

Excess Deaths and Camp Numbers: Some Comments

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I DID NOT ANSWER Stephen Wheatcroft's article in the April 1990 issue even though part of its declared purpose was to expose the errors of my 'literary' evidence as compared with his own 'professional, objective' approach. This was because I had every hope that Soviet material would fairly soon discredit his supposedly weighty set of tables and this has, indeed, largely happened (in, for example, *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, nos. 6-8, 1990; *Vestnik statistiki*, no. 7, 1990; and, though perhaps Wheatcroft did not have access to it, *Rodina*, no. 11, 1989).

By 'literary' he meant no more than 'unofficial', and seemed unaware that, to put it mildly, official Soviet material was as likely to be false as any other; and that it is as easy to fake impressive tabulations as to invent a single figure. Thus he censures me for having 'claimed that the registration system for births and deaths was disbanded after October 1932', and that I offered 'no convincing evidence' of this. In fact I spoke not of a disbanding of the system but merely of 'non-registration of deaths' at this time (as I have noted before, Wheatcroft's capacity to misquote me jibes ill with his devotion to rigour). My source was indeed literary—even *émigré*; it was credible in itself; there seemed no motive for falsification; and it fitted the general statistical picture. Also, as so often, it has now been confirmed. *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, no. 6, 1990, prints a contemporary, hitherto unpublished, official census office report from Kurman to Kraval, that in the Ukraine and certain other areas 'a significant number of deaths were not registered'. These amounted in 1933 to 'about 1 million', (and in addition 'not less than 1-1½ million' deaths were not in the registration books because they were unreported by the NKVD). Wheatcroft himself chiefly relies for his gross estimates on the TsUNKhU *registration* tables for the early 1930s which, though satisfactorily non-literary, are thus proven to be of little use in their present form.

Similar objections now arise against Wheatcroft's two other sets of figures. For the 1939 census the figures arrived at by the Census Board were, we are told, 167 277 400. (I had accepted, in *The Harvest of Sorrow*, p. 302, a figure of 167.2 million: not bad!) The additional millions required to bring it up to the official figure of 170 467 186 existed only on paper and, we are now informed, were distributed among areas (and no doubt age groups) which needed topping up. Wheatcroft's deductions are therefore of little use. The same applies (as Alec Nove points out), to his third set of figures—those given for the camp and prison population in the later period in recent Soviet publications, some of which have been repudiated by the KGB itself. For *glasnost*' has indeed extended to

extravagant stuff—including massive ‘evidence’ of German responsibility for Katyn, of Tukhachevsky’s guilt (and soon, apparently, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*).

Nove’s criticism of one of my own estimates—of 3 million dead before 1937 among the collectivisation deportees—is to be taken more seriously. May I explain how this figure was arrived at? As V. P. Danilov pointed out 20 years ago (*Arkheograficheskii Ezhegodnik za 1968 god*, Moscow, 1970, p. 249), the population deficit in January 1937 must have been 15–16 million: and he was accepting a 1937 census figure of just under 164 million, while we now know that the true figure was 162 million, so that Danilov’s 15–16 million should read 17–18 million. Of course this is very rough, and there are other approximations, but the substantive question remaining is how much of a population deficit in this range represents death and how much a decline in the birthrate. On all the figures then and now available, I am not inclined to lower my excess death figure for 1930–37, of about 11 million. *Within* that 11 million, I concluded from other evidence that the dead of the 1932–33 famine numbered about 7 million: (and now we find the number dying in 1933 given as 8 million more than the figure for 1934, see *Vestnik statistiki*, no. 7 1990, p. 41; while the infant death component is indicated by the figures for life expectancy in the USSR in 1932, 1933 and 1934—32.8, 11.6 and 38.2 respectively!).

If my figures so far are more or less right, that leaves 4 million pre-1937 excess deaths not attributable to the 1932–33 famine. I divided this into about 1 million in the Kazakh disaster, and 3 million among deported ‘kulaks’. Nove thinks this last too high; and of course if the true Kazakh figure is $1\frac{1}{2}$ million the ‘kulak’ deportee figure is lowered to $2\frac{1}{2}$ million. I do not know why a figure in this range should be thought excessive: it matches the proportions dying in the very similar national deportations of 1943–44. Meanwhile, Nove’s point that Soviet statisticians still often seem to be giving too high a figure for emigration from the Central Asian republics in the early 1930s (of about 2 million instead of about $\frac{1}{4}$ million) is valid.

