

RESEARCH BRIEF • FEBRUARY 2025

The Anatomy of the Great Terror: A Quantitative Analysis of the 1937-38 Purges in the Red Army

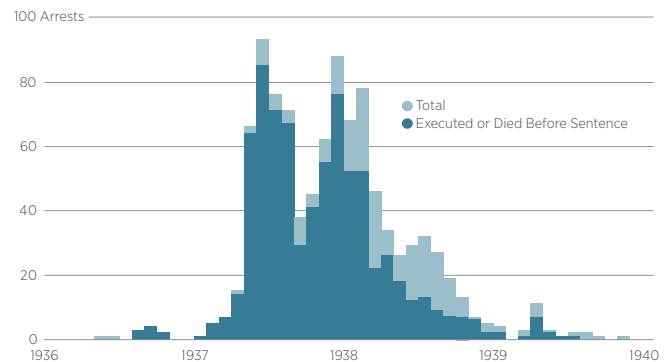
Based on BFI Working Paper No. 2024-154, “The Anatomy of the Great Terror: A Quantitative Analysis of the 1937-38 Purges in the Red Army,” by Alexei Zakharov, Yale University; and Konstantin Sonin, University of Chicago

Stalin’s military purge sought to preemptively minimize the risk of a possible coup, and he did so by targeting the most competent officers, directly impacting the disastrous Red Army performance in the first years of the German invasion.

Historically, purges are one of the main instruments used by authoritarian rulers to keep opposition in check, including both masses and elites. Purges of military elites are commonly used by autocratic rulers to reduce threats—real or perceived—to their rule. In the case of Joseph Stalin and the Great Terror of 1937-38, over half of 1,844 Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) army officers who held general-grade military ranks were repressed, and at least 780 were executed, including three of the country’s five highest-ranked officers.

This episode has particular significance as historians consider the purge a primary reason for the Soviet Army’s failed response to Hitler’s invasion of the USSR in June 1941. In this paper,

Figure 1 • Timeline of Arrests Among the Soviet High Command



Note: This figure shows the number of arrests among general-grade Soviet officers each month of the 1936-1939 period. There were 11 arrests in 1936, 13 in January-March 1937, 15 in April 1937, and 66 in May 1937. The arrests peaked in June 1937-January 1938 and were mostly over by the end of 1938. Arrests made during 1938 were also much more likely to result in prison than in a death sentence.

the authors compile a large dataset of Soviet generals that includes their background, positions within the military hierarchy, and service history. In addition, the data allow the authors to study the connections among fellow officers, shedding light on the probability of repression and the timing of arrests.

The authors find that the following officers were targeted:

1. Officers deemed more competent—Conditional on other characteristics such as rank, age, or ethnicity, officers who obtained a high rank had a higher probability of repression.
2. Younger officers—Youth significantly increased the risk of repression.
3. Together, competence and youth were a potent mix—A younger officer of two with the same rank was most often purged, given that such an officer (one who had achieved a given rank at an early age) was considered the most competent.

While much of the historical record provides no evidence to explain the Great Terror (Stalin, for example, left no memoirs), this new analysis supports the hypothesis that the purge was preventive in nature and not random. This finding is counter to existing literature which argues that promotion decisions within autocracies prioritize loyalty over competence.

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NO. 2024-154 · DECEMBER 2024

The Anatomy of the Great Terror: A Quantitative Analysis of the 1937-38 Purges in the Red Army

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