war against the USSR hardly came as a bolt from the blue. The political situation had been rapidly deteriorating since 1937, and the potential for war was signalled by agreements between Germany, Italy, and Japan, the countries that formed the basis of the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo 'Axis'.²¹⁵ The chief threat was Nazi Germany, but these two superpowers had both been in the World War I Alliance; their current affiliation with Germany showed the changes which had taken place in the European and global balance of power. Nazi expansionism immediately took aim at Austria and the Czechoslovak Republic, but over the long term, Poland was also a focus, shifting the threat of conflict measurably closer to the borders of the USSR. Conflict in fact broke out between the USSR and Japan at the Manchurian, Korean, and Soviet border at a time when friction in Eastern Europe had also intensified. The Soviet commanders, weakened by the purges, lack confidence, but in the end the conflict did not balloon into a serious issue. A head-on collision occurred nevertheless between the Soviets and the Japanese army the very next year in Outer Mongolia. The USSR came out of this the winner, and this permitted a diplomatic settlement of the country's relationships with Japan. Japan focused on war in China and Asia, avoiding hostilities with the USSR in 1941. But even with this, the Soviet government was less than certain about Japan's attitude, fearing that it might have to fight a war on two fronts.²¹⁶

But from the USSR's standpoint, the main issue was nevertheless not the Far East and Asia. Unfavourable developments in Europe had multiplied in intensity from 1937, when British government member and later Foreign Minister Edward F. Halifax indicated he understood Hitler's wish to control Austria, the Czechoslovak Republic and Gdansk.²¹⁷ Stalin's army purges and those he carried out in the government and the party hardly inspired the trust of his potential

215 Nálevka V., *Světová politika ve 20.století*, pp. 132 and 143.

216 Barsenkov / Vdovin, *Istoriya Rossii*, pp. 276–277; cf., collection Chanchin-Gol, 39, eds. G. P. Solonicyn. Moscow, DOSAAF SSSR, 1989.

217 Nálevka V., *Světová politika ve 20.století*, p. 143.

allies in the USSR's competence to succeed in a war against a strong enemy.²¹⁸ In March 1938, Nazi Germany annexed Austria and it was clear that the Czechoslovak Republic would follow soon after. It seemed unlikely Britain and France would risk war with Germany to save the Czechoslovak Republic. The USSR was forced to rethink its attitude. The agreement between Great Britain, France, Italy, and Germany, made on 29 September 1938 in Munich, simplified Soviet decision-making by releasing it from contractual obligations that dated to 1935 that would have mandated it enter the war. But the Munich Agreement also convinced Stalin that the Western Allies wanted Hitler to focus on Eastern Europe²¹⁹, and he therefore saw a pressing need to consolidate the country's internal situation and mitigate the tense relationships with Nazi Germany.

Stalin and his circle nevertheless reacted slowly. For the first two thirds of 1938, there was no substantive change in the ongoing massacre of the elites, and the numbers of those executed hardly decreased from the 1937 figures.²²⁰ The camps and prisons were overflowing and repressive measures played havoc with production at individual facilities and throughout economic sectors. Acts against foreigners instigated diplomatic collisions with foreign states, and cases in which Soviet diplomats and security service agents stayed abroad were on the increase.²²¹

But the trial we have already detailed against the 'right-wing Trotskyite block' formed the turning point. It was not the final act in the series of executions and the repression carried out against individuals Stalin and his circle wished to kill, or whose freedom they wished to take away. Still waiting for prison sentences were members of the Central Committee and the Politburo of the VKS/b and candidates for those positions, including Stanislav V. Kosior, Vlas Ya. Chubar, Jānis Rudzutaks, Robert I. Eiche and many other high-level functionaries in the regime. But Stalin and those around him could not entirely ignore the warning signals coming from abroad. The USSR's isolation grew and the continuing repression made it impossible to consolidate political and economic conditions. Workers with experience continued to be replaced by those in the third or fourth ranks of the regime's bureaucracy, or by beginners who had no idea how to carry

218 Erickson J., *The Soviet High Command*, pp. 488–489.

219 Werth N., *Istoriya sovetskogo gosudarstva*, pp. 287–288.

220 However, finally the last quarter of 1938 was impacted by the prepared mitigation of repressions which, on the other hand, increased the number of people sentenced to long-term imprisonment (15 to 25 years).

