

HOW MANY VICTIMS IN THE 1930s?

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NUMEROUS estimates of the demographic consequences of collectivisation and of the Terror have been made in the West, and in the most recent years also in the Soviet Union. Estimates vary widely. This journal has published the dispute on this subject between Rosefielde and Wheatcroft. But all 'estimators' have suffered from gaps in published data, which clearly had as their purpose the concealment of the number of victims. The object of the present note is to draw attention to what appears to be the first attempt by a Soviet archivist to fill some of these gaps.

Before presenting an analysis of his results, let us make clear what it is that we are discussing. There are, firstly, *deaths*: deaths in the process of deportation, affecting principally peasants in the period 1930–33, deaths from hunger, mostly in 1933 (peasants again), and deaths from all causes in prison and Gulag. Secondly, there is the question of the *deficit in births* in the worst years. Thirdly, there is the issue of the *size of the camp (Gulag) population* at different dates; and also the *number of exiles and deportees*, such as *spetspereselentsy*. This last category covers a wide range of conditions of life and of victims. Thus our former colleague S. V. Utechin told that he and his family were in Karaganda as *spetspereselentsy*, under tolerable material circumstances (and Utechin himself was an *agitator* in the 1938 elections!). By contrast, some lived under appalling conditions; a (postwar) example was Ariadna Efron, daughter of the poet Tsvetaeva (see her correspondence with Pasternak, *Novyi mir*, 1988, no. 11). Many deported peasants died of hardship, others managed to get jobs on construction sites and in new factories. So there are important distinctions to be made when one speaks of 'deportees', who undoubtedly numbered many millions, and who share only the characteristics that they were neither in the care of Gulag, nor free citizens.

Finally, one must stress that the evidence to be cited below relates to the period that ends in January 1939. Many millions must be added if one were to try to estimate a total covering the whole period up to Stalin's death.

The April 1989 issue of *Voprosy istorii* contains a fascinating article by V. Tsaplin, who is the director of the central state economic archive. He begins by deploring the fact that many key documents and archives remain closed, and that this has led to the appearance in the Soviet press of extremely high estimates of the number of victims, estimates based on 'memoirs, doubtful sources and even inventions (*vymyslakh*)'. He had access, in his official capacity, to documents held by TsUNKhU (the statistical office) and Gosplan. These give a number of particulars relating to the census of 1937, which, as is known, was suppressed, its authors shot. He cites a letter sent to Stalin and Molotov in March 1937 by I.

Kraval, the head of TsUNKhU: the population at 6 January 1937 came to 162,003,225, or 156.9 million 'less military servicemen'. But the same source gives the number of servicemen at that date as 2 million, including camp guards. This leaves a gap of just over 3 million. Kraval's letter refers to a report from the NKVD that their 'special contingents', to be included in the census total, numbered 2,653,036, which can be taken as representing the minimum number in Gulag at that date. (Again I emphasise that this excludes deportees, who were presumably included in the total as if they were ordinary citizens.)

So between 1926 and 1937 the population had grown by 15 million. But from the registration of births and deaths it was expected that the increase would be 21.3 million. This gap was the subject of a letter from the deputy head of the department of demography and health, Kurman, dated 14 March 1937. He discusses the reasons. First among them he puts the flight from the USSR of Kazakhs, and also Turkmens and Tadzhiks, in the period 1930–33, which he estimates at 2 million. Secondly, the 1926 census included some double-counting. The remainder he assigns to 'under-recording of deaths in the previous decade'. Specifically referring to 1933, Kurman notes the following:

Special investigations on the spot showed that in the Ukraine, the Azov Black Sea, Saratov and Stalingrad kraia and the Kursk and Voronezh oblasts there were significant numbers of unregistered deaths. On the basis of available materials it may be said that in 1933 one million deaths were not recorded. According to the department of population the number of deaths in 1933 came to 5.7 million, and with the addition of those not recorded it was 6.7 million.

Kurman went on:

It may be estimated that of the total number of unrecorded deaths, at least 1.0–1.5 million relate to deaths whose registration was not included in the general citizens' records: *spetspereselentsy*, those imprisoned in concentration camps and others. These data must evidently be with the Gulag of the NKVD.

Note that this figure of 1.5 million relates to the whole period, not just to 1933. Tsaplin concludes that total unregistered deaths in 1927–36 numbered 3.8 million, some in the famine, some in detention.

