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University Press of Kansas

# Acknowledgments

This book owes a considerable debt of gratitude to many people who have contributed to its creation. I owe special thanks to James Harris, who has been a constant source of encouragement and incisive criticism from the very early stages of this research. James kindly shared archival sources and read several draft versions of this manuscript. Others who have read the whole or parts of the book and given me the benefit of valuable suggestions include Roger Reese, David R. Stone, Stephen Brown, and Steven J. Main. I owe thanks to Mark B. Smith for conversations about this research and his encouragement to think about the social history of the Red Army. Mark Harrison provided insightful advice and forced me to challenge many of my assumptions. Any errors remaining in what follows are my own.

I am grateful for a travel grant from the Royal Historical Society and funding from the School of History at the University of Leeds that allowed me to travel to Moscow to carry out archival research. I owe thanks to the staff at the Russian State Military Archive and the Russian Archive of Socio-Political History for their assistance and patience. Researching in Moscow would have been impossible without Irina and Dmitri, who showed me nothing but warm hospitality during my stay.

The second half of chapter 6 was published as “The Purge of the Red Army and the Soviet Mass Operations” in *Slavonic and East European Review*. Elements of several chapters have been published in *Europe-Asia Studies* in “Subversion in the Red Army and the Military Purge of 1937–1938.”

Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to my parents for their unwavering support throughout my PhD and beyond, without which writing this book would have been impossible. It is to them that I dedicate this book.



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# Introduction

On 11 June 1937, a closed military court sentenced a group of the Red Army's most talented and experienced officers to execution. Charged with membership of a supposed military-fascist plot, working with the Nazis, and planning to overthrow the Stalinist regime, all were shot immediately after the trial. The executions of Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevskii, Iona Iakir, Ieronim Uborevich, Boris Fel'dman, Robert Eideman, Avgust Kork, Vitalii Primakov, and Vitovt Putna sparked international scandal. Tukhachevskii in particular was world renowned. He was a hero of the Russian civil war and the Red Army's most capable strategist. Moreover, as soon as this supposed military conspiracy was discovered, Josef Stalin and the head of the Red Army, Kliment Voroshilov, ordered a massive purge of the armed forces. A wave of repression quickly spread throughout the officer corps and the rank and file as a growing number of fellow conspirators were connected to the military-fascist plot. This purge was not brought to a halt until November 1938, and it cost the army dearly. In addition to the execution of some of the Red Army's most talented officers, over the next two years, approximately 35,000 military leaders were discharged from the ranks. Thousands were arrested, and many were executed.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this decapitation of the Red Army between 1937 and 1938 is still pointed to as contributing to its terrible performance in the months after June 1941, when the Soviet Union was caught off guard by Adolf Hitler's Operation Barbarossa.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the military purge is also blamed for ruining any chance that Britain, France, and the Soviet Union might have forged an alliance against Hitler's Germany in the years before the outbreak of World War II. Stalin's attack on the Red Army made him seem like an unpredictable ally, and one with now reduced military strength.<sup>3</sup>

The military purge is a pivotal event in the history of the Great Terror—the name given to the surge in political violence and repression in the mid- to late 1930s, during which over one million Soviet citizens were imprisoned in labor camps and over 750,000, at the very least, were executed. During these years of repression, the military purge marked the point at which the growing political violence, formerly al-

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most exclusively targeted at Stalin's old political opponents, began to affect those without such black marks on their records. Someone like Mikhail Tukhachevskii, for instance, had never supported the former political opposition before his arrest and execution. The military purge was thus not merely an attack on the Red Army. As we shall see, the military purge broadened the scope of the Great Terror in a number of important respects.

