SOVIET REGULAR AND POLITICAL POLICE IN THE
1930s

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Project Information

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Executive summary

This paper examines the working relationship between the regular Soviet police and the political police in the 1930s. During the years 1930-1934, the political police took control over and attempted to thoroughly restructure the regular police, with the goal of making the latter force more professional and accountable, and better able to address the problems of disorder caused by the immense social transformations of this period. The attempt at reform, however, was a failure, as the political police proved unable to exert effective control over local regular police forces and unable to reshape these forces along the intended lines. The paper concludes by tracing how the results of this failed reform contributed to the massive repression carried out by the authorities at the end of the decade.
This paper examines the working relationship between the Soviet regular police (officially the Worker-Peasant Militsiia, hereafter the *militsiia*) and the secret police (in this period, the Unified State Political Administration, or OGPU) in the 1930s. The paper concentrates in particular on the years 1930-1934, because the evolving interrelations between the regular and political police systems in the USSR during these years fundamentally shaped the course of state repression later in the 1930s, especially during the wave of mass repression known as the “Great Terror” in 1937-1938.

The regular and political police were separate organizations in the 1920s. However, in late 1930, after nearly a decade of political and bureaucratic conflict between the two organizations, the political police took over the operational and bureaucratic leadership of the regular police. The political police managed to take over the regular police both because the OGPU leadership tended to support Stalin in the high-level Communist Party struggles that took place at the end of the 1920s, and because the Party leadership as a whole supported OGPU ideas for creating a new, modern, unified “Soviet” police system. Once the OGPU took over, it was given carte blanche by the Party leadership to completely restructure the Soviet police system, to create a single Soviet police that could deal with the immense problems of social disorder that accompanied the launching of campaigns of mass industrialization, collectivization, and urbanization (all part of the First Five-Year Plan).

The political police leadership, however, did not attempt to create in the early 1930s a single, undifferentiated, hierarchical Soviet policing system in which the *militsiia* merely formed a bureaucratic

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1. The term "*militsiia*" was first adopted by the Bolsheviks in reference to volunteer militias that existed during the 1917 Revolution; they later applied the term to the full-time, professional police that evolved from these militias. Although a strict translation of the term "*militsiia*" into English would therefore be "militia," I prefer to retain the Russian "*militsiia*" to underscore the professional nature of the police force to which it refers. I use the English "militia" only to refer to genuine spontaneous groups of workers that sprung up during the 1917 Revolution.

2. Most scholars refer to the Soviet political police in the pre-WWII period simply as the “NKVD” (People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs), which is inaccurate for the period before 1934. The notorious “USSR NKVD” came into bureaucratic existence in 1934 as part of a reorganization of the existing political police (the OGPU, which existed as an agency from 1923 to 1934). This USSR NKVD eventually became the famous KGB. Unfortunately, as this paper will show, “NKVD” was also the name for the bureaucracy that controlled the regular police (the *militsiia*) in the 1920s, an organization that was separate from the OGPU. I can find no convenient shorthand way to refer to the political police in this period other than the correct “OGPU.” The reader will hence have to forgive the possible confusion and remember that the political police in the period under consideration was named the OGPU and not the NKVD.
subdivision of the OGPU. The political police expected to set policy and control the militsia on an operational level, but they also expected the militsia to remain a separate hierarchy, both in terms of local administrations and in terms of self-conception. The connections between the two organizations were initially secret, and the militsia continued to have nominal working contact with local soviets and social organizations (such as the Komsomol). The new Soviet policing system, as envisioned by OGPU officials in the early 1930s, was to be comprised of parallel but separate regular and political polices that worked in close contact with each other but fulfilled different roles and maintained distinct levels of contact with the population.

Surprisingly, central police officials in the early 1930s were largely unable to bring this reform plan to fruition. The OGPU leaders found that they were unable to solve the problems that plagued the regular police in the 1920s—low qualifications of officers, high turnover, rampant corruption, and lack of accountability to central administrations. They were unprepared for the difficulties associated with controlling an under-paid, decentralized, poorly trained militsia that was substantially larger than the OGPU itself and that more resembled traditional systems of local control than a modern police force. Control and contact after 1930 came from personal relations, especially since local regular police chiefs were chosen from among OGPU officers after the takeover. But the daily institutional control of the militsia by central OGPU officials remained surprisingly weak throughout the decade.

This failed reform program had important implications for the evolution of Soviet policing and Stalinist repression alike. Central and local officials reacted to these problems of weak central control and bureaucratic disarray in the mid-1930s by attempting to centralize command and “Chekaize” the regular police (the term was coined to refer to the Cheka, the Bolshevik political police in the first years after the 1917 Revolution). As a result, the regular police was increasingly drawn into the work of the secret police, especially regarding low-level manifestations of economic “counter-revolutionary” crime. At the same time, the unification of the regular and political police, however incomplete and fitful, brought the secret police into areas of activity that were the purview of the civil police in the 1920s, or were at least contested ground between the two organizations, including implementation of the internal
passport system, policing of economic crime (especially speculation, or the crime of buying and reselling scarce consumer goods) and violent hooliganism (rowdy, drunken behavior in public).

When Stalin launched the "Great Terror" of 1937-1938, an action comprised of many interrelated parts including a set of campaigns against low-level social marginals called "mass operations of repression of anti-Soviet elements," local police maintained a substantial amount of bureaucratic leeway in terms of defining and selecting targets. Many of the targets they selected were "regular" criminals who had been identified earlier in the decade. This is not to say that the mass operations were not carried out predominantly by the secret police; but the secret police leadership had to work with an extensive, decentralized, sometimes uncontrollable police administration, both regular and political, in order to collect information, identify suspects, and select targets. Though we still know little about the actual mechanics of the mass operations, there is no reason to believe that central police officials suddenly developed a higher level of control over local police during the mass operations than they enjoyed in the preceding years. The evolution of the Soviet policing system as a whole, then, played a fundamental role in influencing the nature and course of state repression in the Stalin period.

NEP policing and the takeover of the militsia by the OGPU in 1930

The basic set of problems and difficulties in the relationship between regular and secret police in the early 1930s was inherited from the period in the 1920s known as the New Economic Policy (NEP). After the initial institutional chaos of the Civil War, the Soviet policing system settled into a two-tiered pattern of separate political and regular police forces similar to the Tsarist system that it replaced. The activity of the regular police, some 130,000 officers strong by the mid-1930s, was not an unimportant issue to the secret police and party leadership. Neither was the militsia a peripheral problem for Stalin himself; debates regarding public order and police failures reached all the way up to the Politburo in the mid-1930s. The issue of policing as a whole, then, deserves more attention in our understanding of the evolution of the Soviet system of policing and repression under Stalin.