He then attempts to put all these data together, noting that in the (normal) years 1927–31 the average number of deaths was 2.6 million. In the two years 1932 and 1933 *registered* deaths numbered 8 million. This suggests to him a minimum number of 2.8 million deaths from hunger that were *registered*. In the archives is a document on population in 1930–34, which points to 'exceptionally high death rates in 1933 in the Ukraine, Lower Volga, North Caucasus and the central black-earth-region—just in the Ukraine the number who died was 2.9 million, i.e. over half of all the deaths in the USSR, though the Ukraine's population was only a fifth of that of the USSR'. These figures are registered deaths. It seems (to me) to follow that, if say three quarters of the estimated million of unregistered deaths were in the Ukraine, then total deaths there in that year were of the order of 3.7 million; subtracting 'normal' deaths this gives a rough total of 3.1–3.2 million famine victims in that grim year 1933 for the Ukraine alone.

Tsaplin concludes, from the evidence of and around the 1937 census, that during this period (i.e., up to January 1937) 2 million fled from the USSR, 3.8 million starved, 1.5 million perished in 'places of detention' (this would include deported 'kulaks') and 'a further 1.3 million could be considered as dead from hunger and in places of detention'. Total population loss: 8.6 million up to January 1937.

It this possible? What arguments can be advanced for a higher figure? Note that Tsaplin's evidence suggests deaths from the famine of 4 million, perhaps even 5, depending on how one distributes his 'residual' of 1.3 million between the villages and 'places of detention'. Clearly the large majority of the victims up till then were peasants.

It is also plausible that some of the Kazakhs who were said to have fled had in fact died of hunger. The word 'hunger' is omitted (as Tsaplin notes) even from the archive materials, and so this could have been a way of avoiding telling the whole truth.

Some Western commentators based estimates of the number of victims on the high population estimates published at the time for the early 1930s, (In early editions of my *Economic History* I did this myself). As Tsaplin points out, it had been publicly claimed that on 1 January 1934 the population had reached 168 million, but this (he states) was a conscious lie: the unpublished figure was 160.5 million. The archives showed a population decline in 1933 by 'almost 1.6 million', while officially published statistics claimed an increase of 2.3 million. Lies were also published about the year 1932. Tsaplin concludes that TsUNKhU kept two sets of demographic books, 'one for the press and one for official use'. One can also work backwards from the apparently reliable 1937 census figure (those who organised the census paid with their lives for it!). The Kraval letter cited by Tsaplin estimates population growth in 1935–36 at 1.4–1.5% per annum, which suggests a population of no more than 159 million in 1934 (perhaps the million unrecorded deaths estimated for 1933 by Kurman explains the difference).

Needless to say, the low or negative growth in population in these hard years was also a consequence of a decline in the birth rate. On this the present source gives no information, probably because he has found none.

He then goes on to the 1939 census results. Accepting the 1937 census figure, he notes that the population increase in the year 1937 was reported as 3.4 million, a million more than in 1936 (which must have been a better birth year than 1935, for obvious reasons). Tsaplin finds this 1937 figure to be plausible, as do others: this was also the time when abortions were made illegal. A similar increase in 1938 would yield a total for January 1939 of 168.8 million, not the officially claimed 170.1 million. He noted that for January 1938 the published TsUNKhU and the unpublished population figures are almost identical (169 and 169.3 million); such figures are quite inconsistent both with the census of 1937 *and* that of 1939. (The population in January 1939 should then have been 172 million.) Tsaplin assumes, not unreasonably, that the 1938 TsUNKhU figures were falsified in both their published and unpublished versions. He also considers that the official 1939 figure of 170 million requires too large a rate of natural increase over 1937 to be credible. 168.8 is the more plausible maximum number.

To support this view, he cites comparative data of great importance, not (as far as I am aware) ever published before, which he also found in the archives: figures of the population less military and prisoners—146 million in 1926, 157 million in 1937, 161.5 million in 1939 (the document in question was drafted in February 1939, as a preliminary census report). He estimates the military to number 3 million in January 1939. Then, if the population was 168.8 million, this leaves 4.3 million to explain. He considers the number of prisoners to be at least 3 million. He noted in the archives that in the 1939 census there were 5.8 million persons *perepisannykh v osobom poryadke* ('registered by special procedure') which could be the sum of military and prisoners. He then speculates that there could have been 1.3 millions who died in detention and whose deaths had not been recorded, in which case the population was even lower than 168.8 (it would be 167.5 million). Alternatively we could add them to the number of prisoners, bringing this number above 4 million.

