

Repressions Targeting Polish Officers of the Leningrad Military District

During the Great Purge in the Light of Documents
From the Latvian State Archive

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Abstract

The objective of the article is to draw the attention of Polish historians to the importance of the resources of the Latvian State Archive in Riga for research into the history of repressions targeting Poles in the Soviet Union. This facility holds in its collections materials concerning the persecution in the USSR of persons born on the territory of present-day Latvia. As an example, use has been made of case files documenting investigations conducted by the NKVD against Poles – serving officers of the Red Army – during the Great Purge. The abundance of archival materials relating to this professional group allows us to conclude that the Latvian State Archive is a potentially valuable location for studying the course of repressions directed against Poles in the USSR, especially at a time when the resources of Russian archives are virtually inaccessible.

The Latvian State Archive (Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs – LVA) in Riga has a unique collection of records relating to repression in Bolshevik Russia and subsequently the USSR. The collection bears a rather complex title: the Latvian SSR Committee for State Security, criminal cases involving the most dangerous anti-government persons. During the Khrushchev era, some investigation case records (Russian: *arkhivno-sledstvennyye dela*) were transferred from the field archives of the Committee for State Security of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, where they had been created, to the archives of the same institution in the oblasts, kraia, or republics where the victims had been born. This is why most of the records at the LVA pertain to Latvians. Other nationalities born in the former Latvian SSR, which is now the independent state of Latvia, are also represented.

As numerous Polish communities had existed in the region since the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, many Poles were born there at the turn of the twentieth century, not only in Daugavpils and the surrounding area (e.g. Władysław Studnicki), but also in Riga, Ilūkste, and other towns in the Latvian guberniyas, which at the time were part of the Romanov Empire. Some of them did not become citizens of the re-established Polish state or of independent Latvia after November 1918, either because they were unable or unwilling to do so, and remained in Bolshevik Russia. Some enlisted in the new state's armed forces, the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army (Russian: *Raboche-krest'yanskaya Krasnaya armiya – RKKA*). Some became officers or, more precisely, members of the commanding personnel (Russian: *komandno-nachal'stvuyushchiy sostav*), as the officer corps was designated in the new revolutionary terminology.

The Great Purge in the USSR, which reached its peak in 1937–1938, was not the greatest crime perpetrated by Joseph Stalin's regime; the great famines in Ukraine and Kazakhstan during forced collectivization were far more devastating. However, it was a time of unprecedented persecution targeting the country's political, cultural, economic and military elites. Although representatives of all ethnic groups living in the USSR were persecuted, repression disproportionately affected members of nationalities regarded as “non-Soviet”, who at that time began to be labelled *inorodtsy*. The largest group among these were Poles. They were also the fifth largest group in the RKKA officer corps (*komandno-nachal'stvuyushchiy sostav RKKA...*, 1934), after Russians, Ukrainians, Jews and Belarusians. It is hardly surprising, then, that they were frequent targets during the Great Purge.

The city of Leningrad occupies a unique position in the history of Soviet repressions against Poles in the USSR. The former imperial capital was home to a sizeable Polish community. However, they did not constitute one-eighth of the population of Leningrad and the surrounding oblast, as stated in official Russian publications reporting on the number of Poles executed in Leningrad at the height of Stalinist terror (Razumov,

1995–2015). The “cradle of the revolution” was also home to the command headquarters of one of the most important districts in the USSR’s military structure: the Leningrad district. The city itself was the second most important site for military training after Moscow. It is therefore unsurprising that many Poles served in the district, most of whom were victimized by various forms of repression during the Great Purge. Most documents describing the persecution of Polish officers in the Leningrad Military District are now held in the archive of the Federal Security Service in Saint Petersburg. The FSB has never been inclined to grant foreign historians access to its archival holdings, and today conducting archival research in the Russian Federation today is virtually impossible. Fortunately, some of the RKKA officers who were persecuted in Leningrad and the surrounding area were born in what is now Latvia, and the case files from the NKVD investigations conducted against them ended up in Riga, where they can be consulted by scholars. Although only a limited number of case files have been identified at the LVA to date, there are enough to allow us to reconstruct the overall course of the persecutions.

The Leningrad District was among those in which the NKVD’s national operations, including the so-called Polish operation, produced the highest number of victims. This is evidenced by data published in Russia on the subject. The vast majority of death sentences against Polish Red Army officers were handed down by the NKVD Commission and the USSR Prosecutor’s Office (also known as the Higher Dvoika, consisting of the People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs, Nikolai Yezhov, and the USSR Prosecutor, Andrey Vyshinsky), as set out in Yezhov’s order of 11 August 1937, which is considered the beginning of the Polish operation.

The first Polish officer arrested in the Leningrad District whose files can be found in Riga was Colonel Mikołaj Chondażewski (Russian: Nikolay Vladimirovich Khondozhevsky). An assimilated Pole, he began his military career in the Imperial Russian Army. Before World War I, he graduated from the Cadet Corps in Pskov, the Konstantinovsky Artillery School, and the Mikhailovskaya Military Artillery Academy in Saint Petersburg. At the outbreak of war in 1914, he was serving as a captain in the artillery of the 20th Infantry Corps. His corps was shattered during the failed Russian offensive in East Prussia, and Chondażewski was taken prisoner by the Germans in August 1914. Following the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, he was repatriated to Russia, where he joined the Red Army. His expertise as a military expert was put to systematic use. He served as deputy (Russian: *pomoshchnik*) to the commandant of the RKKA Artillery Academy and, in 1921, following the conquest of Georgia, became first chief of artillery of the Caucasus Army, the predecessor of the Transcaucasian Military District. In 1923, he became artillery commander of the 20th Rifle Division in the Petrograd (soon to be Leningrad) District and subsequently deputy artillery inspector of the district. His career was derailed in 1926 when he lost a package of secret and top-secret documents, for which he received

