



Used by right to discredit left, used by left to discredit left

Many were the dead

There are still those who play down or make light of the slaughter that took place in the Soviet Union under Stalin. Indeed organisations such as the CPB's Young Communist League, George Galloway's Workers Party and the CPGB (Marxist-Leninist) boast of a recent growth of recruits. **Jack Conrad** looks at the Soviet Union as a mode of mortality

Each social formation, each mode of production has its associated family arrangements, laws, morality, accepted norms and common ideas. Each too exhibits its own particular pattern of mortality.

Original communism lasted at least 200,000 years due to material abundance and militant egalitarianism - our Garden of Eden. However, obstetric complications, childhood vulnerability, malaria parasites, dangerous animals and male rivalries contributed to high death rates. Through the invention of agriculture the Neolithic boosted human numbers many times over, yet, showing this was a counterrevolution, women's oppression, endemic warfare and mass epidemics followed. Crowd diseases such as smallpox, typhus and measles need "a human population that is sufficiently numerous, and sufficiently densely packed," if they are to sustain themselves - impossible with "small bands of hunter-gatherers".¹

The cultural marvels of classical antiquity were based on piracy, military victories and a murderous system of chattel slavery. Declining feudalism saw numerous popular revolts, noble families extinguished in dynastic wars and recurring plagues. The Black Death of 1346-52 is alone estimated to have wiped out at least a quarter of Europe's population. Rising capitalism promised to bring about Immanuel Kant's age of "perpetual peace". In reality there was the ruthless dispossession of peasants, decimating wars of colonial conquest, the African slave trade and a cannibalistic exploitation of wage labourers. Capitalism in decline is both civilised by the invading power of the organised working class and driven to the utmost extremes of barbarity: expanded suffrage, universal education and World War I; the welfare state, public works and the gas chambers; the social democratic settlement, antibiotics and the threat of a nuclear Armageddon.

What of bureaucratic socialism? It was possessed by a vaulting mission to modernise and advance: heavy industry, mechanised agriculture, mass literacy, health services, cutting-edge science, etc. Yet between 1929 and 1953 each five-year plan was conjoined with a huge loss of life. Calculating, even roughly, how huge inevitably has a technical - almost a dry - aspect to it. Census returns, archive documents, birth rates, death rates, etc. However - and this needs stressing - judging what statistics to include, what statistics to discount, what statistics to adjust, rests in no small part on political criteria, on moral values. So we are not dealing with brute facts.

Looking back from a disappointed old age, some claimed they had no idea of what was really going on. Eg, Eric Hobsbawm, the distinguished historian, Eurocommunist and royal Companion of Honour:

Of course, we did not, and could not, envisage the sheer scale of what was being imposed on the Soviet peoples under Stalin at the time when we identified ourselves with him and the Comintern, and were reluctant to believe the few who told us what they knew or suspected.²

So there were the "few" who knew or suspected something was badly amiss. Indeed, while in the 1930s there was a mountain of dross produced by the Friends of the Soviet Union, there were also more than a few who were quite capable of providing worthwhile insights. Eg, William Henry Chamberlin, Ante Ciliga, Will Durant, Malcolm Muggeridge, Victor Serge, etc.³ But the likes of Hobsbawm did not want to listen. I do, though, fully accept that Hobsbawm and co were completely unaware of the full magnitude of Stalin's terror. Incidentally, so too was just about everyone else in the west.

However, before Stalin's death in March 1953, there was more than a refusal to listen.

A succession of scurrilous 'official' CPGB pamphlets defended - even celebrated - the trials, mass arrests and executions: WG Shepherd *The Moscow trial* (1936); R Page Arnot *The socialist offensive* (1937); Marjorie Pollitt *Defeat of Trotskyism* (1937); R Page Arnot and Tim Buck *Fascist agents exposed in the Moscow trials* (1938); Bill Wainwright *Clear out Hitler's agents* (1942).⁴ Other 'official communist' parties echoed the absurdities. As did fellow travellers - not least a string of reformist intellectuals: eg, Louis Fischer, Walter Duranty, Anna Louise Strong, Bernard Shaw and HG Wells. There was even Joseph E Davies, US ambassador to Moscow from 1936-38. He insisted that the great show trials revealed an "exceedingly serious plot" hatched by the Soviet Union's deadly foes, internal and external.⁵ Doubtless, the growing Nazi menace provided the justification needed to put scruples aside.

Then came the 20th Congress. Nikita Khrushchev took a sledge hammer to the Stalin personality cult. He condemned Stalin for taking the "path of repression and physical annihilation, not only against actual enemies, but also against individuals who had not committed any crimes against the party and the Soviet government".⁶ True, Khrushchev fixed on the killing of thousands of loyal party cadre and army officers. Leon Trotsky, Gregory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, Nikolai Bukharin, etc, were notably missing from those whom he exonerated. Nevertheless, the wall of lies had been shattered and could never be repaired. The truth, at least in part, had been admitted by the post-Stalin Stalinites.

Despite that, there were those who inexcusably sought to pardon Stalin (and thus rescue their own tarnished reputations). Eg, the 'official' CPGB's vice-chair and leading thinker, R Palme Dutt (1896-1974). Against those shamefaced former devotees, who were rushing to disassociate themselves from the Stalin cult, Palme Dutt resorted to an 'ends justify the

means' defence of his old master:

That there should be spots on any sun would only startle an inveterate Mithra-worshipper. Not about the now recognised abuses of the security organs in a period of heroic ordeal and achievement of the Soviet Union. To imagine that a great revolution can develop without a million cross-currents, hardships, injustices and excesses would be a delusion fit only for ivory-tower dwellers in fairyland, who have still to learn that the thorny path of human advance moves forward, not only with unexampled heroism, but also with accompanying baseness, with tears and blood.⁷

Although often deviously, even after the 1991 fall, that apologetic line still had its adherents. In America Michael Parenti, Grover Furr and Joseph Hancock; in Russia Gennady Zyuganov, Eduard Limonov and Yuri Zhukov; in Britain George Galloway, Arthur Scargill, Robert Griffiths; etc.*

