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Brett Homkes
Grand Valley State University

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Certainty, Probability, and Stalin's Great Party Purge



Brett Homkes
McNair Scholar

ABSTRACT

In 1935, Stalin decided to purge his own party to consolidate power in the Soviet government. Since the inception of historical research about this event, a debate has developed regarding the number of arrests and deaths of Soviets ordered by Stalin. This study will examine the figures calculated by Western historians to determine where correlation and discrepancy exist. The importance of this research is to assess the reasons why such dramatic statistical differences exist among various historians. The historians' sources show the difficulty of determining accurate figures because of the secretive nature of the Soviet government and only partial opening of Soviet archives.

In 1936, Josef Stalin, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [CPSU], initiated a Party Purge, the extent of which, measured by the numbers of deaths and arrests of Party members and their affiliates, has proved to be highly controversial. A long-simmering historical debate about this issue surprisingly deepened after the fall of the Soviet Union brought about the partial opening of government archives that many thought would answer all questions. Part of the problem is that the numbers have ideological significance: for example, the lower the figures, the more "normal" the USSR appears, making it possible that it could have become a social democracy on the welfare state model. Conversely, the higher the figures, the more "surreal" the whole Soviet experience seems, making it virtually impossible to believe that it could have mutated into anything that would have prevented ultimate catastrophe.

The most influential participants in the "purge debate" are J. Arch Getty and Robert Conquest. Getty's numbers of deaths and arrests are low in comparison to Conquest's vastly higher figures. Much has been made of Getty's "revisionism" and Conquest has been pilloried as a "Cold Warrior," but a study of the sources used by these two historians better explains how they arrived at their conclusions than do their politics and the rhetoric of their friends and enemies.

In the late 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* began the long-anticipated opening of the state archives, the dispute about the Soviet Union's capacity to develop into a "normal" social democracy gained a new intensity. One of the key questions was, and remains, the extent of the actual human cost of Soviet socialism. Basically, it was a question of scale. Many believed that the archives possessed the necessary evidence to settle this matter once and for all.



Edward Cole, Ph.D.
Faculty Mentor

The question of the extent of the terror that Stalin's Communist Party unleashed upon the Soviet people became a battleground for historians. Those who believed that the USSR was in the midst of evolving into a social democracy downplayed the harsh traits and ideology of Stalin's regime. These historians argued in favor of a paradigm centered on "grass roots" mechanisms of modernization such as upward social mobility coupled with the problems of mass industrialization within a ten-year period.

The problem of the human cost of socialism encompasses many subjects, such as forced collectivization and slave labor, but the Party Purge of the late 1930s remains the emblematic focal point. Once seen by traditional scholars as "totalitarian," in the hands of revisionists, who began collecting evidence to discredit "the t-word," the Purge took on a new look. Essential to

the revisionist task was a body count low enough to suggest the credibility of a Soviet Union on the road to social democracy.

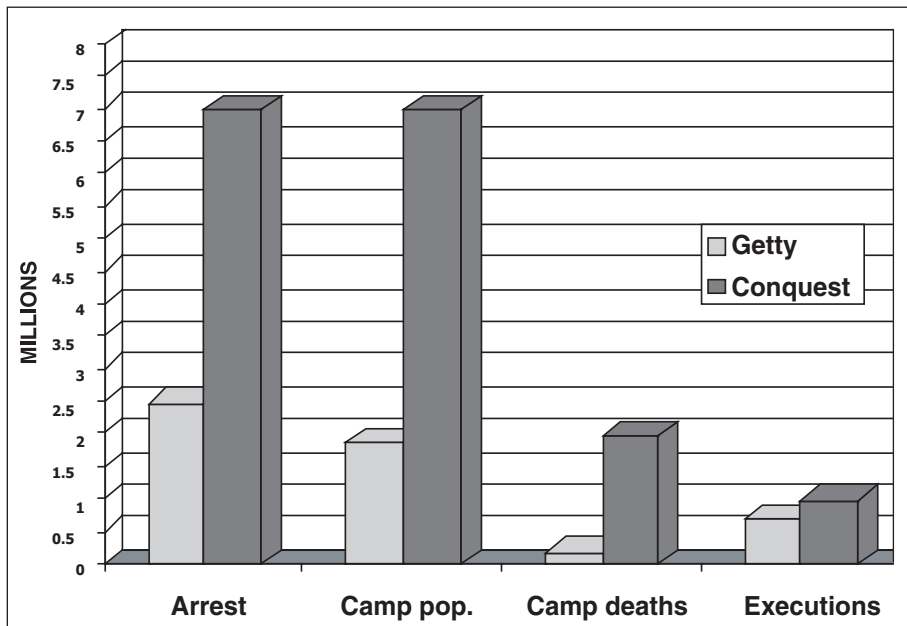
The Party Purge was not the first episode of terror within the Soviet Union. Beginning with the severe policy of War Communism under Lenin, and continuing with Stalin's forced collectivization and mass industrialization, the Soviet people had already experienced extensive pain and death at the hands of the Bolsheviks. But the great Party Purge was unique because it was the first time that the target had shifted to the Party itself.