a one-year suspended prison sentence. Thereafter, he served only as commander of an artillery regiment and as chief of artillery of a rifle corps. From 1934 onwards, he served at the RKKA Artillery Academy as a lecturer, and later senior lecturer, in tactical and gunnery program (*Khondozhevsky Nikolay Vladimirovich, n.d., "Spravka na starshego prepodavatelya", 1937*). He was promoted to colonel on 1 February 1936 (*Prikaz Narodnogo komissara oborony, 1936*).

On 28 August 1937, the NKVD Directorate for the Leningrad Oblast petitioned for his arrest, stating: "Born in 1884 in Jelgava, Latvia; Polish; citizen of the USSR; of noble origin; former officer in the Tsarist army; non-party member; lecturer in tactics at the RKKA Artillery Academy [...]. While serving as chief of artillery of the Caucasus Army, he had contact with the Polish spy Łukaszewicz. He informed him of the state of the artillery [army - author's note] and, through Łukaszewicz, sent letters to his first wife, residing in Poland. In 1926, he was tried for the loss of secret and top-secret documents" (*Postanovleniye ob izbranii mery presecheniya, 1937*).¹ On this basis, and following approval by the Military Prosecutor of the Leningrad Military District, he was arrested on 3 September (*Anketa arestovannogo Khondozhevskogo..., n.d.*). He was formally discharged from the RKKA by order of the People's Commissar for Defense, Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, on 9 October, in connection with his arrest by the NKVD (*Prikaz NKO po lichnomu sostavu No. 0995..., 1937*).²

Chondażewski's first interrogation was recorded on 9 September. It was a preliminary examination and the tone was exceptionally calm. The detainee was questioned about his circle of friends and colleagues at the academy, as well as more distant acquaintances in Leningrad and beyond. At the end, the investigating officer alluded to his correspondence with his ex-wife, who had moved to independent Poland. The colonel did not hide the fact that he had corresponded with her while in German captivity and that, when serving as chief of artillery of the Caucasus Army, they exchanged a single letter each via a woman employed at the Polish consulate in Tiflis (now Tbilisi, Georgia) (*Protokol doprosa obvinyayemogo Khondozhevskogo Nikolaya Vladimirovicha ot 9 sentyabrya..., 1937*). Given the modus operandi of NKVD investigators, it may be assumed that the following weeks were devoted to "breaking" the colonel to obtain testimony consistent with the *a priori* assumption adopted at the time of his

1 Józef Łukaszewicz, a lawyer, served unofficially as Polish consul in Tiflis in 1921–1923, representing the interests of the Polish diaspora in the Caucasus. Formally, he was employed at the Italian consulate in the Georgian capital. In 1923, he was arrested by the GPU and convicted of espionage together with a group of Polish citizens; they were later exchanged for Bolshevik agents captured in Poland.

2 It is worth noting that the same order also dismissed two other Poles serving at the Academy: Colonel Piotr Ciecieniewski (arrested on 14 September) and Major Aleksander Tomaszewski (arrested on 2 September).

arrest, namely that he had engaged in espionage on behalf of the re-established Polish state. Of course, the investigators' "work" was entirely off the record – interrogations involving physical violence were simply not documented. It is noteworthy that Chondażewski withstood such pressure for two months. This is evident from the interrogation minutes of 10 November 1937.

The opening lines of the minutes already suggest that the interrogation had been prepared in advance. The first recorded instruction reads: "You have been arrested on the charge of being an agent of a foreign intelligence service and of engaging in active espionage. Give testimony on this matter". The response was: "I confess that in 1921, while serving as chief of artillery in the Caucasus Army, I was recruited by the Polish consul in Tbilisi to engage in espionage on behalf of Polish intelligence". Chondażewski then explained that, in exchange for the Polish mission's assistance in corresponding with his ex-wife, who was living in Poland, he provided information about the units under his command. However, it should be emphasized that he categorically refused to admit that he continued working for Polish intelligence after his transfer to Petrograd (later Leningrad) (*Protokol doprosa obvinyayemogo Khondozevskogo Nikolaya Vladimirovicha ot 10 noyabrya...*, 1937). It soon became clear that the NKVD investigators needed nothing more to bring formal charges against Chondażewski. Three days later, they attempted to force him to confess to membership in a "counter-revolutionary monarchist organization", but he categorically refused (*Protokol doprosa obvinyayemogo Khondozevskogo Nikolaya Vladimirovicha ot 13 noyabrya...*, 1937).

This did not alter the colonel's fate, which appears to have been sealed from the moment of his arrest. Subsequent events unfolded with lightning speed. The NKVD investigators drew up an indictment charging Chondażewski with long-term espionage on behalf of Poland and membership in a counter-revolutionary organization of former Tsarist army officers. Although they noted that he had confessed only to a small part of the allegations, they reported that testimony from other detainees constituted sufficient evidence of his guilt. The case was referred to the Higher Dvoika pursuant to Yezhov's Order No. 00485 of 11 August 1937 (*Obvinitel'noye zaklyucheniye po sledstvennomu delu No. 25582...*, n.d.).³ On 24 November, Yezhov and USSR Prosecutor Vyshinsky sentenced Chondażewski to death, and the sentence was carried out three days later (*Akt o privedenii v ispolneniye prigovora v otnoshenii Khondozevskogo...*, 1937).