*George Galloway - author of *I'm not the only one* (2004) - mourns the "disappearance of the Soviet Union". The "biggest catastrophe of my life," he caterwauls. As for Griffiths, over a pint or three, ensconced in his favourite pub in the Cathays area of Cardiff, Griffiths would tell anyone who cared to listen about Stalin's inspiring mission, his great foresight in carrying out forced collectivisation and how the purges put paid to a fifth column of traitors, hirelings and spies" (See *Weekly Worker* October 30 2008). Arthur Scargill counts as another committed Stalin partisan. In his case alcohol and lack of sobriety has nothing to do with it. According to Scargill - speaking in 1997 at a rally organised by the pro-Stalin Committee to Celebrate the October Revolution - the "ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin" explain the "real world". Despite that, it is a "mistake to talk about the events" which led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Bizarre. And, going on to say far more about himself than his 'four great teachers', he claims that "if Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin" were alive today, they "wouldn't be talking about theoretical problems", but discussing what the "real struggle is about" (See www.socialist-labour-party.org.uk/upto_date_news_and_comment_can_b.htm).

SUPPLEMENT

That was despite a paradigm shift in what constitutes accepted historic fact, beginning, crucially with Khrushchev's speech, but, perhaps, more significantly, at least in terms of scholarship, the publication of Robert Conquest's *The great terror* (1968). His was the first comprehensive study of the terror. Besides a forensic reinvestigation of *causes célèbres* - the Kirov murder, the trials of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, etc - Conquest was concerned with the bigger picture. He was able to draw on the correspondence, books, manuscripts, periodicals, files and investigative studies coming from the highly fragmented Russian émigré 'community'. Exiled Mensheviks, anarchists, Ukrainian nationalists, Cadets, royalists and pan-Slavic rightwingers were all widely published in the west (and not only in Russian). There was also the little flurry of memoirs published in the Soviet Union during the so-called 1956-64 Khrushchev thaw.

In particular, though, Conquest sought to bring to light the appalling truths that could be revealed by probing seemingly innocuous official Soviet documents - crucially census returns. Inevitably, his point of departure here was the Soviet Union's 1926 (first full) census. There are problems with it. The situation, especially in the countryside, remained somewhat chaotic. Hence some western demographers consider the 1926 population count of 148 million to be an *underestimation*. Conquest put such complexities aside. He simply factored in the Soviet Union's expected 'natural' growth - a 'natural' growth rate which would give a population of around 178,600,000 in 1937.

In January 1934 Stalin told delegates to the CPSU's 17th Congress that the Soviet Union had a population exceeding 168 million. He also boasted of an annual increase of three million: a figure that put the Soviet Union at the top of European league table of population growth - a ranking that supposedly proved the "superiority of socialism over capitalism".⁸ The second five-year plan certainly assumed a population of 180.7 million for the beginning of 1938. As things turned out, the results were an acute embarrassment. The January 1937 census was hurriedly, violently, suppressed. Those who compiled it were either imprisoned, killed or disappeared. The NKVD had purportedly discovered a "serpent's nest of traitors". The man in charge of the census board, OA Kvitkin, a distinguished Sorbonne-educated statistician, was arrested on March 25 1937. The authorities explained that he had tried to diminish the Soviet Union's population numbers. In reality it was the Stalin regime that had done exactly that (and not by using pen and paper).

The Soviet Union was noticeably short of people. Of course, Conquest did not then have the full results of the 1937 census available to him. However, in post-Stalin demographic publications, the 1937 figures were referred to on a number of occasions - the most specific giving a population of 163,772,000, others a rounded-up 164 million. Either way, a shortfall of around 15 million (note, this includes the unborn).

Conquest discusses the possibility that fertility rates crashed because of the turmoil caused by collectivisation. Doubtless that happened. But, following socially disruptive events, such as war, plague or famine, the number of births tends to shoot upwards 'in compensation' (presumably towards that end the Soviet Union banned abortion in 1936). Anyway, Conquest comes to a firm conclusion. The main factor behind the population shortfall was the terror system presided over by Stalin.

Since Conquest first published in 1968, the 1937 census, and some other closely related documents, were released by the post-Soviet authorities in Moscow. Far from the USSR having around 164 million people, the census gives a total of just over 162 million. The preliminary figure that the census board produced was 156 million. But that did not include the military, prisoners and journeying individuals. The number of prisoners was given as 2,653,035 and the military, including the NKVD, an estimated two million. By adding a few other categories the census board managed



Many went into the Gulag system, many did not come out

to top up the numbers.⁹ That certainly confirms Conquest's claim that there was a big population shortfall, though nearer to 16 or 17 million (again, note that includes the unborn).

We also discover the dilemma faced by census officials. Thus we read IA Kraval, head of Gosplan's central administration for economic accounting. He worriedly reports, in a letter to Stalin and Molotov, on the results of the 1937 census: "The overall population, according to the census of January 6 1937, was 162,003,225." Krevel knows that this will displease the beloved *vozhd*. Desperately he tries to shift the blame. The gap between the anticipated population figure and the "actual one" established by the census is put down to flawed previous estimates.¹⁰ Kraval dares not mention the word 'famine'.

Not surprisingly, the 1937 census shows a statistically significant disparity between the number of men and women. Within the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic there were 48,726,033 men and 55,241,891 women. A gender gap which could only be partially accounted for by - mainly male - deaths on the battlefields of World War I and the 1918-20 civil war.¹¹ The compilers of the 1939 census desperately pumped up the numbers (suspected then, thought highly likely in 1968, proven beyond doubt after 1991). A population of 170,467,186 was claimed. Maybe the statisticians and officials concerned were motivated by an entirely selfish desire to save themselves, their families and their friends from the attentions of NKVD goons. That aside, their figures too show a sizeable population deficit, although not as large as the one that actually seems to have existed.

Despite the fog of falsification, the real situation could not be hidden. Using Russian sources, émigré accounts, statistical projections and the occasional well-educated guess, Conquest details the causes - a politically triggered famine, executions, mass deportations, neglect of gulag prisoners, etc. He thereby helped shift the focus of Soviet studies away from the undoubtedly terrible injustices inflicted upon prominent individuals - the subject of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at noon* (1940); even the suffering and heroic resistance in the camps put up by rank-and-file Trotskyites, Zinovievites, Democratic Centralists, Mensheviks, anarchists, etc - as graphically reported by Ante Ciliga in *The Russian enigma* (1938).¹² Conquest shows how terror became a system. Others, such as the exiled Mensheviks, David Dallin and Boris Nicolaevsky, in *Forced labour in Soviet Russia* (1948), undoubtedly paved the way. They showed the existence of mass slavery under Stalin. However, Conquest proved that Stalin was responsible for mass murder.

