

On Sources: a Note

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IN 1990–91 A DISCUSSION TOOK PLACE in this journal between Wheatcroft and Conquest about the relative merits of ‘statistical’ and ‘literary’ sources for the study of Soviet history.¹ Of course Conquest was quite right in thinking that Soviet statistics were often very misleading.² Furthermore, as has long been known by Sovietologists, literary sources are of great value in giving a qualitative picture (within economics, the classic case was the use of literary evidence to analyse the situation in agriculture). The purpose of this note, however, is to show by example that the use of literary sources for quantitative estimates can be a serious source of error.

In his 1983 paper,³ Rosefielde used the figure of 156 million as the population of the USSR recorded in the 1937 census. He based this figure (the results of the census of 1937 being then unpublished) on the well known book of Antonov-Ovseenko, who in turn based it on what he had heard in the Gulag. On the basis of this figure, he suggested that there may have been 21 million excess deaths in 1929–39. This was a typical example of the utilisation of ‘literary’ material to make quantitative estimates.

We now know that the figure of 156 million was a serious underestimate of the actual population of the USSR in 1937. The population of the USSR according to the census of 1937 was 162 million. According to specialists of the demographic department of the former USSR Goskomstat scientific research institute there is reason to think that this is an underestimate and that the real figure was nearly 163 million.

It would be a mistake to suppose that the figure of 156 million was just an unreliable rumour⁴ and bore no relationship to reality. It is in fact a (downward) approximation of the data on the normally enumerated population. It excludes, however, the population registered by the NKVD (officials, guards, prisoners, deportees, frontier troops) and by the NKO (armed forces). This illustrates one of the pitfalls of literary evidence of quantitative matters—it is only when one has access to the statistics that one can know precisely what the literary evidence is evidence of. The relationship between the figures of 156 and 162 (or 163) million is set out in Table 1.

Hence it can be seen that one of the most important pieces of evidence given to support Rosefielde’s reconsideration of the demographic consequences of Soviet industrialisation was misinterpreted. When correctly interpreted in the light of accurate statistical data (not then available) it does not support Rosefielde’s arguments. Instead of throwing important new light on Soviet economic history,

TABLE 1

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ANTONOV-OVSEENKO ESTIMATE AND THE ACTUAL POPULATION OF THE USSR IN JANUARY 1937 (MILLIONS)

1. Total normally enumerated population (final data)	156.996
2. Enumerated by NKVD (officials, guards, prisoners and deportees)	2.660
3. Armed forces	1.687
4. Civilians enumerated by the NKO	0.427
5. Frontier troops enumerated by NKVD	0.269
6. Total census population (1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5)	162.039
7. Estimated population allowing for errors in census	162.739

Source: *Seriya 'Istoriya Statistiki'*, vypusk 3–5 (chast' 1), *Istoriya naseleniya SSSR 1920–1959 gg.* (Moscow, Goskomstat, mimeo, 1990), pp. 31–34.

the figure of 156 million simply shows the danger of relying on literary evidence provided by someone who 'misconstrued what he had been told'.⁵

Conclusion

Literary sources may be unreliable guides to quantitative aspects of Soviet history. This is illustrated by the use in literary sources of a (downward) approximation of the normally enumerated population as an estimate of the total population of the USSR in 1937 (which also included those enumerated by the NKVD and NKO and those not enumerated at all). Hence one of the major pieces of evidence for Rosefielde's reconsideration of the demographic consequences of Soviet industrialisation is worthless.

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¹ S. Wheatcroft, 'More light on the scale of repression and excess mortality in the Soviet Union in the 1930s', *Soviet Studies*, 42, 2 (April 1990); R. Conquest, 'Excess deaths and camp numbers: some comments', *Soviet Studies*, 43, 5 (1991).

² An example of how one can be misled by Soviet statistics is provided by my own 'Note on the number of 1933 famine victims', *Soviet Studies*, 43, 2 (1991). This gave rise to an interesting correspondence (in particular with S. Maksudov). As a result I have come to the conclusion that although the ADK data were a very useful contribution to the debate, I was too uncritical in analysing them. It now seems to me that these data pay too little attention to the fact that the excess deaths of the Kazakhs (about 1.3 million) took place in 1931–32 (not 1933). Furthermore, it is unclear if the increase in death rates which ADK calculate for 1929–32 takes adequate account of the deaths among the peasants deported from their homes in the dekulakisation and collectivisation drives. Hence the ADK estimates for the total population at 1 January 1933 are probably too high. In view of these factors I now consider:

- (a) it is a mistake to treat the famine as being just a matter of a few months in 1933 (as is done by ADK). The famine began in 1931 (in Kazakhstan) and there were still famine deaths in 1934. Hence it seems more accurate to refer to the 1931–34 famine. Nevertheless, as ADK correctly argued, most of the victims died in 1933—the peak in famine deaths being in March–August 1933;
- (b) the number of 1933 deaths is probably overestimated by the ADK data (because they have not taken sufficient account of the earlier deaths of Kazakhs and deported villagers and hence are using too high a population estimate for 1 January 1933). Their estimate of 1933 deaths probably includes some victims who died in 1931–32;
- (c) the total deaths in 1930–36 from collectivisation, dekulakisation and famine were

probably about 8 million, of whom the great majority were famine victims. The population deficit was higher. Conquest's estimate of 11 million excess peasant deaths in 1930–37 seems too high and has a very weak statistical basis.

E. A. Osokina, basing herself on the population registration data in the archives, has recently estimated that the number of 1933 famine deaths was about 3.3 million (E. A. Osokina, 'Zhertvy goloda 1933 goda: skol'ko ikh?', *Istoriya SSSR*, 5, 1991). Her analysis suffers from the same weakness as Wheatcroft's 1990 estimate. It is based on a source (the population registration statistics) which is known to be unreliable.

³ S. Rosefelde, 'Excess mortality in the Soviet Union: a reconsideration of the demographic consequences of forced industrialisation 1929–1949', *Soviet Studies*, 35, 3 (July 1983).

⁴ Anderson & Silver ('Demographic analysis and population catastrophes in the USSR', *Slavic Review*, 44, 3 (Fall 1985), p. 526) describe it as originating from 'the rumour mill'. They were, however, quite right to think that it was not the total population of the USSR in that year.

⁵ Rosefelde, p. 391, mentioned this as one possibility. Another area in which Rosefelde appears to have been misled by literary sources concerns his analysis of the number of inmates of the Gulag. The figures given by Rosefelde in 'An assessment of the sources and uses of Gulag forced labour, 1929–56', *Soviet Studies*, 33, 1 (January 1981), are much greater than the data presented, on the basis of archival materials, in V. N. Zemskov, 'Zaklyuchennyye, spetsposeleentsy, ssyl'noposeleentsy, ssyl'nye i vyslannyye', *Istoriya SSSR*, 5 (September–October 1991).