

NOT TWENTY MILLION, NOT RUSSIANS, NOT WAR DEAD

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With *Pravda* warning this week against “liberalisation in the western sense” and the *Sunday Times* desperately trying to redefine Mr Gorbachev’s liberal traits as those of a “kind tsar”, the inevitable media hype surrounding the “Gorbachevian revolution” is perhaps beginning to ebb. Whilst welcoming the present phase of renewed détente and dialogue, it would be unwise to base our optimism on continuing misconceptions about the Soviet system and Soviet history. Too few commentators pay heed to the realities which constrain all would-be renovators and which have complicated the Soviet record even in its supposedly finest hour.

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No reputable historian can deny that more human beings perished in the Soviet Union during the Second World War than in any other country. Poland, Yugoslavia and European Jewry can claim higher losses in percentage terms, but not in sheer numbers.

Yet the “20 million Russian war dead” has become one of those magical statistics that are endlessly repeated but rarely examined. It is one of the few items on the credit side of the Soviet balance-sheet that can offset some of the equally terrible items on the debit side - the Civil War, the Volga Famine, the Collectivisation Campaign and the Ukrainian Terror-Famine, the Purges and the GULAG.

The “20 million” figure is recruited for the most varied purposes. Soviet commentators use it to support their thesis that, since the Soviet peoples have suffered appall-

ingly from war, the Soviet government is incapable of militarism. Anti-communists have used it to increase our fear of an implacable adversary who can only be stopped by nuclear weapons. Politicians like Mr Livingstone use it in their arguments for unilateral western disarmament. Sentimental Russophiles like Peter Ustinov use it to heighten the pathos of their tall stories about innocent “Holy Russia”.

To date, the practitioners of *Glasnost* have largely confined their revelations to the peacetime horrors of the 1930s, when in all probability similarly vast numbers of Soviet citizens were done to death as during the war. Gorbachev has not called for a revision either of the Leninist period or of the “Great Patriotic War”. Yet the Soviet terror machine was created not by Stalin but by Dzierzynski; and no one switched it off in 1939. If *Glasnost* persists, the wartime horrors will have to be examined as well. They are of special concern to us, since from 1941 to 1945 the Soviet Union was our ally.

In 1945, when the Allied governments were collating the statistics of war, Soviet officials maintained with some force that their own losses were incalculable. Later, in the 1950s, when the western powers were seen to have won the war with only minimal losses, the Soviets were eager to follow suit. The figure of 20 million did not emerge until Khrushchev’s time, when the Soviet census of 1959 revealed a colossal gap in projected demographic growth since the last pre-war census. Before the war, a similar gap of 17 million had been briefly published for the period

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1929-37, until the director of the census, together with his entire staff and their results, had disappeared in the Purges. It was not long before the awesome statistic was related not just to the population gap but to "war deaths" and to "victims of Fascism".

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Soviet sources are generally more cautious than the western enthusiasts. The *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, for example, (Third Edition, Moscow, 1979) states: "The Soviet Union incurred enormous losses. More than 20 million Soviet people perished during the war." True to form, it adds an ideological gloss about "world civilisation" being "saved from Fascism"; but it offers no details about which categories of Soviet citizens were killed, or by whom.

Estimates of Soviet military losses can reach as much as 13 million - almost four Red Army-men killed for every German casualty. Recent disclosures have confirmed the old suspicion that the period of the Nazi-Soviet Pact was not used to prepare for war with Germany, and that the Red Army's unpreparedness resulted in its inflated casualty rate, especially in the initial phase. Among the overall losses were some five million Soviet prisoners captured by the *Wehrmacht*. And their fate is particularly instructive. Roughly 80 per cent of them were systematically starved to death by the Nazis. The surviving million or so were classed by Stalin as traitors, and, on repatriation to the USSR in 1945, were sent straight to the GULAG. It is a nice question whether these men, who had defied Hitler only to be killed by their own side, can properly be counted among the victims of the struggle against Fascism.