3 What is striking is that the case file includes a copy of a document that was not approved by the deputy head of the NKVD Directorate for the Leningrad Oblast, State Security Major Aron Khatenever, until July 1938 (!). The indictment itself was probably drafted in the second half of November 1937.

One issue is striking when examining the colonel's case file. In September 1937, around the time of his arrest, a sizeable group of Poles associated with the RKKA Artillery Academy were also arrested. Staff members, including Colonel Piotr Ciecieniewski and Major Aleksander Tomaszewski, were arrested, as were students including Captain Paweł Pirog, Lieutenants Bolesław Popławski and Aleksander Subocz. All of the sentences in these cases were passed by the Higher Dvoika, and all of the individuals were sentenced to death (Pozharsky, 2012). Chondażewski's first interrogation minutes mention Ciecieniewski, but only as an acquaintance from the academy. There is no indication that any of these officers gave testimony about the colonel; had they done so, it would certainly have been appended to his case file. It is evident that NKVD investigators made little effort to coordinate cases brought against Polish officers in the RKKA. The primary objective of the investigation was to extract confessions of imagined guilt.

The next Pole whose case file is held in Riga is Captain Jan Tarasiewicz (Russian: Ivan Yakovlevich Tarasevich), commander of the machine-gun battalion of the 208th Rifle Regiment of the 70th Rifle Division. From 1936 onwards, his division and its subunits guarded the border with Finland on the Karelian Isthmus and constructed fortified positions there. This would later prove fatal for Tarasiewicz. A commission of the Leningrad Military District staff, headed by the newly appointed deputy chief of staff, Colonel Kuzma Kachanov, concluded that the battalion defense sector under Tarasiewicz's responsibility had been constructed in a "wrecking" manner (Russian: *vreditel'skii*). On this basis, on 8 October 1937, the regimental party organization expelled the captain from the VKP(b) (*Vypiska iz Protokola Nr 20...*, 1937). Four days later, the Military Council of the Leningrad Military District dismissed him from the Red Army. By 19 October, the NKVD petitioned for his arrest, stating: "He is conducting counter-revolutionary wrecking activities aimed at weakening the forces of the fortified garrison of the 208th [Rifle Regiment]" (*Postanovleniye ob izbrani mery presecheniya...*, 1937). The arrest took place on 23 October (*Anketa arestovannogo Tarasevicha...*, n.d.).

Strikingly, the investigation followed a wholly different course than in Chondażewski's case. The first recorded interrogation took place on the day of his detention and had a somewhat ritualized character. Tarasiewicz was questioned about his family, relatives abroad, and similar matters. The only departure from routine was a question about why the faces of certain individuals had been scratched out in photographs confiscated during a search of his quarters. The captain explained that the photographs had been taken during an inspection visit to his garrison by Marshal Voroshilov and his entourage, which included the then head of the city party committee. Upon learning that he and two other individuals shown in the group photograph had been arrested, Tarasiewicz scratched out their faces (*Protokol doprosa obvinayemogo Tarasevicha...*,

1937). Next came something already familiar from Chondażewski's case: a long gap in the recorded interrogations, time presumably devoted to "preparing" the detainee to confess to fabricated guilt. During this period, the investigators interviewed two Russian officers as witnesses. They had attacked Tarasiewicz particularly harshly at a meeting of the regimental party commission convened to expel him from the party. They repeated allegations of "wrecking" in connection with the construction of fortifications along the battalion's section (*Protokol doprosa svidetelya Labzova...*, 1937; *Protokol doprosa svidetelya Bobritskogo...*, 1937). Tarasiewicz's next recorded interrogation did not take place until 6 December. He admitted that in 1925, while studying at the Combined Military School of the Red Communards, he had been recruited by a fellow student, Czesnowicz, to spy for Poland. He said that he had passed intelligence to Czesnowicz until 1936. In 1937, on Czesnowicz's instructions, a man named Iwanicki was to re-establish contact with Tarasiewicz, to whom the captain likewise provided intelligence information (*Pokazaniya obvinyayemogo Tarasevicha...*, 1937).

That, remarkably, was where the investigation ended. In the indictment compiled shortly thereafter, NKVD officers omitted the "wrecking" thread entirely and formulated a single charge: "counter-revolutionary espionage activity on behalf of Poland". They proposed referring Tarasiewicz's case to the Higher Dvoika, in accordance with the procedure set out in Yezhov's order (*Obvinitel'noye zaklyucheniye po sledstvennomu delu No. 32693...*, n.d.).⁴ On 12 January 1938, the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs and the USSR Prosecutor examined the case and sentenced the captain to death. The sentence was carried out three days later (*Akt o privedenii v ispolneniye prigovora v otnoshenii Tarasevicha...*, 1938).

