

Putin launches purge of military

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Shortly after the inauguration of his fifth term as President in late April, Vladimir Putin has initiated a far-reaching purge of the military leadership.

The purge began with the arrest of Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov on April 24. He was accused of taking a bribe of more than 1 billion rubles (about \$11 million). Then, on May 14, at Putin's suggestion, Sergei Shoigu (Minister of Defense since 2012) was not included in the new government. Instead, former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economic Development Andrei Belousov, who has no background in the military, was appointed as the new Minister of Defense.

The explanations given for the appointment of Belousov, a well-known economist, to the leadership of the Ministry of Defense, have largely centered on Russia's need to reduce military spending and transition to a full-fledged war economy. However, while this may be part of the explanation, it hardly accounts for the systematic replacement of the military leadership with civilian personnel close to the president.

Thus, on May 20, Deputy Defense Minister Yuri Sadovenko was removed from his post by a decree from Putin. Oleg Savelyev, a former auditor of the Audit Chamber and Deputy Minister of Economic Development, became the new Deputy Defense Minister. On Monday June 17, Putin dismissed three additional deputy ministers of defense and appointed three civilian officials instead. Like Belousov, none of them have a background in the Russian army. The Kremlin justified their appointment with the fight against "corruption" in the military.

Other leading figures of the military command were removed as well, with many of them arrested and detained on bribery charges. This included Yury Kuznetsov, head of the Defense Ministry's main personnel department, and Vladimir Verteletsky, head of the Defense Order Support Department. The former commander of the 58th Army of the Southern Military District, Ivan Popov, was detained and accused of embezzling a large sum of money from metal structures intended for the construction of defense facilities in Zaporizhzhya region in 2023. Last year, Popov vocally criticized the lack of military supplies on the front in Ukraine, and publicly spoke about the mass death of Russian soldiers on the front.

Sukhrab Akhmedov, the commander of Russia's largest army unit (the 20th Army), was also removed from his post. The arrest of Vadim Shamarin, deputy to the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Valery Gerasimov, has prompted speculation that Gerasimov himself might soon also be dismissed.

These dismissals might just be the beginning. According to information relayed by an unnamed Russian government official to

The Moscow Times, "by the end of the year, dozens, maybe even hundreds, of people of various ranks will be arrested in all units of the Defense Ministry."

Already, the purge has begun to extend to high-ranking regional officials. The Deputy Governor of Tyumen Oblast, Vyacheslav Vakhrin, was arrested on June 9; leading regional officials of the Republic of Karelia, Oryol Oblast and the Krasnodar Krai have also been arrested, based on fraud and bribery charges.

The Kremlin's claim that this purge is bound up with a "fight against corruption" lacks any credibility. "Corruption" is the modus vivendi of the entire Russian oligarchy and capitalist state apparatus, which emerged out of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union and the plunder of state assets. The charge of "corruption" is routinely levelled by one faction of the oligarchy against another to cover up the real content of their infighting.

Historically, conflicts between political and military authorities on the eve of major wars or in the context of wars have always had great political significance.

The current purge in Russia inevitably evokes the memory of Stalin's notorious massacre of the Red Army leadership in 1937, during the Great Terror, in which generations of socialists were murdered. The Red Army, which had been founded by Leon Trotsky, was a particular target of Stalin's counterrevolutionary genocide. But there was also a geopolitical component to the purge: The mass murder of the generals took place in the context of Stalin's preparations for a rapprochement with Hitler, which was sealed in the Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939. It decapitated and demobilized the Red Army on the eve of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union just two years later, in June 1941.

There are, of course, fundamental differences between the nature of the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia. The USSR originated in the socialist 1917 revolution and remained a workers' state, despite its severe degeneration under Stalinism. The terror against the Red Army by Stalin was part of a political counter-revolution against the traditions and cadre of the revolution. Today's capitalist Russia and the Putin regime emerged out of that counterrevolution, which culminated in the destruction of the USSR in 1991. But precisely for that reason, the Putin regime has inherited definite methods and features of Stalinist policies.

Moreover, as was the case with the 1937 purge, the current purge is taking place in the context of the aggression of imperialism, which is intensifying tensions within the ruling stratum. In fact, a central component of the imperialist war against Russia has been the fostering of conflicts within the oligarchy and state apparatus, substantial sections of which have a pro-NATO orientation.

