Screenplay for the film "1921 - Mikhail Tukhachevsky. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI

Screenplay Summary:

The text traces the trajectory of Mikhail Tukhachevsky, from an ambitious young tsarist officer to a Soviet marshal executed by Stalin, focusing on three key knots: the suppression of the 1921 revolts (Tambov and Kronstadt), the failure of the 1920 war against Poland, and, later, Stalin's fear of a military leader who was too brilliant.

Born into a noble family and first in his class at the military academy, Tukhachevsky had long seen himself as a "Napoleon": staged photos in imperial poses, a cult of career and risk. In 1917, unlike his comrades in the Semenovsky Guards Regiment who left to join the White camp, he chose to "stay for the time being with the Bolsheviks," betting on the opportunities the new regime offered a talented officer. Trotsky made him one of his main tsarist "military specialists" integrated into the Red Army and later called him "the demon of the Civil War."

In 1920, Tukhachevsky commanded the Western Front against Poland. Under Lenin's slogan "Through Warsaw to Berlin and Paris!", he saw this campaign as his march on Europe. His order – "Through the corpse of White Poland lies the road to the world conflagration" – is explicitly Napoleonic in tone. But the Bolsheviks overestimated the Poles' revolutionary enthusiasm and underestimated their patriotism: the Polish counteroffensive, the rout of the Red Army, and the peace treaty signed in March 1921. Tukhachevsky then admitted that his army was half composed of "rabble," exhausted by seven years of war – and his career seemed broken.

To "pay" for this failure, he was given the most unpopular operations of 1921. In Tambov province, he crushed a massive peasant uprising born of grain requisitions (prodrazvyorstka) and the violence of food detachments. Armed with unlimited powers, he issued extermination orders: hostages shot if weapons were not surrendered, families of rebels deported, concentration camps, 70,000 people displaced, including thousands of children. He had chemical shells fired to "cleanse the forests" where the insurgents were hiding, taking care only to move livestock out of the gas zones. Ten years later, he would devote a chapter to chemical weapons in his theoretical work New Questions of War.

At the same time, he led the suppression of the Kronstadt revolt. In a context of famine, strikes in Moscow and Petrograd, and derisory wages, the sailors – former heroes of 1917 – demanded an end to requisitions, freedom of speech, and soviets without Bolsheviks. Lenin had a delegation arrested and shot, then pressed Tukhachevsky to take the fortress before the opening of the 10th Party Congress. The assaults across the ice cost thousands of lives among the cadets sent into the attack. The sailors' central demands (abolition of grain requisitions) were eventually adopted: this was the beginning of the NEP. But in the official narrative, the role of revolutionary sailors was erased, a fictitious White "Combat Organization" was invented, and the poet Gumilyov, among others, was shot. Tukhachevsky justified the brutality of the repression to Lidiya Nord by recalling the sailors' own violence in 1917, while sensing that he had been chosen precisely because he would "do what was necessary."

Despite Tambov and Kronstadt, his career resumed: he became an influential theorist, a symbol of Soviet–German military cooperation, commander of military districts, then Marshal of the Soviet Union in 1935–1936. He played a leading role in the People's Commissariat of Defense, as Zhukov would later note. But this growing influence, combined with his aristocratic background, the huge weight of former tsarist officers in the Red Army, and the prospect of a war with Germany which he proclaimed inevitable, made him, in Stalin's eyes, a danger far greater than Hitler himself: the potential leader of a victorious army that might obey only him.

From the late 1920s, the OGPU kept Tukhachevsky under surveillance, German disinformation campaigns accused him of working for the Reichswehr, and arrested officers, under pressure of interrogation, denounced him as a future military dictator. Stalin noted that "it's possible, since it cannot be excluded," then delayed: "too early." He waited until the army was even more dependent on him and the political moment more favorable.

In 1937, the great purge struck the Red Army. After a final 1st of May at which Stalin raised a toast to those who would still "be at this table" for the October anniversary, Tukhachevsky was moved to a provincial district, then arrested, tried, and shot. His friend Shostakovich refused to sign the letters of condemnation. Behind the biography of a brilliant, risk-taking, violent, and cultured officer, the text thus shows how the same man successively embodies the hope of revolutionary conquest, terror against peasants and sailors, and finally the internal enemy whom a frightened dictator must eliminate before the coming war.

Screenplay:

1921 – Mikhail Tukhachevsky

A year before his death, in 1936, on the way back from the funeral of the English king George V, Marshal of the Soviet Union Mikhail Nikolayevich Tukhachevsky stopped in Paris. The improbability of this situation was heightened by the fact that Deputy People's Commissar Mikhail Nikolayevich Tukhachevsky, formerly a second lieutenant in the tsarist army, met there with his former fellow officers of the Life Guards Semenovsky Regiment. In other words, a hero of the Civil War in Paris met with White émigrés – officers who had fought under Kornilov, Denikin, and Wrangel. What's more, during this meeting Mikhail Tukhachevsky said to his friends of youth: "I have lost."