Naturally, cold war warriors everywhere were cock-a-hoop. Although over a rather longer period, Stalin's regime equalled, or even surpassed, Hitler's *Reich* in terms of total *internal* deaths (within their empire the Nazis killed around 14 million - including, of course, between four and eight million Jews). Further boosting his

reputation on the right, Conquest excoriated leftwing luminaries, such as Beatrice and Sidney Webb, George Bernard Shaw, Jean-Paul Sartre, Harold Laski and DN Pritt. He accused them of being Stalin's useful idiots because of writings, statements and comments excusing or justifying various aspects of the purges. But, of course, that is exactly what they were.

1. Conquest

At this point it is worth providing a thumbnail sketch of Robert Conquest. Undoubtedly, a conflicted personality, he came from an impeccable bourgeois background. Conquest's father was a successful US-born businessman. As a boy he attended Winchester (self-credited as Britain's most academic public school). Contemporaries talk of his smartness and self-confidence, even his arrogance. And yet, in 1937, after studying in France, Conquest joined the Oxford University branch of the CPGB. Spain, anti-fascism and an admiration of the Soviet Union were motivations - that and healthy youthful rebelliousness. So privilege and talent combined with fellow feeling and a desire to serve a great cause.

Sadly, by that time, 'official communism' had been turned into a machine for the miseducation of such budding revolutionary intellectuals. Hence the Marxism Conquest learnt was in part a worthwhile introduction to the classics of Marx, Engels and Lenin, in part a jaundiced rendition of historic events, in part mushy popular frontism and in part crude justification for the latest zig or zag of Soviet foreign policy.

Conquest describes his politics at the time as those of a "left deviationist". He says his best friend was a Trotskyite. Given this, Conquest's newly acquired world outlook was always prone to hit the rocks. It soon did. He resigned from the CPGB after asking what the party's attitude would be if Neville Chamberlain's government decided to fight Nazi Germany. He received the curt reply: "Comrade, it is impossible that the bourgeois Chamberlain would ever declare war on Hitler." This he found "oafish" ("I didn't like the word 'impossible'").¹³

Typical of members of the League of Abandoned Hope - Koestler and Ciliga included - Conquest would not only suffer bitter disillusion: he rapidly moved from left to right (nonetheless, till the late 1970s he called himself a "Labour man"). By the end of World War II Conquest was already a trusted member of the British diplomatic service - in all probability a Secret Intelligence Service (ie, MI6) agent. Assigned to the foreign office's Information Research Department, his 'official communist' training proved invaluable. The blandly named IRD was specifically designed to counter communist influence in the labour movement.

In 1956 Conquest embarked on a career as a freelance writer. Quite clearly though, he not only maintained, but further developed, his relationship with the securityocracy. In effect he became an MI6 asset, serving as a public mouthpiece of right social democratic anti-communism. On a personal

level, this brought establishment accolades and rich material rewards.

Amongst Conquest's first books were those distributed through Praeger Press - a US-based company, which acted under the guidance of the CIA.¹⁴ Eg, *Power and politics in the USSR* and *Soviet deportation of nationalities*. Other early books included *Soviet nationalities policy in practice*, *Industrial workers in the USSR*, *Justice and the legal system in the USSR* and *Agricultural workers in the USSR*. However, only the bone-headed would dismiss this body of work as just lying, cold war propaganda. There is an unmistakable agenda, naturally. Yet there is valuable information too: facts and figures, citations from the Soviet press, case studies, etc.

That said, *The great terror* is his most valuable achievement. Doubtless, there are shortcomings. Conquest did not - could not - locate the Soviet Union in historical terms. Nor are underlying laws of motion sought out, let alone discovered and revealed. His method is empirical. Nonetheless, *The great terror* is essentially an honest work of scholarship.

Eg, almost in spite of himself, Conquest admits that there was a qualitative break between the emergency measures - justifiable and unjustifiable - ordered by Lenin, Trotsky and other communist leaders during the 1918-20 civil war and the post-1929 terror system of Stalin.

As a best estimate, Conquest concludes that around one million were executed in the 1936-38 period alone and that from 1936 to 1950 some 12 million died in, or due to the effects of, the gulag system - probably a considerable overestimate. At any rate, in total, Conquest reckons that the Soviet Union lost some 20 million citizens because of the *political decisions* and *actions* of the regime under Stalin. Quite rightly, this tally includes forced collectivisation and its ghastly consequences. Conquest considers that some seven million died - through being killed, imprisoned or subjected to internal exile, but above all because of subsequent starvation and disease.

Later, it should be noted, after more information became available, Conquest modified his estimated death toll - downwards. Introducing the 40th anniversary edition of *The great terror*, he attributed some 12-15 million deaths to the Stalin regime.¹⁵ Incidentally, showing that the archives do not provide researchers with neatly rounded figures, we have *The black book of communism* (1999), edited by Stephanie Courtois.¹⁶ It gives a 20-million-total death toll (albeit for the entire period between 1917 and 1991). Part one, consisting of 15 chapters (one quarter of the entire book), is written by Nicolas Werth, a member of the Paris Institute for Contemporary History. Along with many post-1991 authors, he too, like Conquest, boasts of accessing "the newly opened archives".

For my part, I have experienced no particular agonies in accepting Conquest's broad estimate of the deaths which ought to be attributed to the Stalin regime - due to either homicidal intent, bureaucratic bungling or depraved indifference. However, arriving at an exact figure is - at least in my opinion - completely illusory. Eg, in his memoirs, after recalling the harrowing experiences of mass starvation, including cannibalism, in Ukraine during the early 1930s famine, Khrushchev writes: "Perhaps we'll never know how many perished directly as a result of collectivisation, or indirectly."¹⁷ This is surely right. The records simply do not exist. No, not even in the famed archives.