Tarasiewicz's case raises several questions. The records are strikingly sparse: from the formulation of the charges that served as the basis for his arrest to the report confirming the execution of the death sentence, documentation comprises only 26 leaves, some written on both sides. This is exceptionally little. The captain had been arrested on charges of *vreditel'stvo* ("wrecking"). In those grim times, such an accusation typically ended in a death sentence. Although the investigators had witness testimony supporting the "wrecking" allegation, the indictment omitted the matter entirely. It is unsurprising, however, that the investigators, aware that he was a graduate of the Combined Military School of the Red Communards named after Unshlikht (the institution's full name), formulated the charge as espionage on behalf of Poland. Similar cases are known from many other military districts, since until 1927 the school had

4 The deputy head of the NKVD Directorate in the Leningrad Oblast formally approved the indictment on 28 December 1937.

a distinctly Polish character and was intended to train military cadres for the future Sovietization of Poland. What is astonishing, however, is that Tarasiewicz's testimony did not lead to any further action by the Leningrad NKVD. The man who had supposedly recruited Tarasiewicz for intelligence work, Piotr Czesnowicz (Russian: Petr Antonovich Chesnovich), remained an active Red Army officer serving in Leningrad. Moreover, according to the testimony he gave during Tarasiewicz's rehabilitation proceedings, he was not held criminally liable during the Great Purge or thereafter (*Protokol doprosa svidetelya Chesnovicha...*, 1957). There is likewise no indication that he was even dismissed from the RKKA in 1938, as happened to hundreds of Poles and other officers with any "connections abroad". This again suggests that NKVD investigators at the time focused on closing individual cases with an indictment, while related threads were not necessarily of interest to them.

The "Polish spy" template was not applied in the investigation of Major Piotr Kozłowski (Russian: Petr Adamovich Kozlovsky). In this case, it was the place of birth, rather than the nationality, that proved decisive. In the petition for his arrest, the investigators wrote: "While serving in the RKKA, he systematically engages in counter-revolutionary propaganda among military personnel. He has praised fascist Latvia and collected information on the condition of military units" (*Postanovleniye ob izbranii mery presecheniya...*, 1938a).⁵ Kozłowski was arrested on 11 February 1938 (*Anketa arestovannogo Kozlovskogo...*, 1938).

During the first interrogation, held two days later, he was questioned about his family and his service in the Tsarist army (he had served first as a private and a non-commissioned officer in the elite Horse Guards regiment). He stated that shortly after demobilization he traveled to his family home, and then returned to Bolshevik Russia. The investigators devoted particular attention to clarifying how the major's sister Julia, who had previously lived in Latvia, came to be in the USSR (*Protokol doprosa obvin'yayemogo Kozlovskogo Petra Adamovicha ot 13 fevralya...*, 1938). This time, the NKVD did not spend much time "preparing" the prisoner to produce the expected testimony. The next recorded interrogation took place just two weeks later, and the most important parts went as follows: "I am guilty in that my sister, Julia Adamovna, told me she had been sent to the USSR by Latvian intelligence to propose that I do the Latvian government a 'favor', that is, provide information on the condition of Red Army units, otherwise threatening reprisals against my relatives living in Latvia". Further: "On the one hand, I feared that by exposing my sister [as a Latvian intelligence agent] I would myself arouse the suspicion

5 This time, the arrest petition was approved by the deputy head of the NKVD Directorate for the Leningrad Oblast as early as 5 February.

of the Soviet authorities; on the other, I feared that the Latvian authorities would take repressive measures against my relatives living in Latvia". He continued: "In these circumstances, through my sister Julia Adamovna, I agreed to assist Latvian intelligence by supplying information on the condition of Red Army units. Through my sister Julia Adamovna, I passed Latvian intelligence information about the situation in the 29th Rifle Division, in which I was serving at the time" (*Protokol doprosa obvinyayemogo Kozlovskogo Petra Adamovicha ot 27 fevralya...*, 1938). As it turned out, this was Kozłowski's key admission. On 3 March, NKVD investigators attempted to induce him to confess that, having served since 1931 as chief of communications of the 43rd Rifle Division, he had continued to engage in espionage activity. The major rejected these claims, however. He did, however, admit that some of his statements could be considered counter-revolutionary (*Pokazaniya obvinyayemogo Kozlovskogo...*, 1938).

However, the final interrogation was, in effect, theater, since on 27 February (that is, immediately after the previous interrogation) the deputy head of the NKVD Directorate for the Leningrad Oblast, State Security Major Natan Shapiro, had already approved the indictment. It read: "He served as a non-commissioned officer in the Horse Guards regiment, which during the October Days had been sent towards Moscow to support the Provisional Government; he avoided service in the Red Army and was recruited by Latvian intelligence, to which, through his sister, he passed secret information on the condition of the 29th Rifle Division". Interestingly, although Kozłowski was accused of espionage on behalf of Latvia, the case was nevertheless referred to the Higher Dvoika within the framework of the Polish operation, on the basis of the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs' Order No. 00485 (*Obvinitel'noye zaklyucheniye po sledstvennomu delu No. 47602...*, n.d.).

It is hard to say what happened next. The case file then falls into a puzzling silence, as if Kozłowski had been forgotten for months by the NKVD. Moreover, in early September 1938, the NKVD Commission the USSR Prosecutor's Office ceased to operate. Their prerogatives were assumed by troikas within local structures of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs. It was the Special Troika of the NKVD Directorate of the Leningrad Oblast that ultimately sentenced Kozłowski to death, but only on 19 October 1938. The sentence was carried out on 28 October (*Akt o privedenii v ispolneniye prigovora v otnoshenii Kozlovskogo...*, 1938; *Vypiska iz Protokola No. 068...*, 1938).⁶

Although the major's case did not follow a typical trajectory, similar departures from the norm did occur during the Great Purge. In NKVD investigations conducted within the framework of operations related

6 The document gives a different date for the sentence: 27 October.

to nationality, the usual pattern was that within a few weeks the case ended with a death sentence handed down by the Higher Dvoika. A second common practice was to attribute to “non-Soviet” nationalities espionage on behalf of their respective nation-states.