221 Declaration by Fyodor Raskolnikov, Alexander Barmin, Walter Krivitsky and others, generally see Chaustov V./ . Samuelson L, *Stalin, NKVD i repressii*, pp. 308–312.

out their functions. Some time in mid-1938, this state of affairs forced the realization on Stalin and his circle that the mass repression must end and measures must be taken to stabilize the situation. About a month after the 'right-wing Trotskyite' trial, personnel changes changed the momentum. In the middle of August 1938 at a meeting of the top leadership of the VKS/b, the name of Lavrentiy P. Beria was proposed for Head Secretary of the NKVD, and he began work in Moscow in mid-September 1938, shortly thereafter assuming Yezhov's position as head of the commissariat.²²²

As Yezhov's deputy, Beria had already had a free hand to carry out radical changes. The organizational work for the VKS/b Central Committee was taken care of by Georgy M. Malenkov. The pair's immediate brief was to halt the machinery of mass terror and stabilize the situation in the country.²²³ The fundamental organizational and cadre measures taken required about three months of intensive work. Candidates for responsible positions were difficult to find—the terror and purges had involved not only the security and judicial apparatus, but those of the party and state, as well. Many of the involved had considerable influence and connections.

Resolutions adopted by the government and the VKS/b Central Committee dated 17 November and 1 December 1938 changed security and disciplinary practices.²²⁴ Mass actions by the NKVD were halted immediately, as were the arrest and displacement of ordinary citizens. In the future, arrests were to take place only on an individual basis, with consent from a prosecutor. If leading party functionaries were involved or leaders of state institutions, the appropriate People's Commissar or head of the central institution had to authorize the arrest, as well. For MPs in the parliament of the USSR or those of the union or autonomous republics, consent from the pertinent legislative bodies was required. A set legal procedure was reinstated and the extrajudicial bodies that had decided on punishment were scrapped.²²⁵

222 See Zhukov Yu. N., *Tayny Kremlya*, pp. 65–68; see also, Amy Knight, *Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1995; Beria was appointed to the NKVD via a politburo resolution dated 21.8.1938. See *Lubyanka: Stalin i Glavnoye upravlenie gosbezopasnosti NKVD 1937–1938*, p. 545.

223 See *Lubyanka: Stalin i Glavnoye upravlenie gosbezopasnosti NKVD 1937–1938*, pp. 550–552.

224 See *Lubyanka: Stalin i Glavnoye upravlenie gosbezopasnosti NKVD 1937–1938*, pp. 607–611 and 624–625.

225 This measure did not concern the politburo and Stalin and the *ad hoc* created bodies.

These measures were, however, significantly restricted. The kangaroo court was still in place. Decisions on politically motivated punishments continued to be reserved to Stalin and his circle. For such cases, the criminal code, judicial procedure and the prosecutor's opinion did not apply. Mass purges were still carried out in agencies where the regime found the people employed impossible to tolerate. The gravest instance took place at the People's Commissariat of foreign affairs in the context of the ousting of Maxim Litvinov.²²⁶ Executions, as noted above, continued to be carried out for those on the lists approved by Stalin, and the same formula was used to decide on the executions of Polish officers in Katyn, Ostashkov, and elsewhere. In August 1940, Leon Trotsky was murdered in Mexico on Stalin's orders. But in spite of this, after the changes of late 1938, the steady stream of unjustified arrests and executions diminished substantially. The end of the Yezhov era came with expressions of the long suppressed resentment the public harboured over the unreasonable, unjustified acts of repression. Such a mood was also evident in the preparations for the Eighteenth Congress of the VKS/b in spring 1939. NKVD leaders panicked; they committed suicide in greater numbers. They did not feel responsible for their actions, because they had been instructed to carry them out by those above. There is no point in us pointing the finger of moral culpability at them—such attitudes were standard for the politics and ethics of Stalin and his circle.²²⁷

226 Litvinov was recognized as a supporter of the British and American orientation in foreign policy and was Jewish by origin which, from Stalin's point of view, prevented the USSR from meeting Nazi diplomats and leaders.

227 Khlevniuk O., *Chozjain: Stalin i utverzhdienie stalinskoy diktatury*, pp. 353–359.