The Terror itself, and these "mass operations," are outside the scope of this paper. I will only note that evidence suggests that, though they varied from locality to locality, the entire police system, including the militsia, was involved in the selection of targets. For a more complete picture of the mass operations and their part in the Great Terror, see my "Socially Harmful Elements and the Great Terror," in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., Stalinism: New Directions (London and New York Routledge, 2000), and David Shearer, "Crime and Social Disorder in Stalin's Russia: A Reassessment of the Great Retreat and the Origins of Mass Repression" Cahiers du monde russe 39, 1-2 (1998): 119-148.
regular and political police were bureaucratically separate and structurally dissimilar during NEP. The 
milititsia was a decentralized organization, subject to the Internal Affairs Commissariat in Moscow but, in 
reality, under the control of local state organizations (the soviets), and the milititsia, as the police of the 
communist state, was expected to maintain open contact with local soviets, with social organizations 
(such as trade unions or the Komsomol), and with the population itself. The political police, in 
comparison, was centralized across the entire USSR, under control of OGPU hierarchies reaching directly 
up to Moscow; it was not subordinate to local state administrations and maintained little open contact 
with social organizations (though it of course carried out secret surveillance of individuals within these 
groups). The conflicts between these separate policing systems in the 1920s would complicate their 
unification after 1930.

Lenin, in pre-Revolutionary writings on police in a communist society, argued that a professional 
regular police force would be unnecessary in a proletarian state and that armed workers would maintain 
public order themselves. Following this precept, the new Bolshevik regime in 1917 dispersed municipal 
police administrations, which had functioned under the Provisional Government between February and 
October 1917, and called into existence volunteer workers' militias made up of Red Guards (radical 
proto-military groups that had sprung up during the Revolution) and existing factory militias ³ At the 
same time, the Bolsheviks recognized the practical need to coordinate policing across the new nation and 
created a Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the Russian Republic (NKVD RSFSR) on October 28 
(November 10), 1917 as one of thirteen Commissariats in the RSFSR government. ⁴ The Bolsheviks saw

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⁴ It is important to underscore that this Internal Affairs Commissariat was for most of the 1920s a separate 
bureaucratic entity from the political police organization (the OGPU). The two were bureaucratically linked during 
the Civil War, but still maintained a separate bureaucratic profile in the minds of the Bolshevik leaders. The 
relations between the two in the years before 1923 are complex, but it is sufficient to note that they were separate 
between 1923 and 1930, and to point out that their names might foster some confusion. The Internal Affairs 
Commissariat of the Russian Republic (NKVD RSFSR) controlled regular policing alone from 1923 to 1930, while 
the OGPU controlled the political police in the same period. This NKVD RSFSR is not the same organization most 
commonly referred to as "The NKVD," by which historians generally mean the political police of the Internal 
Affairs Commissariat of the USSR, created in 1934, under which both the OGPU and the milititsia were unified. 
Vorontsov, V. I., i dr., Organy i Voisk MVD Rossii. Kratkii istoricheskii Ocherk (Moskva: Ob"edinennia redaktsii 
no contradiction between centralized policy-making and local administrative control; while the Internal Affairs Commissariat in Moscow was to set general policy guidelines from the center, local soviets were to have full control over daily policing activities. The regular policing system also followed a somewhat federalist model within the Soviet Union in the first several years after the Revolution: after the formation of the USSR, each Union Republic was constitutionally guaranteed the right to conduct its own regular police affairs, though this guarantee weakened in practice as the 1920s progressed.7

By the beginning of NEP, the militsiia had evolved into a full-time, professional administrative police under practical control of local soviets and only loosely tied to the center.8 The Internal Affairs Commissariat of the Russian Republic (NKVD RSFSR), in contradiction of the formal requirements of the USSR constitution, attempted to set general policy guidelines for all national republics throughout the 1920s (though it was most often unsuccessful in doing so). But in reality, the militsiia in the 1920s was an extremely decentralized organization, made even more so by budget difficulties late in the decade that increasingly forced the Internal Affairs Commissariat to rely on local soviets for funding of almost all police activities. Constitutional guarantees (however weak) and bureaucratic realities provided local police administrations with tremendous latitude in setting the parameters of police activity in the 1920s.10

The Bolshevik secret police followed a rather different evolutionary path in the 1920s. The Bolsheviks held no illusions about the necessity of a secret police for the survival of their regime: they

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7 Some evidence suggests that the Commissariat of Internal Affairs was created specifically in order to coordinate local soviets in the first few years after the Revolution. Local police, then, were often the backbone of local administration in general. No research has been done on this important function of the NKVD in the first few years after 1917, but tasks of the NKVD were obviously ambiguous from the start, caught between the need for some amount of centralization and national coordination and the reality that, even if local policing bodies had not been so recalcitrant, the center did not have enough organizational or institutional capability in the months following October to exert much influence on daily policing in localities. See George Lin, “Fighting in Vain: NKVD RSFSR in the 1920s” (Dissertation: Stanford University, 1997), p. 21, citing I. Kizilov, NKVD RSFSR (Moskva: 1967), p. 135.

8 Little information exists on the transition to a professional militsiia in the early 1920s. Given the level of opposition to centralization expressed by local workers’ militias during the Provisional Government period, one would expect similar resistance to centralization under the Bolsheviks. Whether this was the case is open to research.


created the Cheka, headed by the notorious Feliks Dzerzhinskii, in the first days after the Revolution. As with the militsia, the transition of the Cheka from “revolutionary organ” to full-time political police between 1917 and the end of the Civil War is relatively unstudied, especially regarding daily activities of political policemen. The connections between regular and political police in this period have also received little attention. The regular and political police were bureaucratically linked during the years of the Civil War; their inter-connections were strengthened by the fact that Dzerzhinskii headed both the Cheka and the Internal Affairs Commissariat for several years after the Revolution. With the end of the Civil War and the beginning of NEP, however, the two police organizations were split apart by the Bolshevik regime.

By the time of the creation of the USSR in 1923 (when the political police was re-named OGPU), the two police organizations were openly hostile. Each organization campaigned vigorously throughout the 1920s for the right to subsume the other and to control policing in the USSR. The conflicts between the regular and political police in the 1920s centered around questions of competing jurisdictions, authority to apprehend certain groups of criminals, and bureaucratic jealousies between the two organizations. During most of the 1920s, the OGPU had the upper hand in these conflicts. Not only was the OGPU more important in the bureaucratic hierarchy of the USSR, but it could also point to extreme inefficiency and corruption that was rampant in the militsia in the 1920s to support its calls for abolishment of the Internal Affairs Commissariat and transfer of the regular police to its own organization.