An analogous example can be found in another case involving a Pole, also an RKKK major. In 1937, Antoni Tarando (Russian: Antonin Petrovich Tarando) was serving as a combat training inspector in the Central Council of the paramilitary organization Osoaviakhim⁷ in the Kyiv Military District. As early as 19 August 1937 he was dismissed from the RKKK as a person deemed politically unreliable (*Prikaz NKO po lichnomu sostavu No. 3072...*, 1937). However, he was not arrested until 30 January 1938. Here too the investigation concluded relatively quickly: the last interrogation took place on 20 April, when Tarando confessed to espionage on behalf of Latvia and Germany and stated that he was aware of the existence of a “military-fascist plot” within the Red Army. The indictment was formally drawn up only in September. On 22 September 1938, the major was sentenced to death by the troika attached to the Kyiv Oblast Directorate of the NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR, and he was executed on 4 October (*Delo No. 586 po obvineniyu Tarando Antonina Petrovicha*, n.d.).⁸ As in Kozłowski’s case, the investigation then fell silent for several months, and the charges did not include espionage on behalf of Poland.

The mechanism of Polish-Latvian connections in NKVD investigations during the Great Purge also worked in the other direction. Colonel Władysław Czemis (Russian: Vladislav Ignat’yevich Chemis), commander of the 50th Artillery Regiment in the 50th Rifle Division of the Belarusian Military District, presented himself as Latvian, although he listed Polish as his native language (*Chemis Vladislav Ignat’yevich*, n.d.). He was arrested as a Latvian intelligence agent and a member of a Latvian Trotskyist military organization. Once the investigation was underway, NKVD officers additionally accused him of espionage on behalf of Poland and of membership in the Polish Military Organization (*Delo No. 9831 po obvineniyu Chemisa...*, n.d.).⁹

Not all NKVD investigations against Polish officers in the RKKK during the Great Purge ended as tragically as the cases described above. The death penalty was primarily imposed on those arrested in 1937¹⁰ and

7 Translation: Society for the Promotion of Defence, Aviation, and Chemical Construction.

8 “Military-fascist conspiracy” was the official term used by Yezhov for the alleged military plot said to be headed by Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, the “discovery” of which was announced in early June 1937.

9 Czemis was executed, but unlike the cases discussed above, his sentence was issued by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court.

10 There were, of course, exceptions. One of the best-known concerns Konstantin Rokossovsky, a high-ranking officer of the Leningrad Military District and a Pole by origin. From February 1936 he commanded the newly formed 5th Cavalry Corps.

many of those detained in the winter of 1938, when a sweeping personnel review was conducted in connection with the twentieth anniversary of the Red Army on 22 February. A notable pattern emerged whereby the closer the arrest occurred to the official cessation of repression after 17 November 1938,¹¹ the greater the detainee's chances of survival.

The consequences of the shift in repressive policy can be illustrated by the cases of two Polish colonels in the Leningrad Military District. Both were arrested amid the wave of persecution unleashed in late spring 1938 and continuing through the summer against members of so-called "non-Soviet" nationalities, especially those who until then remained in the commanding and political corps of the RKKA.¹²

The first was Augustyn Szabłowski (Russian: Avgustin Georgiyevich Shablovsky), a former second lieutenant in the Tsarist army. He had spent his entire military career in the artillery. Mobilized into the Red Army in November 1918 and went on to command an artillery battery, battalion, and regiment. As commander of an artillery regiment, he participated in the 1929 armed conflict with China over the Chinese Eastern Railway. He lectured at military academies and worked in the central apparatus. In the mid-1930s, he served on the staff of the Directorate of Combat Training and subsequently in the General Staff of the RKKA. From 1937, he lectured on Advanced Artillery Officers' Courses organized by the RKKA Artillery Academy. He was discharged from the RKKA on 3 June 1938.¹³

The NKVD arrested him on 28 June on charges of being part of a "military-fascist plot" (*Postanovleniye ob izbranii mery presecheniya...*, 1938; *Anketa arestovannogo Shablovskogo...*, 1938). The first interrogation took place that same day and covered all the standard issues seen in previous cases, such as family, friends, and acquaintances. The most significant issue concerned the fact that in most of the declarations submitted during

Arrested on 17 August 1937, he survived months of the most extreme terror in prison, was released on 23 March 1940, and was restored to active service. Moreover, after sanatorium treatment he returned to his previous post, something virtually unheard of at the time. In the following decade he became the "marshal of two nations". To date, however, no researcher has succeeded in locating the investigation file in his case.

- 11 On that day, the Council of People's Commissars and the Central Committee of the VKP(b) adopted a joint decree, "On arrests, prosecutorial oversight, and the conduct of investigations". While expressing satisfaction that the country had been "cleansed" of hostile elements, it also stressed that NKVD officers had committed numerous violations of "socialist legality". One consequence was Yezhov's replacement as People's Commissar for Internal Affairs by Lavrentiy Beria, followed by a wave of repression within the NKVD apparatus.
- 12 First, at the end of May, the Main Military Council of the RKKA (the Red Army's highest collegiate body, of which Stalin was a member) adopted a decision initially applying only to officers of the Far Eastern Front. It was then extended to the entire security apparatus under directives issued by the People's Commissars of Defence, the Navy, and Internal Affairs.
- 13 For more on him, see Wojtkowiak, 2015, pp. 509–510.