The reason why Stalin lashed out at his military in such an extreme manner in the summer of 1937 remains a mystery. What is certain is that there was no genuine conspiracy inside the Red Army. It has long been known that the military-fascist plot had no basis in reality. Evidence used in support of the conspiracy was obtained by the Soviet political police by forced confessions and torture. After Stalin's death in 1953, many victims of the military purge (like other prominent victims of the wider Great Terror) were posthumously rehabilitated during Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization.<sup>4</sup> Since 1937, there have been frequent attempts to explain Stalin's attack on the Red Army, but no adequate or convincing explanation has been presented about why Stalin would gut his officer corps just years before the outbreak of world war. The most common interpretation depicts Stalin launching a carefully premeditated purge of the Red Army in 1937 as another part of his domination through terror.<sup>5</sup> However, this explanation has immediate and obvious flaws. If consolidation of power was the main objective of the military purge, Stalin chose a terrible time to do this. As we shall see, from the Soviet leadership's point of view, world war was on the horizon in the mid-1930s, and Soviet defense spending was rising rapidly in response. Why would Stalin build with one hand and destroy with the other? Why actively prepare for war while weakening the Red Army through a mass purge? The military purge potentially put not only Stalin's own grip on power in danger but also the existence of the entire Soviet Union, as Stalin might be forced to fight any future war with a weakened military. On the surface, the military purge appears to be an irrational act; it does not sit comfortably with an explanation focusing on Stalin's desire for greater personal power and control.

In this book, I offer an entirely new explanation for the military purge. I show why Stalin thought that such a great risk needed to be taken in 1937 and why, at least from the perspective of the Soviet leadership, this was not irrational. Stalin launched a wave of repression against the Red Army not as another part of a carefully orchestrated consolida-

tion of power. Rather, he did this from a position of weakness and at the last moment. By mid-1937, in what was recognized as a time of looming war, Stalin misperceived a security threat from within his army. He came to incorrectly believe that it had been infiltrated by foreign agents at all levels. Moreover, not only had these spies managed to get inside the Red Army, but so-called evidence obtained by the political police sketched out a conspiracy at the very heart of the high command. On the basis of these misperceived dangers, Stalin was compelled to crack down on the Red Army. He thus sanctioned a major purge to root out the subversives he believed were hidden in the ranks. From Stalin's point of view, how could he fight the coming war with a military that had been so badly compromised? However, as an expanding wave of discharges and arrests ripped through the Red Army starting in June 1937, the military purge, like the wider Great Terror, escaped central control. This was partly re-established in early 1938, and the military purge was eventually called to a halt in November—the same time that the wider Great Terror was brought to a close—but not before it had caused massive damage to the Red Army. To explain why the military purge was launched, it is thus necessary to try to understand how the Soviet leadership could so badly misperceive the danger from the Red Army in 1937 and come to believe that such drastic action was unavoidable. However, before doing so, a short survey of previous accounts of the military purge will show why few of these have been convincing.

The first attempts to provide a rationale for why Stalin attacked the Red Army in 1937 came from foreign observers and the contemporary press as soon as the executions of Tukhachevskii and the group of senior officers were publicly announced in June. However, with little access to reliable information, these early responses were understandably speculative. The *Manchester Guardian*, for instance, raised the possibility that Stalin had acted in response to a genuine military conspiracy within the Red Army.<sup>6</sup> This theory gained greater currency in later years. Commentators such as *New York Times* journalist Walter Duranty, who was based in Moscow for much of the 1930s, later argued that there had been a real conspiracy in the Red Army.<sup>7</sup> Even though Duranty is recognized as an apologist for the Stalinist regime, less biased figures, such as the American ambassador to the Soviet Union, Joseph E. Davies, agreed that a real military coup had been forestalled in 1937.<sup>8</sup> Although not

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all were so certain of the facts, Stalin's ambition for greater power and control over the state was also put forward as a possible motive behind the military purge.<sup>9</sup> A number of early historical works reached similar conclusions. In a book published outside the Soviet Union in 1938, German writer, communist, and former Red Army officer Erich Wollenberg saw the military purge as one part of Stalin's elimination of any possible challenge to his authority.<sup>10</sup> Taken together, certain unifying themes appear in these early accounts of the military purge: Stalin's desire for power, his willingness to take extreme measures to safeguard this power, and speculation about a possible military conspiracy.

