A. Pechenkin, *Stalin i voennyi sovet [Stalin and the Military Council]*
Moskva, VZFEI, 2007, 160 pages

David R. Stone
It quite often happens that the usefulness of a monograph is eclipsed by the subsequent publication of a more up-to-date monograph. A. A. Pechenkin’s *Stalin i voennyi sovet* falls into a more unusual category: a monograph whose usefulness has been preempted by a documentary publication.

Pechenkin’s title refers the Red Army’s Military Council (*Voennyi sovet pri narkome oborony*), a collective body of nearly one hundred of the Soviet military elite. When in 1934 the Soviet Union reformed the People’s Commissariat of Military and Naval Affairs into the People’s Commissariat of Defense, it simultaneously abolished the Revolutionary-Military Council that had decided key questions of military policy in the early Soviet state. In place of the powerful but small Revolutionary-Military Council, this 1934 reform established a weaker, consultative body, the Military Council. The new Council was also much larger: in place of the dozen members of the Revolutionary-Military Council, the Military Council was created with 80 members. The overwhelming majority of those members did not survive the 1930s. Pechenkin promises a great deal: an exploration of the workings of the Military Council, an examination of the “factors which enabled the career advancement of military commanders, the positions they occupied, and who was repressed in 1937-38 and for what reasons.” In practice, however, he delivers much less. Though he has written extensively about the Red Army’s political dynamics elsewhere,¹ this monograph is more narrowly focused than its title and claims would indicate.
3 Part of the problem is not at all Pechenkin’s fault. The heart of his book, the middle third, is a detailed recounting of the extended session of the Military Council from 1-4 June 1937, at which the Red Army’s high command was acquainted with the case against Mikhail Tukhachevskii and seven other high-ranking commanders. Presented with the ostensible confessions of these men to participation in a long-standing conspiracy to overthrow Soviet power, the high command spent four days in Joseph Stalin’s presence discussing the nature and implications of these findings. When Pechenkin’s book was published in 2007, it was an important and valuable contribution to the literature. Since that time, however, ROSSPEN has published at least six volumes of documents and stenograms from the Military Council, including a volume of over 600 pages dealing specifically with the 1-4 June session. Since Pechenkin quotes extensively more than he summarizes, researchers really ought to read the stenogram of the session for themselves. His summaries are generally accurate, though he suggests that Stalin’s primary motivation for attacking his first eight victims was their connection the German Reichswehr before 1933 (71). This appears to me to be a misreading of Stalin’s statement to the Military Council that the accused truly were spies, and truly had surrendered important information to foreign militaries.

4 The discussion of 1-4 June is really the core of Pechenkin’s story. The introductory section leading into the Military Council’s discussion is an able summary of the existing secondary literature and published primary sources, but does not generally offer much new beyond that. The same is true for the aftermath of the June session: an able summary of existing literature and sources. Pechenkin’s contribution in these sections is his ability to use a collection of unpublished Stalin speeches to provide additional context. He does provide some important insights: the antipathy between Stalin’s military cronies Semyon Budennyi and People’s Commissar of Defense Kliment Voroshilov (20), for example.

5 In terms of analysis, Pechenkin does not take us beyond what we already knew. His introduction rightly notes that “problems of the formation and evolution of the military elite in the second half of the 1930s, relationships between Soviet commanders and the USSR’s political leadership have to this date not been the subject of special scholarly analysis (7-8).” Though he is correct, he concludes here that Stalin did not trust Tukhachevskii, that the Red Army’s high command on the whole held Voroshilov in contempt, and that many in the high command were deeply puzzled and troubled by the accusations against Tukhachevskii and his co-defendants. While he mentions the importance of factions and patron-client networks in the Red Army, the only one which he conclusively demonstrates is that based on the Civil War’s First Cavalry Army. These conclusions will not surprise scholars who follow the literature in the field.

NOTES

1. For example, A. A. Pechenkin, Voennaia elita SSSR v 1935-1939 gg.: Repressiia i obnovlenie (Moscow: VZFEI, 2003); Gibel’ voennoi elity 1937-1938 gg. (Moscow: VZFEI, 2011).
2. Voennyi sovet pri Narodnom komissare oborony SSSR: 1-4 iiunia 1937 g.: Dokumenty i materialy (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2008).

INDEX

Index géographique : Soviet Union
Thèmes : History
Keywords : Military Council, Red Army, Military Elite, Political Leadership

AUTEURS

DAVID R. STONE

Kansas State University