his military service, Szablowski had concealed his Polish nationality. During the interrogation, he confirmed that he was Polish, that his father and mother were also Polish, and that his mother was of German origin but regarded herself as Polish. He was also questioned about the alleged criminal activity that had served as the basis for his arrest. At this stage of the investigation, he firmly denied these allegations (*Protokol doprosa obvinyayemogo Shablovskogo Avgustina Georgiyevicha ot 28 iyunya...*, 1938).¹⁴

Szablowski yielded to the investigators relatively quickly. Just a week later, he testified that, in 1932, Albert Lapin, then head of the RKKa Board of Combat Training, had recruited him to be part of a military-fascist plot (*Protokol doprosa obvinyayemogo Shablovskogo Avgustina Georgiyevicha ot 5 iyulya...*, 1938). However, it was not until August that he revealed the true nature of his counter-revolutionary activities. He had allegedly spread counter-revolutionary propaganda among the officer corps, particularly former Tsarist officers; recruited new supporters to the plot; and, most importantly, after Lapin's transfer to the aviation department at the end of 1932, carried out instructions from Mark Tkachov, chief of staff and deputy head of the Directorate of Combat Training, as well as from Tukhachevsky himself. He also provided a list of names of those allegedly involved in the conspiracy (*Protokol doprosa obvinyayemogo Shablovskogo Avgustina Georgiyevicha ot 4 avgusta...*, 1938; *Protokol doprosa obvinyayemogo Shablovskogo Avgustina Georgiyevicha ot 23 avgusta...*, 1938). This final thread is puzzling, as Szablowski's testimony primarily includes the names of Red Army commanders who had already been repressed.¹⁵ This raises the question of whether he was consciously avoiding the identification of new potential victims for the NKVD, or whether this was merely coincidental. It should be recalled that in June 1937 only the trial and execution of Marshal Tukhachevsky and seven other high-ranking officers, allegedly the leaders of the conspiracy, were officially announced. Information about repression against the remaining officers, especially those serving outside the Leningrad garrison, circulated only unofficially, by word of mouth.

In the autumn of 1938, especially after 17 November, NKVD officers themselves began to be arrested on charges of violating "socialist legality" and using unauthorized interrogation methods, especially coercive

14 Szablowski did indeed conceal his nationality. Like many Poles after the Polish-Soviet War, when Soviet propaganda portrayed Poland as one of the Bolshevik state's most implacable enemies internationally, he preferred to pass as Russian. Others at the time declared themselves Belarusian, Lithuanian, or even Latvian. Of the individuals mentioned here, Colonel Ciecieniewski declared himself Polish at least until 1922, and later Russian.

15 Of the dozen or so names mentioned during Szablowski's interrogations, only Colonel Pyotr Rubtsov (promoted to kombrig in August 1938), who headed a section in the RKKa Directorate of Combat Training in 1931-1932, was never subjected to repression. Only one officer, Gusarov, could not be identified. All the others named by the colonel as participants in the conspiracy were already dead by August 1938.

measures including torture. During this period, State Security Lieutenant Kuznetsov, who was interrogating Szabłowski, sought to secure himself a measure of protection. On 9 December, he re-interrogated the colonel and obtained indisputable confirmation of his previous testimony. On 17 December, he once again questioned him in great detail about the members of the military-fascist conspiracy known to him (*Protokol doprosa obvinayemogo Shablovskogo Avgustina Georgiyevicha ot 9 dekabrya...*, 1938; *Protokol doprosa obvinayemogo Shablovskogo Avgustina Georgiyevicha ot 17 dekabrya...*, 1938). This time, possibly as the interrogator's prompting, Szabłowski listed numerous officers who had not featured in his previous statements as co-participants in counter-revolutionary activity. Most of them were staff officers who had not been subjected to repression during the Great Purge; in fact, for many of them that period marked the beginning of their proper careers. One example was Aleksandr Vasilevsky, later Marshal of the Soviet Union and Chief of the General Staff for most of the war against Germany. The only Pole among them, Kombrig¹⁶ Jan Jarocki (Russian: Ivan Osipovich Yarotsky), was one of the handful of officers in this group who were subjected to repression. Before his arrest, he had been chief of staff of the 16th Rifle Corps and served on the Directorate of Combat Training from 1931 to 1934.¹⁷

Szabłowski was interrogated twice more by representatives of the military prosecutor's office. On 27 December, he fully confirmed his earlier testimony. Only on 14 March 1939 did he categorically stated that he had never been part of any conspiracy and that his earlier statements had been fabricated (*Protokol doprosa obvinayemogo Shablovskogo Avgustina Georgiyevicha ot 27 dekabrya...*, 1938; *Pokazaniya obvinayemogo Shablovskogo Avgustina Georgiyevicha ot 14 marta...*, 1939). He maintained this position during subsequent interrogations conducted by a new NKVD investigator, State Security Sergeant Mikhnevich. These took place on 25 June and 20 July 1939 (*Protokol doprosa obvinayemogo Shablovskogo Avgustina Georgiyevicha ot 25 iyunya...*, 1939; *Protokol doprosa obvinayemogo Shablovskogo Avgustina Georgiyevicha ot 20 iyulya...*, 1939).

It would appear that Szabłowski's conduct during the December 1938 interrogations, particularly his first conversation with a representative

16 The system of military ranks introduced in the Red Army in 1935 was unusually complex and was largely derived from position titles. Kombrig ("brigade commander") was the lowest rank in the senior command tier, roughly corresponding to the first general officer grade in line service.