The Internal Affairs Commissariat was surprisingly resilient in the face of this pressure from the OGPU for its liquidation in the late 1920s. As Stalin consolidated power, however, the difficulties experienced by the NKVD RSFSR regarding basic policing functions made the organization increasingly vulnerable to these attacks. The breaking point came with a fundamental shift in overall Soviet penal

11 Surprisingly, the NKVD survived the ousting of its chairman in 1927. Beloborodov was removed as People’s Commissar in November 1927 and replaced by Tolmachev. Tolmachev came to the NKVD after an undistinguished career in party service, including the position of deputy chairman of the North Caucasus regional executive committee. Beloborodov was subjected to internal exile from 1927 until 1930, after which his party membership was restored and he worked in low-level positions until he was arrested in 1936 and executed in 1938. Tolmachev was arrested in 1932, served a 3-year sentence, and then returned to low-level work until his arrest in 1937 and execution in 1939. See George Lin, “Fighting in Vain,” pp. 123-124, 172-74.
The OGPU maintained a relatively small network of camps for political prisoners in the 1920s; the shift of the NKVD's numerically larger prison population to the OGPU was a fundamental turning point in Soviet penal policy. Peter H. Solomon, Jr. makes the case that economic concerns were paramount to the creation of the Gulag in “Soviet Penal Policy, 1917-1934: A Reinterpretation,” Slavic Review v. 39 (1980), pp. 195-217.

The political machinations that led to the abolition of the NKVD RSFSR remain somewhat murky. Stalin unexpectedly intervened at the April 5, 1930 meeting of the Politburo and “asked” Rabkrim to delay its decision on the NKVD for 6 months. Stalin's reasons for taking this step are unknown. This Politburo resolution was seen by NKVD officials as a major victory, and they immediately issued circulars intended to bolster morale and reverse any inroads that the OGPU had made as a result of the withering press attacks. Throughout the remainder of 1930 the Politburo took no decisive steps regarding the fate of the NKVD system. The NKVD leadership was on the defensive, but there is no indication that the decision to abolish it completely was pre-decided.

Stalin expressed his annoyance with the NKVD leadership for fighting for retention of its inmates and his determination to side with the OGPU in a letter to Molotov dated September 7, 1930: “These [maneuvers of the NKVD] are the machinations of a thoroughly corrupted Tolmachev...I think that it is necessary to carry out the decisions of the Politburo, and to close the NKVD.” Pis'ma I.V. Stalina V.M. Molotovy. 1925-1936 gg. (Moskva: Rossiia molodaia, 1995), pp. 214-15.

Other duties of the NKVD RSFSR were distributed to various administrations. Control over the NKVD’s network of labor colonies and places of confinement was transferred to the Justice Commissariat, and the NKVD RSFSR’s duties regarding communal services were transferred to newly created Communal Services Administrations within each republican Sovnarkom. These aspects of the split were relatively unimportant in the minds of the Bolshevik leadership. See Borisov, A.V., i dr., Politzia i Militsiya Rossii, pp. 140-141.
and the police. Another accurate assessment of the change in Soviet policing came from one of the members of the committee charged with dismantling the Russian NKVD in 1930 and 1931:

I find it necessary to point out in writing that I considered and continue to consider inexpedient the transfer of the militsiia, places of confinement, and the administration of compulsory labor to the OGPU. The OGPU is an organization [dedicated to] the battle with particularly socially dangerous elements, with specific methods of battle, while the militsiia and the administrations of places of confinement are organs of the widest popular activity with completely different methods of work, the fundamental element of which is wide contact with the population. The unification [of these two organizations] will result in the transformation of the nature of the OGPU or the spread of the methods of the OGPU to the activities of the other above-named organizations, a situation that benefits neither the former organization nor the latter.

This critical analysis of the Bolshevik regime’s decision to unify regular and political police accurately predicted the contours of the evolution of the Soviet policing system for the rest of the 1930s.

New working relations between the regular and secret police

The OGPU leadership, upon talking over the direction of militsiia activity, promoted a wide-ranging set of reforms in almost every area of regular policing practice. The OGPU attempted to change methods of patrolling city streets, to reorganize local militsiia administrations, to strengthen connections between police and Soviet institutions and between police and Soviet citizens, and to restructure regular police use of informants to uncover and prevent crime. The OGPU leadership consciously expected to create a “new” Soviet police (I use the term to refer to the New Peelian police of early 19th-century Great Britain, a comparison that was also made by top-level OGPU officials in the early 1930s), one that conformed not only to regime ideas about “Soviet” policing but to international standards of modern police practice.

This set of reforms required a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between the militsiia and OGPU. The OGPU leadership attempted to define the theoretical and practical connections between the militsiia and the OGPU in a way that supported the idea of a new Soviet police: the militsiia was to become a regular police force using methods similar to those of the OGPU to prevent regular instead of
political crime. Importantly, however, the OGPU leadership did not attempt to simply unify the two bureaucracies or to dismantle the regular police and replace it with expanded OGPU administrations. Instead, the Bolsheviks attempted to retain functional divisions between the regular and political police while unifying the command structure of the two organizations. At the same time, they tried to create an outward institutional structure for the new police that conformed to existing constitutional norms regarding the national republics and which hid the involvement of the OGPU in regular policing.

Officially, after the 1930 takeover each republican government (Sovnarkom) was put in charge of a "Central Administration of the Workers' and Peasants' Milititsia" that formulated policy and directed lower-level police administrations. Local militsia administration continued to be nominally subordinate both to the local soviet and to higher-level police administrations. In a strictly legal sense, this was the only arrangement possible, since the USSR Constitution explicitly gave republics the right to control regular police activity within their borders. However, the regime concurrently created a "Central Inspectorate of the Militsia" under the OGPU SSSR to set policy for the nation, along with "Special Inspectorates" (Osobye Inspektii) within local OGPU police administrations to direct the daily work of corresponding local militsia administrations. The OGPU also gained the crucial right to hire and fire militsia officials.

Although this situation resembled the "dual subordination" of the militsia in the 1920s, during which the police were subordinate to both local soviets and to the Internal Affairs Commissariat, the Bolshevik leadership intended the situation to be much less ambiguous than that of NEP. The OGPU gained the right to set policy and direct local police, while the official (non-secret) hierarchies

17 GARF, f. 1235, op. 141, d. 418. ll. 1-3. The resolution also attempted to solve some of the funding and staffing problems of the old militsia by requiring that high-level officials of the militsia and CID be paid at the same level as corresponding OGPU officials.