In December 1917, when Tukhachevsky said goodbye in Petrograd to his Semenovsky friends who were leaving for the Don to join Kornilov, he told them: "I'm staying; right now my path is with the Bolsheviks." In this statement by the 25-year-old Tukhachevsky, the word that stands out is "right now." Apparently Tukhachevsky is recklessly counting on freedom of choice and maneuver in the future, and above all he assumes that the new situation in the country opens up unexpected career prospects for him. Tukhachevsky is ambitious. He finished the Aleksandrovsk Military School in Moscow on 12 July 1914, literally on the eve of the First World War. He graduated first in both performance and discipline; he was granted the right to choose his posting, and he chose the Semenovsky Regiment. The plan was then to go on to the General Staff Academy.

In 1913, during the celebrations of the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty, for zeal in service, the ensign-cadet Tukhachevsky was presented to Nicholas II. Vladimir Postoronkin, a cadet

of the Alekseev Military School, trained together with Tukhachevsky during exercises. In his memoirs, published in Prague in 1928, he writes: “With time, Tukhachevsky became a fanatic in achieving his goals; his guiding principle was to reach the maximum of career advancement, even if he had to risk everything, place the maximum stake.” That is, he was a gambler.

The musicologist Sabaneev, who was close to Tukhachevsky’s old noble family, wrote: “He posed for photographs in Napoleonic attitudes, cultivated an arrogant expression. He felt himself born for great deeds. It had the character of boyishness.”

In his senior years at the military school he wrote a memorandum to the command about the behavior of junior cadets. Three cadets – Krasovsky, Yanovsky, and Avdeyev – committed suicide after Tukhachevsky’s report.

January 1921. For six months already a peasant uprising has been under way in Tambov province under the leadership of Aleksandr Antonov. The “Union of Working Peasantry” keeps issuing leaflets. They are addressed to workers and peasants, to those mobilized. Here are a few fragments:

“Despite all the efforts of the Bolsheviks to blacken the peasant movement with vile slanders, everyone knows perfectly well that the insurgents are the genuine working peasantry, those who fed and still feed all of Russia with their bent backs, whose calluses never leave their hands. The Russian muzhik is meek and gentle, but in his wrath he can be terrible. The Bolsheviks have managed to awaken his rage – upon their own heads. Ruined to the ground by State grain requisitions, swollen from eating weeds, the peasants finally could not bear it any longer.

Mobilized Red Army soldiers, for three years you have been rattling your weapons, but this has brought no benefit or happiness either to you yourselves, or to us, your fathers and mothers. Think about what you have lived through in these three years of fratricidal slaughter.”

The causes of the Tambov uprising were obvious to everyone. At an army party conference in Tambov, one of those involved in suppressing the uprising, the communist Kazakov, said:

“In order to fulfill the grain requisition in full, peasants were subjected to torture: water was poured into their boots and they were left outside in the frost; they were lowered into wells; their beards were singed; shots were fired from revolvers close to their ears. Often these tortures were applied to those who had already fulfilled the requisition; new deliveries were demanded. Thousands of complaints went to the Provincial Food Committee. The complaints were not examined.”

In April 1921, Trotsky’s deputy Sklyansky wrote a note to Lenin:

“I would consider it desirable to send Tukhachevsky to suppress the Tambov uprising. Recently there has been no improvement there, and in some places things have even worsened. But this appointment will produce quite a strong effect, especially abroad. Your opinion?”

Tukhachevsky is a hero of the Civil War; in principle, fighting peasants is beneath him. Lenin replies: “Submit to Molotov for the Politburo for tomorrow. I propose to appoint him without publicity in the Center, without publication.”

On 27 April the Politburo appointed Tukhachevsky “sole commander of the troops in the Tambov district, making him responsible for the liquidation of Antonov’s bands. Give him a term of one month for the liquidation. Do not allow any interference in his affairs.”

Already in February, the grain requisition had been lifted in Tambov province, but this did not lead to an end of the uprising. On 6 May Tukhachevsky arrived in Tambov. On 12 May he issued the extermination Order No. 130.

Even before the order, Tukhachevsky, as an experienced theorist, had worked out instructions that were then developed in the order itself:

“Only two options remain for you, participants in bandit gangs: either perish like mad dogs or surrender to the mercy of Soviet power. The family of anyone who evades appearing is taken as hostages, and his property is placed under arrest. The family is held for two weeks in a concentration camp. If the bandit does not appear within two weeks, the family is exiled to the North for forced labor.”

A separate appeal was addressed to party members in the army: “Great tasks have been laid upon the Red Army in Tambov province.”

Against Antonov’s peasant army, 120,000 troops were deployed, plus 9 artillery brigades, 4 armored trains, 6 armored detachments, 5 motorized armored units, and 2 air squadrons. Tukhachevsky states: “We usually call this stage of the struggle an occupation.”

On the occupied territories he proposes corresponding measures. First: never make threats that cannot be carried out. Second: once a threat has been made, carry it out unswervingly, to the point of cruelty, to the very end. Third: peasants who favor the Soviets must be drawn into Soviet work, into organizing intelligence against the bandits.