2. Life wasted

When it comes to specific categories, researchers can calculate with some considerable accuracy. Eg, the Moscow archives show that 353,074 people were executed after being deemed guilty of a political crime in 1937. The figure for 1938 was 328,612.* But there were summary executions too - the mass grave of Polish officers at Katyn, discovered

* Figures which seem to give a strange sort of comfort to CPB general secretary Robert Griffiths. A "shocking and unforgivable figure," sighs Griffiths, "but it is not the tens of millions claimed by anti-Soviet propagandists down the decades" (*Morning Star* October 3 2005).

by invading Nazi forces, became a long-running international scandal.¹⁸ There were countless Katyns scattered throughout the country. Few of them neatly recorded in GARF files. However, far, far more died, because the system simply did not value human life. The Stalin regime fetishised targets. Raw materials, labour time ... and human life itself was wasted on a vast scale.

Those forced to labour in the gulag suffered beatings, malnutrition, overwork and disease. Perhaps a million died this way. There was no provision of adequate healthcare and no-one bothered to count how many of these poor souls died shortly after being given their freedom - prisoners were often released if diagnosed with some terminal illness. The seven million deaths attributed to forced collectivisation and the subsequent famine has already been mentioned. To that tally must be added the deaths directly and indirectly caused by the deportation of suspect nationalities. Sometimes such measures were carried out in relative good order. Eg, the 1937 removal of 200,000 Koreans seems to have been done more or less voluntarily and saw the civilised resettlement of the population: schools, local self-administration, social institutions, printing houses, papers, etc, were all maintained. Bizarrely, there was a fear that the Koreans would sympathise with imperial Japan. In fact, they fled to the Soviet Union precisely to escape Japanese oppression.

However, increasingly, deportation amounted to near genocidal extermination. In 1944 the entire Chechen and Ingush populations were rounded up in a single "mass operation" - 100,000 thousand NKVD troops and 180 railway locomotives were involved. Anyone who dared resist was to be shot without compunction. The old, ill and infirm were simply dispatched where they were found. Some 600,000 were force-marched to railheads and transported in freight trucks and then, after a hellish journey, dumped in the Siberian and Kazakh wilderness. Within five years, between 123,000 and 200,000 of them were dead. The Balkar, Kalmyk and Karachai peoples perished on a similar scale. Total fatalities due to mass deportations are put at some 1-1.5 million.¹⁹

To the litany of wasted human life must be added what Engels calls "social murder".²⁰ When a system - that is, its ruling elite - acts in a manner that is so irresponsible, so reckless that it is bound to cause widespread death, there can be no other description. Robbing workers of the organisational means to defend their vital interests; turning a blind eye to basic health and safety provisions; triggering an avoidable famine; doing nothing to provide relief; driving prisoners to an early grave through overwork - all of that is murder, even if the coroners' certificate reads 'natural causes'. After all, to die because of a callous politburo decree is just as real as to die by an NKVD executioner's bullet.

On paper the Soviet Union had exceedingly good health and safety regulations. However, in practice, things were altogether different. Studies of occupational diseases were under-resourced, were discouraged, or even denounced. Meanwhile, occupational medicine, as a speciality, found itself largely "ignored". Not surprisingly, therefore, the "number of occupational diseases" went hugely "under-reported".²¹ Suffice to say, workplaces were hazardous, unhygienic and chaotic places; exposure to toxic fumes, deafening noise and dangerous chemicals was a commonplace occurrence.

Without doubt, fatal industrial accidents ran at an exceedingly high level. Michael Ellman provides trade union - ie, official, and therefore played down - figures from 1944 to 1956 and from 1980 to 1990 which show, at a rough estimate, around 10,000 deaths annually.²² If anywhere near right, that equals some 200,000 for the 1928-53 period. To that mounting total we should add those who died prematurely due to injuries suffered at work and occupational diseases: eg, cancer, miner's lung, blood poisoning, etc. Once again, exact figures are impossible to come by.

The housing conditions forced upon the mass of the urban population also

amounted to social murder. Doubtless, initially circumstances markedly improved in comparison with tsarist times. The seizure of aristocratic palaces and bourgeois mansions ensured that. Because of the October Revolution a kind of 'black redistribution' took place with the housing stock. However, in the 1930s and 40s urban living spaces became diminutive to the point of suffocation. Industrialisation was not accompanied by a matching house-building programme. Whole families were forced to share a single room - sometimes two or three families would do so. Repairs typically went undone. There were other priorities. Accommodation, taken as a whole, therefore became increasingly leaky, damp, cold, airless and insanitary. But this was luxury, compared with Magnitogorsk and other such gigantic construction projects: workers had to make do with wooden barracks, makeshift huts, tents and dug outs - even in -40°C winters.²³ And, because half-decent houses and blocks of flats often belonged to enterprises, workers could be evicted if they quit their jobs: purportedly only in "exceptional cases was this regulation not applied".²⁴ Hence, countless workers were to be found taking their shift in overcrowded attics, stairwells and filthy cellars. Unsurprisingly, baths, running water and plumbing were exceedingly rare. Disease was all too common.

Then there are Soviet military tactics - rash, wasteful and before the court of history, indictable. Soldiers were treated as 'meat for the cannon' (the Russian equivalent of 'cannon fodder'). Some 150,000 died on the Soviet side in the 1939-40 Winter War (compared with 25,000 Finns). Leave aside Stalin's monumental miscalculation in trusting Hitler to abide by the terms of the Nazi-Soviet pact and the terrible slaughter that came with the initial stages of Operation Barbarossa. Estimates for the whole of World War II put the number of Soviet soldiers who died at around 8.7 million. Many - far too many - Soviet soldiers were needlessly sacrificed. Deploying them as "human waves" was almost a matter of routine.²⁵ The result could only but be massive fatalities. Then there is the suffering inflicted upon German and Japanese POWs. Instead of attempting to turn them, as the Germans did with their Soviet prisoners, they were used and misused as slave labourers. Out of three million Wehrmacht prisoners, 381,061 officially died in NKVD camps (others put the figure at around a million).²⁶

Even when in good supply, food quality remained notoriously poor and queues endemic. Bread and potatoes dominated the diet²⁷ - hardly balanced or healthy. Life expectancy had to be shortened. Meanwhile, air quality became increasingly problematic in towns and cities. Coal-powered generating stations, chemical plants, paper mills and steel complexes belched out sulphur dioxide, lead, chlorine, mercury and carbon monoxide: the recycling of raw materials was ignored, pollution control devices were primitive, and often went unused because they "impeded productivity".²⁸ Liver, eye and lung disease correspondingly grew. Water pollution certainly contributed to ill health and premature death.

