



Comment on Wheatcroft

ROBERT CONQUEST

Wheatcroft seems to regard his recent intemperate, and not very coherent, piece¹ as a massive refutation of Conquest. Massive, yes—if you include repeated imputations of motive and other matters the serious reader will have skipped ... But refutation, no.

But first, Wheatcroft's claim to superior accuracy, responsibility and general scholarly virtue could do with some puncturing. Two counterexamples:

- (a) He charges me (p. 320) with, disgracefully and typically, speaking of my academic opponents as 'Neo-Stalinist revisionists' (in an English-language interview with Katrina Vanden Houvel published in *Moscow News*). What I actually said was, of Western writers who had implied that there was not much of a terror, 'A few were Stalinists or semi-Stalinists—for remember, there are admirers of Stalin outside the USSR too! But most seem simply to have found Stalin's actions beyond the capacity of their parochial imaginations'.² This casts a certain doubt on his capacity to quote documents.
- (b) Wheatcroft also rebukes me when, having cited an estimate of the numbers disenfranchised which the researcher responsible later withdrew, I pointed out that this did not affect my argument. When first citing these figures, I had written that I was 'not qualified to comment', that I had 'not checked' the 'sources' quoted, that they seemed too large, but that 'if valid' they might be of some significance.³ That is, I treated them as peripheral and unsubstantiated, and they *did not* affect my argument. This casts doubt on Wheatcroft's reliability in recording other views.

On the Soviet leadership's responsibility for the famine he appears to demonstrate that the respected V. P. Danilov, and following him myself (though I get most of the blame!) gave figures for the grain reserves that were too high. But the figure Wheatcroft now gives cannot sustain his acquittal of Stalin and his leadership. A mere half a million tons would be a good bread ration for a million and a half people for a year. That is, a million tons would have done the same for 12 million people for three months—and even a half ration would have been better than none. The stocks were held for emergencies? The death of millions of your subjects is not an emergency?

I pointed out that Molotov told the Politburo in July 1932 that famine loomed, but that the planned requisitions must proceed regardless (we now have Stalin's similar instruction from Sochi). And let me cite an even clearer exchange: Mikhail Khataevich, first secretary of the Ukraine Dnipropetrovsk province, wrote to Molotov

in November 1932 that the 'minimum' needs of the peasantry must be met, or 'there will be no one left to sow and produce'. Molotov answered that this view was 'incorrect, unBolshevik', since 'we cannot put the needs of the State—needs precisely defined in Party resolutions—in the tenth, or even the second, place'.⁴ Wheatcroft takes it that Stalin did not 'consciously plan' the famine. 'Plan' is a slippery word: what we are saying is that he consciously inflicted it.

Then, the Kruglov Report. As I pointed out, the Head of the Security Ministry's Archival Administration, General Krayushkin, when making it public, stated clearly that the true figures were 'far greater', as is indeed obvious.⁵ Wheatcroft argues (as to both the Kruglov and the Shvernik reports) that the KGB would have been anxious not to give underestimates: pure supposition; and the opposite could equally be argued. (Besides, we are told that even at the documentation level the official count gave the 'capacity' of the camps rather than their real population, with an underestimate of c. 15%.⁶

As to the Shvernik report, to take a single objection to it, Wheatcroft now admits that for the one period for which we can check them, 1939–40, the figures given—4464—are false, since in March–April 1940 alone we have records of over 20 000. He is right in saying that only 21 857 of the 25 700 ordered to be shot by the Politburo seem actually to have been 'executed', but this does not help him. He suggests that the 14 552 Polish prisoners of war among them were somehow not counted (what other categories were omitted?). In any case, the remaining 7305 were not prisoners of war at all. They were charged in a routine fashion with counterrevolutionary conspiracy (and were ordered to be shot by local troikas in the eleven provinces concerned).⁷

Of course, this does not *prove* that the Shvernik figures for 1937–38 are wrong, but it does prove that they cannot be accepted uncritically. Wheatcroft now accepts that the Shvernik execution figures for 1937–38, even taken as correct, need to be augmented by some 50%. There are further categories that would increase them yet more.