Seven concentration camps were created in the province, for 13,500 people. The peasants did not give up the insurgents. On 28 May the Red Army went on the offensive. On 11 June Order No. 171 was issued:

“Citizens who refuse to give their name are to be shot on the spot. If weapons are found, the senior worker in the family is to be shot.”

As of 1 August 1921, there were 1,155 children aged three to five in the concentration camps. The data are incomplete. Some 70,000 people were deported, mainly women, children, and old people. A portion of those deported ended up in a concentration camp near Moscow. An old revolutionist from the People’s Will days, Vera Nikolayevna Figner, who headed the Political Red Cross, petitioned for their return to their native villages. Her petitions had no effect.

What *was* effective were the “purges” carried out in the Tambov villages by political “groups of five.” They reported directly to Tukhachevsky:

“On 27 June, after taking the village of Ostroukhovo, the population was ordered to surrender weapons and hand over bandits; 30 hostages were taken. At 19:00, for failure to obey the order to surrender weapons, 10 hostages were shot. The execution had a staggering effect on the citizens. All the peasants declared with one voice that they would all go together and hand in all weapons. Five bandits were handed over. We continue the operation.”

In the village of Nikolskoye, which had a population of 8,000, one soldier died in the Russo-Japanese War, 50 in the First World War, and in 1920–1921 – 500 people.

To suppress the peasant rebellion, 7,000 officer-cadets were called up from Moscow and Orel. Among the Orel cadets were chemical warfare officers, who suggested to Tukhachevsky that

poisonous agents be used to smoke peasants out of the forests. On 12 June Order No. 0116 appeared:

“For the immediate clearing of the forests, I order: forests where bandits are hiding are to be cleared by poisonous gases. The calculation must be precise so that the cloud of choking gas spreads over the entire forest, destroying everything that is hiding in it.”

Tukhachevsky stipulated that during chemical operations care must be taken to save livestock in the gas-affected zone. The operation was delayed for a month: they were waiting for gas masks to be delivered. On 13 July, 47 chemical shells were fired. On 16 July Tukhachevsky reported to Lenin: “Soviet power has been established everywhere.” On 3 August another 59 chemical shells were fired. Previously, chemical weapons had been used in Kiev in 1918 and in suppressing a peasant uprising in Yaroslavl province in 1919.

Ten years later, Tukhachevsky began writing his theoretical work *New Questions of War*. A special chapter is devoted to chemical weapons. Owing to a combination of objective and subjective circumstances, the suppression of the peasant uprising in Tambov province would be the highest and last point of the practical military activity of the talented and educated commander Tukhachevsky.

Tukhachevsky is Trotsky’s dream come true of using tsarist military specialists in the Red Army. Trotsky called Tukhachevsky “the demon of the Civil War.” From Trotsky, those words mean a lot; they almost speak of a kinship of souls. Trotsky himself was called “the demon of the revolution.”

The Tambov uprising in 1921 was not the largest. It was surpassed by the Great Ural-Siberian Peasant Uprising, which began in January 1921. The Bolsheviks called the rebellious peasants “Whites.” The name itself shows the degree of confrontation, the irreconcilability of aims, and the scale of the military operation to suppress the uprising. The backbone of the insurgents was formed by Red Army soldiers who refused to take part in punitive actions against the civilian population. The Siberian peasants did not lay down their arms; they fought their way across the border into China to join the remnants of the White army.

In 1918, in Samara, the Czechoslovak Corps, made up of prisoners of war from the First World War, rose in an anti-Soviet revolt. Among its ranks was the future writer Jaroslav Hašek. Hašek, unlike his comrades, supported the Russian revolution, wrote a proclamation, and was declared a deserter. In Samara, Hašek obtained from a psychiatrist a certificate that he was the half-witted son of a German colonist from Turkestan. Armed with this certificate, he wandered for several months through Mordvin and Chuvash villages. He managed to cross the front line and join a detachment of Chuvash heading for Bugulma, which Tukhachevsky had just retaken from the Whites. Hašek became commandant of Bugulma and soon was attached to the political department of Tukhachevsky’s 5th Army. Whether they ever met personally is unknown.

In 1921, in Czechoslovakia, Hašek’s famous book *The Good Soldier Švejk* was published, in which Švejk describes himself as an “official idiot.” The book by this participant in the Russian Civil War turned out to be absolutely anti-war.

The operation in Tambov province is, in fact, the second part of a special military campaign of 1921. Its first part was the suppression, in March, of the Kronstadt uprising. Tukhachevsky was engaged in both the first and the second parts. In Tambov his opponents are peasants; in Kronstadt,

sailors. Tukhachevsky sometimes calls the war in Tambov and in Kronstadt “business trips.” In reality, before Kronstadt there was first Moscow.

In January 1921, in the Columned Hall of the House of Unions – formerly the Nobility Assembly – a conference of the metalworkers’ union was held. Worker-metalworkers from the tribune demanded freedom of speech, and in the cloakrooms they convinced one another of the imminent fall of Soviet power. The future Procurator General of the USSR, then a journalist, Andrey Vyshinsky, covered what was happening in the House of Unions: “The irritation of the delegates reached the point of loss of self-control.”