18 Control of the militsia by the OGPU, which was an all-Union organization, would absolutely contradict the USSR constitution. There is some indication that the Politburo consciously considered this problem when it created the republican-level militsia administrations, and that it consciously attempted to maintain a facade of constitutionality for both domestic and international appearances. See Borisov, A. V., ed., Politsiya i Milititsia Rossii, pp. 140-142.

19 The relationship between the state and OGPU branches was one of policy making versus simple publication and distribution of the policy. The state militsia administrations were charged with planning, funding, making sure that provisioning ran smoothly, and other mundane aspects of police administration.
(subordinate to republican government hierarchies) presented an appearance of local soviet control to the population and formed a parallel bureaucratic hierarchy for the militsiia that mirrored that of the OGPU.\(^{20}\)

In the areas of provisioning, labor regulations, and disciplinary codes, the OGPU promulgated a series of regulations designed to bring the militsiia in line with the practice of the OGPU.\(^{21}\) Crimes of office and refusal to serve out the full two-year contract signed by all policemen became punishable by a military tribunal. The OGPU also ordered a series of financial changes intended to reduce labor turnover, including standardization of pay between different localities and increased provisioning of militsiia officers to match that of the military.\(^{22}\) The OGPU leadership carried out a purge of the militsiia immediately after its takeover, charging that the police apparatus was infiltrated with "anti-Soviet, freeloading, trouble-making" elements with past criminal sentences and "kulak (i.e. rich peasant) ideologies.\(^{23}\)

Although the total number of officers expelled during the purge, which continued through the end of 1931, is unavailable, the dismissals were substantial. Three hundred policemen were purged from the militsiia of Bashkiria, or 10 percent of the total staff. Eight hundred thirty policemen were purged from the Lower Volga region, including ten chiefs of district-level administrations; forty more district chiefs were demoted but allowed to keep their jobs. In the Urals, 1,233 policemen were purged, including 220 were members of the officer corps. The OGPU leadership actively recruited officers from OGPU border

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\(^{20}\) The reasons for the center's reluctance to turn over control of the police outright to the OGPU are unclear. Beyond the need to maintain some appearance of constitutionality, the party hierarchy may have understood that the population perceived the OGPU as more repressive than the militsiia. The NKVD RSFSR leadership in the 1920s argued that the population respected the militsiia but saw the OGPU as an instrument of oppression, though the high levels of corruption evident in the militsiia might temper that claim.

\(^{21}\) New official instructions for the militsiia were published on May 25, 1931 in "Instructions regarding the Workers' and Peasants' Militsiia" (Polozhenie o RKM) SZ SSSR No. 33 (31 May 1931), article 247, pp. 429-437.

\(^{22}\) For information on the implementation of the instructions, see GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 476, ll. 248-250.

\(^{23}\) GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 474, ll. 1-2. (Tsirkular GURKM pri SNK RSFSR #1/5). Local militsiia administrations began the purge beginning on January 13, 1931, which was to be carried out in complete secrecy so it would not weaken police morale.
guards and internal OGPU troops to replace these "socially alien and criminal elements" that had been employed as NEP-era policemen.

In an important sense, the goal of the OGPU leadership was to separate the jurisdictions of the two policing organizations while unifying command over them. The model that central police leaders promoted was a dual hierarchy of regular and political police, separate but operationally connected organizations that mirrored each other at every institutional level but dealt with distinct spheres of policing. No major police officials in the early 1930s strongly argued for a thorough unification of the militia and the GPU, in the sense of obliteration of the differences between the two in terms of status, tasks, self-conception, and duties. The fact that melding of daily activities was the eventual outcome of this takeover was more the result of difficulties experienced by the OGPU leadership in carrying out its plans than of its initial designs.

Structural divisions: investigation and policing

The operational reforms promulgated by the OGPU leadership after it took over the militia were united by one overarching goal: the OGPU expected to create a policing system that would prevent crime by connecting the daily policing practices of the regular police, the CID, and the OGPU. In particular, the new leadership believed that undercover policing tactics were the key to making the militia into a modernized and effective police force.

In many ways, the OGPU based its ideas for preventative undercover policing on its own activities against political opponents and the organized criminal underworld in the 1920s. The OGPU leadership consciously attempted to transfer many of its own methods to the regular police, especially to the CID. Surprisingly, although OGPU officials carefully defined the spheres of activity of both police services, they did not always retain more prestigious duties for themselves. While they never entertained the idea that the regular police would investigate political crimes, they did attempt to extend "Chekist"

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24 GARF, f. 1235, op. 141, d. 910, l. 22-21. Although transfers from the OGPU generally took place to the highest leadership positions of the militia, OGPU officers understandably tended to see the move as a step down the career ladder.
methods to regular policing. What the OGPU leadership found, to its surprise, was that the militsiia, even
the more elite CID, was in no way capable of carrying out the reform programs to the satisfaction of
central police officials.

The CID was perhaps the most important branch of the regular police in this reform program,
both in terms of its mediation between regular policing and the OGPU and in terms of its centrality to the
idea of the "new" Soviet police. Relations between the CID, the rest of the militsiia, and the OGPU had
been confused and contentious during NEP. Categories of crime handled by the CID, such as armed
banditry that lacked an overtly anti-Soviet political stance, often shaded over into crimes that were the
responsibility of the OGPU. Immediately after it took over the militsiia, the OGPU leadership attempted
to sort out the connections between the CID and the remainder of the police system.24 The CID was
expected to work closely with the patrolling police to unify the tasks of investigation and policing of
public order.25 OGPU officials hoped to turn the CID into a highly specialized, "Cheka-ized" undercover
regular police force that used the methods of the secret police but that dealt with threatening regular
crimes not under the purview of the OGPU.26

Attempts to reintegrate the CID with the militsiia and to delineate the duties of the regular and
political police faltered immediately, especially in the countryside. Central police officials openly
admitted that the CID did not serve rural areas at all. One official termed the countryside, and the single

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24 In 1931 the OGPU leadership abolished the CID as a separate department and subordinated it to local police
administrations, returning to the situation that existed in the initial years after the October Revolution. I will
continue to call the Operativnyi Otdel the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) in English, both for the sake of
consistency and because the attempt to reintegrate it into the regular policing hierarchy failed quickly, as discussed
below. The Operative Department was eventually renamed the Ugolovnyi Rozysk and retained its separate status
from the regular militsiia.