As a means to further solidify his own power, Stalin used the December 1, 1934 assassination of Kirov, the Leningrad Party chief, as an excuse to begin the cleansing. The project slowly gained momentum as the NKVD fabricated accusations of Trotskyite and Zinoviev conspiracies, charging

people within and without the Party of counter-revolutionary crimes. The height of the Purge was from 1937 to 1938 when most of the Old Bolsheviks, Lenin's closest associates at the time of the Revolution, were subjected to humiliating show trials ending in executions and long sentences to the growing prison camp system.

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the partial opening of the archives, Conquest and Getty both focused their research on the Stalinist era, specifically on the Purge. The most notable difference between the two historians' respective works is the scale of their respective totals of arrests, camp populations, camp deaths, and executions within the Soviet Union from 1936 to 1938.

Figure 1. Comparison of J. Arch Getty and Robert Conquest's arrests, camp population, camp deaths, and executions for 1936–1938 Party Purge of the Soviet Union



Robert Conquest, who was born July 15, 1917, attended Winchester College, Grenoble, and Magdalen College, Oxford. Conquest joined the Communist Party in 1937 and fought in the British light infantry during World War II. After the war ended, Conquest left the Communist Party and joined the Foreign Office, where he remained until 1956. He is the author of seventeen books on Soviet history and politics. His best-known work, *The Great Terror*, was published in 1968 and then again in 1990, in a revised edition.¹

In *The Great Terror*, Conquest attempts to explain Stalin's motives and methods as he began the Party Purge. Regrettably, during the 1960s, when Conquest was researching his book, the Soviet Union was a closed society, or in other words, was unwilling to share information with the international community concerning certain events that had taken place within its borders. Although much had been learned from Nikita Khrushchev's famous 1956 XX Party Congress "Secret Speech" and from the campaign of "de-Stalinization" that followed, to estimate the true scale of the Purge Conquest really had no choice but to turn to alternative sources of information. However, the rapid decline of the Soviet Union after Mikhail Gorbachev took power in 1985 opened up many sources of information previously unavailable. Hence, Conquest continued his research and published his revised version of *The Great Terror* in 1990. Conquest concludes that approximately seven million Soviet citizens were arrested from 1937 to 1938, and of these, approximately one million were executed and two million died in camps. Another one million

people remained in prison throughout 1938, and roughly eight million people were confined in the system of NKVD labor camps administered by an organ now known simply as the *Gulag*.

Conquest uses interviews with former inmates of the *Gulag* system as one of his main sources. The transcripts of these interviews are difficult to obtain because Conquest fails to document where they can be found. Nonetheless, independent interviews with former *Gulag* inmates completed by the United States Congress in 1970 confirm Conquest's numbers.

Conquest also relies on several newspaper and magazine articles from the Soviet Union and present-day Russia. These sources include Russian newspapers: *Yunost'*, *Agitator*, *Moscow News*, and *Sotsialisticheskaiia Industriia*. Although these papers and periodicals are not readily available in the United States, I was able to find two articles from *Moscow News* that Conquest uses: one dated week number eighteen of 1988 and the other week forty-eight of 1988. From the week eighteen article, Conquest uses the number of executions within Uzbekistan, approximately forty thousand, to extrapolate figures for the entire Soviet Union.² Conquest also uses the article of week forty-eight, written by Roy Medvedev, a famous dissident who estimates that the number of Purge victims ranges from 16 to 18 million arrests, of which 10 million either died or were murdered.³ One controversial aspect of Medvedev's article is that it originated from an organization called *Memorial*, a famous *glasnost*-era institution still dedicated to preserving the memory of the men and women who fell victim to Stalin's Purge. Some

say that Memorial's agenda promotes higher figures of deaths and arrests in order to demonize Stalin.

Forensic work also uncovered mass graves within the former Soviet Union. In an article titled, "Unearthing the Great Terror," Conquest says about the graves: "Revisionists' estimates for the whole USSR could be tucked into a single corner of...one gravesite of a single minor republican capital."⁴ For evidence that Byelorussian executions numbered somewhere between 250,000 and 300,000, Conquest relies on several articles written about Soviet mass graves. Of course, owing to the impossibility of exhuming all of the many suspected modern mass burial mounds in the Byelorussian region, these totals are difficult to confirm.

One of Conquest's more unique sources is the Japanese Navy's record of ships entering and leaving the enormous Kolyma camp region dedicated chiefly to mining gold in the Arctic wilderness of northeastern Siberia. While Kolyma was in operation, the only way to receive goods or export gold was for Soviet ships to pass through Japanese waters. The Japanese routinely stopped these vessels to perform customs searches, thus recording estimates of the populations of workers' camps and the amount of gold Soviet prisons were producing. The records reveal that each of five ships carried approximately 4,000 prisoners and completed 10 to 11 journeys annually, thus leading to a total of 200,000 to 220,000 prisoners being transported each year.⁵

J. Arch Getty, the best and most famous of the revisionists, was born in Louisiana and received a BA from the University of Pennsylvania in 1972, and

¹ Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 180.

