



The Great Terror: A Reassessment

By Robert Conquest

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The definitive work on Stalin's purges, Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror* was universally acclaimed when it first appeared in 1968. Edmund Wilson hailed it as "the only scrupulous, non-partisan, and adequate book on the subject." George F. Kennan, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, noted that "one comes away filled with a sense of the relevance and immediacy of old questions." And Harrison Salisbury called it "brilliant...not only an odyssey of madness, tragedy, and sadism, but a work of scholarship and literary craftsmanship." And in recent years it has received equally high praise in the Soviet Union, where it is now considered *the* authority on the period, and has been serialized in *Neva*, one of their leading periodicals.

Of course, when Conquest wrote the original volume two decades ago, he relied heavily on unofficial sources. Now, with the advent of glasnost, an avalanche of new material is available, and Conquest has mined this enormous cache to write a substantially new edition of his classic work. It is remarkable how many of Conquest's most disturbing conclusions have born up under the light of fresh evidence. But Conquest has added enormously to the detail, including hitherto secret information on the three great "Moscow Trials," on the fate of the executed generals, on the methods of obtaining confessions, on the purge of writers and other members of the intelligentsia, on life in the labor camps, and many other key matters.

Both a leading Sovietologist and a highly respected poet, Conquest here blends profound research with evocative prose, providing not only an authoritative account of Stalin's purges, but also a compelling and eloquent chronicle of one of this century's most tragic events. A timely revision of a book long out of print, this updated version of Conquest's classic work will interest both readers of the earlier volume and an entirely new generation of readers for whom it has not been readily available.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Upon its publication in 1968, Conquest's *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (LJ 12/1/68) received wide acclaim for its broad, well-documented portrayal of the death of millions in Stalin's peacetime consolidation of power. A generation later, the collection of samizdat literature and the openness of glasnost have permitted access to better information, thereby allowing a reassessment of the study. Conquest's review largely confirms the original work. In the new edition more recent documentation is incorporated and some portions are revised based upon new data. However, the substance of the text is much the same. Outdated appendixes have been removed. This remains an essential source, and any library without it should buy it. Larger collections will want the revision.

- Rena Fowler, *Northern Michigan Univ. Lib., Marquette*

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Review

"Anthony Powell once wrote of Robert Conquest that he had a 'capacity for taking enormous pains in relation to any enterprise in hand.' It is beyond dispute that, forty years after the publication of *The Great Terror*, this judgment requires no reassessment." --Michael Weiss, *The New Criterion*

I happened to mention to a few colleagues the other day that I was reading Robert Conquest's "The Great Terror". This drew blank looks. I amplified somewhat, referencing Stalin, Yeshov, Molotov. More blank looks. I grew up in a cold war household. My father was a something of a rarity, he was a right wing journalist who travelled widely in Russia bringing back a story which, in the 60s and 70s, was largely ignored by the media and everyone else. He knew then what we all know now, that Russian communism was rotten to the core and was a house of cards teetering on abject collapse. Alas, but that house took decades to come down and so condemned a further generation or two to lives of quiet and unrelieved desperation and hopelessness. What does our society know of this? A society that, in the case of America, can be convulsed with paroxysms of despair when a few thousand people died in a single tragic incident -- genuinely convinced that something without precedent has happened. The most common formulation we hear of this, is the common reference to September 11th as "the day our world changed". For heaven's sake -- there is now a Jenny Craig television advertisement in which a formerly fat person testifies that September 11th changed her world such that she decided to lose weight. Ye Gods. But what exactly is it that changed? History, as my high school history teacher used to say, tailgates. Conquest tells us that Stalin and Molotov, during a "typical day at the office", would sign liquidation orders for THOUSANDS of innocent people by simply putting their signatures together with the word "liquidate" at the bottom of a sheaf of papers that contained the names. And then they would head for the cinema, a solid day's work done. All that appears to have changed is that moderns have forgotten the nightmares of yesterday. Each fresh outrage is treated as something unique, something personal, something without precedent. "The Great Terror" is an effective antidote to this type of thinking. "The Great Terror" is a book that was available in the late sixties. It was, like my father, largely ignored. I had school chums who were Marxists. Teachers as well. They either denied the facts or more often, accepted what had happened on the principle that it was necessary to "break a few eggs to make an omelette". And so the regime which was to be responsible for murdering tens of millions of its own

