

# Robert Conquest



Conquest, pictured outside the Kremlin, first came to prominence as a poet and enjoyed writing limericks

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Influential historian and poet who helped to expose the horrors of Stalinist communism and collaborated with Kingsley Amis

As a writer, historian and social analyst, Robert Conquest was distinguished by the forcefulness of his views and the pugnaciousness with which he expressed them. Like his friends Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis, he was impatient with and angered by all manner of *bien-pensant* thinking, political correctness and theorising, and determined to tell what he saw to be the truth, whether about Stalin's genocide or the betrayal of educational standards, however much others might flinch.

In 1968 he published *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties*, his 550-page masterpiece. This drew upon not only published sources but the testimony of refugees and documents smuggled out of what was still a highly repressive country. In it he gave harrowing details of the torture, shootings and mock trials in which prisoners were forced to confess to crimes they had not committed, and the Arctic penal colonies and concentration camps to which they were dispatched, often to their deaths.

Although there had been books about Stalin's purges before, Conquest made clear their frightening scale, producing realistic estimates for the first time. The figure of 20 million dead "is almost certainly too low", he asserted.

During the economically desperate 1930s, it had seemed to many decent people in the West that communism was the only alternative to Nazism and they looked to "Uncle Joe" Stalin for salvation. Their belief became hard to sustain in the face of the wartime Nazi-Soviet pact, but even after the war there were leftist "dupes" (as Conquest called them) who accepted

invitations to the Soviet Union and returned to vouch in public for the propriety of the regime. The truth, as Conquest said, was “beyond the capacity of their provincial imaginations”.

His evidence about what communism had meant in practice was so appalling and unassailable, and his message about continuing systematic Soviet brutality was so clearly borne out by the invasion of Czechoslovakia just a month before his book was published, that any apology for the Soviet regime required more and more culpable self-deception.

Bernard Levin hailed *The Great Terror* as “a most necessary book”, and when copies were smuggled into Russia they were received with gratitude because at last the truth was becoming known in the West. Decades later, when the book was finally published in Moscow, a former senior apparatchik and member of the Politburo told Conquest he had read it by torchlight under his bedsheets when it first came out.

Conquest did not change the intellectual climate on his own. Other historians and political commentators were active in the same cause, and there were heroic bulletins and samizdat publications by numerous dissidents, led by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Yet he undoubtedly played a considerable part in quashing the intellectual respectability of Soviet communism as an alternative to western liberalism, and in exposing the truth about what Ronald Reagan (whom he occasionally advised) was to call “the evil empire”. By persuading people in the West to confront the horrors that had gone on and were continuing on the other side of the Wall, he strengthened the resolve that eventually outfaced the Soviet leaders and led to a relatively peaceful end to the Cold War.

George Robert Acworth Conquest — the son of Robert Folger Westcott Conquest, a Virginian who settled in England, and an Englishwoman, Rosamond Acworth Conquest — was born in Great Malvern, Worcestershire, in 1917. A year earlier, his father had been awarded the Croix de Guerre for his service with the French army in a US ambulance unit.

The young Conquest was educated at Winchester — where a forbidden excursion to London cost him his prefect title — and Magdalen College, Oxford, where he studied PPE (politics, philosophy and economics) and ironically was a member of the Communist party for a short time. “I was even a left deviationist. My best friend was a Trotskyist and when King George VI was crowned we decorated the college at Oxford with eight chamberpots painted in red, white and blue,” he recalled. He read voraciously but claimed he only ventured to the Bodleian library once as a student. At 20, he visited Russia, swam in the Black Sea and inspected a collective farm.

He served in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry from 1939 to 1946. While attached to the Soviet Army group in the Balkans, he witnessed the Soviet takeover of Bulgaria. So began his long campaign to see that the truth about the Soviet Union was told.

He returned to Bulgaria in 1946 as press attaché and second secretary in the British embassy, after which he became first secretary in the UK delegation to the United Nations. He resigned from the Foreign Office in 1956, a year after he was appointed OBE. By then he had acquired an extensive knowledge of eastern European politics. Thereafter, he lived as a freelance writer and as the holder of research fellowships, mainly from institutions in the US.

Conquest first came to prominence as a poet and critic. In the mid-1950s he published *Poems* and edited *New Lines*, an influential anthology by himself and eight younger poets. With Kingsley Amis (obituary, Oct 23, 1995) he edited *Spectrum: A Science Fiction Anthology*, of

which five volumes appeared between 1961 and 1966, and they also collaborated on *The Egyptologists*, a slight novel about husbands who employ the Metropolitan Egyptological Society as a cover for adultery.

*Where Do Marxists Go From Here?* (written under the pseudonym of John Arden), and *Back to Life: Poems from Behind the Iron Curtain*, edited by Conquest under his own name, appeared in 1958. They were the forerunners of the long succession of books about the Soviet Union in which he analysed with savage precision the iniquity of those who had ruled there since 1917.

In a short but powerful study of Lenin, published in 1972, he argued that Stalin was the natural heir of Lenin, whose bigotry, cruelty to the Mongolians and devotion to terror made him a monster, though one who, unlike Stalin, was not a total stranger to generosity or even to love. Typically, he summed up his views in one of his many limericks:

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.

The historian Simon Sebag Montefiore said Conquest had been a “huge influence” on him, encouraging his own research into Stalin and demolishing for ever the previous attempts by “idiotic” intellectuals on the left to mitigate Stalin’s crimes. Conquest, he said, had understood the Cold War (“he got everything absolutely right”) and demonstrated that the Soviet system was the enemy of everything the West believed in. Sebag Montefiore described him as “charming, worldly, urbane, sensitive — a funny mixture, with a beautiful command of English. He was very gentle and almost artistic in his language but absolutely ruthless in the clarity of his message”.