The nuclear programme too shows just how criminally irresponsible the regime was. In 1949 Stalin gave the go-ahead for atmospheric nuclear tests in Kazakhstan. That meant tons of wind-borne radioactive dust billowing up into the air and polluting the surrounding area for hundreds of miles: more often than not the local population was not issued with warnings of an impending explosion. Nor were the dangers of radiation explained to them. Inevitably an epidemic of spontaneous abortions, deformed babies, cancers, etc, followed.²⁹ Meanwhile nuclear waste was dumped in lakes and rivers. To this day standing on the banks of Lake Karachay for just an hour is enough to get a "lethal dose of radiation".³⁰

Doubtless the inability to deal with such basic problems helps explain why the authorities ceased publishing statistics for life expectancy in 1972, infant mortality rates in 1974 and age-specific death rates in 1976.³¹

3. Maximisers and minimisers

On the right there are those whom I shall call the maximisers. They exaggerate, misdirect and muddle in order to discredit the left. On the left there are the minimisers. They downplay, excuse, blame others and thereby also discredit the left.

Let us begin with the maximisers. Dishonestly, they blame the October Revolution for most, if not all, the unnatural deaths that occurred between 1917 and 1991. That includes, believe it or not, the 1918-20 civil war launched by the white armies of Denikin, Kolchak and Yudenich, which in addition saw the intervention of troops from Britain, US, France, Serbia, Romania, etc, along with a large-scale Polish invasion from the west and a similarly large-scale Japanese invasion from the east. Without the logistical supplies, training, finance and diplomatic support provided by the Anglo-French alliance the whites would have been quickly trounced. Instead a protracted struggle ensued.

Grotesquely, the maximisers blame the October revolution for the deaths caused by the 1921-22 post-civil war famine and typhus epidemic too. In fact, both the 1921-22 famine and typhus epidemic can be used to illustrate the stark contrast between the Lenin and Stalin regimes. At great cost the communists won the civil war. Some three million died. Cities were drained of people. Economically Soviet Russia lay in ruins. The countryside - in particular Ukraine - was ravaged. A sudden drought triggered catastrophic crop failures, widespread hunger and a rocketing curve of death. At least 20 million people were affected by the famine. All were given the widest publicity. Lenin issued an international appeal for proletarian aid. Simultaneously, the utmost effort went into ensuring a good harvest for the next year. Decrees were issued cancelling tax demands on peasants, together with the evacuation of 100,000 inhabitants from the most hard-pressed areas. Valued treasures were sold on the international art market to raise funds.

President Herbert Hoover agreed to sponsor the American Relief Administration - that at the prompting of Maxim Gorky and an all-Russian cross-class aid committee (it contained former Cadet members of the Provisional government). Those close to the Hoover administration hoped to use ARA to gather together top people, who could "develop into a representative government in Russia". So famine relief went together with counterrevolutionary machinations. Nonetheless, ARA was given a free hand to oversee the distribution of substantial food deliveries. Alone the US had the necessary surpluses. At the time, the country was dubbed the "food dictator of the world".³²

True to form, the *Daily Express* insisted that reports about the scale of the famine were a blatant exaggeration - almost a hoax, designed to extract tribute from the gullible. Needless to say, the famine was all too real. EH Carr, moreover, makes the worthwhile point: "estimates of those who perished are unreliable, more especially since hunger is more often indirect than a direct cause of death".³³ Nonetheless, a five million figure is widely quoted and seems uncontroversial.

By way of contrast, in the early 1930s Stalin and his minions guiltily hid the famine in the Soviet Union's black earth belt. As already noted above, Conquest reckons that some seven million died because of Stalin's collectivisation drive and his subsequent refusal to order emergency food and medical deliveries to starving areas.³⁴ Simultaneously, though, grain was exported abroad in order to secure the hard currency required for purchasing German and American industrial equipment and technical know-how. Stalin was determined to "catch up" with the west, and in the shortest time possible. Now it was the anti-communist press that carried reports exposing the full extent of the famine. All indignantly denied in *Pravda* and *Izvestia*.

By discounting such glaring differences, by refusing to address real history, by

employing statistical smoke and mirrors, the maximisers produce bloated claims of 40, 50, 60 ... even 80 million deaths.³⁵ Not untypical is the total produced by Rudy Rummel, a US academic, number-cruncher and advocate of universalising "liberal democracy". Rummel breezily informs us that 61,911,000 were "murdered by the Soviet Union" between 1917 and 1987.³⁶ A figure both so large and so precise that it can only but be absurd.

If Rummel had said "killed in" instead of "murdered by" he might have had a point. But his 'murder' count allots 50% of the fatalities that occurred in the wars, famines and epidemics of 1918-22 to the Soviet Union, along with the deaths inflicted upon Germany by Soviet Army during World War II (without the latter his *internal* estimate for those "murdered by the Soviet Union" falls to a mere 55 million).³⁷ Rummel's agenda is perfectly clear:

- (1) Inflate - include anything and everything that can be used to produce the biggest possible figure - the aim is to shock.
- (2) Blame Marxism, the October revolution, Lenin, Trotsky, etc, for the Stalinite terror.
- (3) Gloss over the white terror, the imperialist-sponsored civil war and the subsequent strategy of siege warfare.
- (4) Discount Stalin's counterrevolution within the revolution. In short, equate Stalinism with socialism and exonerate capitalism.