25 In a meeting of the heads of republican-level CIDs in late May 1931, Usov, the new assistant chief of the Central
Inspectorate of the Militsiia within the OGPU and the head of GURKM pri SNK, compared the situation to that in
the OGPU. There was not internal functional division within the OGPU between "outward order and operative
questions," he argued, and hence the militsiia should not have one either. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 475, ll. 3-5. Usov
calls the changes "operativization"; he argued for the need to "operativize" the militsiia. Ibid., 14

26 GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 475, ll. 12, 21-23. A participant in the 1931 Conference of CID Chiefs carried the idea
further, arguing that the precinct inspectors were purely operative functionaries and hence should be subsumed
under the CID of the militsiia. The militsiia, he argued, would then be divided into two main sections: a CID,
dealing with all investigation, and an outward department or "beat" department (stroevoi otdel), which would be
responsible for strictly overt functions like posts, guards, plus open surveillance and training of police. GARF, f.
9415, op. 5, d. 475, ll. 30-31
policeman that served in the countryside – the rural “precinct inspector” – the “homeless children” (besprizorniki) of police work, noting bitterly that the only difference was that “the besprizornik is served and nurtured by a whole range of party-social organizations, and our precinct inspector isn’t helped by anyone.”

Divisions between the CID and the OGPU were also difficult to work out in practice.

Although the militsia, including the CID, was not supposed to take over any overtly political functions. militsia officials in the countryside usually were the first Soviet administrative officials to come into contact with certain types of anti-Soviet activity that nominally fell under the jurisdiction of the OGPU.

At a 1931 meeting of CID chiefs, the head of the Central Militsia Administration expressed this distinction with regard to banditry:

[W]e, as the Operative Department [CID] of the Militsia, will not specifically deal with questions related to the struggle with political banditry. We know that in the countryside we will take part in this matter on an everyday basis, because our apparatus is much more developed in the periphery [than that of the GPU], and it is completely obvious that very often in the countryside officers of the militsia will be the first to react when certain sorts of crimes are committed, like a murder carried out by a kulak for purely class goals. This sort of crime is the business of the GPU, and the militsia in this case is only that initial force that will begin to investigate the situation. The OGPU does not have that sort of well-developed network [in the periphery] and some cases will therefore without question be investigated initially by the militsia. Our general task in this matter is to make the organs of the militsia into Chekist organs in essence, Chekist in spirit, in methods of work, in forms of work, but not in any sense to replace the organs of the GPU with the militsia.

Although central officials were willing to allow some overlap between regular and secret police in the countryside, they were adamant about not allowing it in the cities, where the OGPU had a highly developed set of institutions. Even in urban areas, however, OGPU authorities could not immediately reform relations between the OGPU and the militsia along the lines they desired. Many local OGPU officials took the political victory over the NKVD as a sign that they should simply take over the militsia wholesale, especially in the case of the CID, notwithstanding repeated instructions from central officials to the contrary. The fact that the new CID and militsia chiefs were usually OGPU officers transferred to the militsia after December 1930 only strengthened this trend. Central police authorities noted with

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28 GARE, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 475, l. 56
29 Ibid., l. 7.
alarm that the new OGPU officers reorganized the local CID departments to duplicate their experiences in
the OGPU, often treating the detectives as lower-level functionaries to help deal with the immense work
load of the secret police. OGPU officials also used militsiia officers to conduct technical work such as
bookkeeping or guarding prison cells in secret police administrations, usually without the approval or
sometimes even the knowledge of higher-level militsiia officials.

For the most part, though, local OGPU administrations ignored the militsiia altogether. Even as
late as 1932, regional-level OGPU administrations made little effort to supervise militsiia operations;
lower-level officials were even more remiss. Supervision of lower-level militsiia bodies by the regular
police hierarchy, furthermore, generally consisted of occasional visits to localities by touring inspectors or
higher-level police chiefs. Regional police chiefs, one report stated, simply arrived in localities, looked
around for a bit, and then left. The CID detectives, for their part, continued to see themselves as
separate from and superior to the rest of the militsiia. Although the restructuring specifically intended to
eliminate this duality of local policing, local detectives often did not play along, preferring to see
themselves as closer to the better-respected OGPU. Local OGPU administrations paid little attention to
the CID and were uninterested in supervising and training the militsiia as a whole.

Policing, social disorder and administrative collapse

The rest of the plans for reforming Soviet policing faltered on similar problems. As the OGPU
attempted to transform the Soviet policing system, the militsiia itself was faced with problems of public

\[\text{[bid.,]} \ 12.\]
\[\text{[GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, ll. 6ob-9.]}\]
\[\text{[The author of this particular report suggested that heads of regional-level administrations should spend no less than}
\text{four months each year touring the periphery. This suggestion is enlightening both because it shows the incredibly}
\text{high level of "touring" that would be required to maintain any sort of useful contact between localities and the}
\text{center, and because it was completely impossible for the center to release top officials to tour the countryside for}
\text{lengthy periods of time due to the manpower shortage facing the police as a whole. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, ll}
\text{8ob-9.}]}\]
\[\text{[There was no uniform division of authority within local police forces regarding investigation practices throughout}
\text{the early 1930s. In some areas, the Operative Department carried out all investigations without exception, while in}
\text{others it investigated only certain crimes, leaving others to the patrols (odely svyazny). GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 474,}
\text{t. 76.]}\]

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disorder that were several orders of magnitude greater than those of NEP. Forced collectivization, launched in 1929 and resumed in earnest in mid-1930, strained the Soviet administrative system to its limits, as did the forcible resettlement of hundreds of thousands of peasant families to northern areas of the USSR. Rapid urbanization, in part driven by this attack on the countryside, likewise stretched police administrations to their limits. The expectation of the OGPU leadership that local police could reform their entire bureaucratic system and methods of policing in the midst of this chaos and disorder was badly misplaced. The carefully delineated system of parallel police forces promoted by the OGPU leadership collapsed completely in the early 1930s, leaving the OGPU, both at the center and in localities, with little daily control over militsiia activities.

The criminal justice system as a whole was consumed by the task of supporting the Party’s rural and industrial campaigns between 1929 and 1933. As a result, the basic administrative activities of the Soviet criminal justice system largely collapsed during the First Five-Year Plan. Justice officials ignored basic functions like trials, investigations, and supervision of the police. Judges and investigators not only prosecuted property crimes related to collectivization, grain requisitioning, and theft of industrial property but also participated in brigades sent to the countryside to carry out collectivization and dekulakization. The militsiia played an active role in these campaigns as well: urban policemen were requisitioned for detachments sent to the countryside to quell peasant unrest, while rural militsiia officers were usually the first contact between the state and rebellious peasants. Local police were on the front lines of the collectivization campaign in 1930 and 1931 and, like justice officials, spent most of their time responding to disturbances in the countryside instead of patrolling or investigating crimes. The regular police, furthermore, were usually the first Soviet administrative officials to confront insurrections once the detachments had left, leaving them with little time to implement the reform programs of the OGPU leadership. Central police officials strongly condemned the tendency of local party and government...