Early interpretations of the military purge did not alter by the 1960s and 1970s; they appeared in more developed forms in general histories of the Great Terror and the Red Army. Historians and political scientists writing at the time of the Cold War typically saw the military purge in a similar light: this was just another part of Stalin's escalation of political repression in the 1930s aimed at securing his personal power and neutralizing potential threats.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, according to some Cold War historians, Stalin purged the military because he believed that certain officers in the high command, particularly those around Tukhachevskii, might one day block his expanding power. The Red Army was merely another institution that needed to be subjugated if Stalin was going to achieve total dominance. In this respect, the military purge was understood in the context of the growth of Stalin's cult of personality and his abuse of power.<sup>12</sup> Notably, alongside this common argument focusing on Stalin's desire for untrammelled power, Cold War accounts tend to examine the military purge on a narrow basis, referring to it as the Tukhachevskii Affair, after its most famous victim. However, this framing reduces any analysis of the repression in the Red Army to the relationship between Stalin and his military elite. Supposed animosities and assumed personal tensions between Stalin and his leading officers were seized on as providing the rationale behind the military purge. This focus on personalities neglected any serious consideration of the experiences of the rest of the officer corps and the wider rank and file during the years of the Great Terror. It left inadequately explained why the military purge affected the entire Red Army and not just the high command.

Common to Cold War accounts of the military purge is a story about a fabricated dossier of evidence that Stalin supposedly used to incriminate the senior officers he wanted out of the way. This dossier apparently



contained falsified materials, which provided a smoking gun: a group of leading Red Army officers, with German assistance, were planning a coup. The dossier story exists in several versions; in some cases, there is no physical file of evidence, only verbal disinformation. In the most common version, Stalin personally ordered evidence to be fabricated to provide a credible pretext for eliminating the officers from the high command whom he believed stood in the way of his goal of attaining total power. The political police then had the necessary incriminating dossier put together outside of the Soviet Union (seemingly to give it more credibility) and returned to Stalin via an independent channel.<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, in another version of the story, Stalin is depicted as being duped by German intelligence agents who decide to fabricate the dossier and have it sent to the Soviet Union to provoke Stalin into attacking his own military.<sup>14</sup> In most versions of the story, the main protagonists are the president of Czechoslovakia, Eduard Beneš; the head of the German intelligence agency, Reinhard Heydrich; and the Russian White émigré and Soviet double agent, Nikolai Skoblin. Beneš's role was that of chosen intermediary; he was supposedly fooled into passing disinformation about the Red Army officers to the Soviet ambassador in Prague, which was then returned to Stalin. In different variations of the dossier story, either the Soviet political police or German intelligence agents arrange for the disinformation to be passed to Beneš. In his memoirs, Beneš claimed that he found out about plans for a Soviet military coup secondhand through Count Trauttmannsdorff, one of Hitler's high officials. Apparently Trauttmannsdorff accidentally disclosed the existence of secret negotiations between Hitler and Tukhachevskii and had spoken about an "anti-Stalin clique" in the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> Reinhard Heydrich's role was working with the double agent Nikolai Skoblin to fabricate the necessary documents, which supposedly included genuine signatures from the incriminated officers.<sup>16</sup> In one version of the story, Skoblin is depicted as convincing Heydrich that there was talk of a military coup circulating among senior Red Army officers. Heydrich then agreed to fabricate the necessary incriminating materials for transmission to the Soviet Union, having sensed an opportunity to provoke Stalin into attacking his army.<sup>17</sup>

The dossier story is full of intrigue and conspiracy. Had it not been for Nikita Khrushchev's acknowledgment of its existence in the early 1960s, it probably would not have been given much credibility by historians.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, despite how often the story appears in books on the

