



Wheatcroft and Stalin's Victims: Comments

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WHEATCROFT'S LATEST ARTICLE in this journal on the number of Stalin's victims¹ reproduces some familiar statistics in an improved form but leaves one regretting that research into this difficult but essential question has not yet advanced far beyond the point reached in the early 1990s, when these figures first appeared in print. Perhaps that is as far as anyone can go until the FSB archives are freely available (not least the 8 million index cards they contain on Gulag inmates to 1940, if indeed these have still survived), but it would be wrong to give the impression that the data now published, which were compiled within or on the margins of the Soviet security establishment, are final or definite—'les vrais chiffres', as Werth incautiously called them.² On the contrary, they should be regarded as provisional pending further independent investigation.

To begin with nitpicking: Wheatcroft's Table A2.2 on p. 338 ('the Kruglov figures' of January 1954), column 4, heading should have made clear that it includes labour colonies (ITK), and the data for 1953 refer only to the first six months of that year; in the footnote, the term 'executions by agency' (the MVD and its forerunners?) is odd—are these just the VMN listed above or something else?—and it is not evident why only two recently published lists of victims, in Moscow and St Petersburg, should be singled out when more than a dozen such compilations have appeared in other parts of the country (see below). In Table A2.3 (p. 339) it should have been made plain that these data refer only to Gulag camps (ITL), excluding colonies; the series begins in 1930 but source references are provided only from 1932 on. Zemskov's 1991 article gave the number of inmates on 1 January 1946 as 746 871; the figure given here (600 897) occurs in his 1993 article written jointly with J. A. Getty and G. T. Rittersporn and so was presumably revised in the interim, but we are not told why. There is a very slight difference for 1944 in column 6 (64 110 vs. 64 119) and the number 'liberated' in 1937 needs an extra digit: 364 637 not 36 437—presumably a printer's error? Both the Zemskov articles cited give the figure for those present on 31 December 1942 as 983 974, which ties in neatly with that offered for the following day, rather than the 999 738 we are offered here. Finally, Zemskov took care to mention in his 1991 article that the Gulag statistics for 1942 and 1945 were incomplete, but this cautionary note has not been reproduced.

Rather more substantial is the hitherto mysterious question of the 'transfers' (A2.3, columns 5–6). Zemskov in 1991 was at fault for writing simply '*iz lagerei NKVD*'

and ‘*v lageri NKVD*’, presumably copying the original; Wheatcroft has helpfully added the word ‘other’ and calculated the net gain or loss under this head for each year (column 7). He explains that the document in question was a mechanical summation of returns from subordinate agencies and that the central authorities were wrong to leave these data in such a crude form. So far so good, but: is this also Zemskov’s view, and why are there such great variations between ‘transfers in’ and ‘transfers out’, especially in the post-war years, if the explanation is so simple? One reason may be that many incomers had been previously confined in facilities other than prisons, whether regular or ‘special’, such as the filtration camps for repatriates (although these were abolished in 1946). But the large discrepancies do make one wonder about the reliability of the data submitted by the subordinate agencies. So too do the figures for despatch to undefined ‘other’ destinations, although these at least were relatively small. Wheatcroft assures us (p. 324) that *fond* 9414 in GARF contains ‘thousands of files of Gulag accounting data which are now freely available for information’. Ideally one would like an analytical catalogue of this *fond* (and the others used by Zemskov and associates for their 1994 article). Failing that, it should not be too much trouble for a scholar with access to these records to tell us which the reporting agencies were—production administrations like GULGMP (minerals) or territorially based camp complexes; whether their data were verified or modified before being included in the final tabulation; whether all regions of the country were duly included (one such list omits Central Asia!); and just when, and for what purpose, this document was drawn up: what is its relationship, if any, to the ‘Kruglov figures’?

Getty and his colleagues were commendably frank in indicating some of the difficulties they had encountered in dealing with quantitative data emanating from ‘a bewildering variety of institutions’.³ They also suggested, in passing, that camp commandants may have reported excessively high or low figures. Wheatcroft dismisses this possibility (p. 324); so too did Zemskov:⁴ they would, he argued, have derived no advantage from doing either, and so ‘there is a satisfactory degree of reliability in accounting’ and—leaping a few hurdles here—we now have ‘the genuine statistics of political repressions’.