The purge occurs less than a year after billionaire-turned-mercenary leader Evgeny Prigozhin launched a coup attempt against the military leadership with an appeal to NATO. At the time, the coup attempt enjoyed significant support in sections of the military. It was followed by what amounted to only a minor purge within its ranks. The dismissal of Sergei Shoigu, in particular, had been one of the main demands of Prigozhin's coup attempt. Shoigu has been closely associated with Russia's military strategy since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and was long considered one of the figures closest to Putin.

As a result of the purge, the position of the military within the state apparatus and the determination of the strategy in the war in Ukraine has been severely weakened. The top positions of the Russian Defense Ministry are now in the hands of economists with no background in the army. At the same time, in another parallel to 1937, the position of the secret service, the FSB—the direct successor of the Soviet NKVD which carried out the Great Terror—has been vastly strengthened. It is the FSB that is leading the investigation into “corruption” at the highest levels of the military. Capt John Foreman, the UK's former defence attache to Moscow told the Guardian, “The FSB finally got their teeth in the defence ministry and general staff. Shoigu kept the FSB largely away from the ministry throughout his tenure.”

The purge occurs as the danger of a direct confrontation between NATO and Russian troops in Ukraine and a nuclear exchange is greater than ever before. After serious military setbacks by NATO's proxy forces in Ukraine, which have claimed half a million or more lives, the Biden administration has now openly embraced the firing of US and NATO missiles far into Russian territory, risking, even more recklessly than before, a nuclear confrontation. And earlier, US Army Gen. Charles K. Brown Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that sending NATO trainers to Ukraine is inevitable, which effectively means that sending NATO troops is inevitable.

The Kremlin's response has been a combination of nuclear saber rattling and military escalation, on the one hand, and renewed attempts to broker a deal with the imperialist powers, on the other. In May, Russia conducted military exercises for the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons and launched an offensive in the Kharkov (Kharkiv) region, simultaneously advancing along the entire front line. However, the offensive in the Kharkov region has remained relatively limited and does not require a second wave of mobilization, which the Kremlin has been eager to avoid, for fear of triggering an open eruption of social discontent.

Shortly after the beginning of the offensive, media outlets have reported that the Russian government has made new advances to US and European imperialism. On June 14, Putin openly made a peace proposal to Ukraine and NATO, reiterating his earlier demands for the demilitarization of Ukraine, and the recognition of Crimea and Donbas as parts of Russia. Predictably, the Ukrainian authorities and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg rejected the proposal. The strategic goals of NATO imperialism in the war go far beyond the Ukraine and even Russia itself: From the standpoint of the imperialist powers, the complete subjugation of Russia and its raw material resources is a necessary component of the

preparations for an all-out war with China.

The zig-zags by Moscow and the intense conflicts within the ruling class flow from the historical, social and political position of the Putin regime. Having emerged as a Bonapartist regime out of the restoration of capitalism, and overseeing extreme levels of social inequality, the Putin regime is desperately seeking to balance between different factions within the oligarchy, between the oligarchy and imperialism as well as between the oligarchy and the working class.

The main axis of the Kremlin's war strategy has been to use limited military pressure to force the imperialist powers to the negotiating table. But the relentless escalation by NATO has undermined this strategy and fueled the infighting within the ruling class. No doubt, a major reason for the purge is that Putin is seeking to preempt a challenge from within the military to his political rule and conduct of the war. But much suggests that, far from consolidating the position of Putin, the purge will only further aggravate tensions within the ruling elites.

At the same time, discontent is growing within the working class, which is made to bear the brunt of the war. Already now, a growing proportion of the Russian population favor peace negotiations. According to estimates by the Levada Center, a think tank aligned with the NATO-backed opposition in the oligarchy, more than 51 percent of the population favor peace negotiations. A particularly large age group in favor of peace talks are young people aged 18-24. Among them, the think tank estimates that only 26 percent are in favor of continuing the war, compared to 61 percent who favor peace.

However, so far, this position does not go beyond the hope for peaceful coexistence of capitalist states with antagonistic interests. This is impossible under capitalism. The imperialist powers are engaged in a new redivision of the world, adopting genocide and mass murder as state policy and risking nuclear war. The Putin regime, for its part, defends the assets of the oligarchy that emerged out of the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union. Whatever the intense factional infighting, ultimately, the Russian oligarchy as a whole sees its principal enemy not in imperialism, but in the working class.

The Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists, working in alliance with the International Committee of the Fourth International, insists that workers cannot place their hopes behind a peaceful self-regulation of capitalism or any section of the ruling class. There is only one way to prevent the imperialist carve-up of Russia and the entire former Soviet Union, and end the barbarism of the capitalist world: The working class must intervene independently in the situation and put an end to the war through the struggle for socialist revolution.



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