He then charges me with antipathy to documents. Not at all. I merely hold that documents should be treated with at least as much scepticism as any other source, and that the other sources should be considered even in the absence of documentation. He complains of my calling failure to do this 'conceptually flawed'. I pointed out that he ignored, or dismissed with a brief sneer, a single example, figures—indeed less exact—quoted by a wide range of Russians with exceptional access to material over and above the two KGB exhibits, including (once again) a representative of the Security Ministry itself. These he labels 'literary', apparently because not based on already published official documents. But this is absurd, and reminds me, doubtless unfairly, of those historians who could find no archival evidence that Hitler ordered the Holocaust. Come to that, the only 'document' we have on the death of Ordzhonikidze makes it a heart attack; it is the non-documentary evidence that is generally accepted ... We should note, incidentally, that the secrecy of a document is no guarantee of its correctness. There are secret and top secret documents, as late as the late 1970s, that assert German responsibility for Katyn.⁸

A major red herring of Wheatcroft's is that he makes, and confuses, two arguments against me: that I am restoring my earlier estimates, and that I am suggesting higher

estimates now than he (Wheatcroft) advances. The first is false, the second true. This muddle, or misrepresentation, pervades his entire piece. In this context, he quotes a paragraph of rhetoric by Getty and Rittersporn, in a controversy in the *American Historical Review*, and implies that they won the debate. I refer readers not merely to the issue Wheatcroft quotes but also to the subsequent issues, where a very different impression might be given.⁹ But I note that he does not find it appropriate to point out their, or anyone's, earlier errors (more recent and far more *outré* than mine) of *underestimation* ('thousands', 'thirty-two thousand', 'the low hundred thousands') or, for example, treating the Tukhachevsky accusations as authentic!

Wheatcroft seems not to know that historical work that uses figures that may have to be corrected in the light of later evidence may be sound in every other respect, as is true of the work of historians from Herodotus and Tacitus (impossible figures on Xerxes's and Calgacus's forces, reliable and conscientious as to fact). Unverified or unverifiable numbers have always been a problem. It may be helpful, for the record, to note how I, and others, made estimates some decades ago that have turned out to be too high. It would perhaps have been more prudent not to attempt this at all, but at the time there seemed no other recourse. At any rate, the methods of deduction were in themselves the best available.

My estimates of Kolyma, for example, were based on a tally of reported camps, reports of average numbers in a camp, together with a check of the trans-Okhotsk penal ships' reported number of trips per annum and their reported capacity. Though relying on a variety of prisoners' and sailors' reports, this gave exaggerated figures. But they were as good as could be achieved at the time (and much higher estimates were then circulating). Wheatcroft rebukes me for asserting that in every other respect my Kolyma book is completely sound, which it is.

As to the more central point of estimates of arrests over 1937–38, in addition to similar sources, they were more substantially based on checks made by those in prison of the numbers entering them. In Kharkov, the physicist Alexander Weissberg¹⁰ (and others elsewhere) kept notes of the numbers on prisoners' receipts and so on, and came up with an estimate of 5.5% of the prison's catchment area being arrested—and so with a similar slightly lower count by another scholar.¹¹ Although this was rough, and not necessarily representative, it was obviously legitimate, by far the best that could be done at the time—and still contributory.

Meanwhile, let us note that Wheatcroft's interpretation of the Zemskov tables (better seen in the original Russian version than in his redeployment of them) is contrary to the natural reading of its categories—and contradicts his own treatment of the 1937–38 figures.