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[15] In a typical example, a rural precinct inspector in the Moscow region responded in March 1930 to a group attack on a newly formed collective farm. Some 100 women gathered at the central barn of the new kolkhoz to demand the return of their cattle, which they claimed were poorly treated by the kolkhoz members in charge of them. Local Komsomol activists attempted to prevent the seizure of the cattle but were forcibly removed by the group of...
authorities to requisition local police for collectivization and dekulakization campaigns. In reality, however, police at all levels could do little to halt this trend. Although the OGPU continued to press its plans to reform the police system after 1930, in practice the need to support the collectivization campaign was paramount. Police turned to other tasks when time permitted.

The OGPU takeover compounded problems of bureaucratic decentralization and induced a complete failure of the modest hierarchies of command that existed before 1930. As the OGPU dismantled the centralized bureaucratic structure of the NKVD RSFSR in 1930, local police administrations gained a tremendous amount of latitude in policy creation and implementation. Local soviets in remote areas often continued to direct local police, making use of the still official (if disingenuous) laws about the rights of local soviets and the national republics to direct policing affairs. Even though secret instructions made the relationship between the OGPU and the militsiia clear, published laws gave Administrative Departments of local soviets nominal control over the activities of the militsiia as late as 1932. Although part of the rationale for abolishing the NKVD RSFSR had been to centralize funding of police activities, funding still took place at the local level until 1932 (in many areas until 1934). Even those administrations in which police were paid from the central budget often had to rely on local soviets for funding for operational matters.

The OGPU, for its part, had little permanent representation in most localities in the early 1930s, and was unable to closely monitor regular police activity for most of the early 1930s.\(^37\) Lines of
command from central OGPU officials to local police administrations, though carefully defined in numerous circulars, were largely non-existent in reality. Poor communications, lack of paper, and bureaucratic chaos at the center meant that directives often failed to reach localities at all. A CID officer from the Republic of Georgia, for example, complained that central leadership was completely absent:

"Up to this point [May of 1931, five months after the OGPU takeover] we have not received any sort of directives [from the central leadership in Moscow]. We have received no instructions, no textbooks. In general, guidance from the center for the regions has been very weak."

The OGPU leadership had little previous practice trying to direct and control local policemen with less experience, training and discipline than their own political policemen, and they were unable to create a functional centralized police administration for several years after the takeover.

At the same time, bureaucratic centralization also faltered on poor information flow from local police to central authorities. Central officials complained bitterly and repeatedly in the early 1930s about their inability to obtain information from localities regarding crime trends, police work, and the makeup of local forces. A typical circular sent from the Central Militsia Administration (GURKM pri Sovnarkom) in Moscow to local police in August 1931 lamented that, despite specific orders sent to localities in May of that year requesting statistical summaries of operative work by August 1, not a single police administration had fulfilled the directive and sent the requested information to the center.

Central police officials could force compliance only through threats to fire local officials, a step they were reluctant to take because of the severe shortages of officers that plagued the militsia throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Central officials also complained that local police, even in areas that were not particularly remote, ignored their instructions and continued to work in ways that they were accustomed to before the OGPU.

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38 GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 475, l. 95.
39 The circular called the situation "impermissible" and ordered immediate forwarding of the requested information. GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 474, l. 69.
40 GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, l. 49.
takeover. In particular, local officials failed to devote much energy to reforms that required them to maintain close contact with social or government organizations. One report from Moscow region, for example, complained that local police chiefs and the precinct inspectors ignored requirements to report to workers' meetings and plenums of village soviets:

Cases even exist where some district Militsiya Administrations have failed to deliver reports to the Presidiums of District Executive Committees [of the soviets] for a year or more, for example the Chief of Kommunist District Militsiya Administration has not delivered a report [to the Soviet] for over a year and a half.

This total lack of police contact with local soviets was apparent in all localities, including central locations in which the central police administration in Moscow exercised some amount of direct control. Rural precinct inspectors in particular were completely independent after the OGPU takeover obliterated what little nominal control local soviets had over them during NEP. Precinct inspectors remained itinerant policemen, touring large areas of the countryside and meting out justice to their own standards. 12

In addition to the obstacles to reshaping the structure of police administration, OGPU officials found it difficult to reshape the staff of the Militsiya. The OGPU almost immediately ran into nearly insurmountable problems of funding and provisioning. These difficulties were endemic to the Soviet administrative system in the 1930s, but the OGPU leadership was surprisingly and somewhat naively unprepared to face shortages of material and manpower in the regular police system. Though financing was supposed to be centralized, the OGPU leadership quickly realized that they had little chance of successfully providing even the most basic provisions to local police – uniforms, shoes, and even firearms. In 1931 some regional police administrations were so under-funded that they could provide arms to only 50 to 60 percent of their policemen. 44 As early as February 1931, financial planners in Moscow noted that the central militsiya hierarchy made no provisions for supplying local police with automobiles, leaving local police to search for funding from local soviets. 44 Funding for the finer points

12 GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 491, II 9-8
42 GARF, f. 1235, op. 72, d. 340, II 1-6
13 GARF, f. 1235, op. 141, d. 910, I 15 Another report on provisioning of the militsiya stated that the task had been fulfilled extremely poorly after the OGPU takeover. Control and inventory of weapons was reportedly weak and in many locales the weapons themselves were in poor condition. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, II 78-79.
14 GARF, f. 9415, op. 1, d. 2, I 11.
of police work was almost non-existent. One officer of the CID complained that the organization’s
meager budget did not allow for purchasing the foreign-made microscopes necessary to investigate crime
scenes. Uniforms were in short supply, a problem only exacerbated by the new OGPU leadership’s
immediate and rather inexplicable decision to order a change of uniforms in May 1931. By September
1931 central police authorities realized that new uniforms were in extremely short supply and postponed
the exchange until January 1, 1933. New uniforms, however, were distributed to urban police first, while
rural police were instructed to continue using their old uniforms.

Difficulties in recruitment and training also hampered the creation of a new Soviet police. The
militsia chief of the Russian republic described the dire problem of finding qualified personnel in 1931 as
follows:

Recruits for the militsia predominantly come from the countryside, individuals who have
neither qualifications nor any military background, who are not particularly valuable for
industry or construction trades; and furthermore such people often join the militsia while
they are waiting for better work to appear.