His conclusion: over the entire decade, 7.9 million died of hunger or in detention, and 2 million fled from Central Asia. Rounding these figures, we have 8 million dead and 2 million refugees, a total loss of 10 million up to January 1939. (Further heavy losses were, of course, to come.)

Is this plausible? It looks similar to my own figure of 10 million up to 1937 (*Economic History of the USSR*, revised edition, p. 170), but the similarity is only on the surface. I included those 'not born', and did not allow for the massive flight from Central Asia. Also my 1937 population figure was over a million above the total cited here. Of course higher estimates of victims are possible, but it becomes difficult to 'insert' them into the demographic data. It must be repeated that they exclude all categories of deportees unless they died before January 1939.

If a figure of 4 million (or slightly less) in Gulag in 1939 seems low, it is worth recalling two things. One is that a great many were shot in 1937 and 1938. This is confirmed by a recently published figure. Shot by order of troikas, special councils and special tribunals:

In 1936:	1,118
In 1937:	353,074

(Source: G. Kumanov, *Pravda*, 22 June 1989.)

Kumanov points out that others were shot by order of other bodies, so the total is incomplete, and there is no figure for 1938, which was also a bad year. (The mass graves discovered in Kuropaty relate also to 1939–40.)

The second point to recall is that there was a high death rate in camps, apart from the shootings. Suppose just as hypothesis, that 15% of prisoners died in any one year (in the worst years this was surely exceeded), and the number of detainees in Gulag remained on average at 4 million throughout the period 1937–53, i.e. for 16 years. This would mean 600,000 deaths in detention annually, and an equal number of new arrests to keep up numbers. Sixteen times 600,000 is 9.6 million dead in detention, surely a figure horrific enough not to require any exaggeration. If at Stalin's death there were still 4 million prisoners, this would imply that 13.6

million had been in Gulag in these years. A higher death rate would mean a still higher total. Thus if it were 17% this would yield close to 11 million deaths in Gulag in 16 years if the numbers detained in an average year were 4 million. If the Gulag population were assumed to be much higher than this—say over 10 million, as some assert—the statistical consequences would surely be beyond reasonable plausibility. Of course, in reality the numbers arrested, detained, killed, varied widely in different years. The point is that a low estimate of the number in detention in any one year is consistent with a very high Gulag *throughput*, if I may be excused an inappropriate term.

Finally, we now have data on the Soviet war losses. B. Sokolov, *Voprosy istorii*, 1988, No. 9, states that 30·6 million served in the armed forces during the war, 8·5 million were killed, 2·5 million died of wounds, 5·7 million became prisoners of war. These figures are, of course, vastly higher than those put forward by S. Rosefelde (*Soviet Studies*, XXXIX, no. 2 April 1987), p. 292) which were quite incredibly low—and he even assumed that the wartime birth-rate was normal! In the present context, it is essential to note that to serve in the war it was necessary not to have already died of hunger or in detention (though we know that large numbers of the *spetspereselentsy* and other deportees were mobilised, and some served with distinction).

We can agree with Tsaplin's conclusion:

We cannot consider these [his] data as final. It is necessary to undertake a deep analysis of all the demographic materials, the reconstruction of the 1937 census, its comparative analysis with those of 1926 and 1939. Only the full study of sources will permit us to calculate the total of those who suffered from the repression of the 1930s. This cannot be confined only to those who perished and those who left the USSR. Such a study will confirm or refute my contentions regarding the deliberate distortion of the results of the 1939 census . . . I have no doubt that the effort to distort the population data was due to the desire to conceal the scale of the mass destruction of people in the 1930s. The victims disappear from the statistics. They simply did not exist.

Given today's circumstances and Tsaplin's approach, it seems inconceivable that he would have sought to understate the total numbers who died. Yes, he says, there are still blank spaces to fill, there are important archives yet unopened, but he has significantly reduced the area of ignorance, or so it seems to me. Those who think differently should give their reasons.

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After this paper was sent to the press, there appeared in *Argumenty i fakty*, 1989 No. 45, some tables which give much lower figures for the camp population, figures apparently taken from the archives of the NKVD. The figures are very much lower than is generally supposed even by the most moderate commentators. Thus, even at the end of 1937 the total only comes to 996,000, and the figure for 1936 (821,000) is far below the one cited by Tsaplin from the 1937 census materials. Clearly more information is needed.