A number of subsidiary points, worth citing, arise in the context we are discussing. Here are a few:

- It is misleading to count only Article 58 counterrevolutionaries as 'political' prisoners. Many others were under sentence because of acts *politically* categorised as crimes, like being late for work, or teaching religion illicitly.
- And then, even when a Gulag document is right as to totals, its categories may be wrong or misleading. Wheatcroft himself has written of the 'escape' figures from NKVD 'settlements' that these may in fact cover deaths. Again, in two separate

cases in a single family, we are told that they were released when on the point of death and so did not figure in the deathroll.

- The category ‘arrests’ is itself a slippery one—many were in jail for many months before being so regularised.
- Deaths then disguised as 10 years without the right of correspondence were not registered in the ZAGS until the autumn of 1945.¹²
- We now see the military purge figures rising again in both Russian and Western estimates, after a period when they shrank.¹³
- The lists sent in 1937 to local NKVD of those to be purged list ‘first category’ as to be shot but ‘second category’ to be deported (*vysylka*): so these would not appear on Gulag or *ssylka* figures.¹⁴ In general, the number sent to *vysylka* is unclear, but it must have been high, as most sentences to Gulag included a period of *vysylka* to follow the camp term—depending on the numbers actually released from camp.
- Again, nearly a million prisoners were released into the army after June 1941, but a major part of these went into penal battalions. Was this a ‘release’? (They were used for such purposes as storming across minefields).

Throughout his piece, Wheatcroft is concerned to misrepresent and impugn my motives—the traditional recourse of the sectarian. It would be hard, apparently, to explain to Wheatcroft that my early works on the Soviet Union were undertaken out of a wish to discover the facts. Academics, in the sense Wheatcroft intends, had not done so (and work by the leading Russianist, Sir Bernard Pares, and the leading social scientists, the Webbs, and most others, were valueless ...). I have avoided the abusive tone Wheatcroft has used against me, but I will not conclude without mention of an acquaintance who had attended a talk of his at the time the mass graves were being discovered, telling me that when she raised the subject, he dismissed it (‘rather testily!’) as rumours. Yes, after all, bodies are not documents.

Hoover Institution, Stanford

¹ Stephen G. Wheatcroft, ‘Victims of Stalinism and the Soviet Secret Police: The Comparability and Reliability of Archival Data—Not the Last Word’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51, 2, March 1999, pp. 315–345.

² *Moscow News*, 1989, 13, p. 16.

³ *Soviet Studies*, 34, 3, July 1982, p. 436.

⁴ N. A. Ivniitsky, *Kollektivizatsiya i raskulachivanie* (Moscow, 1994), pp. 198–199.

⁵ *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 17 April 1993, p. 13.

⁶ V. P. Popov, ‘Gosudarstvennyi terror v Sovetskoi Rossii’, *Otechestvennye Arkhivy*, 1992, p. 22.

⁷ *Biuletyn Historycznej Agencji Informacyjnej*, 1992, 1, pp. 1–4.

⁸ See, e.g., secret and top secret documents on the Katyn massacre ‘in connection with the anti-Soviet campaign about the so-called “Katyn question”’, Politburo protocol P1/35 (15 April 1971) and 10 following documents, *Voennye arkhivy Rossii*, 1993, 1, pp. 124–174.

⁹ *American Historical Review*, 98, 4, October 1993, pp. 1017–1049 and 99, 3, June 1994, pp. 1038–1041.

¹⁰ Alexander Weissberg, *Conspiracy of Silence* (London, Hamilton, 1952), pp. 314, 319.

¹¹ See F. Beck & W. Godin, *Russian Purge and the Extraction of Confession* (London, Hurst & Blackett, 1951), pp. 66–67.

¹² *Rasstrel'nye spiski*, vol. 1 (Moscow 1993), p. 191.

¹³ See, e.g., Antonella Cristiana, *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, January–June 1998.

¹⁴ *Leningradskii Martirolog. 1937–1938*, vol. 1 (St Petersburg, Rossiiskaya Natsional'naya biblioteka, 1995), p. 39.