The militsia accepted recruits without any qualifications, and even so it suffered from constant
shortages of staff. At the beginning of 1931, in seven central regions of the RSFSR, for example, 2,650
positions remained vacant out of a total of 60,000, positions for which police had funding but could hire
no officers. Of the recruits that could be found, many were said to be “class-alien, decaying, unfit-for-

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45 GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 475, ll. 84–100, esp. 85.

46 The order for new uniforms can be found in GARF, f. 9415, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 51–550b, complete with a description of
the new uniforms and the rules for wearing them. The order, dated April 29, 1931, calls for new uniforms to be
distributed beginning May 1, 1931. It is not surprising that outfitting all policemen in the USSR with new uniforms
would be a problem in an economic system notorious for lack of light industrial goods. It is more surprising that the
OGPU leadership was quite indignant when difficulties arose in the provisioning process.

47 GARF, f. 9415, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 149–150. One can only guess that the uniforms worn by rural police were in the
poorest possible condition.

48 OGPU officials generally were satisfied with the social composition of the militsia. One report noted that as of
July 1, 1932, 23.3 percent of policemen were party members, 6.2 percent were Komsomol members, and 70.5
percent were non-party. Most of the party members were the commanding officers, while very few rank-and-file
policemen were party members. The report also outlined the social composition of the militsia: 21.2 percent
workers, 64.9 percent peasants of various social-economic categories, and 13.9 percent white-collar workers. The
worker contingent was relatively stable, having grown 1.5 percent in 1931. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, ll. 26–27.

49 GARF, f. 1235, op. 141, d. 910, l. 40.
Shortage of cadres early in the decade was such a problem that police academies regularly graduated their trainees well before their meager course schedule was complete.\textsuperscript{51}

Labor turnover also continued to be a problem, one that the OGPU found, to its surprise, that it initially could do nothing about.\textsuperscript{52} In 1929, yearly turnover rates for police in the RSFSR were 64 percent for the regular militsiia and 53 percent for the industrial militsiia. In 1930, rates were 64 percent and almost 80 percent, respectively. Turnover in certain areas was higher, often up to 100 percent, meaning that a given police position was occupied by a different officer every year. Policemen often treated the position as seasonal labor, taking the job to bridge slow periods between planting and harvest in the countryside.\textsuperscript{53} Turnover continued to be a problem, remaining at levels as high as 50% per year even in major cities like Moscow through 1935.\textsuperscript{54}

This incredibly high turnover wrought havoc with the modest system of training maintained by central officials. Policemen often changed jobs once they received training because their bureaucratic experience made them prime candidates for better positions in the economic or state bureaucracies. In 1930, for example, in five surveyed regions of the RSFSR 1,015 policemen began work after receiving formal training while 899 policemen with previous training left for better jobs. Police officers often left the militsiia to work as security guards or consultants for the very same organizations, factories, or department stores at which they had been stationed as police officers. State and industrial organizations simply offered better pay for the same position.\textsuperscript{55} In a final affront, police who quit for better work usually took their precious uniforms with them, especially in the countryside.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., II 40-39.
\textsuperscript{51} GARF, f. 9415, op. 1, d. 1, l. 55.
\textsuperscript{52} GARF, f. 1235, op. 141, d. 910, II 39-37.
\textsuperscript{53} GARF, 9401.12.135.26

Usov, the police chief, was particularly bitter about the practice of inter-bureaucratic "headhunting" that drained the militsiia of the few qualified officers it had. See GARF, f. 1235, op. 141, d. 910, II. 39-37.

\textsuperscript{55} GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, II. 66-77.
The militsia under the OGPU also continued to suffer from the same disciplinary difficulties that plagued the NEP-era police. Police officers were often removed from their assigned guard posts for other administrative duties, left of their own accord, or fell asleep. Central authorities complained that the majority of regular policemen did not know how to use the weapons issued to them. Many knew neither their specific duties nor the basic characteristics of the city around them. Central officials were particularly concerned about crime and disciplinary infractions within the militsia and with an overall lack of "Chekist" spirit. Drunkenness, sleeping on the job, and rude behavior towards the population were widespread. One 1932 report from the Moscow region maintained that "anti-Soviet moods" had become commonplace within the militsia and that the militsia was "infiltrated to a significant extent by class-alien and unfit elements." The report provided a litany of examples. In Reutovskii district (Moscow region), for example, ten former kulaks, traders, and other class-alien elements worked in the militsia. Local administration was characterized by nepotism, while police misappropriated public and private property for "mercenary-minded" purposes. Drunken policemen fired indiscriminately on workers, raped arrested women, and murdered drunks in local jails. In Ramenskii district a "Trotskyite group" supposedly controlled the militsia, openly promoting anti-Soviet agitation at rural meetings.

In all areas, policemen continued to abuse their positions with impunity, seizing property from arrested individuals for their personal use and accepting bribes. As a result, many districts witnessed extraordinarily high levels of administrative sanctions for crimes on duty. In Kuznetskii district of Moscow region, 48 percent of the entire militsia staff was charged with some sort of malfeasance during

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56 One 1932 circular chided local officers for their habit of working "by the book", police failed to see themselves as "masters of the street" and instead resembled "passive watch-guards of the old times or, at best, blind executors of policy." Ibid., I, 83.

57 Central officials were well aware of the tendency of local police to use physical force and violate norms of procedure when arresting citizens. A September 1931 Prikat from Usov complained that local policemen often beat people they arrested to loss of consciousness, especially drunks. Usov strongly condemned such behavior, saying that those policemen who use physical methods during interrogation were "class-alien elements" and "holdovers from the Tsarist period." GARF, f. 9415, op. 1, d. 1, II. 134-135.

58 GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 491, II. 8-9.
1932; in Esenovskii district, 70 percent; in Pushkin district – 80 percent; in Shelkovskii district - 85 percent; and in Kommunist district - 96 percent. Disciplinary infractions were often attributed to alcohol consumption on the job. One 1932 report noted that “drunkenness in the militsia, notwithstanding a series of measures [against it], remains at a very high level – 890 policemen disciplined [for drunkenness in Moscow in] April 1932, 1,131 in May, 1,041 in July 1932.”

