

Robert Conquest: The Uses of History

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*E. H. Carr suggested in his lectures that formed *What is History?* that one can only really understand history through understanding the historian. To understand the historian, one then casts an eye towards circumstances, the background of gestation, product and ultimate shaping behind that process.*

Robert Conquest, accomplished poet and historian who died on August 3, was the great example of the historian as process. He gathered his material with what amounted to an almost penitent objective (many historians do, feeling that the truth is beaver-ing its way to the pen of revelation). Such histories do become political weapons, furnishings for furious assaults against opponents and positions. They form dossiers of conviction and documents of condemnation.

Conservative historians and commentators would see in Conquest an example of relentless exposure of the Soviet project, taking the form of over 20 books. In the US, he was awarded the presidential medal of freedom for fighting the Cold War with his pen, a point that does raise the curtains on the role of the historian.

Such awards tend to politicise analysis, lending weight to the illusory nonsense that it teaches us much at all. Conquest did, as a case in point, publicly support the botched US involvement in Vietnam, giving the impression that an abundant knowledge of the Soviet gulag justified the murderous stalemate in Indochina. Clear eyes are sometimes better reserved for the past.

“In 1968,” wrote George Will, “five years before the first volume of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* was published in the West, Conquest published *The Great Terror*, a history of Joseph Stalin’s purges during the 1930s.”[1] Just as Conquest misread contemporary times, his critics, mainly on the left, refused to read the blood-stained record of an overly stacked ledger. Stalin’s corpse filled gulags were coming to light, the still fresh blood a subject of Conquest’s interest. This was Conquest as the arm of the anti-utopian brigade, puncturing holes in the Soviet edifice and, implicitly, the communist program. But he came later to the mission – he had himself been an enthusiast of Stalin, having paid a visit to Moscow in 1937. This was hardly surprising to those who believed that the communist mission transmogrified into the Soviet state was the only genuine show of change in town. Conservatism was in cynical decay; capitalism was in a Depression inflicted shambles, and fascism was making stomping gains on the European continent.

The denunciation of Stalinist terror would come from within, via the “secret speech” of Nikita Khrushchev. This had a disingenuous flavour to it – for all of Khrushchev’s anger, he had been a Stalinist product. But the change there involved a spring clean on the cult of

personality. It was this cleansing that began what amounted to revisionism, with historical works forming the basis of expiation.

Conquest kept company with others who swayed from what was considered the hoodwinked left to a sober, steely reasoned right. There were the intellectual popularisers such as the polymath Arthur Koestler who were railing against such systems and grieving over the God that failed. The Cold War was being waged, not merely in the journals of the academy but the broadsheets and media outlets. The CIA also did its best to keep such individuals in leaf and clover. The central assumption here was that the Soviet system could not reform. Conservative authoritarianism, however, could.

Conquest was always best when sticking to history, rather than the flimsier notion of history as policy. His *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (1986) was a grim account of the famine in Ukraine between 1932 and 1933, one which saw the death by starvation of at least 7 million people. This war against the kulaks packed quite a punch, bringing to light an event that had been dismissed as elaborate fabrication. Propaganda can prove to be Clio's evil twin.

A vital, if gruesome feature of Conquest's work was an extensive discussion of the deportation program that Stalin endorsed with monomaniac conviction. It saw the removal of Crimean Tartars, the targeting of Chechens, the expulsion of the Volga Germans. Kazakhstan became the dumping ground of nationalities par excellence.

A conspicuous tendency to enlist Conquest into modern political struggles, unsheathing him to cut rivals and opponents, remains. His work, argues Will, is the precursor to understanding the Putin system. Putin is not merely an echo of what came before, but its product, the work of officials "thoroughly marinated in the morals of the regime Lenin founded".

Similarly Stephen Schwartz, executive director of the Centre for Islamic Pluralism, contemporises such historical analysis, making that classic, and erroneous leap between past system and present policy. "Another Robert Conquest will be needed, sooner or later, to account for the new chapter in Russian imperialism." [2] This is less history as ideological supposition. Differences matter less than similarities.

Conquest was himself, till his death, at the chopping coalface, refusing to give liberal education its due and riding the wave of the Thatcher revolution, becoming, in fact, its speech writer. The musty archive and the sanguinary record only made him cynical. The communist may have been criminally delusional, but the liberal was dangerously complicit in providing him truck. "Stalinism and Maoism may be dead," he asserted in his 1999 essay *Liberals and Totalitarianism*, "but they still pollute the intellectual atmosphere." [3]

Miseducation is the persistent theme, reflected by such dangerous notions as "peace studies" that are inflicted on "helpless teenagers" even if Conquest, along with his admirers, also had the habit of eviscerating ideologies of change they disliked while omitting errors within their own canon.

A final point on the issue of using Conquest to, as it were, conquer. Such history is on the look out for betrayers and sell outs, a form of vanguard McCarthyism. Will, to take a glaring example, is not even that bothered by Putin, whom he deems Lenin's distant grand child. It is the apologist as true target, and here, Conquest becomes a weapon for Will to attack

Bernie Sanders and his “moral obtuseness” which saw him spend his honeymoon in the Soviet Union in 1988. This is no longer history but well worn agitprop.

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Notes

- [1] <http://humanevents.com/2015/08/10/how-robert-conquests-history-book-made-history/>
- [2] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-schwartz/robert-conquest-stalinism_b_7963926.html
- [3] <http://www.newcriterion.com/posts.cfm/In-memorial-Robert-Conquest-1917-2015-7830>

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