The loss of self-control is easy to explain. The year 1921 marks the beginning of a terrible famine in the country, in front of which the hunger of the previous three years pales. Moreover, the wage of a skilled worker, in relation to the 1913 level, in the first quarter of 1921 amounted to the equivalent of 21 kopecks *per month*, and in the second quarter to 16 kopecks per month. In 1913, one day’s wage was 1 rouble 16 kopecks. At the Aleksandrov plant in Petrograd, which had previously produced highly sophisticated products, the workers were making frying pans, lighters, and axes, which they took away to sell.

On 11 February, because of an acute fuel crisis, it was decided to close 93 factories, including the famous Putilov, Sestroretsk, and “Triangle” works. The list was published in the newspapers. Compared with 1916, the number of workers in Petrograd had decreased fivefold. The population of Petrograd had fallen from 2,347,000 to 799,000. That is, besides the enormous human losses in the Civil War, Russia had paid with all the achievements of its pre-revolutionary economic upswing. Economic landmarks had disappeared. The huge country had torn itself apart, and from then on everything was done with blood.

“Our revolution is filthy, and our revolutionaries are bastards; honest people can neither live nor work,” said the communist worker Yuri Lutovinov. He would commit suicide.

In February, strikes broke out in Moscow. Soon events began in Petrograd. After yet another cut in food rations, workers at the Pipe Works and the Baltic Shipyard went on strike. On 24 February the workers took to the streets in demonstration, demanding bread and Soviets without Bolsheviks. Officer-cadets from military schools were sent to disperse the demonstrations; martial law was declared in the city; arrests were made; the demonstrations were labelled a “counter-revolutionary revolt.”

And it was against this background that events began in Kronstadt. On 25 February representatives of the crews of the battleships *Sevastopol* and *Petropavlovsk* went to Petrograd to find out what was going on in the city. They returned and reported. The sailors then adopted a resolution. They demanded freedom of speech and assembly, the release of those imprisoned in connection with workers’ and peasants’ movements, the abolition of communist political departments, and the granting to peasants of the right to dispose of their land and trade freely. And their main demand was: down with grain requisition in the countryside, down with food detachments. This was natural.

Most Kronstadt sailors came from villages; they were sometimes allowed short leave at home, they received letters. They knew that the countryside was starving, that the requisition detachments were taking even the seed potatoes that had just been planted – digging them up and requisitioning them. In Kronstadt itself, rations were constantly being cut. These sailors had fought in the Civil War; they had believed the agitation. Now the war was over, and despair had arrived.

The commander of the Baltic Fleet, Fyodor Raskolnikov, was eating very well. In 1939, Raskolnikov would become a “non-returnee,” would manage to stay abroad, and die in his bed. He wrote to Stalin a famous open letter which, only in perestroika times, would be published in the magazine *Ogonyok* and make a powerful impression with its refrain: “You shot them, Stalin.” In this letter, Fyodor Raskolnikov addressed Stalin with the words:

“With the cruelty of a sadist you are beating down cadres useful and necessary to the country: they appear to you dangerous from the point of view of your personal dictatorship. You have beheaded the Red Army. You have killed the most talented commanders, brought up on the experience of the World War and the Civil War, headed by the brilliant Marshal Tukhachevsky.”

But that solitary revolt of Raskolnikov would come in 1939. In 1921, Fyodor Raskolnikov was purging the political command staff of the fleet and living in a mansion in Kronstadt with his wife Larisa Reisner. Larisa Reisner was a Silver Age poetess, commissar of the Baltic Fleet, and prototype of the woman-commissar in Vsevolod Vishnevsky’s play *The Optimistic Tragedy*. She was a very beautiful woman. She was loved by Gumilyov and Trotsky – she dedicated to him the poem *Sviyazhsk* – then by Raskolnikov, then by Radek. Gumilyov and Radek were shot, Raskolnikov was declared an enemy of the people, Trotsky was exiled and murdered. She herself died of typhus in 1926. When her coffin was carried out of the House of Printing on Nikitsky Boulevard, the entire courtyard was full of military men, writers, diplomats.

In 1921, in the house with a large staff of servants, Raskolnikov held receptions, his wife dazzled in her outfits, and on exceptionally festive occasions the sailors were given a soup made from dried fish. Forty-eight hours before the uprising, political department reports of the Baltic Fleet recorded:

“In the garrison club, a performance was given of the 9-act play *The Chancellor and the Locksmith* by Lunacharsky. 830 spectators. Paid performance. The club hosts a singing class, three piano classes, a solfeggio class, and an art circle.”

On the battleship *Petropavlovsk* two film showings were held – a drama and a comedy. 450 people attended. *Petropavlovsk* would become the main battleship of the uprising. In the political department’s report there was not a word about the sailors’ mood. Commissar Nikolai Kuzmin telegraphed to Petrograd: “The situation in the fortress is improving.”