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military purge, whichever way it is presented, there is no reason to believe it. The story derives from unreliable memoir accounts, often those of political police defectors who have long been discredited.<sup>19</sup> Other key pieces of evidence, such as Beneš's own memoir account, have also been proven to be inaccurate.<sup>20</sup> There is nothing to suggest that the dossier story has any basis in reality. Aside from the problems with the existing sources, there is also a complete absence of any other reliable evidence. After the opening of the Russian archives in the early 1990s, no piece of documentary evidence has been found to support the story. Moreover, the archival materials that are now accessible do not point toward the existence of a fabricated dossier either. For example, one week before the closed military trial in June 1937 that sentenced the Tukhachevskii group to execution, Stalin met with the Red Army's most senior officers to discuss the recently exposed military-fascist plot. The transcript of this meeting is now available, and throughout the entire four-day session, there is not a single mention of any dossier of incriminating evidence. Nor was it used during the June military trial itself.<sup>21</sup> This is remarkable if the fabricated dossier was really the central piece of evidence against Tukhachevskii and the other officers incriminated in the military conspiracy. Why would Stalin go to such lengths to have evidence fabricated with the chief aim of giving the planned executions in the high command credibility if he never publicized it or seemingly even used it? The same can be said for the version of the dossier story where Stalin is duped by German intelligence. If the German evidence was so convincing, why were the rest of the Red Army elite not told about it in June? It also seems unnecessary that Stalin would choose to have the dossier fabricated abroad, then sent back to the Soviet Union. It would have been far easier to have the group of officers incriminated on groundless charges inside the Soviet Union, like all the other prominent political victims of the Great Terror. In short, the poor source base and lack of evidence mean few historians take the dossier story seriously today.

Cold War accounts of the military purge were also shaped by dominant trends in the historiography of the Great Terror. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Great Terror was depicted by historians as little more than a brutal consolidation of power, with Stalin portrayed as the master planner who methodically executed anyone who stood in his way.<sup>22</sup> By extension, the military purge was viewed merely as another stage in this consolidation of power into another area of the Soviet state. However,

as we have already seen, there are problems with this view of the military purge. At a time when the regime believed war was approaching, would Stalin really endanger the security of the Soviet Union by executing some of his most talented military leaders and arresting thousands of officers just to achieve personal dominance over the armed forces? How did Stalin find himself in such a position if he was such a meticulous and careful planner of promoting to the highest ranks people whom he did not fully trust? If Stalin's aim was absolute control, why was Tukhachevskii given so much authority in the Red Army in the first place? Why did he remove Tukhachevskii in 1937, and not at any time before?

Serious questions were raised against established accounts of the military purge as part of wider reassessments of the Great Terror published in the 1980s and early 1990s. Notably, a group of "revisionist" historians questioned the level of premeditation that lay behind the military purge. For instance, in examining the events leading up to the military trial in June 1937, some argued that these were not as expected if Stalin had meticulously arranged the execution of the Tukhachevskii group. Indeed, despite the clouds that had begun to circle Tukhachevskii in early May, it took several weeks for Stalin to decide on a course of action. When he finally did do something, his first move was to demote Tukhachevskii from the position of deputy people's commissar of defense to command the less prestigious Volga Military District.<sup>23</sup> As one historian commented, this was an unusual way to treat supposedly dangerous conspirators.<sup>24</sup> If Stalin saw Tukhachevskii as a threat to his power, if he was a marked man, and if there was incriminating evidence against him, it makes little sense not to arrest him immediately.

With restricted access to credible primary sources, however, historians writing in the 1980s and early 1990s could do little more than point out the obvious holes in Cold War accounts of the military purge.<sup>25</sup> Only with the release of huge amounts of previously inaccessible documents from the Russian archives upon the collapse of the Soviet Union were more detailed studies on the impact of the Great Terror on the Red Army published. With the declassification of internal army, Communist Party, and political police materials, it was possible for the first time to gain a fuller understanding of the course of repression in the Red Army during 1937–1938. This newer work cast even more doubts about the accuracy of Cold War interpretations of the military purge, particularly the common framing of the Tukhachevskii Affair. For example, using

new archival materials, Roger Reese showed that a practice of purging (*chistki*) had already been established in the Red Army during the 1920s and 1930s. Regular internal purges were designed to improve ideological conformity in the ranks by removing anyone deemed to be class aliens, socially harmful elements, or belonging to other subversive categories.<sup>26</sup> Reese argued that when the regime called on Soviet citizens to participate in the hunt for enemies of the people in 1937, the resulting surge in denunciations quickly spread throughout the Red Army, as the officers and soldiers were already accustomed to purging class enemies from the ranks.<sup>27</sup> An established practice of internal purging transformed into a vehicle of mass denunciation in 1937–1938. In this way, Reese shined important light on the responses from ordinary soldiers to the regime’s calls to root out hidden enemies, showing that the military purge was much more than the Tukhachevskii Affair. The reactions from the Red Army as a whole to both the wider Great Terror and the military-fascist plot are crucial to understanding why the violence of the military purge reached such a large scale.

