

Human Rights Day Balloon Debate: who is the greatest of the 20th century?

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Joe Stalin

The following is the text of an interview with Joe Stalin

Interviewer: Mr Stalin, I understand that you are speaking at the balloon debate at the London School of Economics on the 8th December where you intend to claim that you've done more to promote understanding of human rights than anyone else. Is this correct?

Joe Stalin (*for it is he*): Quite correct. I expect an enthusiastic response and am confident that I will be sailing away across the clouds while the others fall to earth.

I: But many will find this claim incomprehensible if not outlandish.

JS: Then they'll disappear soon enough (*laughs*). Only joking young man. Lighten up.

I: So how do you explain your claim?

JS: Firstly you need to strip away the bourgeois idiocy that inevitable surrounds discussions such as these. I don't claim to have the popularity of my fellow balloonists – wet liberals all – but I claim my actions have made a greater contribution than theirs to the universal applicability of the doctrine of human rights. I'm confident that the hard thinking audience of the LSE will understand this. Remember Sydney and Beatrice Webb, the LSE's founders, were among my greatest fans.

I: I can't imagine the connection between human rights and your kind of Marxism.

JS: How so?

I: Because Karl Marx dismissed human rights as nonsense, irrelevant to the real issue of exploitation.

JS: Correct – but then he was, like me, a utilitarian sort of fellow. I am not claiming to be a champion of human rights, which I regard as weak minded trickery, merely that my actions did more than any others to help create the modern human rights movement, much more so than anything my fellow panellists have done.

I: Please explain this apparent paradox.

JS: Human rights has been part of western philosophy for many years – indeed some would argue that it was the basis of European radicalism throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Tom Paine's Rights of Man – the one book every worker would have been likely to have read in nineteenth century England. Given the powerful work of John Locke and the influence of the American and French revolutions it seemed likely that rights would have formed the basis of radical progressive thought in the modern world.

I: So what happened?

JS: Karl knocked them off that particular perch. He saw, quite rightly in my view, the danger of this kind of sentimentality and utopianism. He foresaw the need of Marxism to colonise the space occupied by those who care about social justice and equality for itself and substitute the harsh but scientific doctrine of dialectical materialism in their place. After all if human rights had remained the foundation stone of radical thought, the dominance of the communist parties would never have been possible and our methods deemed unacceptable.

I: So Marxism needed to eliminate its other options so it could dominate radical thinking?

JS: Exactly. By the later nineteenth century Marxism defined the parameters of radical thinking rather than ideas of human rights. This, in retrospect was Karl's great achievement. I couldn't have achieved what I did without this important ground work. In the great clash of twentieth century ideology – the battle between capitalism and communism (where I admit we've had a little setback), human rights was utterly marginalised. In fact when the conflict appeared to become one between fascism and communism we almost stamped out the idea of human rights forever. With a very satisfying boot on the face as my old opponent George Orwell would no doubt have said.

I: Surely human rights became a rallying point for those opposed to fascism?

JS: How naïve you are – did you say you were from the LSE? Aren't they teaching you history nowadays? In the 1930s, when the threat of fascism became clear to all but the most stupid of the upper classes, people looked to communism and the Soviet Union to defeat it. Hence we built the Popular Front movements and saw a great defection of western intellectuals to our side. The Red Army then broke the back of the Nazi armies; our power and prestige was never higher than in 1945. Our right to rule in Eastern Europe was conceded by the US and the British who were happy to betray the Poles, the Czechs and their other allies. What role did human rights play in the defeat of fascism? Nothing! How many divisions did the human rights movement have? None!

I: So why did the idea of rights gain such a hold after the war?

JS: Well, arguably my old admirer HG Wells started it off when he called for a declaration of rights during the war and of course President Roosevelt's four freedoms speech was instrumental. These two certainly launched the concept of human rights as a modern framework for discussion. But neither of those is in the balloon with me so they don't count. No, I think we could have held out against rights if it hadn't been for certain unfortunate developments.

I: Surely the shocking truth about Nazi death camps played a big role in establishing human rights in international politics.

JS: Perhaps. But everyone at the top knew about those camps during the war and did little to try and stop them. The Allies were particularly neurotic about being seen to fight a war on behalf of the Jews. I'm confident that if it hadn't been for certain unforeseen developments Nazi atrocities would have been interpreted as a victory for our vision of Marxist-Leninism – not a case for a new human rights movement.

I: What unforeseen developments?

JS: All that wretched publicity about the so-called oppression inside the Soviet Union. All those silly Cossacks committing suicide rather than coming back to the motherland to be executed properly. All that opposition to the policies of the Soviet Union, to the arbitrary executions, the camps, the political prisoners, and other necessary measures that we took to safeguard the security of the motherland. Without that opposition generations of radicals would have seen communism as the antidote to fascism. Human rights would never have figured in their calculations. It was weak minded, sentimental leftists and liberals who turned away from the sacrifices we were making to secure world domination, and who revitalised human rights. After all it wasn't until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the greatest tragedy of all of lifetimes that human rights really took hold on the international stage.

I: Let me pursue this some more. Surely it was the awareness of the Holocaust that caused many people to argue that we needed to recognise and protect the essential dignity of human beings? At the time that the Nazis were committing terrible atrocities weren't you violating human rights on a massive scale yourself?

JS: Of course I was – in a necessary cause of course – you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. But this is my point. Without me the historical lesson of fascism would have been to boost leftism. It was the so-called (by my opponents) oppression of rights by a workers state that led people to conclude that rights were universal rather than construct of the left. Until I came along no-one on the left wanted to believe that the left itself could oppress people, they couldn't imagine it. I had fourteen million people in labour camps, the peasants had slaughtered half their herds, starvation was rampant, the NKVD were carting off people to the camps by quota, thousands were going through sham show trials before their execution – and

leftist visitors came to Soviet Russia and still saw a workers paradise! It took a long time for people to realise that human rights was the only guarantee against people like me and upstarts like Hitler.

As for the Holocaust – why do you think that promoted awareness of human rights? No-one did anything about the Nazis until they invade Poland. They were building concentration camps back in 1933 and all anyone else did was turn away Jewish refugees seeking asylum. No, no my naïve sentimental friend. If you want to meet to the instigator of the modern human rights movement you're looking at him. That's why I should stay in the balloon while the rest of these poltroons get thrown out.

I: Well, thank you Mr Stalin. I have to confess I'm amazed.

JS: Join the queue young man.