On 1 March the chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, Kalinin, was sent to Kronstadt. At the rally on Anchor Square, Kalinin began to speak of the achievements of Soviet power. Voices shouted: “Enough praise. Tell us when you will abolish the grain requisition! When will you stop strangling the muzhik?” Kalinin left. The sailors arrested Commissar Kuzmin. Then cries were heard that measures for self-defence were needed. Power in Kronstadt was taken by the Provisional Revolutionary Committee.

In Moscow, in an official government communiqué, it was announced that a White Guard revolt had broken out in Kronstadt, led by General Kozlovsky. The Kronstadt Revolutionary Committee issued an appeal: “Comrades, do not believe the words of the autocratic commissars. It is a brazen lie.”

Troops began to be concentrated around Kronstadt. The families of the sailors in Petrograd were taken as hostages. Tukhachevsky arrived in Petrograd on 5 March. He was entrusted with suppressing the uprising, and he was urged to hurry: it was necessary to finish with Kronstadt by 8 March, when the 10th Party Congress was to open.

On 6 March, in Petrograd, a peaceful delegation from Kronstadt was arrested and shot. On 8 March Tukhachevsky threw 3,000 cadets into the assault. The Party Congress opened; Lenin declared: “The White Guard revolt will be repulsed in the next days, if not in the next hours.” The Kronstadt men beat back the attack. Almost all those who advanced across the ice toward the fortress were killed or wounded.

Already on 7 March, a member of the 4th Petrograd Artillery Battalion, Anna Kozhevnikova, was executed by firing squad for a conversation with a friend: “Oh, look at what is going on in the fortress,” she had said. “Many communists have decided to leave the Party.” This was the simple truth. During the days of the uprising, 900 people left the Party in the fortress.

On 8 March, at the Congress, Lenin raised the question of abolishing the grain requisition. The main demand of the Kronstadt sailors was satisfied. It was decided to cease resistance and go to Finland. As for the demand for freedom of trade, on 8 March at the Congress Lenin said that “freedom of trade would lead to White Guard rule and victory of capitalism.” A week later, by the end of the Congress, Lenin changed his position and convinced the delegates that there was nothing terrible in trade, since power was in the hands of the working class.

Just at the moment when Lenin’s evolution on free trade was complete, Tukhachevsky began his second assault on Kronstadt. On 17 March, in the thaw, 25 percent of the Red Army men of the 499th Rifle Regiment marched in felt boots, 50 percent in bast shoes. Tukhachevsky wanted to direct them by telephone. It didn’t work: shells broke the lines. Sleds were built to transport machine guns and ammunition. The soldiers’ food rations were increased.

The advance of Red Army units on rebellious Kronstadt, March 1921.

On the battleship *Petropavlovsk* most of the crew did not flee to Finland. In the morning, at the height of the assault, they washed the deck, went to the bathhouse, stacked their weapons, and began to await their fate.

In addition to arrests, a show trial, and executions of participants in the Kronstadt uprising, another punitive measure was chosen. In the official account of the events of spring 1921 there was not a word that the anti-communist uprising had been raised by sailors who had previously taken part in the October coup and the Civil War.

In the summer of 1921, as organizers of the uprising there was designated a “Combat Organization of Petrograd” which was supposed to have aimed at overthrowing Soviet power. The poet Nikolai Gumilyov – whom Larisa Reisner had once refused to marry – was shot for unproven membership in this organization.

The Kronstadt events had another consequence. The Civil War was already over. In 1921, for young people of about fifteen or sixteen, who by their age did not know or understand what the Civil War had been, Kronstadt fell like an unexpected romantic gift. These boys ran away from home, fled to Kronstadt in order to “catch up with life.” They wanted participation and a vivid spectacle. The Red Army men in bast shoes, walking over the ice to storm the fortress, inspired mortal pity. At the same time, they turned out to be the victors. Pity and enthusiasm mixed in a child’s heart and gave rise to an immediate desire to surrender oneself to the power of the victors. Among such boys there were many from intellectual and even noble families. I know one of them: he is my wife’s grandfather. In 1937 he was shot.

For the sake of historical justice, it must be said that the first person to speak out for abolishing grain requisition – exactly what the Kronstadt sailors demanded – was Trotsky. He spent the winter of 1920 in the Urals, received a mass of, let us say, economic impressions, and returned with the firm conviction that it was necessary to abandon War Communism and at all costs introduce an element of personal interest. Lenin at that time opposed this resolutely.

In 1921, at the 10th Congress, after the Kronstadt uprising and against the background of the peasant uprising in Tambov, Lenin abolished grain requisition. This was the beginning of the New Economic Policy – NEP. At that same 10th Congress, the post of General Secretary was introduced for the first time. Trotsky wrote: “It was precisely at the 10th Congress that Stalin was earmarked, at Zinoviev’s initiative and against Lenin’s will, for the position of General Secretary. Nobody attached any significance to it.” Stalin became General Secretary a year later, in April 1922. Soon after that, Lenin had his first stroke.