17 Besides Vasilevsky and the aforementioned Rubtsov, Szabłowski's testimony also mentioned other officers promoted to general ranks in 1940, including Vasily Gordov, Aleksandr Pulko-Dmitriev, and Nikanor Zakhvatayev. Two colonels who were arrested in spring 1938 were also mentioned: Ivan Bogomolov and Valentin Karavayev. Komdiv Alexander Sediakin, who was executed in July 1938, was also mentioned. Of the fourteen people mentioned, only one, Gritsko, could not be identified.

of the military prosecutor's office, proved decisive for his subsequent fate. By confirming his incriminating testimony at a time when many prisoners were already beginning to retract theirs, having learned of the 17 November resolution and of the growing number of arrests among their former NKVD interrogators, he committed a serious error. Moreover, he never once justified his earlier statements by alleging that Investigator Kuznetsov had used physical coercion against him. The investigation continued over the following months. During this time, the NKVD investigators, while formally acknowledging that the accused had withdrawn his confession of participation in the conspiracy, continued their inquiry. They now asked him chiefly about his official contacts, both with convicted "enemies of the people" and former associates who remained at liberty. They also asked him about his role in drafting regulations prepared within the RKKA Directorate of Combat Training.

Szabłowski came close to regaining his freedom. Despite the testimony from December 1938, in April 1940 the Military Prosecutor's Office of the Leningrad Military District petitioned to terminate the investigation and release the colonel on the grounds that he had retracted his testimony that had constituted the principal evidence in the case. It was emphasized that, of all the "enemies of the people" whom Szabłowski said he had collaborated with and who were executed, only Komdiv Sediakin had mentioned him in his testimony and had been very vague about him (*Postanovleniye voyennoy prokuratury...*, 1940).¹⁸ Unfortunately, on 7 May 1940, the Osoby Otdel (Special Section, the military counterintelligence branch) of the NKVD in the Leningrad Military District appealed this decision to the military prosecutor general of the RKKA. The most important part of the appeal read: "Considering that Szabłowski is of noble origin and served as an officer in the Tsarist army and the army of the Provisional Government, and that Sediakin, Lapin and Tkachov were sentenced to the supreme measure of punishment, I deem it appropriate to refer his case to the Special Conference [Russian: *Osoboe soveshchanie*] at the NKVD of the USSR" (*OO NKVD LVO...*, 1940).¹⁹ No response from the Main Military Prosecutor's Office of the Red Army survives in the case file, but it must have been favorable. The charges presented in the indictment were very serious and were as follows: "He was a member of an anti-Soviet, military-fascist plot within the RKKA and participated in the development

18 This decision was approved by the Military Prosecutor of the district on 25 April. Unfortunately, it remains unknown whether State Security Lieutenant Kuznetsov, who conducted all of Szabłowski's interrogations in 1938, was held criminally liable for violations of "socialist legality". Scholars researching the repression of officers in the Leningrad Military District have not been able to determine this, nor his rank or position (Grigoryan, Mil'bach, Chernavsky, 2013, p. 288).

19 Although arrested, Albert Lapin never stood trial: he committed suicide in a prison in Khabarovsk.

of a harmful, defeatist theory of ‘deep battle’, designed to result in the Red Army’s defeat [in a future war]” (*Obvinitel’noye zaklyucheniye po sledstvennomu delu No. 53357-38g...*, 1940).²⁰ In 1938, such charges would undoubtedly have resulted in a death sentences, yet on 28 September 1940 the Special Commission sentenced Szabłowski to five years in a labor camp. It was also noted that he was to serve his sentence in the Ust-Izhemsk camp (*Vypiska iz Protokola No. 121...*, 1940).

Another colonel who served in the Leningrad MD and was arrested in the summer of 1938 was Waclaw Ławrynowicz (Russian: Vatslav Bronislavovich Lavrinovich). He is an example of a middle-ranking officer. A former warrant officer in the old army and a German prisoner of war from 1917 to 1918, he joined the Red Army in June 1918 and was decorated with the Order of the Red Banner for his participation in the civil war. In 1931, he devoted his career to the rapidly developing armored corps of the Red Army. In May 1936, he was appointed commander of a mechanized regiment in the newly formed 16th Cavalry Division. While serving in this capacity, he was promoted from major to colonel in April 1937 (Wojtkowiak, 2015, p. 323–325; *Lavrinovich Vatslav Bronislavovich...*, n.d.).²¹ Interestingly, when he started serving in this division (he had previously served in Transbaikalia), he had the opportunity to come into contact with fellow Poles. The cavalry corps that his unit belonged to was commanded by Konstantin Rokossovsky, and the head of communications of the division was Captain, later Major, Rafał Pipin (Russian: Rafail Ivanovich Pipin).

On 16 August 1938 Ławrynowicz was discharged from the RKKA (*Prikaz NKO po lichnomu sostavu No. 01362...*, 1938). It turned out that he had been under NKVD scrutiny for over a month; on 4 July an arrest petition had been prepared, justifying it as follows: “As a Polish nationalist, in 1922 he attempted to depart for permanent residence in Poland. He visited the Polish consulate. He is suspected of espionage activity” (*Postanovleniye ob izbranii mery presecheniya...*, 1938c).²² It is difficult to ascertain what delayed the security organs, but Ławrynowicz was not arrested until 23 August (*Anketa arestovannogo Lavrinovicha...*, 1938).

What sets the Ławrynowicz case apart is his conduct throughout the interrogations. Despite repeated attempts to attribute to him espionage on behalf of Poland and Latvia, and service in the German army after

20 The theory of “deep battle”, more precisely “deep operation”, was a military doctrine developed in the Red Army at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s. It was the Soviet counterpart (and, in some respects, a precursor) to the German Blitzkrieg. One of its principal proponents was Marshal Tukhachevsky; in 1937 the doctrine was declared “wrecking”.