With access to important archival materials, other historians similarly traced the roots of the military purge before 1937, likewise taking the focus away from the narrow framing of the Tukhachevskii Affair. Oleg Suvenirov documented repression in the military from the early 1930s, showing that before the decisive year of 1937, the Red Army saw the arrests of former political oppositionists, the lower ranks had erupted in mass protest during the years of the collectivization of agriculture, and “counterrevolutionary” groups and supposed foreign agents were frequently unmasked by the political police everywhere along the army hierarchy.<sup>28</sup> Further, Suvenirov revealed the impact of the most important political events of the 1930s on the Red Army. After the murder of Leningrad party boss Sergei Kirov in December 1934, for instance, Suvenirov estimated that a wave of tens or hundreds of military arrests soon followed.<sup>29</sup> Repression in the Red Army could be shaped by domestic tensions, fueling spikes in political violence. In short, Suvenirov demonstrated there is an important prehistory to the military purge of 1937–1938 and that the Red Army was sensitive to changing political currents in the Communist Party before the outbreak of the Great Terror. Instead of a simple story of the Tukhachevskii Affair and a fabricated dossier, the military purge must be seen in the context of the broader political repression of the 1930s.

More detail about the military purge has also been gained from im-

portant recently declassified sources, such as the transcript of the meeting of the Military Soviet of June 1937, which reveals how the news of the military-fascist plot was disseminated to the wider Red Army.<sup>30</sup> What is striking about this meeting is that for many, this was the first time they had heard about a military plot in the high command. Many of the assembled officers reacted with shock when informed that their former comrades—people whom they had believed to be loyal officers—were apparently dangerous conspirators. Stalin and the army leadership used this opportunity to call for a purge of the ranks and encouraged officers to assist in the hunt for enemies, leading to a surge in denunciations. More ominously, some of the assembled officers discovered their own names in the interrogation transcripts circulated at the meeting and were soon arrested.<sup>31</sup> Partially declassified interrogation transcripts have also contributed to our knowledge by showing how the political police pieced together a military conspiracy in 1937. This was a process not without flaws or contradictions; it provides a firm rebuttal to those who maintain that there was a genuine and coherent military conspiracy in the Red Army.<sup>32</sup> In addition, other historians have used new archival materials to explore the connections between the Red Army and German high commands in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>33</sup> This is a connection with particular significance. One of the main charges against the senior officers at the closed military trial in June 1937 was that they were agents working for Germany. The military-fascist plot certainly had no basis in reality, but an established relationship between the German and the Red Army high commands put the latter in a vulnerable position in 1937.

However, despite this new level of detail about the military purge and the new archival sources, no credible or convincing explanation has yet been offered for why Stalin would attack his army at the same time the regime believed war was approaching. Reese and Suvenirov explored the dynamic of the purge process in the army, showing that the tide of denunciations from within the ranks could not have been wholly directed by Stalin and that there is an important prehistory of repression in the military before 1937, but neither points to why Stalin ordered the military purge in the first place.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, other newer works do not convincingly explain why the military purge was initiated, and they instead fall back on traditional arguments focusing on Stalin's desire for loyal officers and a premeditated attack on the Red Army.<sup>35</sup> In the main, the majority of recent accounts either make no firm judg-