Flatteringly, 20th century Anglo-Saxon capitalism is referred to as "liberal democracy", thereby creating a categorical distinction between it and other capitalisms. Naturally, "liberal democracy" escapes any blame for World War I and World War II. According to the 'democratic peace theory', promoted by Rummel and others, liberal democracies hardly, if ever, engage in armed conflict with each other and, when they do fight wars, fewer people tend to get killed.³⁸

Let us now turn to the minimisers. Even post-1991, it was all too easy to find unreconstructed Stalinites. Besides prominent and not so prominent individuals, there still exists an abundance of Marxist-Leninist, Maoist and Enverist groups, sects and so-called parties.³⁹ Ultra-Stalinites, needless to say, maintain that there is nothing questionable about Stalin's forced collectivisation, the great show trials, the gulag system, the deportation of entire nationalities, etc. *Morally, this is a leftwing mirror image of rightwing holocaust deniers, such as David Irving, Arthur Butz and Nick Griffin.⁴⁰ Not that we should favour laws against such people. Free expression provides the best conditions for arriving at the truth.

That said, the more sophisticated Stalinites achieve their objective of excusing Stalin by the simple device of concentrating on the maximisers - their sources, inconsistencies, exaggerations and paymasters. Easy, but, at the end of the day, facile and thoroughly unconvincing. Representative of this sorry method is the three-part article, 'The new wave of anti-communism' by Kenny Coyle.⁴¹ Coyle once counted as a prominent member of the *Morning Star's* CPB - its international secretary, no less⁴² - until, that is, he found a lucrative living in China. **

*In Britain, perhaps the most notable post-1991 ultra-Stalinite was Harpal Brar. Once a member of the SLP's executive committee, he became chair of the CPGB (Marxist-Leninist). Brar also fronted the unashamedly named Stalin Society. His publication, *Lalkar*, savaged Robert Griffiths for being a lily-livered liberal, because he accepted that Stalin was responsible for any crimes at all. As to Griffiths' admission of 700,000 deaths, this is just anti-Stalin propaganda, snorts *Lalkar*. Only 100,000 people were sentenced to death, it maintains. However, many of them "had committed violent crimes, such as murder and rape. Even then, sentences were often commuted to various terms in the gulag." On the basis of this type of reasoning, Stalin's penal system is compared favourably with the situation in the "US today" (*Lalkar* January 2006).

**The *Morning Star's* CPB shifted from collectively prostituting itself to the Soviet Union to collectively prostituting itself to the People's Republic of China. Thus, in the run-up to the August 2008 Beijing Olympics, the CPB formed itself into a propaganda agency for the Chinese regime's 'enlightened' rule of Tibet. Coyle acted as the pimp. Five of his wretched *Morning Star* articles (plus two editorials) were reproduced as a CPB pamphlet: *Tibet: colony or part of China?* Yet despite the new Chinese paymaster, there remains an undying attachment to bureaucratic socialism, written in Cyrillic letters.

SUPPLEMENT

Coyle brandishes Rummel and co, and their use of rightwing Ukrainian nationalists, cold-war warriors, Nazi-era sources. All he needs to do is to list them off. He appears to believe that, having done that, his case is proven. Amongst his fellow 'official communists' such an approach amounts to conclusive evidence - good enough, at least, for the gullible amongst them (ie, most of them). Anyone who accuses bureaucratic socialism of being responsible for deaths on a Hitlerite scale, can, therefore, without difficulty, be categorically dismissed.

Knowing that he must do more, however, Coyle serves up one trite excuse after another. The peasants themselves were partially responsible for the famine, because they slaughtered livestock and destroyed "food stores and seed". Local officials were "overenthusiastic" in handling collectivisation. There were "active members" of fascist organisations in Ukraine. Chechen separatists "attempted to secure Nazi support". Etc, etc. Many of Stalin's prisoners were "common criminals" and would have been jailed in the US or Britain.⁴³ Again, etc, etc. All done with a certain cleverness in terms of 'official communist' apologetics (but not that clever).

After all, why did the peasants gorge themselves rather than see their property collectivised? Clearly the abolition of private holdings was neither voluntary nor properly planned. Why were local officials so brutal and so determined to enforce 100% collectivisation? Were they not under binding orders issued from above? How come people in Ukraine hated the Stalin regime so much that so many of them welcomed the invading Nazis? Presumably some wanted to ally an independent Ukraine with Nazi Germany: the case with Stepan Bandera.⁴⁴ Certainly, though, most of those who greeted German troops as liberators burnt with indignation against forced collectivisation and presumably that fanned already existing anti-Russian and anti-Jewish sentiments. Were the Chechen separatists fundamentally different from Indian, Egyptian and Irish nationalists, who looked to Germany as a potential ally against their imperial oppressor? Are not "common criminals" mostly social victims and is law not a means of class and racial oppression? Around 40% of the two million "common criminals" incarcerated in US jails are black and, of course, black people are five times more likely to be imprisoned than white people.⁴⁵ The likes of Coyle cannot even ask such rudimentary questions. It is easy to appreciate why. Such feeble excuses for Stalin and bureaucratic socialism show the true moral worth of the minimisers.

Totally giving the game away, Coyle actually cites Stalin's well known, and utterly cynical, March 1930 *Pravda* article, 'Dizzy with success'. Amazingly, the poor fellow takes the article at face value, as a sincere 'calm down' message to overexcited officials, rather than a crude attempt to blame subordinates for the "seamy side" of collectivisation.⁴⁶ No better is the attempt to narrow down what constitutes the death toll. Many, including Coyle, want to count only *intentional* or *sanctioned* state killings. Proven death warrants ordered under article 58 of the penal code - counterrevolutionary crimes - are required. Even the personal signature of Stalin himself. Obviously, this approach deliberately excludes a whole raft of other categories.

Hence we are seriously told that it is "totally absurd and naive nowadays (after the opening of Soviet archives) to rely on" Conquest. His "facts" are, supposedly, "far from based on scientific research". True, it is casually admitted that there is a "debate as to whether we should add famine victims" - as Conquest did. But the minimisers typically brush this aside and plump for a total death toll of 2-2.5 million. Yet, if we include the collectivisation famine, that already amounts to a 9-9.5 million total. However, there is, as always, the determination to push things further down. It is admitted that at least a million perished in the gulag, but, well, it is callously said, people in prison die "every day". Hence, while the Stalin-period

bureaucracy can be blamed for "enlarging the gulag system" from 1929 onwards, that is "not to claim that the bureaucracy was to blame for every single death that occurred anywhere in the Soviet Union during those years".⁴⁷

This is a formulation that combines stupidity with the most depraved apologetics. No-one could possibly blame Stalin and bureaucratic socialism for every death that occurred between 1929 and 1953. Inane. It is, after all, as natural to die as it is to be born. But it is obvious that the gulag system cannot be compared with even a 'normal' prison regime (almost without exception cruel, degrading and inhuman). The gulag did not contain extermination camps on the pattern of Auschwitz-Birkenau, etc. Nonetheless, the gulag exterminated. People sent to the Arctic camps were to all intents and purposes handed a death sentence. They were killed off slowly by the freezing cold, overwork, dreadful diet, absence of adequate medical care, lack of suitable protective clothing - leave aside the beatings and general abuse. Few survived.

