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Letters: Stalin's Orcs

Robert T. Tally Jr.
Texas State University

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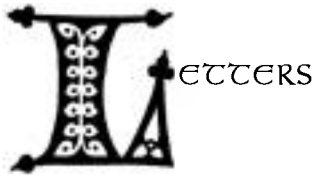


Abstract

Following up on his article in *Mythlore* 29.1/2, the author summarizes a recent discovery that Josef Stalin once attempted to create a superior species of warrior by cross-breeding humans and apes.

Additional Keywords

Eugenics; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Orcs



STALIN'S ORCS

ROBERT T. TALLY JR.

IN "LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS ORCS" (*Mythlore* 29.1/2 [Fall/Winter 2010]), I discussed some of the ethical problems raised by Tolkien's characterization and use of Orcs, and I argued—a bit tongue-in-cheekily—that the Orcs of Middle-earth deserve some respect and sympathy. Not long after the publication of this piece, I came across an article confirming the existence of at least one other notable Orc-enthusiast: Josef Stalin. It seems that the Soviet leader was attempting to breed an army of Orcs in the 1920s.

The story is that Stalin—encouraged or perhaps dazzled by revolutionary advances in genetics and in the sciences more generally—ordered Russia's leading researcher in animal husbandry, Ilya Ivanov, to investigate the possibility of creating a super-warrior out of human and ape hybrids. According to reports, Stalin told Ivanov: "I want a new invincible human being, insensitive to pain, resistant and indifferent about the quality of food they eat." (Here is the point at which a World War II veteran would insert a joke about C-rations, perhaps.) Ivanov, who had pioneered techniques of artificial insemination in racehorses, set about attempting to inseminate chimpanzees with human sperm, only to achieve the sort of results we know today would have been inevitable. More appalling, this program also used human "volunteers" inseminated with ape sperm. Ivanov's failure in this project, undoubtedly combined with other disappointments and consistent with Stalin's treatment of others, must have led to his imprisonment and exile; he died in Kazakhstan around 1932. An account is available here: <http://news.scotsman.com/world/Stalins-halfman-halfape-superwarriors.2688011.jp>.

Of course, Stalin and Ivanov weren't thinking of Orcs exactly, but given the value placed upon Orcs by Melkor, Sauron, and Saruman, one can easily imagine that this interbreeding of man and ape had similar aims. As noted in my article, there are different theories as to the origins of Orcs in Tolkien's world, but the most likely explanation is that they are bred (and "corrupted") from Elves or Men. Also, we know of interbreeding among the races, with the *Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* recounting at least one Maia-Elf marriage (Melian and

Thingol), three Man-Elf unions (Beren/Luthian, Tuor/Idril, and Aragorn/Arwen), and most notoriously, the interbreeding by Saruman of Orcs and humans. As Gamling notes just before the Battle of Helm's Deep in *The Two Towers*, "these creatures of Isengard, these half-orcs and goblin-men that the foul craft of Saruman has bred, they will not quail at the sun" (III.vii.536). The point is not just that Saruman has created a hybrid of Man and Orc, but that such a being is more capable of fighting (among other things, through not being daunted by sunlight) than the normal adversary. Saruman has accomplished what Stalin had futilely dared: to create a class of super-warriors through interbreeding.

In his preface to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien definitively rejected any allegorical reading of the work, arguing that, *had* he meant for the War of the Rings to represent the Second World War, then "Saruman, failing to get possession of the Ring, would in the confusion and treacheries of the time have found in Mordor the missing links in his own researches into Ring-lore, and before long he would have made a Great Ring of his own" (Prologue.xxiv). Tolkien here mildly rebukes those readers who would associate Sauron with Hitler, Saruman with Stalin, and the Ring with the atomic bomb, or who would invoke such similarly "topical" interpretation of the work. I certainly do not wish to reassert any crudely allegorical meaning for Tolkien's masterpiece, but the story of Stalin's Orc-breeding dream (if I may term it such) shows once more the degree to which Tolkien's world is not quite so far from our own.

In his wartime letters to his son Christopher, then fighting the Germans as a member of the R.A.F., Tolkien compared the enemy to Orcs, but he also noted that the result of "attempting to conquer Sauron with the Ring" was "to breed new Saurons, and slowly turn Men and Elves into Orcs," although he added that things are not so clear cut, "and we started out with a great many Orcs on our side" (L 78). Indeed, in a letter sent just three weeks later, Tolkien avers: "I think the orcs are as real a creation as anything in 'realistic' fiction: [...] only in real life they are on both sides, of course" (82). These metaphorical references only show that Tolkien was well aware of the significance of Orcs in our understanding of the real world, even if Orcs are not actual beings of the sort Stalin hope to unleash upon the enemies of the U.S.S.R.

At the risk of seeming churlish once more, I would say that the story of Stalin's plan to breed a race of super-warriors presents another occasion for sympathizing with Tolkien's Orcs, who—like all of us—did not ask to be born and who are doing their best to make their way in this world not of their choosing.