ment about motive or merely allude to Stalin's appetite for power and his attempt to crush any possible opposition. In this sense, despite the new archival material, there has been little development from the interpretations of the Cold War on the central question about why Stalin attacked his army in such an extreme manner in 1937. The few explanations of the military purge that do differ from the traditional Cold War view remain far from complete. For example, one historian has argued that Stalin launched the military purge because an alliance of senior officers, led by Tukhachevskii, wanted to force the head of the Red Army, Kliment Voroshilov, out of his position.<sup>36</sup> This group of officers were apparently unhappy with the direction that the Red Army was heading and blamed Voroshilov for this, which Stalin then interpreted as a threat. In this way, tensions within the military elite are presented as evidence of a possible plot. Even though the military-fascist plot was groundless and there were no genuine plans for anything as serious as a coup, there were still some conspiratorial moves behind the scenes from a group of senior officers who wanted Voroshilov removed as head of the Red Army. However, much of this evidence is circumstantial. There is also a big difference between a group of senior officers hostile to their superior and genuine conspiratorial plans to force him out.<sup>37</sup> As we shall see, Tukhachevskii certainly had a poor personal relationship with Voroshilov, and he was also subject to persistent rumors about his loyalty. Yet there is nothing to suggest that there was any concerted effort to remove Voroshilov from the army leadership. Moreover, this explanation does not account for why the military purge later affected 35,000 army leaders and not just the small group of conspirators who were apparently plotting Voroshilov's downfall.

There has been little progress in explaining Stalin's purge of the Red Army because previous work has infrequently engaged with the large body of research on the Great Terror published since the opening of the Russian archives.<sup>38</sup> Debates about the origins of the Great Terror and the forces behind state violence in the Stalin period have been transformed over the past twenty years as a result of access to previously classified archival sources. Since the opening of the Russian archives in the early 1990s, interpretations of the Great Terror that dominated the postwar years and that directly influenced early examinations of the military purge have been shown to be narrow and incomplete. During

the 1950s and 1960s, historians typically examined the Great Terror from the perspective of political history and variously depicted Stalin as using state violence in order to overcome resistance to revolutionary change; using it as a means to increase his personal control over the Soviet Union; or using it simply as a consequence of a paranoid personality. Some historians and political theorists saw state violence as inherent to the Soviet system itself, but the majority writing in these years tended to focus solely on Stalin's purported intentions and individual actions during the Great Terror at the expense of an analysis of wider Soviet society.<sup>39</sup>

Even before the Russian archives opened, however, this dominant Cold War narrative had already been challenged by revisionist historians examining previously neglected aspects of the Great Terror. Notably, revisionist historians took emphasis away from high politics and instead explored the role of wider society in the formation of the Stalinist system.<sup>40</sup> In the 1990s, a growing number of historians began to challenge how the Great Terror had previously been framed, showing that the surge in political violence during 1937–1938 was a much more complex phenomenon than simply state repression directed from above. Research from the early 1990s, for instance, highlighted a range of societal tensions that compelled ordinary Soviet citizens to actively participate in the Great Terror and denounce one another to the authorities, whether out of fear, loyalty, or malice. These social tensions were so strong that the Great Terror took on a momentum of its own, and the regime began to lose control.<sup>41</sup> Other historians have offered new interpretations for the primary cause of the violence, challenging the accepted view that Stalin's desire for more power and personal control is the central factor. Before the Russian archives opened, Arch Getty argued that strained relationships between the center and regional party leaders and attempts by the center to bring local elites into line in 1937 provided the spark for the Great Terror. Importantly, Getty presented the Great Terror as a reactive process caused by a loss of control, rather than being carefully premeditated.<sup>42</sup> Other historians have similarly argued for the importance of internal systemic pressures and pointed to a struggle between the party and state, as well as between the elite and the workers, that encouraged the regime to turn to repression to manage the system.<sup>43</sup>

Following the same approach, part of this book will explore how the Red Army rank and file responded to the military-fascist plot. It

will show that even though the military had a stronger sense of hierarchy and discipline than existed in wider society, the response from the troops to the regime's urgent call to root out hidden enemies during 1937–1938 created a similar level of turmoil and disorientation in the ranks. Like the broader Great Terror, the military purge eventually took on a momentum of its own.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the tensions between the army leadership and the officer corps will also be examined. There are many suggestions that some officers resisted the frequent calls to find enemies within their units in the years before the Great Terror. As we shall see, like the recalcitrant regional party leaders that Stalin sometimes struggled to bend to his will, some officers had a vested interest in evading orders.

