

MICHAEL BURLEIGH

## HE TOLD US SO

THE DRAGONS OF EXPECTATION: REALITY  
AND DELUSION IN THE COURSE OF HISTORY

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By Robert Conquest  
(Duckworth 256pp £18)

RECENTLY I HAVE been reading some of the large-scale histories of the 1960s. A test of whether they are any good or not as guides to what was lasting and significant in that decade, when the ephemeral became an art form, has been seeing whether they mention the publication in 1968 of Robert Conquest's masterly *The Great Terror*. One book does mention Conquest, but in the context of his friendships with Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin. Most just drone on about the sexual appetites of juveniles or enthuse over the Beatles and rioting students.

In addition to being a poet of some stature and author of works of science fiction, Conquest is the world's most distinguished student of the former Soviet Union. His work has a richness of classical and literary allusion which is missing in that of Harvard historian Richard Pipes (like Conquest, a former adviser to Ronald Reagan), and he has been more prolific than the late Martin Malia, the Irish-American scholar whose achievement most resembles Conquest's own.

Six years ago Conquest published *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*, which amply illustrated Czeslaw Milosz's astute remark: 'The achievement of Robert Conquest becomes more obvious when we view it together with the behaviour of his contemporaries.' Although he never made the comparison explicit, Conquest included brief flashes of autobiography which he juxtaposed with the careers of various academic apologists for Stalinism, whose delusions and lies he exposed on virtually every page.

The son of an American father, Conquest spent his childhood in the South of France and then, after Winchester and Oxford, volunteered for the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry to fight the Nazis for five years. A chance offer to learn a new language while stationed in Italy in 1944 resulted in his posting as liaison officer to the Third Ukrainian Front of the Red Army in Bulgaria, where he remained for four years (at the British Military Mission in Sofia), witnessing the Communist takeover.

Back in England, he joined the Information Research Division at the Foreign Office, became 'Webb Fellow' at the London School of Economics, and was briefly literary editor of *The Spectator*, although not necessarily in that order. He eventually left England for the Hoover

Institution at Stanford, where, now in his late eighties, he works in an office whose piles of books and papers testify to its occupant's energy and interests.

Conquest's new book contains further tantalising snippets of autobiographical detail. There was a backpacking trip around Europe in 1937

with his friend John Blakeway, father of Britain's leading documentary television producer, and a journey round Central Europe in an old truck a year later with John Willett, the Brecht expert. It would have been good also to have included his first and, until the 1990s, last visit to the Soviet Union, which he mentioned in the TV series he so brilliantly presented, *Red Empire*. He was filmed in a cell in the Peter and Paul fortress in Leningrad. The guides tut-tutted about the conditions of the individual prisoners incarcerated there before the Revolution. Conquest subsequently learned that fifty people were crammed into such cells after the Revolution, and that there were many more prisons packed to the gunwales in Leningrad during that period.



Conquest: sceptical voice

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