The minimisers nowadays like to base themselves on the 'discoveries' of the revisionist school within academic Soviet studies: ie, those who downplay the crimes of Stalinism, usually by insisting on the archives as a unique source of reliable information, etc.* Yet the fact of the matter is that, though the totals given in that revisionist bible, *Stalinist terror: new perspectives* (1993), are lower than Conquest, the totals are still horrendous. Stephen G Wheatcroft writes of an "excess mortality rate" of between four and five million, Alec Nove a slightly lesser three to four million. Meanwhile, J Arch Getty comes up with a rough and ready three million.⁴⁸ Once again, the collectivisation famine is put aside.

Just because many of these death toll figures are based on "new methods" and the "newly opened archives" are they more accurate than Conquest's estimate? Well, despite modern myths to the contrary, the archives are not, in fact, open. The secret police have not even released a full list of the files. No-one outside the Federal Security Service - the inheritor organisation of the OGPU, NKVD and KGB - actually knows what is there. Access is granted when it suits. The researcher has to ask the secret police archivist/librarian for particular files ... they may or may not provide them. And, of course, how can one know that what has been seen is everything that can be seen? There is also the possibility that, under Stalin, NKVD agents did not produce accurate reports for their superiors. Rather, they might have told the boss what the boss wanted to hear. False reporting has been known - ask any former spook. There is still yet another possibility. The archives might have been 'cleansed' by the FSS. Famously, the ministry for state security - the Stasi - in the former GDR shredded, shredded and shredded. So we must, because we lack full information, deduce the number of Stalin's victims through "various indirect methods".⁴⁹ Hence the importance of census returns and demographic studies, etc.

Apologetics of any kind is, in fact, alien to Marxism. We straightforwardly ask how many died directly or indirectly due to the workings of bureaucratic socialism. Not

* Members of the loose-knit revisionist school managed to secure some well-remunerated university chairs in the 1970s and 80s and thereby gained some wider political influence. This suited the interests of a broad coalition of forces - rogue businessmen, transnational corporations, mainstream liberal politicians, left reformists and 'official communists' - those who wished to boost commercial relations, promote global cooperation, peaceful co-existence or even convergence with the Soviet Union. Arms limitations agreements under Jimmy Carter were enthusiastically welcomed as a breakthrough of sanity, while talk from Ronald Reagan and his administration about an 'evil empire' was derided as madness. Ditto Reagan's highly publicised pledge to consign "communism" to the "ash heap of history". In comparative terms the US conservative right were therefore revolutionaries when it came to the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. The Soviet studies revisionists were inclined to accept the status quo and argue for piecemeal reform. They certainly thought that, while the Soviet Union faced problems, it would last long into the future. The authorities in Moscow were not displeased. Under Mikhail Gorbachev a number of their books and articles were published. There were critical plaudits. Even awards.

just due to Stalin's explicit orders and those in his immediate circle. We have a good idea of the Soviet Union's birth and death rates between 1926 and 1991. But, taking into account material circumstances, how many men and women passed away quietly after a long and fulfilling life? How many lives were cruelly and unnecessarily cut short because of the political decisions, calculations, blunders or criminal indifference? Questions which can be used to judge the efficacy of any social system.

Take the 16th-19th century trans-Atlantic slave trade. Any study which only counted deaths ordered and duly recorded in the ledgers of the American slavocracy would rightly be shot down in flames. Their records are, in fact, unsurprisingly detailed (to the point of obsession). Purchase prices, age, assignments, illnesses, offspring, escape attempts, floggings, day, month and year of death - all were painstakingly recorded. As a result, we know, for example, that there was a huge death toll associated with the so-called 'seasoning' period (the initial three years of slavery). African diseases met American diseases. Milton Meltzer gives a 33% mortality rate for the first year alone.⁵⁰ Overwork, crowded, airless barracks, inadequate diet, gang rapes, beatings and other brutal punishments - all significantly shortened life. Much to the consternation of the slave-owners. They were, after all, concerned with profit and loss (and, quite commonly, sexual gratification).

The American plantations were, however, just one point of a triangular system, which joined the seizure and purchase of human beings in Africa with the delivery and sale of American tobacco, sugar and cotton, in Britain. Hence, it follows that any calculation of the slave trade's death toll ought to include the system on both sides of the Atlantic.

Those killed resisting or trying to escape the slave hauls conducted by Arab and native slavers in Africa have to be counted. Then there are the deaths experienced during the course of the fraught land journey to the west African ports. A Luanda merchant in the late 18th century, Raymond Jalama, says that "nearly half of those captured inland were dead by the time they reached the coast".⁵¹ Then there is transit - the cargo losses suffered while crossing the Atlantic. Meltzer estimates that 10 million slaves were delivered to the Americas. There was, though, he says, a 12.5% death rate during the crossing and a further 4%-5% loss while waiting in harbour.⁵² Hugh Thomas provides not dissimilar figures. In his *The slave trade* (1997), he reckons that 13 million slaves were shipped from Africa. Only 11,328,000 arrived, he says.

Hence, in total, the Atlantic slave system - which obviously included the internal reproduction of slaves within the Americas - is estimated to have caused between 15 and 20 million premature deaths.⁵³

What would one make of a contemporary 'Marxist' who, while blaming British slavers - in the 18th century they exercised a near monopoly - for "enlarging" the human cargo transported from Africa to the Americas, then said that these entrepreneurs, wealth-creators, risk-takers, must not be blamed "for every single death". After all there were those slaves that died after a long life, were there not?