When it comes to the post-1936 figures the original edition of my *The Great Terror* came out over 20 years ago, and new information has naturally affected even some of its factual material: when it comes to its figures, they were not originally put forward as more than estimates or deductions, and are hardly immune to reconsideration.

There is one probable, or possible, error in the post-1937 figures I gave then. This was, based on such estimates as were then available, that there were about 5 million in camp at the beginning of 1937, and that (as was indeed the fact) these were mainly peasants: and assuming the reported percentages of survival, this meant about $3\frac{1}{2}$ million peasants dying in camps over the later period, which I added to my 11 million pre-1937 peasant death roll to bring the total premature collectivisation mortality to $14\frac{1}{2}$ million. The most recent figures show that in the 1937 census the reported NKVD non-frontier guard ‘contingent’ was, less its own personnel, about $2\frac{3}{4}$ million, and if so, this peasant death group of those actually dying in NKVD hands from 1937 on should be only about 2 million+.

Let us assume that these figures now published as given by the NKVD to the Census Board are correct (they may not be: the Board complained that it had

issued them about 4 million blank forms and only got about 2 million back—a presumable indication of its expectations). In any case, this does not have a direct bearing on the total of excess deaths among the deported kulaks. For the total exiles of 1930–32 amounted to 10 million or more (Academician Tikhonov estimates 13 million+), and even subtracting my figure of 3 million dead deportees in 1930–37 there must have been not fewer than 7 million in camp or exile at the end of 1936. The number dying prematurely outside labour camps after 1937 can only be guessed: but conditions in the Arctic remained grim, and half a million does not seem excessive. (Moreover, strictly speaking, peasant arrests in the 1937–38 period were largely collectivisation-linked; in Kursk province this amounted to nearly one-fifth of all arrests, and if (as the Vinnitsa and Kuropaty graves suggest) peasant contribution to the dead of the Ezhovshchina was similar, this can hardly have been less than another half a million.)

However, though the figure of about $2\frac{3}{4}$ million as the prisoner element in the NKVD ‘contingent’ may not greatly affect my estimates of the peasant component of the post-1937 death toll, it does affect my general figures on the prison and camp population and so on in the Ezhovshchina.

So if, as still seems about right, there were about 7 million arrests in 1937–38, the total pool of actual prisoners to be then allotted to various categories would be about $9\frac{1}{2}$ million rather than my original 12 million. If there were about 1 million in prisons at the end of 1938, and 2–3 million had been shot or died in camps over the Ezhov period, then only another $5\frac{1}{2}$ – $6\frac{1}{2}$ million would have been alive at this point, rather than the 8 million I had estimated. These figures are obviously mutually dependent: the more dead the fewer in camp and *vice versa*. In any case, they remain rough. Such adjustments are inevitable, but it remains the case that over the post-1937 period the ‘literary’ evidence (supported by recent Soviet evidence from provincial archives too) is considerably superior to the supposedly rigorous tables cited by Wheatcroft. To accept the latter would involve believing that there were not more in camp in Stalin’s time than in Brezhnev’s, and that there were hardly more in prison than in tsarist times! And this is, moreover, to reject the massive camp information over the 1940–41 period from Poles and others, some of whose local detailed estimates have lately been confirmed in Soviet sources.

It will be seen from the above that however the pre-1937 excess dead are allotted, they can hardly have totalled less than about 10 million; and that (since we are told in every source that no more than 10% of those in custody in 1937–38 survived), some 8 million more must have then followed.

We are already in the region of 18 million without taking into account the victims of post-1938 arrests and deportations. In addition, even if we accept lower figures, such as those of Volkogonov, for 1936–38 we are still in the region of 16 million for the deaths of the victims of the pre-1939 arrests alone. ‘The Twenty Million’, as they are now often written of in the USSR, cannot be a substantive exaggeration: Wheatcroft rightly remarks that high Soviet figures are sometimes derived from my own: but many are not, e.g. those of Shmelev, Yurasov, Mikoyan, Medvedev. Moreover, they are sometimes notably higher than mine, and this may well be right.

So far, it is true, I and those who take my view have only been *proved* right about the facts of the Stalinist terrors, against various Western critics. Still, perhaps even that should be taken into account in considering our inevitably less exact, but not therefore less serious, consideration of the figures, or range of figures, now under debate.

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