The problem of poor performance and disciplinary infractions was particularly pronounced in the industrial militsia. The most common complaints were that the industrial militsia, like the police in general, constantly left their guard posts, fell asleep, or failed to show up for work at all. An August 1931 circular from Moscow noted that such low-level performance problems made up 90 percent of the total infractions committed by both the industrial and the regular militsia. The 7,631 industrial police in Moscow region (with eighteen districts not reporting) committed 7,804 disciplinary infractions in 1931 that resulted in some form of punishment. 4,714 (60.3 percent) were relatively minor infractions on duty, such as sleeping or leaving without authorization. Industrial police were particularly prone to leave their jobs without returning their official police identification, which they then used to commit crimes and pass themselves off as police officers.

The lack of coordination and bureaucratic flux within the police system as a whole provided numerous possibilities for flagrant abuse of the system. The following example is somewhat unrepresentative due to the extended nature of the crime but not at all unique in the chaotic context of the

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19 This report, however, stated that overall levels of anti-Soviet opinion in the militsia were acceptable and were the result of poor working and living conditions and low pay. GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 3, ll. 26-28
20 The fact that several areas would simply not report information to the center, even in Moscow, was a ubiquitous feature of police reports in the early 1930s. To some extent, the police leadership accepted this reality and drew conclusions based on the data that was in fact sent in.
21 GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 474, ll. 79a-80
22 GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 9, l. 48 OGPU officials deemed the industrial militsia more prone to graft and theft than the regular militsia, both because industrial policemen tended not to be career police officers and because they had close contact with valuable goods. The OGPU carried out a general purge of the membership of the industrial militsia in October 1931. I have no information regarding the results of the purge. GARF, f. 9415, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 173-173ab.
early 1930s. In Moscow in 1931 the CID reported that they had arrested a 20-year old professional criminal from Kiev who made a living impersonating a member of the Moscow Soviet and an OGPU officer. The impostor appeared at marketplaces and, presenting his forged credentials, collected “special taxes” from private traders of up to 100 rubles. The impostor provided receipts for his “special taxes” complete with official-looking stamps from the Moscow Soviet and the local administration of the Commissariat of Finance. Local traders, accustomed to these sorts of shakedowns from real police officers and often living at the border between legality and illegality, had little to gain by not paying. This “officer” threatened to arrest individuals in the name of the OGPU if they did not pay their “taxes” on the spot, and in several cases, according to the police report, actually “carried out arrests, escorting the ‘arrested’ individuals to local police stations.”

At a very basic level, the OGPU attempt to restructure the regular police was derailed in the first years of the 1930s by problems of staffing, funding, and lack of local enthusiasm for the project. The administrative chaos of the First Five-Year Plan made bureaucratic restructuring difficult if not impossible. The OGPU leadership, however, was unprepared for the extent to which the regular police was disorganized and unprofessional. As a result, the set of reforms promoted by the OGPU that were intended to create a new preventative police failed within the first few years of OGPU control over the militsia. The unification of regular and political police that took place across the rest of the decade occurred in spite of these initial plans, and it occurred in ways neither planned nor expected by the central leadership.

Implications and conclusions

The abject failure of the OGPU to reform the militsia in the first several years of the 1930s had a fundamental influence on the evolution of Soviet policing for the rest of the decade. Most importantly, this failure influenced policing tactics in the mid-1930s in a way that tended to expand the range of individuals who would be targeted once Stalin launched the “Great Terror” of 1937-1938. The failure of

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GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 476, l. 126.
the police leadership to create a well-organized, hierarchical, "modern" policing system opened space for
the promotion by local and central officials alike of other methods of policing in the mid-1930s, methods
quite different from those planned by the OGPU when it took over the militsiia. By far the most
important of these methods, by the mid-1930s, was the tendency of the police to view the Soviet internal
passport system as a policing tactic rather than as a way to regulate population movements or as a way to
strengthen the collective farm system (both of which were originally important issues in the creation of
the passport system in 1932). Use of the passport system as a policing tactic increased the tendency of the
OGPU to treat the militsiia as subordinate forces that could be called upon to carry out specific pressing
tasks. It also increased the extent to which the OGPU was involved in issues of policing public disorder
and social control. Purges of cities, carried out increasingly by both militsiia and GPU officers under the
auspices of the passport system, became by the basic method of Soviet policing. Specific categories of
crime, especially speculation and hooliganism, were increasingly dealt with by the political police in
conjunction with militsiia via the passport system rather than by the militsiia alone. This mixing of
regular and political police activity intensified the trend towards viewing public-order crimes such as
hooliganism and speculation in terms of their "threat" to the Soviet system, and eventually led to the
inclusion of these "threatening" categories of regular criminals in the repression of 1937-1938.

By 1936 and 1937, the political police and the militsiia were firmly ensconced in areas of
competence that had been separate at the beginning of the 1930s. By the time that the Great Terror took
place, the militsiia had expanded their activity to many areas that easily shaded over into "counter-
revolutionary activity," while the rest of the secret police apparatus had substantial experience with
policing public-order crimes like hooliganism, banditry, passport violations, and speculation. Thus, when
the Politburo began ordering mass arrests of "kulak [rich-peasant], criminal, and other active anti-social
elements" in August 1937 (campaigns that resulted in nearly 700,000 executions before they were called
off in late 1938), both the political police and the militsiia were poised, in their own ways, to fulfill the
quotas they received from Moscow.

The best published guide in English to the course of these "mass operations" and their place in the overall
evolution of the Great Terror is Oleg Khlevniuk, "The Objectives of the Great Terror, 1937-38," in Julian Cooper,
This paper has argued that the unification of the tasks and administrations of the political police and mightya that took place in the mid-1930s, and the specific way that this unification took place, was influenced by the failure in the early 1930s of a particular vision of unification, separation, and coordination of the two halves of the Soviet policing system. In the early 1930s, the OGPU took over the mightya with the full intention of controlling the operations of both forces while carefully delineating separate spheres of activity of the regular and political police. The ideal “new” Soviet police that was promoted by the OGPU leadership in the early 1930s was highly centralized and hierarchical, yet was based on a clear concept of parallel and separate but operationally connected regular and political police systems.

I have argued that, for practical reasons, this idea of dual hierarchies failed completely in the early 1930s. This failure substantially increased the range and scope of state repression that occurred later in the 1930s. In practical terms, the close supervision of regular policing activities by the secret police leadership in the 1930s did not have the intended effect of improving policing activities and reducing crime. Instead, the OGPU takeover of the mightya actually reduced central control of local police for several years, while it eventually expanded the repressive nature of the Stalinist policing system and widened the scope of the Great Terror in 1937-1938. These results cannot be traced to simplistic notions of the inherently repressive nature of the Stalin-era secret police; rather, they were the product of unforeseen evolutionary pressures on the Soviet policing system that arose from the context of social and bureaucratic chaos and uncertainty in the early 1930s.