² Kamil Ikramov, "Not Supposed to See it?" *Moscow News*, No. 18, 1988.

³ Roy Medvedev, "The Suit Against Stalin," *Moscow News*, No. 48., 1988.

⁴ Robert Conquest, "Unearthing the Great Terror," *Orbis*, Spring 1989: 240.

⁵ Conquest, *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 227.

his PhD from Boston College in 1979. Currently, Professor Getty teaches at the University of California at Los Angeles. He is the author of five books and many articles. In his study titled *The Road to Terror*, Getty produces estimates of the number of executions, arrests, camp populations, and camp deaths from 1937 to 1938: total arrests approximately 2.5 million, camp populations from 1.9 million, camp deaths at 160,084 and executions at 681,692.

Throughout *The Road to Terror*, Getty refers to an article written in collaboration with Gabor T. Rittersporn and Viktor N. Zemskov, who compare and contrast several different estimates of the number of “victims” during Stalin’s great Purge, including those by Conquest, Dmitri Volkogonov, and Roy A. Medvedev. In comparison to these, Getty’s figures are much lower and have the advantage of precise archival documentation.

In addition to archival sources, Getty also uses the newspaper *Pravda*, and in particular, an article published on 22 June 1989, exploring the damage that Stalin caused to the Russian economy and people, thereby harming the country’s defense during World War II. The author, G. Kumanev, provides execution figures for 1936 of 1,118 and for 1937 of 353,074. Kumanev comments on the figures arguing that they seemed to be purposefully lowered and/or inaccurate (in Russian, “заниженными”).⁶ Another article used by Getty is in *Pravda*, 14 February 1990. The unnamed author numbers the 1930–1953 executions for “counterrevolutionary and state crimes” at 786,098. According to the article, the source for these figures was the KGB.⁷

The most significant source used by Getty is the *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv*

Rossiskoi Federatsii (GARF); from the documents he found there, Getty creates a table of figures for arrests and sentences. These derive from documents in *fond* 9401 of the NKVD archival material. Getty also uses *fond* 9401 for other statistics, such as those concerning persons banished in efforts to collectivize agriculture, and those executed from 1937 to 1938.⁸ Getty utilizes another *fond*, 9414, for figures of the number of prison inmates in the beginning of 1938 and camp deaths and camp sentences from 1935 to 1940.

Getty also employed documents from the Federal Archives in other publications. For example, several times throughout his article entitled “Victims,” he cites GARF documents as sources for the number of deaths and arrests during the Purge. He employs documents from *fond* 9401 to compare percentages of convictions and arrests during 1937–1938, and *fond* 9401 documents also appear throughout the article.

Because of the wide discrepancy between the figures arrived at by the accepted authorities on the subject, chiefly by Conquest and Getty, the most recent books on Stalin’s Purge avoid the question of numbers. One suspects that this also is done to avoid appearing to be a “Cold Warrior” like Conquest or a “revisionist” like Getty. For example, in her widely acclaimed 2003 book on the *Gulag*, Anne Applebaum effectively avoids giving specific numbers in terms of arrests, executions, and deaths within the camp system.⁹

When comparing historians’ conclusions, analyzing the sources is very important. Conquest utilizes a wide variety in compiling his totals. However, there is little or no supporting documentary evidence. Getty, on the other hand, has more precise numbers, but they are derived from a very

narrow range of sources. Also, Getty’s estimates lack credibility because they are implausible in light of the evidence accumulating from forensic archaeology, the oral tradition, and other non-archival sources.

This is part of a larger pattern of research differences, a tradition born out of the nineteenth century “old history” and the emergence of a 20th century “new history.” Old history emphasizes the importance of documents primarily from archival sources, while new history takes into account a much wider range of sources such as sociology, economics, psychology, anthropology, and archaeology. Getty is squarely in the “old history” tradition, whereas Conquest was compelled to rely on “new history” evidence.

These two historians are at odds in the debate over the potential transition of the Soviet Union into a social democracy because of the methods and sources used to determine the number of Purge victims. Regardless of whether or not their personal ideologies support or deny the theory of social democracy, the evidence they present will be used by scholars far into the future.

At present, what we can say, without checking out the sources ourselves, is that Getty’s figures can be taken as a reliable minimum and Conquest’s as a reliable maximum. One is a certainty and the other a probability, and at present they are so far apart that even specialists in the field of Soviet history are reluctant to choose. Let us hope that future generations will be more apt to diversify their sources and consider both archival documents and non-archival evidence to come to a consensus about what is certainly one of the greatest atrocities of modern times.

⁶ KG Kumanev, *Pravda*, No. 173., June 22, 1989.

⁷ *Pravda*, No. 45, February 14, 1990.

⁸ J. Arch Getty, *The Road to Terror*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 588.

⁹ Anne Applebaum, *Gulag*, (London: Doubleday, 2003), 571.

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