The artist Dmitry Nalbandian would paint a picture entitled *V. I. Lenin and J. V. Stalin Working on the GOELRO Plan*. In reality, it was not Stalin but Georgy Maximilianovich Krzhizhanovsky who worked with Lenin on the electrification plan for Russia. The plan was adopted by a decree of the Council of People’s Commissars in 1921, with the wording: “For a period of 10–15 years, depending on the general course of development of the national economy.”

Tukhachevsky left us recollections from a female relative and, according to some accounts, one of his wives – Lidiya Nord. She saw Tukhachevsky immediately after Kronstadt and told him she was horrified by the brutal suppression of the sailors’ uprising. Tukhachevsky answered:

“And you should remember how those sailors behaved during the revolution! Who went from house to house conducting searches, robbing, raping, shooting? No, I feel no pity for that scum.”

And he added:

“But when I received the order to suppress this revolt, I didn’t feel much pleasure, because I understood why they had chosen me.”

Tukhachevsky knew that Kronstadt and Tambov were the price to be paid for defeat in the Polish campaign of 1920, in the failed war against Poland. In the spring of 1920 he had been appointed commander of the Western Front, at that time the main front for the Red Army. Then Lenin put forward the slogan: “Through Warsaw to Berlin and Paris!” Tukhachevsky was 27. His opponent, Marshal Józef Piłsudski, was 53. In the First World War Piłsudski had held general officers’ posts; at that time Tukhachevsky had commanded a platoon.

Now, after victories over Kolchak and Denikin, a goal appeared before Tukhachevsky that he could not even have dreamed of in his youth. It was not simply a war with Poland.

It was his, Tukhachevsky’s, march on Europe. His order before the July offensive clearly conveys his state of mind:

“Fighters of the workers’ revolution! Turn your eyes to the West. In the West the fate of the world revolution is being decided. Through the corpse of White Poland lies the road to the worldwide conflagration. To the West! To Vilna, Minsk, Warsaw – march!”

Here one should not pay too much attention to the words about the world revolution. That is not the point. This order sounds better in French; it is pure Napoleon. Tukhachevsky was convinced that the army could do anything.

Lenin demanded an offensive. Dzerzhinsky incessantly insisted that the Poles were waiting for the Red Army in order to get rid of the landlords. On 4 August Stalin telegraphed Lenin: “Poland is exhausted.” On 14 August, the Red vanguard units were in the suburbs of Warsaw.

But at first they had groundlessly overestimated the revolutionary feeling of the Poles, and in the end they underestimated Polish national feeling. On 16 August the Poles went over to the counteroffensive, and then to the offensive along the whole front. They advanced as far as Minsk. It was a complete defeat for the Reds.

Trotsky writes in his memoirs: “After the brilliant victories of yesterday, no one wanted to reconcile himself to this. I found in Moscow a mood in favor of a second Polish war. Desire became the father of thought.” Trotsky went to the Western Front, convinced himself that the army was unfit for a new offensive, returned to Moscow, and the Politburo adopted a decision in favor of concluding peace with Poland. The peace treaty was signed on 18 March 1921, just as Tukhachevsky was storming Kronstadt.

To his relative Lidiya Nord, Tukhachevsky said of the war with Poland: “I saw clearly that my army was made up fifty percent of all sorts of rabble and that it was not the army I would like to have.” Most likely that army, after four years of the First World War and three years of Civil War, had simply had enough of war. The revolutionary dash toward Europe meant nothing to a peasant army.

In 1920, after Poland, Tukhachevsky considered his career finished. But after the suppression of the Kronstadt revolt he had a sense of having been rehabilitated. A conversation took place on a direct line between Tukhachevsky and the Soviet Commander-in-Chief, former tsarist colonel Sergei Sergeyevich Kamenev, immediately after Kronstadt.

“Our tour here is over. Permit me to return home,” said Tukhachevsky.
Kamenev replied:
“Your tour has ended brilliantly. My congratulations.”

Contrary to all historical logic, the question remains fascinating: what would have happened if Tukhachevsky, at the head of the army, had gone right through Europe and reached Paris? When Lenin was urging Tukhachevsky to advance, he hardly calculated everything to the end. Trotsky says of Lenin: “Lenin was not a mechanical calculator that never makes mistakes. Lenin did make mistakes, and very big mistakes, commensurate with the gigantic scope of his work.” Tukhachevsky at the head of the army might have turned into one of Lenin’s giant mistakes. It is impossible to say what role would have been left to Lenin and Trotsky if they had found themselves far in the rear, trailing behind a front-running army commander.

In the Tukhachevsky family there was a legend that they were descended from Count Idris, son of Count Baldwin IX of Flanders, from the French royal House of Capet. Count Baldwin was a participant in the Fourth Crusade and the first emperor of the Latin Empire on the ruins of Byzantium.

