

Victims of Stalinism: A Comment

ROBERT CONQUEST

FOR ALL ITS IMPRESSIVE-LOOKING TABULATIONS, Wheatcroft's article¹, while making an occasional good point, is fundamentally flawed.

His claim to present the true, 'archival' totals for the victims of Stalinism is fallacious. He has simply accepted Kruglov's report, for no apparent reason, and incorporated the Shvernik report, at the same time using the Zemskov figures for Gulag. These are in any case incompatible.

We are all inclined to accept the Zemskov totals (even if not as complete) with their 14 million intake to Gulag 'camps' alone, to which must be added 4—5 million going to Gulag 'colonies', to say nothing of the 3.5 million already in, or sent to, 'labour settlements'. However taken, these are surely 'high' figures.

There are reservations to be made. For example, we now learn that the Gulag reported totals were of capacity rather than actual counts,² leading to an underestimate in 1946 of around 15%. Then as to the numbers 'freed': there is no reason to accept the category simply because the MVD so listed them, and, in fact, we are told of 1947 (when the anecdotal evidence is of almost no one released) that this category concealed deaths: 100000 in the first quarter of the year'

Yet whatever (he weaknesses of The Zemskov figures, they are nothing compared with the ones Wheatcroft relies on for his broader estimates: that is, the two reports by the KGB to the political authorities in the 1950s and 1960s.

As to the Kruglov report: the security ministry representative who first made it public, the then head of its Archival Administration, General Anatolii Krayushkin. introduced it with the comment that its figures were 'far too low'. What more needs to be said?

Then the Shvernik report:

- (a) The total for executions in 1939 and 1940 is given in this report as 4464. This would not cover those shot at Katyn alone, while the full total for executions in the Katyn-style operations over a couple of months in the spring of 1940 is 25 700. It might be feebly argued that Katyn was a special case. How many more special cases would there be? But anyhow, the 11 000 non-POWs out of the 25 700 were processed in the ordinary way through provincial troikas, no differently from the—equally ordered from above—scores of thousands shot in the provinces in the special operation of 1937.
- (b) The total of arrests given in the Shvernik report for 1937-38 is 1 372 392, of whom 681 692 are given as shot. The total entering Gulag camps in that period as given by Zemskov is 1 853 513.

(c) The 9.8 million given by Zemskov as entering Gulag camps in 1939-52 is not compatible with the 1.1 million figure of arrests, minus executions, the Shernik report gives for this period. An attempt, again feeble, to overcome this is to say that the report only covers those sentenced for 'political' offences, omitting those dealt with by 'ordinary' courts. This cannot stand up. Zemskov gives the proportions of 'counterrevolutionary' prisoners in Gulag camps over the period. Omitting 1950 (for which this proportion does not appear) the percentage of 'counterrevolutionaries' varies from 28.1 to 59.2%, with an average of 37.7%. In any case, many not sentenced as 'counterrevolutionaries' were 'repressed' by any ordinary standards: for example, to take an *actuel* case, General Lebed's father, a factory worker, was sentenced to five years in 1937 for twice being more than 10 minutes late at his job representative of many such offenders. I think we might also count as 'repressed' the 170-odd legless, blind and otherwise incapacitated men sentenced to camp on such charges as vagrancy in 1937, and shot on the same charges early in 1938.⁵

On the other side of the coin, Wheatcroft virtually ignores a very different set of numbers, which are less 'detailed' and less 'precise'. (In Soviet times numerical precision and detail were, to put it mildly, no guarantee whatever of accuracy, as with the hugely detailed, and thoroughly falsified, 1939 census with its 220 pages, 67 tables and thousands of exact figures for the tabulation-fetishist.)