However, rather than argue that Stalin initiated the military purge as part of efforts to manage a dysfunctional Soviet system (or that this was an unforeseen consequence of these efforts), this book argues that Stalin attacked the Red Army because he misperceived a serious security threat. It will explore why Stalin saw such a grave danger from his military and how he came to believe that there was no other choice but to unleash a mass purge. This examination of the military purge has relevance to newer debates concerning the influence of Bolshevik ideology on the use of state violence and how the Soviet leadership's interpretation of the world fueled a fundamental misperception of threat. In this way, this book will help reveal the motivations behind the wider Great Terror. Indeed, even though Cold War accounts of the Great Terror are now recognized as reductive, there is still little consensus about Stalin's motivations or why he turned to state violence so frequently. Although new archival documents have allowed more nuanced interpretations of the 1930s, they have also generated many unanswered questions. New strands of research into Soviet culture and society, foreign policy, and the influence of ideology and intelligence on the behavior of the regime have created new controversies without settling older arguments about why the Great Terror began, and for what purpose.

The influence of Bolshevik ideology on the regime's perception of the world is central to this examination of the military purge. New archival documents, such as private correspondence between Stalin and members of his close circle, have already shown the strength of ideology inside the upper circles of the Communist Party. Stalin frequently used Marxist language outside of his public speeches and in his private correspondence. It is now clear that he did not just cloak a base desire



for power in Marxist rhetoric.<sup>45</sup> Stalin viewed the world through a Marxist lens and appears to have been ideologically committed.<sup>46</sup> Historians have already explored the influence of ideology on the regime's domestic policies, specifically as a mobilizing force behind political violence.<sup>47</sup> Others have examined the regime's ideological hostility to capitalism, namely the deeply held belief that the capitalist world was engaged in a vast conspiracy to destroy the Soviet Union and what effect this had in shaping state repression.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, James Harris has argued that the Soviet leadership's concerns about the capitalist encirclement of the Soviet Union, combined with a stream of inaccurate or misread intelligence, left them convinced that a major war was approaching for almost all of the interwar period. Stalin often expressed concerns that foreign agents were infiltrating the country and preparing acts of sabotage, a view that was only reinforced by the regular arrests carried out by the political police of supposed foreign agents and other counterrevolutionaries. A stubborn misperception of threat lay behind the violence of the Great Terror.<sup>49</sup>

This book further explores Bolshevik ideology and the regime's perception of threats in examining how Stalin perceived the security of the Red Army specifically. Taking the Russian Revolution as a starting point, it shows that the Bolshevik regime had an uneasy relationship with its standing army from the very beginning. Maintaining a traditional standing army (rather than a more ideologically acceptable people's militia) clashed with the Bolsheviks' revolutionary principles and made for uneasy civil-military relations. Alongside this ideological hostility, the Red Army was regarded as an obvious target of foreign agents and domestic counterrevolutionaries throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The military was judged as vulnerable to infiltration and displaying alarming security weaknesses that the regime believed would be seized on by hostile capitalist countries. Yet these threats were consistently perceived as more dangerous than their reality. The Stalinist regime saw more enemies arrayed against the Red Army than actually existed. This gulf between the perception and reality is crucial to understanding why Stalin purged the military in 1937. Indeed, by this point, this gulf had grown extensive, creating ideal conditions for a spy scare to erupt in the ranks and for the political police to simultaneously unmask a "military conspiracy" in the high command. As we shall see, there is little to suggest that Stalin did not take these threats seriously. A radical purge of the army was the only possible response. In this respect, Stalin launched the military purge

from a position of vulnerability and misperception rather than from a position of confidence and strength. Even though he believed world war was increasingly likely, Stalin purged the organization he needed the most because he misperceived a threat to his own power and the security of the regime from the Red Army. Although Stalin undoubtedly wanted to preserve his own power—and this remains an important motivation in both the military purge and wider Great Terror—it is necessary to understand what he believed put this at risk.

