

Accessories to murder?

The charge that Stalin murdered millions of Soviet citizens during the 1930s is familiar to most of us. Western historians estimate the body count from Stalin's purges anywhere from eight to 30 million.

This week, for the first time, a leading Soviet historian has gone public with the estimate that the Soviet dictator was responsible for 10 million dead.

Last year I wrote that the Soviet Union could not join the society of decent, civilized nations until it faced up to the terrible truth from its totalitarian past — just as postwar Germany had done. Now, after decades of official silence and private whispers, the USSR is finally allowing the truth about Stalin to come out. To be sure, this helps Mikhail Gorbachev's current anti-Stalinist campaign. But it's also deeply painful for the proud, nationalistic Soviets. Admitting that their former dictator killed more victims than Adolf Hitler is soul-wrenching.

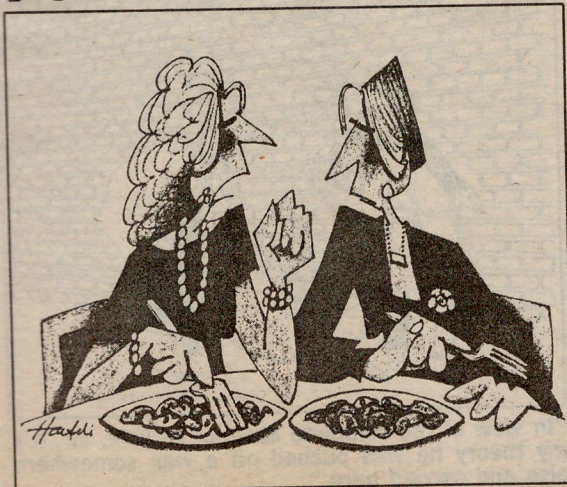
I recall vividly sitting in a small restaurant one night in Moscow with a Russian lady who spoke to me in a small, hushed voice about how her family had been arrested, deported to the gulag and never seen again. She wept quietly. The Soviet peoples, too, have gone through a holocaust, but until now they could not even openly speak of their terror and suffering.

Whether the true body count was 10 or 30 million, or most likely somewhere in between, there is no doubt that Stalin was as great a monster as Hitler. If you judge evil by body count alone, then Stalin was even more wicked.

Note that Hitler's worst crime — the extermination of six million Jews and two million non-Jews — remained largely hidden during the war. Stalin's crimes occurred in the late 1920s and 1930s — in full view of a world that chose not to see. So when those great defenders of democracy, Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, allied themselves with the USSR, Stalin's crimes had already been committed.

What's more, historian Robert Conquest has

Punch



"If you don't want this to get back to Rachel, then why are you telling me?"

ERIC MARGOLIS



dug up proof that there was ample information about Stalin's crimes available at that time — for those who cared to look. But, of course, Churchill and Roosevelt did not care at all to peer into Uncle Joe's execution cellars or gulag.

What would our response be today if the U.S. and Britain had allied themselves with Hitler's Germany in a war against the USSR? Would postwar Germany be going through a process of de-Nazification today, just as the USSR is purging Stalin's memory and bad works?

Soviet citizens are now asking, "shouldn't those responsible for Stalin's crimes be punished?" Many of the executioners and guilty officials are still around, living on state pensions. If we continue to hunt down the SS, why not the OGPU, MVD and NKVD killers who murdered millions?

If Soviet citizens are asking such questions, surely it's time for some glasnost here in the West. What were our war heroes doing allied to the monstrous Stalin? Does this not make them accessories or accomplices to his vast crimes?

Perhaps we should at least consider the Soviet view that the lineup in World War II had nothing to do with preserving freedom or fighting tyranny. Rather, the U.S. and Britain went into the war to preserve or expand their own political and economic interests from the German challenge. We cannot totally dismiss the Soviet claim that in 1939 they feared an attack from the imperial powers, Britain and France, as much — or even more — than from Germany.

Of course, writers and historians who make a living out of turning World War II into mythology will reject such disturbing thoughts. The war was a struggle between good and evil. Most people will agree, and continue to watch Hollywood epics about evil Nazis.

Soviet citizens are asking, how could we have allowed such crimes? How could we have allied ourselves in 1939 with Hitler? By contrast, in the West, where speech is free, there is no debate at all. Our wartime myths have become so profoundly accepted as dogma that no one seems to question them.

It seems heresy or absurd to ask, "wasn't Roosevelt a war criminal for giving mountains of aid to Stalin, the man who killed millions? Churchill knew of Stalin's crimes. Was he not criminally responsible for abetting modern history's worst killer?"

Nations that lose wars, like Germany and Japan, are forced by harsh reality to look into themselves and at the facts of life. Today, neither holds any myths about World War II. In another generation, they will have put those dreadful years behind them. In the West, we still thrive on our own wartime propaganda. The Soviets, at least, are taking a hard look at the ugly past.