An old acquaintance from captivity, the Frenchman Fervac, remarked on the Latin traits in Mikhail Nikolayevich’s face. The same Fervac recalled how, in the summer of 1917, in the prisoner-of-war camp, they read Dostoevsky in French together. Tukhachevsky reacted unexpectedly:

“Revolutionary Russia will extend its borders far beyond those drawn by treaties. With the red banner, not with the cross, we shall enter Byzantium. We will shake Russia as one shakes a dusty rug. And then we will shake the whole world.”

Already in the autumn of 1914, Second Lieutenant Tukhachevsky of the Semenovsky Guards Regiment had told his comrades:

“For me, war is everything. Either to die or to distinguish myself, to make a career, to achieve at once that which is impossible in peacetime. In war lies my future, my career, the goal of my life.”

Tukhachevsky hated Germany with a fierce hatred, from his time as a prisoner in Germany during the First World War. Incidentally, in captivity he met the future French president de Gaulle. In the officers’ camp they were allowed to go into town on their word of honor. Tukhachevsky escaped. De Gaulle condemned this disregard for an officer’s word.

The Germans were always well aware of Tukhachevsky’s hostility to Germany. In the late 1920s he would speak of the inevitability of a military clash with Germany in ten to twelve years. “And then,” Tukhachevsky said, “she will forget forever the words ‘russische Schweine’.”

At the same time, the Reichswehr’s representative with the Red Army, General Schlalke, noted that Tukhachevsky in no way resembled a German General Staff officer, and that “by his whole type he corresponds to the ideal of an elegant and witty officer of the French General Staff.” The same General Schlalke remarked that Tukhachevsky stood out noticeably against the background of his “rough, proletarian colleagues.”

It must be said that Tukhachevsky was never an ideological adherent of Bolshevism. Moreover, command and staff posts in the Red Army in general, and in Tukhachevsky’s entourage in particular, were occupied by former tsarist military specialists.

In 1918–1920, among the top commanders of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army, 18 out of 20 front commanders were career officers of the tsarist army, of whom 10 were General Staff officers. Of 22 chiefs of staff of fronts, all were career tsarist officers and all were General Staff officers. Of 76 army commanders, 47 were career officers and 27 were General Staff officers. By 1920, at least 125,000 tsarist officers had been mobilized into the army. By that year, 194 tsarist generals and almost 3,000 career officers were engaged in training Red commanders.

If to such a staff “rear” in 1920 a military success in Europe had been added, Tukhachevsky’s victorious army, together with Tukhachevsky himself, could quickly and dramatically have changed. Victory ensures loyalty to the commander.

In March 1920, Wrangel’s resident in Berlin, General von Lampe, also a former Semenovsky officer, wrote in his diary: “Tukhachevsky – is he not a Napoleon?” With what Tukhachevsky would have returned to Russia, one cannot say with certainty. His political views are unknown. What is known for sure is that he did *not* turn into a Napoleon.

Among former tsarist officers there was no feeling of caste solidarity. In 1924, the tsarist colonel, General Staff officer, and Chief of Staff of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army, Boris Mikhailovich Shaposhnikov, wrote a book, *On the Vistula*, and laid all responsibility for the failure of the Polish campaign exclusively on Tukhachevsky.

It was a curious time, those first years after the Civil War. Former tsarist officers felt themselves heroes, because they were in fact the ones who had won the Civil War. And the state system had not yet hardened completely. Therefore these heroes of the Civil War were already – and still – unafraid to discuss among themselves why they had entered the service of the Reds.

Tukhachevsky reacted extremely painfully to such conversations when they concerned him personally. According to Lidiya Nord, he could not calm down:

“I don’t give a damn about all this talk, but I’m simply curious why only Tukhachevsky is on everyone’s tongue. Yet I know that no one will reproach Generals Potapov and Brusilov, Colonels and Lieutenant-Colonels Yegorov, Petin, Schwartz, Kork, Sollogub, Shaposhnikov and all the others who entered the Red Army. Didn’t they do the same thing I did, when I was only a lieutenant, they being generals and staff officers of the tsarist army? How can you transfer to the service of the Reds and preserve your virginity?”

In fact, even in 1924 such private conversations were already out of place. That same year Tukhachevsky was placed under operational surveillance by the OGPU, together with such prominent commanders and military theorists as Kamenev, Vatsetis, Snesarev, Svechin, Bonch-Bruevich.

Mikhail Dmitrievich Bonch-Bruevich, a lieutenant-general in the tsarist army, was in 1918, on Lenin’s orders, in charge of defending Petrograd. He was the brother of Vladimir Dmitrievich Bonch-Bruevich, director of the Council of People’s Commissars’ office, known as the author of the story about Lenin entitled “The Society of Clean Plates.” That story – about how Lenin ate well as a child and what his father devised so that he would eat even better – Bonch-Bruevich managed to write in the brief interval of NEP between the terrible famine of the early 1920s and the monstrous famine of the late 1920s in the USSR.

From 1929, German intelligence began to spread disinformation that Tukhachevsky was working for the German General Staff. The choice of Tukhachevsky as target is understandable. He was a promising military theorist, played a serious role in Soviet-German cooperation, attended Reichswehr maneuvers, visited German factories, and, in Moscow, had contact with German officers. The OGPU recorded the disinformation.