21 These types of documents (concerning those killed or missing in the war against Germany) were accessible via the *Pamyat’ naroda* website run by the Russian Defence Ministry; access to them was closed in June 2023.

22 In fact, Ławrynowicz’s permanent residence and birthplace were in Daugavpils (Dźwińsk/Dyneburg), in present-day Latvia.

his capture in 1917, Colonel Ławrynowicz firmly rejected all accusations and calmly clarified any ambiguities. He also explained that his decision to leave the Red Army in 1922, under the pretext of applying for Latvian citizenship, was the only way he could see his wife and family in Samara after many years apart, since he was repeatedly denied leave.²³ Moreover, his testimony was corroborated by documentation from the RKKA Personnel Directorate. For this reason, on 31 January 1939 the NKVD Directorate for the Leningrad Oblast and the Osobyi Otdel of Leningrad Military District conceded that there were no grounds to bring charges against Ławrynowicz, and they decided to discontinue the proceedings and release him from custody (*Postanovleniye OO LVO i UNKVD...*, 1939). The colonel was released on 2 February 1939 (*Izveshcheniye k orderu No. 889*, n.d.).

The cases discussed here, concerning Polish Red Army officers who served in the Leningrad Military District and whose files are now held in the Latvian State Archive in Riga, provide an almost complete spectrum of how similar proceedings unfolded across the USSR, its military districts, and its fleets. NKVD officers levelled a wide range of accusations at Poles: most obviously, espionage on behalf of Poland; espionage on behalf of another state; participation in a “military-fascist conspiracy”; and membership in a monarchist military organization (which Colonel Chondażewski ultimately refused to admit). The only accusation absent here is the one at the heart of Yezhov’s Order of 11 August 1937: membership in the Polish Military Organization (POW), though the Colonel Czemis’s case in the Belarusian Military District partly complements this picture. The structure of the investigations and the rhythm of interrogations also suggest that “direct coercive measures” were employed in the vast majority of cases, that is, bluntly speaking, various forms of torture. The aim was to obtain what USSR Prosecutor Andrey Vyshinsky called the “tsarina of evidence”: the defendant’s confession. Vyshinsky, who was of Polish origin (his father’s name was January), simultaneously sat on the extrajudicial body that at the time handed down sentences to thousands of RKKA officers and ordinary Soviet citizens of “non-Soviet” nationalities, namely the Higher Dvoika. There is also a wide spectrum of behaviors and positions among the accused, ranging from full cooperation with the investigating NKVD officer (Colonel Szabłowski) to long-term resistance (Colonel Chondażewski) and an adamant refusal to admit any crimes (Colonel Ławrynowicz). The final outcomes likewise span the full range of typical of the Great Purge: the supreme measure of punishment; a sentence of several years in a labor camp; and, finally,

23 The course of the investigation suggests that no direct coercive measures were used against Ławrynowicz. This may have been a consequence of his late arrest: on 22 August, the party official Lavrentiy Beria, then First Secretary of the Communist Party in Georgia, was appointed First Deputy People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs, which could have signalled an impending shift in repressive policy and in the internal rules of the commissariat.

release, which was possible only for those who survived to see the sharp change in repressive policy after 17 November 1938.

The archival materials held by the Latvian State Archive are undoubtedly a valuable resource for studying repressions against Poles who were Soviet citizens, not just Red Army officers and not just victims of the Great Purge. Anyone researching persecution of Poles in the Soviet state, regardless of the victims' profession or the period in which the persecution occurred, will find source material there, provided that the victims were born within the territory of present-day Latvia.

Finally, a brief note on the fate of the two men who, unlike thousands of Poles in Leningrad and the Leningrad Oblast during the Great Purge, were not executed. Augustyn Szablowski served the full term of his sentence. In November 1944, he was sent to the front to fight in the war against Germany and took part in the battle for Königsberg and the Berlin operation. For this, he was awarded the Order of the Patriotic War, Second Class, on 5 June 1945 (*Nagradnoy list na Shablovskogo...*, 1945).²⁴ In 1949, he retired as a colonel. Waclaw Ławrynowicz was reinstated on 19 July 1939 and became a lecturer in mechanized forces tactics at the Military Electrotechnical Academy in Leningrad. Although it remains unclear in what capacity he was sent to fight at the Finnish front, on 2 April 1940 he was promoted to kombrig, and on 4 June 1940 to major general of the armored forces. He was the only Pole among the five 1940 promotions whose original rank had been major. This was in addition to the repressions he had suffered during the Great Purge. By comparison, Konstantin Rokossovsky was immediately granted the rank of komdiv, three grades higher, and in 1940 he too became a major general. From May 1941, Ławrynowicz headed the motor and armored forces of the 23rd Army. He was killed in action near Leningrad on 21 September 1941 (*Lavrinovich Vatslav Bronislavovich...*, n.d.).²⁵

(transl. by Dominika Gajewska)

24 As of 6 August 2023, the document was accessible via podvignaroda.ru; it can be located by entering surname, given name, and patronymic under “lyudi i nagrazhdeniya”.

25 His personnel card contains a striking inconsistency: it states that he began service at the Military Electrotechnical Academy as an assistant on either 10 April or 29 May 1939, yet the order rescinding his dismissal from the RKKA was issued only on 19 July, when he was appointed lecturer at the Academy.

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