

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Stalin's Twenty-Nine Million Victims

The openness ushered in by the Gorbachev leadership has led to the release of startling demographic data. This data shows that during the Stalin era, from 1927 to 1953, the Soviet Union had approximately 29.3 million "excess deaths" resulting from terror, man-made famine and the accompanying unnecessarily harsh living conditions under which a significant part of the population lived. So said Paul Robeson, Jr., a translator, journalist and consultant who spoke at the Harriman Institute December 7, 1989. Robeson lived in the USSR as a teenager, from 1936 to 1938.

The new population figures force us to use the term "genocide" to describe Stalin's policies, Robeson said, since the 29.3 million deaths are equivalent to "almost 5 Holocausts." The new figures are still not published because they would be too traumatic for the Soviet people. "The dimensions of the crime are too extraordinary," he remarked. "If you spread this across the pages of *Pravda*, you would simply destroy the country. That is why it has been coming out in gradual bits and pieces." The Soviets previously had recognized that Stalin killed only 6.2 million people.

### "Specific Excess Deaths"

"The Gorbachev leadership has come to bury Stalinism, not just Stalin," Robeson said. One reason for this is that many in the current leadership saw older relatives killed in the purges. He calculates that about 2.13 million members were purged from the Communist Party during the period 1921 to 1939 (40% of the membership), and of those at least 1.92 million were shot or died in prison camps — 90% of those purged. "Their children are now in power, and that explains both the democratization and the de-Stalinization."

Robeson came up with his numbers by reviewing demographic data which until recently had been suppressed. Figures that came out of the USSR during the Stalin era were often falsified; Stalin's men were careful to manipulate population numbers lest anyone realize that millions of people were being "liquidated." *Ogonyok* recently reported that when Stalin found the population figures in the 1937 census too low, he had the statisticians shot.

Robeson said that the total excess deaths just from 1927 to 1939 were 18 million, the result of "a conscious policy to terrorize the population" into submission. The 1939 census was inflated by 7 million "to cover up specific excess deaths." Five million of these died in the man-made famine of the early 1930s. "The other 2 million were to cover up the deaths of people who were shot at random, systematically by quota, simply to terrorize the population between 1937 and 1939." It was up to the local party leaders to decide who would be killed in order to meet their quota; those chosen were trucked to killing grounds, shot in the temple, and buried in layers. The victims were listed officially as "incarcerated without right of correspondence." All across the Soviet Union, these mass graves are now being unearthed.

### Starvation as a Weapon

The terror was worst against ethnic minorities and those in the countryside. "The people who suffered most were the peasants, not people in the cities," Robeson said, suggesting that Stalin wanted to destroy the traditional culture of the peasants and force them to become industrialized. "It was a matter of policy in the Ukraine and the southern tier. They used starvation as a weapon to destroy the peasant culture. They not only confiscated the grain, they confiscated the seed, and sealed off the areas so that no grain could come in, and actually sold grain abroad during the famine for industrial goods."

"The genocide was primarily against non-Great Russians," Robeson said. More than two-thirds of Stalin's victims were non-Great Russian. From 1926 to 1939, the Great Russian population of the USSR grew by 16.4 million, while the non-Great Russian population grew by only 2.2 million.

Many nationalities were targeted. The nomadic Kazaks "fared badly," seeing 15-20% of their population die or emigrate. But it was the Ukrainians who suffered the most. Four million of the republic's 31 million people were starved to death in the early 1930s. More than 2 million were among those Soviets who fled to Poland, often with the complicity of local party leaders and sympathetic Polish border guards.



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But when the USSR invaded Poland in 1939, these people were brought back to the Ukraine.

After the Soviets annexed Eastern Poland, the Baltic states and Moldavia (Romanian Bessarabia) at the beginning of World War II, they exported terror to these areas. The USSR claimed that 20.2 million people were incorporated into the Soviet Union when the new territories were added, rather than the actual figure of 23 million. From 1939 to 1941, the NKVD deported and shot 2 million of them. That still left a figure of nearly one million unaccounted for, which was used to help absorb the mass executions by Soviet authorities after the war. Additionally, during the war, one million Poles simply vanished in Soviet labor camps.

Another 6 to 7 million Soviets died as a result of harsh living conditions and government repression during World War II. Robeson noted, "The figures only give cold numbers. Think about these numbers as real people." He added, "One thing is clear — the children of the holocaust have made a pledge in blood to destroy not just the myth of Stalinism, but every vestige of its culture."

## The Rebirth of Marxism?

An audience member asked Robeson what was known about Stalin's terror by his father, Paul Robeson, Sr., the

famed actor, singer and civil rights campaigner, who brought his family to live in the USSR in the 1930s. He answered that "as early as 1934 he knew something was wrong," but could not have known the full picture. Robeson said his father supported the Soviet Union because it was an important counterweight to Western imperialism and an ally of Third World freedom movements, but that he did not agree with Stalinist practices and was never a communist.

Robeson still considers himself a Marxist. "My father knew, and I know, the underbelly of this [capitalist] system, and its viciousness, and its murderousness." Stalinism had nothing to do with Marxism, he continued. "You're watching the death of Stalinism and the birth of communism with Gorbachev today.... You are looking at the world's first Marxist head of state trying to do now what Lenin should have tried to do in 1917."

Today's international situation is a watershed which will reduce the power of the United States, Robeson claimed, because Gorbachev has destroyed the basis of the Cold War and NATO. "The United States without NATO has no military-economic base for domination of the Third World, and that's what NATO is for," he said. "That's why Bush wants to keep it."

*Reported by Paul Lerner*

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