One does not need to presume malicious motives on the part of these officials, such as a desire to obtain more supplies, but simply to remember the context in which they worked, for this was conducive to negligent and arbitrary behaviour. The Gulag administration was, after all, a criminal body which treated convicts as *rabsila*, as human flotsam slated for physical destruction—in 1948 it was ruled that political should never be allowed to return from the NKVD’s ‘empire’—and so one can hardly expect accurate, conscientious reporting. These functionaries were not trained accountants, and at the lowest level the work was done by the so-called *pridurki* (criminal offenders who collaborated with the camp authorities). If statistics on output and the like were regularly falsified, why not those dealing with inmates? It is here that the evidence of sources dismissed by scholars with a social-science bent as ‘anecdotal’ acquires significance. As for the senior officials, they will have been tempted to fill in missing data by inserting the quotas laid down for the capacity of the various sub-units in the system. V. P. Popov, who in 1992 published the data reproduced by Wheatcroft in Table A2.2, has questioned Zemskov’s figures on these very grounds,

and suggested that the number of arrests for political offences in the late 1930s should be raised by 300 000.⁵

Conceivably the figures for Gulag mortality may refer only to deaths occurring from 'natural' causes and exclude executions for alleged insubordination or other random killings. Zemskov's 1991 figures exclude the hundreds of thousands of repatriates in the post-war 'special contingent', as he acknowledged,⁶ and it is not certain whether he included those members of deported ethnic groups who were siphoned off and sent to camps rather than settlements. It is suggestive that a memorandum (*spravka*) compiled at the end of 1953, during the preparation of the 'Kruglov report', included 282 926 individuals convicted of 'other especially dangerous state crimes' under other provisions of the Criminal Code than Article 58, e.g. banditry or espionage, and these were *excluded* from the total of 3 777 380 given in the report.⁷ Their exclusion was quite logical in the light of Kruglov's brief, but misleading from the standpoint of a student of the regime's human rights record. For all these reasons we need to be prudent when using these official sources which, far from being the last word on the subject, are probably about as reliable as the average mafioso's tax return.

Historians should not let themselves be mesmerised by statistics. This approach is of course legitimate, indeed essential, but it limits our vision and distracts attention from what should be the chief objective, to evaluate the Gulag phenomenon as a whole and set it in international context. We need to integrate the vast descriptive, literary and statistical material and to place the knowledge derived since 1987–88 from official records (in the provinces as well as the centre) in a perspective governed by humanistic values and respect for judicial norms, one from which moral considerations cannot be entirely excluded.⁸ Fortunately a number of post-Soviet writers, especially in provincial centres, are seeking to 'come to terms with the past' (pardon the cliché) in very difficult circumstances. 'White books' or 'books of memory' have appeared in such cities as Samara (edited by N. E. Popkov & V. N. Myasnikov, 5 volumes, 1997), Yaroslavl (volume 4 compiled by A. V. Konoplin & G. A. Zhozhova, 1997), Novgorod (volume 4 edited by L. P. Rychkov *et al.*, 1995), Orel (volume 3 edited by I. Ya. Mosyakin *et al.*, 1996) as well as in the Kuzbas, Urals, Far East and other regions. These literary endeavours deserve critical attention by Western scholars.

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

² N. Werth, 'Goulag: les vrais chiffres', *L'Histoire*, 1993, 169, pp. 38–51.

³ V. N. Zemskov, Arch Getty & Gabor Rittersporn, 'Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-war Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence', *American Historical Review*, October 1993, pp. 1017–1048, at p. 1045.

⁴ V. N. Zemskov, 'Polit. repressii v SSSR 1917–1990 gg.', in *Rossiya XXI* (Moscow, 1994), pp. 111–112.

⁵ See A. L. Litvin, 'Sovetskaya istoriografiya "Bol'shogo terrora"', in *U istochnika: sb. st. v chest' S. M. Kashtanova* (Moscow, 1997), part 2, p. 568.

⁶ V. N. Zemskov, 'Gulag: istoricheskko-sotsiologicheskii aspekt', *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, 1991, 7, p. 17.

⁷ Zemskov, 'Polit. repressii ...', p. 109.

⁸ See J. Keep, 'Recent Writing on Stalin's Gulag: An Overview', *Crime, History and Societies*, 2, 1, 1997, p. 108.