Marx, by way of contrast, savaged the apologists of his day. He was a sworn enemy of anything and everything that demeaned the human spirit, that diminished human potential, that wasted human life. Hence Marx's meticulously documented, theoretically profound, but morally excoriating conclusion to volume one of *Capital*. He details the human costs of the land thefts, the enclosures, the forced clearances, the replacement of people by sheep. He attacks with bitter irony the enslaving of black Africans, the callous destruction of aboriginal populations and the looting of colonies. The child-labour, overwork and atrocious conditions endured in the factories, mines, mills, etc. Like Jeremiah in the *Old testament*, Marx seethes with righteous indignation. Unforgettably, he describes capital as coming to dominance "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt".⁵⁴

An apt description too of the bureaucratic socialism born with Stalin's first five-year plan ●

Notes

1. J Diamond *Guns, germs and steel* London 1998, p203.
2. E Hobsbawm *Interesting times* London 2002, p139.
3. See P Flewers *The new civilization?* London 2008.
4. www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/subject/trotskyism/index.htm.
5. JE Davies *Mission to Moscow* London 1942, p179.
6. www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1956khrushchev-secret1.html.
7. *Labour Monthly* May 1956.
8. DL Hoffmann *Cultivating the masses: modern state practices and Soviet socialism, 1914-1939* Ithaca NY 2011, p133.
9. See www.eastview.com/xq/ASP/sku=RC010137/1937/USSR/Census//Russian/Census//qx/research-collections/product_view.asp.
10. www.korolevperevody.co.uk/kraval.html.
11. See marxists.anu.edu.au/history/ussr/government/1937/census/distribution.htm.
12. A Ciliga *The Russian enigma* London 1979, p209.
13. www.opinionjournal.com/forms/printThis.html?id=110009618.
14. See www.nytimes.com/1977/12/26/archives/worldwide-propaganda-network-built-by-the-cia-a-worldwide-network.html.
15. R Conquest *The great terror: a reassessment* Oxford 2007.
16. S Courtois et al *The black book of communism: crimes, terror, repression* London 1999.
17. NS Khrushchev *Khrushchev remembers* London 1971, p60.
18. See JK Zawodny *Death in the forest: the story of the Katyn Forest massacre* Notre Dame IN 1962.
19. See N Bougai *The deportation of peoples in the Soviet Union* New York 1996.
20. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 4, London 1975, pp394.
21. H Kahn, 'Models of occupational health in the eastern European countries: the Soviet Union and Estonia' in J Jeyaratnam and KS Chia (eds) *Occupational health in national development* Singapore 1994, pp444-523.
22. M Ellman *Socialist planning* Cambridge 2014, p238.
23. S Kotkin *Magnetic mountain* Berkeley CA 1995, p83.
24. www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/OGATA%2C%20TAKETORA%20%20%20VOL.%201.0006.pdf.
25. See N Litvin *800 Days on the eastern front: a Russian soldier remembers World War II* Lawrence KA 2017.
26. See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_prisoners_of_war_in_the_Soviet_Union.
27. www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86T00591R000100140005-4.pdf.
28. M Rezun *Science, technology and ecopolitics in the USSR* Westport CT 1996, p169.
29. There were hundreds of overground and underground explosions in Kazakhstan. Using the central Asian republic in this shameful manner continued until 1989: some 200,000 are thought to have been directly affected in terms of their health.
30. M Rezun *Science, technology and ecopolitics in the USSR* Westport CT 1996, p171.
31. See C Davis *International Journal of Epidemiology* Vol 35, issue 6, December 1 2006, pp1400-1405.
32. BM Weissman *Herbert Hoover and famine relief to Soviet Russia, 1921-1923* Newark NJ 1974, p15.
33. EH Carr *The Bolshevik revolution* Harmondsworth 1976, p284.
34. R Conquest *The harvest of sorrow* London 2002, p306.
35. Eg. Alexander Solzhenitsyn gives a 66 million figure (*The gulag archipelago: 1918-1956* London 1975, p10).
36. See RJ Rummel *Lethal politics: Soviet genocide and mass murder since 1917* Abingdon 2017.
37. freedomspace.blogspot.com/2005/04/how-many-did-stalin-really-murder.html.
38. See MW Doyle *Liberal peace: selected essays* Abingdon 2012; RJ Rummel *Power kills: democracy as a method of nonviolence* New Brunswick NJ 2009; SR Weart *Never at war: why democracies will not fight one another* New Haven CT 1998.
39. See www.broadleft.org/antirevi.htm.
40. Former British National Party leader Nick Griffin never renounced his views on the Nazi holocaust that landed him with a suspended prison sentence in 1998. Writing in *The Rune* (he was appointed editor in 1995), Griffin denied that the holocaust had ever taken place. Contemptuously he dubbed it the "holohoax". This resulted in a conviction for inciting racial hatred under the Public Order Act. Griffin also attacked the discredited historian, David Irving, Britain's leading holocaust denier, accusing him of "backtracking on the old gas chamber lie". Irving admits that some Jews were exterminated by the Nazis (www.searchlightmagazine.com/index.php?link=template&story=219).
41. *Communist Review* Nos 31-32, spring, summer 2000. With the addition of another one of his *Communist Review* articles, this was republished as a CPB pamphlet - K Coyle *Lies damned lies and anti-communism* (London 2007).
42. Other former prominent members include Kate Hudson, Left Unity and CND chair; the RMT's Bob Crow; and Andrew Murray, Unite chief-of-staff.
43. *Communist Review* No32, summer 2000.
44. See G Rossolinski-Liebe *Stepan Bandera: the life and afterlife of a Ukrainian nationalist* Stuttgart 2014.
45. www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/rates.html.
46. JV Stalin *Works* Vol 12, Moscow 1955, pp197-205.
47. *Letters Weekly Worker* May 1 2008.
48. See J Arch Getty and RT Manning (eds) *Stalinist terror: new perspectives* Cambridge 1993.
49. Private email from Hillel Ticktin to Jack Conrad, June 3 2008.
50. www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specials/1624_story_of_africa/page54.shtml.
51. www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specials/1624_story_of_africa/page54.shtml.
52. See M Meltzer *Slavery: a world history* New York 1993.
53. See M White, 'African American slavery': necrometrics.com/pre1700b.htm#African.
54. K Marx *Capital* Vol 1, London 1970, p760.