New documents from the Russian archives have also allowed an examination of the Soviet mass operations, which ran from summer 1937 until autumn 1938 and which were responsible for over one million arrests and nearly 700,000 executions.<sup>50</sup> Not only were the mass operations responsible for the majority of the victims in the Great Terror but they show that it was ordinary people, rather than the political elite, who suffered the most.<sup>51</sup> This is in sharp contrast to Cold War works on the Great Terror, which tended to focus on the repression within the Communist Party elite and the staging of the three notorious Moscow show trials between 1936 and 1938. Indeed, ordinary peasants, workers, and non-Russians constituted the overwhelming bulk of the victims of the Great Terror. Yet even though it is undisputed that Stalin ordered the mass operations, it is still far from clear why he did this. Some historians argue that Stalin launched the mass operations because he wanted to internally secure the Soviet Union in the face of the approaching world war, and this meant removing any unreliable groups from the population.<sup>52</sup> However, the importance of the anticipated future war in sparking the mass operations has been questioned, primarily because in reality there was no pressing international crisis threatening the Soviet Union in the summer of 1937. Alternatively, another explanation of the mass operations emphasizes domestic factors, arguing, for instance, that the regime feared that levels of anti-Soviet opposition in the countryside had grown significantly during the first half of 1937, which was considered a threat in the context of forthcoming open elections to the new Supreme Soviet scheduled for that year. There were growing fears that anti-Soviet elements could influence the outcome of the process. In this view, having realized the danger posed by so many unreliable groups in the population, Stalin decided to launch mass operations in the summer to internally secure his regime.<sup>53</sup>

This book will advance a new explanation of the mass operations that reconciles these conflicting interpretations. The military purge

was launched in June 1937, just weeks before the first mass operation began. As we shall see, the military purge was sparked by the regime's misperception that the Red Army had been widely infiltrated by foreign agents. The Soviet leaders believed that a "fifth column" had been discovered in the Red Army in the summer of 1937. After the launch of the military purge, Stalin subsequently moved to secure wider society by sanctioning the mass operations. If he believed that foreign agents were inside the military, could Stalin be certain that other less reliable population groups were not equally compromised or being manipulated by foreign powers? The fear of a future war thus provided an important underlying motivation to the mass operations, but it was the more immediate threat of a perceived fifth column within the Red Army that first drove the military purge in June 1937 and then became the catalyst for the mass operations just weeks later. In this respect, it is unlikely that the mass operations were planned long in advance, and they are best seen as a knee-jerk response to a sudden and mistaken fear that a fifth column potentially extended much further than the Red Army. The mass operations are a reflection of the regime's sense of insecurity rather than its high level of totalitarian control.<sup>54</sup> The military purge was much more than just a subplot in the Great Terror. It transformed the scale and scope of the broader political violence.

In order to understand the military purge of 1937–1938, it is necessary to begin with the Russian Revolution of 1917. The security anxieties surrounding the Red Army in 1937 did not suddenly appear; their roots stretched back nearly two decades. Identified security threats to the army shifted and evolved over a twenty-year period until they finally peaked in mid-1937. Chapter 1 thus examines the formation of the Red Army and its early years, from its creation in early 1918 and its performance during the civil war. This chapter shows that the new Red Army was immediately identified as a target of various enemies by the Bolshevik Party leadership and the political police. Moreover, it was plagued by numerous uprisings and rebellions in the lower ranks, casting doubt on the reliability of the ordinary soldiers. Chapter 2 focuses on the post-civil war period until the early 1930s, showing that even though the war was now over, with the Bolsheviks victorious, the perceived threats to the Red Army continued to generate serious concerns about its internal security. In these years in particular, the gulf between the perception and reality of threats began to widen. Chapter 3 examines a period of crisis for the Red Army when the political police claimed to have uncovered

an extensive military conspiracy in the upper ranks in the early 1930s at the same time that the rank and file were protesting against the collectivization of agriculture. Chapter 4 explores the early to mid-1930s, revealing a lull in the level of repression in the Red Army but at the same time demonstrating that there were several ongoing underlying problems with its political reliability that were never solved. Chapter 5 details the long chain of events from the summer of 1936 to the start of the military purge in June 1937. Finally, chapter 6 examines the chaotic aftermath of the military purge, arguing that it accelerated the scale of the Great Terror in acting as a catalyst for the Soviet mass operations.



University Press of Kansas