citizens, on a scale and in a cold blooded manner that rivals and even surpasses the more famous Hitlerian Holocaust, is ignored or forgotten. In 1990, communism collapsed. My father, an embittered old cold warrior by then, took little pleasure from having been proven right. Conquest, however, took the opportunity to revise and expand his monumental book. Virtually everything he had written about was confirmed by the glasnost revelations - as he takes pains to demonstrate. It is true that many of those who died in the execution cellars or the death camps deserved their fate. But the vast majority were innocent wives children, peasants teachers workers and writers. It is estimated that "every other family in the USSR had one of its members in jail". Stalin's purges gave rise to the unthinkable. A slave labour economy. Want to know why they beat us to space or how they got the Bomb so quickly? Well, among other things, they stole virtually all of our secrets and the had slave labour. On the theft of the West's secrets another must read is David Holloway's "Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy 1939-1956". Conquest writes quite well - he is also an accomplished poet. But the book is also something of a catalogue of horrors and he writes in what is at times a dismayingly dispassionate manner. He is somewhat relentless. --By Graham Henderson -

Reading *The Great Terror* is an awakening awareness of mind-boggling inhumanity. To say that in the 1930s Stalin snuffed out twenty million of his citizens hardly begins to describe the essential evil of his rule, which caused indescribable suffering for countless millions more. It's easily forgotten that the October 1917 coup by which the Bolshevik intelligentsia came to power lacked popular support and by 1921 had lost any semblance of representing the proletariat. From its inception, the party of Lenin and Trotsky embraced deceit, violence, and willingness to sacrifice others as a means to power, bringing Hitler later to say that unlike Social Democrats "he could always turn a Communist into a Nazi." Stalin merely took the context of intolerance to its logical extreme, plotting the decimation of his opposition into ever smaller groups, assisted by the very ones that would themselves successively be destroyed by it: Trotskyites, then Rightists, Bukharinites, Zinovievites, and finally the Stalinists themselves. The 1937 Plenum already marked the complete transformation into autocracy. Key to Stalin's success were his patience and that he never revealed (or tested) the limits of his ruthlessness. Rivals continually underestimated him: Trotskyites supported the disastrous 1930 agricultural collectivisation, miscalculating that he wouldn't dare another repression and the peasants would revolt-- but Stalin did impose an even worse famine two years later, starving an unimaginable 10 million Russians and Ukrainians. Supporters and opponents alike never held him personally responsible: even the Terror itself was called the Yezhovschina. Victims could be persuaded that the Terror was in the interest of Communism not Stalin, and it is to this day unknown whether Stalin himself believed it. His capriciousness and promises of leniency induced even high officials to produce confessions and denunciations, hoping that perhaps one more obscenity committed in his service might restore them to favour. At first, at least an actual crime and the formality of a show trial were needed. The fringe benefit of Stalin's assassination of Kirov was that other opponents could be executed for it. Convictions relied solely on confessions that were rather blatantly inconsistent and sometimes bizarre. Though brave individuals sometimes recanted at trial, they fell back into line after a short 'recess'. The rare evidence introduced that was actually verifiable was knowingly false: for example, the Copenhagen Hotel Bristol where Sedov had allegedly met had actually been demolished at the time. But full show trials were a luxury reserved for the Party elite. One court report simply read: "No prosecutor. No witnesses. No co-accused. No defender." The crimes themselves were soon completely fatuous. Article 58 of the Criminal Code outlawed "flight abroad," "lack of faith in the Socialist state," and fascinatingly "suspicion of espionage." Insufficient loyalty to Stalin was fatal. Workers or managers who failed to meet their quotas were convicted of sabotage, as indeed were NKVD investigators for failing to meet their 'arrest quotas'. Doctors were convicted for assassinating Gorky by smoke from bonfires, Jews for spying for Nazi Germany, and clergy for praying. Purges soon reached to the citizenry, and the mere misfortune of being denounced practically guaranteed guilt. Confessions were wrought by horrible torture. Wives and children of accused were held hostage and often shared their fate. Children under the age of 17 were despatched to NKVD settlements. Overflowing cells built for twelve held a hundred, so that prisoners had to pack down sideways like sardines-- and only in shifts. Most could not

withstand round-the-clock beatings for more than a few months and succum --By Ben Hekster

About the Author

About the Author:

Robert Conquest is Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. He is also the author of *The Harvest of Sorrow*, *Stalin and the Kirov Murder*, and numerous other books.

Users Review

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