In 1930, during Operation “Spring,” about 5,000 former tsarist officers were arrested, including the Military Academy lecturers Kakurin and Troitsky. Kakurin had been Tukhachevsky’s chief of staff during the Polish campaign. Both gave compromising testimony about Tukhachevsky. They spoke of a future military dictatorship, of a right-wing deviation, of the fact that “Tukhachevsky is waiting, organizing.” Troitsky became an OGPU informer.

A report was sent to Stalin. At that time Stalin was vacationing in Sochi. He read the interrogation records of Kakurin and Troitsky and reacted:

“So it turns out that Tukhachevsky has fallen into the clutches of anti-Soviet elements and has also been thoroughly worked over by anti-Soviet elements from among the rightists. Is this possible? Of course it is possible, since it cannot be excluded.”

But in Sochi Stalin decided that it was not yet time. “We must think this matter over thoroughly,” he said.

Half a year later new testimony was beaten out of Kakurin. He reported:

“Tukhachevsky said that there was also such a perspective that the hand of a fanatic might not stop even before attempting the life of Comrade Stalin himself. I do not exclude that, speaking of a fanatic shooting at Stalin, Tukhachevsky was veiling the perspective he himself was pondering.”

But Stalin said: “Too early.”

At that time, Tukhachevsky was commander of the Leningrad Military District. He lived on Millionnaya Street; his office was in the General Staff building, in the west wing, with windows overlooking Palace Square. In 1933 he was awarded the Order of Lenin. On 7 November 1933 he took the salute at the parade on Red Square. In 1934 he was elected a candidate member of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks). In 1936 Tukhachevsky, together with Voroshilov, Budyonny, Yegorov, and Blyukher, was awarded the title of Marshal of the Soviet Union. In April 1936 he became First Deputy People's Commissar of Defense and head of combat training of the Red Army.

That is how long Stalin could wait.

On 1 May 1936, after the parade, at a banquet in Voroshilov's apartment, an argument broke out between Voroshilov, Budyonny, and Tukhachevsky about an old subject – who, after all, was to blame for the defeat near Warsaw. Then they moved on to current affairs. Tukhachevsky accused Voroshilov of creating a personal grouping inside the Red Army. Voroshilov replied: "And don't they gather round you as well?"

Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov writes in his memoirs: "All of us felt that the main leading role in the People's Commissariat of Defense was played by him." "Him," meaning Tukhachevsky.

As the new war drew nearer, such a Tukhachevsky became absolutely useless to Stalin. And it was not the work of German intelligence that was decisive. It only *seems* that in war you need strong, experienced military leaders, that under the threat of war considerations of their social origin and their service in the tsarist army recede into the background – all the more so since twenty years had passed, and they had won the Civil War and afterwards faithfully served in the highest posts.

For Stalin, the new war was a fresh threat to his power – in fact, the first real threat to his power. And here Stalin's suspiciousness, even without any fueling from Germany, turned into a colossal Stalinist fear. In Stalin's fear for himself lay the source of the most powerful repressions, which first of all mowed down the army.

War would inevitably pull huge numbers of people out of the well-adjusted power machine, make them enterprising, brave, and more free. The person who would be at the head of these people on the road to victory – that was Stalin's most terrible enemy. By every real characteristic, Tukhachevsky was the first marshal. Tukhachevsky was more frightening than Hitler.

On 1 May 1937, after the parade, as a year earlier at Voroshilov's, there was a banquet. Stalin raised a toast:

"The enemies will be exposed; the Party will grind them to powder," said Stalin. "I raise a toast to those who, remaining loyal, will worthily take their place at this glorious table on the October anniversary."

Tukhachevsky would be shot before the October anniversary. When Stalin raised his glass, he already knew it.

Nine days after the banquet, the Politburo, on Voroshilov's proposal, relieved Tukhachevsky of his duties as First Deputy People's Commissar of Defense and appointed him commander of the Volga Military District.

A week and a half later, in Kuibyshev, he was arrested. The arrest took place in the reception room of the Party regional committee. Right there he was changed into a civilian suit and led out through a back door to a car.

One of the former NKVD employees later recalled, after the 20th Party Congress:

“I saw Tukhachevsky in the corridor of the NKVD building, being led to interrogation. He was dressed in a gray civilian suit, and over it he wore a prisoner’s coat made of overcoat cloth, and on his feet were bast shoes.”

Unlike most commanders, the thoroughly civilian Dmitry Dmitrievich Shostakovich did not sign a single letter condemning Tukhachevsky. He had been friends with Tukhachevsky since 1925.

Just a year before Tukhachevsky’s execution, Shostakovich had been subjected to furious criticism in *Pravda* for his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* – in the notorious article “Muddle Instead of Music.” Shostakovich came then to see Tukhachevsky, and they sat together for a long time in his study in the apartment in the “House on the Embankment.”

Tukhachevsky loved music deeply; he played the violin. Before the revolution, before the start of his military career, before EVERYTHING, he had received a solid musical education.