The ethnic breakdown of Soviet losses poses other problems. Although ethnic Russians provided an absolute majority of casualties in the military sector, they formed a minority in the civilian sector. Western historians, who obstinately persist in thinking of the Soviet Union as "Russia", often ignore the fact that the *Wehrmacht* never penetrated beyond the outer fringe of Russian settlement, or of the RSFSR. The lands which bore the brunt of the German attack in 1941 had only just been annexed from Poland and the Baltic States in 1939-40, and did not contain any significant Russian population. The area of German Occupation in 1941-44 was very largely confined to the non-Russian republics. The victimised population was made up overwhelmingly of Balts, Poles, Jews, Byelorussians and Ukrainians. What Soviet sources correctly report as "Soviet losses", western laxity translates into "Russian losses".

In this regard, despite traditional Soviet coyness about the ethnic breakdown - and a special reluctance to discuss Jewish losses on Soviet territory - it is clear that the Soviet nationality which sustained the greatest civilian losses during the war was the Ukrainians. Quite apart from the millions of Ukrainians who fought and died with the Red Army, a Soviet source has recently estimated civilian losses in Ukraine as 5.485 million as compared to 1.793 million in Russia, including presumably the 800,000 at the Siege of Leningrad. Of course, not all the inhabitants of Ukraine were Ukrainians; but it seems reasonable to conclude that Ukrainian war losses were at least of the same order, i.e. 5-6 million, as those of European Jewry, or of ethnic Poles. Anyone who has been misled into thinking of the Ukrainians merely as concentration camp guards, as "pro-Nazi

nationalists" or as members of the one Waffen-SS Galicia Division, should think a bit harder.

The vast category of Soviet civilians who perished in the period 1939-45, but were not killed by the Nazis, contain many cohorts. After all, the GULAG continued to consume perhaps a million human beings per annum throughout the war years. The life expectancy of a deportee did not exceed one winter. Others, like the 15,000 Polish officer-prisoners of 1939-40 were shot outright.

There were the 1-2 million Polish civilians deported from eastern Poland following the Soviet invasion of September 1939. There was a proportionate number of deportees from the Baltic States and from Bessarabia, annexed in 1940. In each of the newly occupied regions, there were mass deportations of former state employees, "bourgeois nationalists", "class enemies", "ideological diversionists" and even of "persons having foreign contacts" (down to stamp collectors and esperantists).

When the German attack came, the Soviets' scorched-earth policy condemned whole towns and factories to forcible evacuation beyond the Urals - 4 million people from the Ukraine alone. Entire nationalities, among them the Volga Germans and the Crimean Tartars, were driven from their homelands. Amidst these vast tides of uprooted humanity, the least hint of dissent earned the fatal label of "spy" or "saboteur". In 1943-45, when the Red Army's counter-offensives brought the NKVD back into the "liberated areas", the process was restarted, and extended into Eastern Europe. Anyone who had dealt with the Germans, willingly or unwillingly, stood to be eliminated as a "collaborator". The non-communist resistance movements, such as the Polish Home Army, were rounded up *en masse* for "illegal activities". Men and women returning from Nazi concentration camps, or from slave labour in the Reich, were faced with the ominous question, "Why are you alive?"

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It lies in the nature of the problem that the victims of Soviet wartime repressions cannot be easily quantified. The records of the victorious Soviets, unlike those of the defeated Nazis have never been opened for scrutiny. Whether the fraction of Soviet civilians who perished at the hands of their own régime was one quarter, one third or even one half of the whole will never be firmly established until the Soviet government itself comes clean. Perhaps that is too much, even for *Glasnost*.

Continuing western reticence on this issue is less understandable. Forty years after the war, it should surely be possible to recognise the full extent of Stalinist crimes, whilst still giving credit to the heroic sacrifices of the Red Army which saved our skins from Hitler. There may be those with a vested interest in preserving the Nazis' reputation as the most murderous régime in history, and others who cannot bear to see a former ally in the same dock as the hated enemy. There are many who still see the Grand Alliance of 1941-45 as "the cause of all good men", rather than a desperate partnership for survival. Nowadays there should be other priorities. So long as western discussions of Soviet history do not assume a vindictive tone, they can only hasten that act of internal expiation which alone can free the Soviet peoples from the fears and burdens of their terrible past.