

Demolishing Myths About Communism

Robert Conquest, a historian whose landmark studies of the Stalinist purges and the Ukraine famine of the 1930s documented the horrors perpetrated by the Soviet regime against its own citizens, has died at 98, having outlived the Soviet Union—which came into being in the year of his birth, 1917—and which he helped to bring down with information.

It is hard for many today to believe, but there was a time when intellectuals in the West were enthralled with Communism and viewed Lenin and Stalin in heroic terms.

Consider the German playwright [Bertolt Brecht](#), who created the modern propaganda play. When he visited the apartment of American philosopher [Sidney Hook](#) in 1935, Stalin's purges were just beginning. Hook, raising the cases of Zinoviev and Kamenev, asked Brecht how he could bear to work with the American Communists who were trumpeting their guilt. Brecht replied that the only body which mattered was the Soviet party. During the entire course of Stalin's purges, Brecht never uttered a word of protest. When Stalin died, Brecht declared: "The oppressed of all five continents...must have felt their heartbeats stop when they heard that Stalin was dead. He was the embodiment of their hopes."

The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, in a July 1954 interview with "Liberation," shortly after returning from a visit to Russia, said that Soviet citizens did not travel, not because they were prevented from doing so, but because they had no desire to leave their wonderful country. "The Soviet citizens," he said, "criticize their government much more and more effectively than we do."

Lillian Hellman, the American playwright, visited Russia in

October 1937, when Stalin's purge trials were at their height. On her return, she said she knew nothing about them. In 1938 she was among the signatories of an ad in the Communist publication "New Masses" which approved the trials. She supported the 1939 Soviet invasion of Finland by stating: "I don't believe in that fine, lovable little Republic of Finland that everyone gets so weepy about. I've been there and it looks like a pro-Nazi little republic to me." There is absolutely no evidence that Hellman ever visited Finland.

Or consider the case of *New York Times* correspondent [Walter Duranty](#), who covered the Soviet Union in the 1930s. In the midst of the enforced famine in the Ukraine, Duranty visited the region and denied that starvation and death were rampant.

In November 1932, Duranty reported that "there is no famine or actual starvation or is there likely to be." For false reporting, Walter Duranty received the Pulitzer Prize of 1932, which complimented him for "dispassionate reporting of the news from Russia." The citation declared that Duranty's dispatches, which the world now knows to have been false, were "marked by scholarly profundity, impartiality, sound judgment, and exceptional clarity."

In 1968, when the book came out, five years before [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's](#) [The Gulag Archipelago](#) appeared in the West, Conquest noted that,

It was still true that, as the great historian Francois Furet noted, after the war and the decline of fascism, 'all the major debates on postwar ideas revolved around a single question: the nature of the Soviet regime.' He adds the paradox that Communism had two main embodiments—as a backward despotism, and as a constituency in the West that had to be kept unaware of the other's reality. And, up to the last, this was often accompanied by a view of the Cold War as an even exchange—with the imputation that any denigration of the Soviet regime was due to peace-hating prejudices.

Since the end of the Cold War, the reality of Communism's terror and brutality has been widely discussed. In 1999, [*The Black Book of Communism*](#), an 846-page academic study that blames Communism for the deaths of between 85 million and 100 million people worldwide, became a bestseller. It estimates that the ideology claimed 45 million to 72 million in China, 20 million in the Soviet Union, between 1.3 million to 2.3 million in Cambodia, 2 million in North Korea, 1.7 million in Africa, 1.5 million in Afghanistan, one million in Vietnam, one million in Eastern Europe, and 150,000 in Latin America.

In *The Great Terror*, Robert Conquest for the first time set forth the scope of Stalin's purges: seven million people arrested in the peak years, 1937 and 1938; one million executed; two million dead in the concentration camps. Conquest estimated the death toll for the Stalin era at no less than 20 million.

"His historical intuition was astonishing," said Norman N. Naimark, a professor of Eastern European history at Stanford University. "He saw things clearly without having access to archives or internal information from the Soviet government. We had a whole industry of Soviet historians who were exposed to a lot of the same material but did not come up with the same conclusions. This was groundbreaking, pioneering work."

Conquest returned to the subject of the 1930s in 1986 with his study [*The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror Famine*](#), covering Stalin's campaign to bring Ukraine to heel and pay for industrial development by expropriating grain from peasant farmers. Millions died in the state-organized famine and the wave of mass arrests. In his preface, Conquest writes: "In the actions here recorded about 20 human lives were lost, not for every word, but for every letter in this book."

Robert Conquest, born in England, graduated from Oxford and in his youth joined the Communist Party. During World War II, he

served as an intelligence officer in Bulgaria, and later remained as the press officer at the British Embassy in Sofia. Observing the reality of Communism, he emerged as a forceful and effective opponent. In 1977, he became a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

When *The Great Terror* was published, many leftist intellectuals rejected Conquest's thesis that Stalin's regime was a natural evolution of Leninism rather than an aberration. Conquest, also a poet, responded:

*There was a great Marxist called Lenin
Who did two or three million men in,
That's a lot to have done in,
But where he did one in,
That grand Marxist Stalin did ten in.*

Since the Russian Revolution of 1917, the world was engaged for many years in a struggle between freedom and tyranny. Now that the reality of Communism's horrors are widely known, it is only proper that we remember those who defended liberty and those who did not.

While many in the West embraced Communism and were slow to recognize its reality, Robert Conquest played an important role in making the truth about that system known and understood.

In his forward to the 40th anniversary edition of *The Great Terror*, Robert Conquest writes: "One of the strongest notions put forward about Stalinism is that in the interests of 'objectivity' we must be—wait for it—'nonjudgmental.' But to ignore, or downplay, the realities of Soviet history is itself a judgment and a very misleading one."

As the history of this period continues to be written and examined, his role will be a significant one. Being a truth-teller is often a difficult enterprise. He undertook it with

skill and, fortunately for all of us, he succeeded.

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