Wheatcroft dismisses figures which do not fit his sources as based on a remark by Sergo Mikoyan, son of Anastas, the veteran Politburo member. This is an indefensible misrepresentation. Such figures have emerged not only from Mikoyan (through his son) but also from Khrushchev (through his then son-in-law, Shmelev), from the late Olga Shatunovskaya, a member of the party commission on rehabilitation, from the late Dmitrii Volkogonov, head of the state commission on rehabilitation, and from Colonel Grashoven, head of the security ministry's own rehabilitation team. Aleksandr Yakovlev, current head of the state commission on rehabilitation, has also given figures covering the whole Soviet period which support the 'high' estimates. And new research in the Ministry of Justice archives is giving similar results. All these (post-1935) give arrest figures in the 19-21.5 million range, and death figures of 7 million. Such figures, later than, and in principle going behind those thought suitable by, the old KGB, cannot be dismissed without any serious comment, especially when the alternatives offered are so untenable.

Similarly with the totals executed in 1937-38. A figure of circa 1.75 million is given by Volkogonov, and by General Karbainov of the security ministry. It is, of course, not impossible that the Shernik report, wrong or misleading on other matters, is right about the numbers formally 'executed', but (as has been pointed out many a time) did not count in those killed with less ceremony.

We cannot yet say that we have anything like perfect information, but we are at least in a better position to take a critical view than was possible earlier.

Those of us who made some effort to deduce numbers before *glasnost*, at a time when little direct evidence was available, naturally laid ourselves open to later correction—though even so our overestimates of certain data were not as unbalanced as underestimates made by revisionists (that Stalin killed 'thousands', some '32

thousand', in the 'low hundred thousands', etc.). The estimates I arrived at on Kolyma were indeed excessive, and as with other early estimates on the whole terror period, now that more is known they must indeed be subjected to major amendment. My approach 17 or 18 years ago, sound in principle, worked out poorly in practice— though it is not true that I took the highest estimate possible:⁶ a minor point, but if Wheatcroft cannot even quote a readily available book right it is a bad sign.

I think it should be said that in every other way my book remains a full and now fully verified account of the subject. Nor are Wheatcroft's new figures to be taken as 'final'. *Memorial* tells me that there are over 2 million names on the local police lists (and that many files have been destroyed, though 600 000 remain). And some of Wheatcroft's assumptions are in any case incorrect—for example, his figures for the free worker contingent there: for we are told that, in January 1953, over half of these were, though not technically zeks, undergoing other modes of penal exile.⁷ However, my main point remains his own conceptual error, not 20 or 30 years ago but now, on the system's casualties over the USSR as a whole.

His continued reluctance to accept that Stalin consciously inflicted the 1933 famine is another matter. But:

(a) He and two others attacked me last year for accepting figures given by the veteran Russian scholar V. P. Danilov for the amount of grain in state reserves at the beginning of 1933: but, as even they conceded, there were approximately 3 million tons there—far more than enough to have prevented the mass deaths that followed. (And it is accepted that Stalin knew of the famine at this date.)

(b) State control of the famine is long since established by the 21 January 1933 secret instruction from Stalin and Molotov to party, police and state officials to block the flight of peasants from Ukraine and Kuban in search of food, together with Yagoda's report on its fulfilment.

(c) And now we have what must surely be admitted as the smoking gun. The Russian scholar Ivnitsky⁸ cites a document from the Russian archives: in the summer of 1932 Molotov, just back from Ukraine, told the Politburo; 'we definitely face the spectre of famine, especially in the rich bread areas'. The Politburo nevertheless decided that 'Whatever the cost, the confirmed plan for grain requisition must be fulfilled'.

Hoover Institution

¹ Stephen Wheatcroft. 'The Scale and Nature of the German and Soviet Repression and Mass Killings, 1930-45', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 48, 8, December 1996, pp. 1319-1353.

² *Orechestvennye arklivny*, 1993, 2, p. 22.

³ D. Volkogonov, *Trotsky*. Vol. 2, p. 370.

⁴ *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 17 April 1993.

⁵ *Soprotivlenie v Gulage* (Moscow, 1992), pp. 114 ff.

⁶ See Robert Conquest, *Kolyma: the Arctic Death Camps*, pp. 224-227.

⁷ See *Istoricheskie aspekty severo-vostoka Ruskii* (Magadan, 1996), p. 45.

⁸ M. A. Ivnitsky. *Golod 1933* (Moscow, 1995). p. 59.