After the fall of communism and the opening of Soviet archives, the American publishers of *The Great Terror* asked him to revise the book and give it a new title. Amis suggested “I Told You So, You F\*\*\*\*\*g Fools” might be appropriate (the publishers thought otherwise). The archives proved Conquest’s prescience: *The Great Terror* was published four years before the first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago*. Timothy Garton Ash remarked that he was Solzhenitsyn before Solzhenitsyn.

Conquest was called in to advise Margaret Thatcher on Soviet affairs before and after she became prime minister. She was, he said, “the only person in politics, along with Condi Rice, with whom I am on cheek-kissing terms”.

His scholarly career flourished, but his private life was turbulent. He was attractive to women, and his interest in the erotic became a leitmotif of his poetry. Mulling over the relation between thought and fornication, he wrote:

*Not love, or not yet love, the sacred act*

*Speaks to that 'worship' passionate,*

*exact*

*The truly human action which of all*

*Seems most material, most animal,*

*This rite of adoration, thigh to thigh,*

*Creates the star-strewn goddess, the*

*deep sky.*

He was married for the first time in 1942 to Joan Watkins, by whom he had two sons. Richard went on to work in the City before settling in France; John is a publisher who runs a country music website in Texas.

As a liaison officer in Bulgaria, Conquest met Tatiana Mihailova, and after the communist takeover in 1948 he helped her to escape. "I said to my two companions, 'Oh well, I suppose there will be a certain relaxation of monogamy' and they were very shocked. But they got girls before I did. My girl was very charming and beautiful and spoke English." After his marriage to Watkins was dissolved he married Tatiana, but she developed schizophrenia and their relationship broke down. In 1964 he married Caroleen Macfarlane. "It wasn't a success . . . I think she just got bored." They divorced in 1978.

That year, he came to London with a new girlfriend, Elizabeth Neece Wingate ("Liddie"), a lecturer in English and the daughter of a Texan airforce colonel; they had met at a poetry reading. Her mother, on learning of the 29-year age difference and Conquest's three previous marriages, was less than enthusiastic. Amis told Conquest: "Bob, you can't do that. Not again." His friend replied: "Well, I thought, one for the road." He married Liddie in 1979 and they remained a happy and devoted couple. She survives him together with his two sons and a stepdaughter, Helen.

His bond with Amis, whom he first met at a party in 1952, was also enduring. As well as science fiction and poetry, they shared an occasionally schoolboyish sense of humour. He once loaned Amis a flat for an assignation in which he had wired up a tape recorder. When Amis let himself in, a disembodied voice said: "Lucky sod."

They joined forces in 1969 to launch a ferocious attack on the Wilson government's reforms in education, especially the abolition of grammar schools and the introduction of comprehensives. They published several so-called Black Papers which railed against the rapid expansion of university education, saying it would dilute standards.

Conquest still continued writing poetry and criticism. *The Abomination of Moab*, published in 1979, contained a wide range of literary essays, including a diatribe against Ezra Pound, a mock-solemn exegesis of "Christian Symbolism in *Lucky Jim*" and a review of William S Baring-Gould's *The Lure of the Limerick*. Conquest's own fondness for that form was demonstrated in Amis's *New Oxford Book of Light Verse*, which included nine limericks by Victor Gray, alias Robert Conquest. His light verse became so popular that it almost overshadowed his more serious poetry. Christopher Hitchens called him "the king of the

limerick” and was particularly impressed by his compression of the “seven ages of man” speech in *Shakespeare’s As You Like It*:

*First you get puking and mewling*

*Then very p\*\*\*ed off with your*

*schooling*

*Then f\*\*\*s and then fights*

*Then judging chaps’ rights*

*Then sitting in slippers — then drooling.* Meanwhile, his long acquaintance with Philip Larkin (obituary, Dec 3, 1985) — who, like Amis, was five years his junior — included an amusing correspondence, part of which was published in Larkin’s *Selected Letters*. It later became clear that they had shared an interest in pornography, with Conquest sending Larkin magazines such as *Swish* and accompanying him to dives in Soho. (This rather drew the sting from his poetical criticism of “Trader Heath” for joining the EEC and so eroding the nation’s moral fabric by letting in “lorry-loads of Danish porn”.)

In 1986 — by which time he had settled in California and was a research fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution — Conquest returned to Soviet history. He published *The Harvest of Sorrow*, about Stalin’s planned famine during the 1930s, which killed ten million people. Reading extracts, Amis wrote to him: “Rather ill times, what with good old Gorbachev being so sodding reasonable.”

Conquest retired aged 90, but to him that merely meant “if I don’t feel like it, I don’t work” and he published two more collections of poetry. Fluent in Bulgarian and French, he enjoyed learning poetry by heart — sometimes backwards — and once recited from memory a portion of Dante’s *Inferno* in Provençal.

In 1990 he took part in a conference on the Cold War in Moscow, where he was fêted and the KGB invited him to inspect the Lubyanka. It was, he said, “extraordinarily nice to have lived to see it all, to have been vindicated completely”.

**Robert Conquest, OBE, historian and poet, was born on July 15, 1917. He died on August 3, 2015, aged 98**

*Clarification: Clarification: We reported that Robert Conquest (Obituary and news, Aug 5) recalled decorating his Oxford college with chamber pots for the coronation of George V. This should have been George VI.*