

BOOKS, ARTS & MANNERS

The Bard of Terror

CHARLES H. FAIRBANKS JR.

I USED to challenge my students to identify the following words: "It's probable that, as regards religion, we are about to enter an era of tolerance. Everybody will be allowed to seek his own salvation in the way that suits him best . . . We are entering into a conception of the world that will be a sunny era, an era of tolerance. Man must be put in a position to develop freely the talents that God has given him." The answers were all over the map—from Jimmy Carter to Eleanor Roosevelt—and there was some consternation when I revealed the author was Adolf Hitler. I used this example to show the peculiarly confusing or disorienting character of modern politics, the difficulty of drawing clear lines between systems that, in hindsight, appear utterly different.

Our century will be forever remembered in history as the century of totalitarianism, which came to power out of World War I and is now collaps-

Stalin: Breaker of Nations, by Robert Conquest (Viking, 346 pp., \$25)

The Great Terror: A Reassessment, by Robert Conquest (Oxford, 570 pp., \$13.95 paper)

ing with the end of the century. The horrors that distinguished earlier centuries—the Mongol invasions, the black death—were easy to recognize, but ours were not. Communism and Fascism had not only millions of sympathizers and apologists, they gained from the tolerance of establishment figures like Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who said that "Leonid Brezhnev is a man who shares our dreams and aspirations." Totalitarianism kept fading from view and reappearing, and this was no accident. All the ideas of totalitarianism originated in the West; socialism and nationalism were, in various Western countries, the very definitions of respectability.

On a mission to the government of

Mr. Fairbanks, a research professor of international relations at the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, was a deputy assistant secretary of state in the Reagan Administration.

Nicaragua in 1983, I was struck to find that the head of the North American department of the Sandinista movement had been a graduate student at Yale just when I taught there. Conversation revealed him as a typical Third World student of typical Western doctrines—Marxism, the *dependencia* theory, the arms race—good-natured, confused, harmless. But put hundreds like him together with a few fanatic killers like Tomás Borge and you have a complete totalitarian regime, ready to begin the "resettlement" of minorities. Likewise the gentle and idealistic Mensheviks created an atmosphere in Russia and abroad where the serious and conscientious people were those who respected the ideas later carried by Stalin to murderous extremity. The dignified German conservatives who were anti-Semitic out of snobbery or tradition turned out to clear the way for Hitler.

In fact, totalitarianism is the product not only of what is worst in us, but of what is best in us: of idealism, commitment, loyalty, hope. It was hard to recognize, hard to respond to, hard to fight because it was in some way a mysterious double of Western civilization, a kind of secret sharer.

Now that totalitarianism in its twentieth-century form is expiring, we owe a special debt to those who helped us to distinguish it as something different and frightful when doing so was still unpopular. Robert Conquest is one of those rare human beings. The

publication of his long-anticipated biography of Stalin, and of the revised, paperback edition of his classic *The Great Terror*, is a good opportunity to assess his lifework.

Conquest's more than twenty books related to Soviet totalitarianism cover an enormous range of specific topics. Politburo politics, literary policy, the nationalities, the Soviet future, the terror, Lenin, and the differences between "despotic" and "civic" culture are only some of the Soviet issues he covered. Throughout his writings, Conquest grasps the suffering of ordinary people with the imagination of a poet and the endless contention of powerful men with the weary recognition of someone who knows it from the inside. Unlike many of our scholars, Conquest is worldly.

Apart from a graceful, unpretentious style and an astounding range of historical reference, Conquest has a gift for the telling fact and the phrase that brings it decisively to our awareness. In the new Stalin biography, for instance, we read that "On 12 December 1937 alone, Stalin and Molotov approved 3,167 death sentences, and then went to the cinema." Lysenkoism (the crank genetics of Stalin's court biologist) appealed because it "promised the submission of the plant world to the orders of the Party."

Unlike his massive *The Great Terror*, Conquest's new book, shorn of most scholarly apparatus, is one of the shortest biographies of Stalin. Yet it may be one of the most interesting. It of course uses the *glasnost* evidence unavailable to Ulam or Souvarine, although readers fascinated by Stalin may crave all the hidden archives dug out by General Dmitri Volkogonov in his four-volume biography and used sparingly by Conquest.

In *Stalin: Breaker of Nations* "the character of Stalin," writes Conquest, "has been displayed rather than dissected." The picture that emerges is of a Stalin who was "psychologically abnormal. . . . [H]e was by nature cruel." He differed from other despots, though (and this is perhaps Conquest's most brilliant insight), in ruling

not only by terror but also by falsification. For the purpose of the torture was to extract false confessions. Nor was this done only in cases where the accused were to be tried in public as great political spectacles, but equally to those shot in secret.

One may disagree in part with seeing in Stalin "a profound mediocrity melded with superhuman will power." Conquest gives thirteen pages to Stalin's military mistakes in 1941, two sentences to "the solid fact that he had indeed won the war." The fact is that Stalin had not made the mistake of the Western democracies in failing to rearm quickly, or the mistake of Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese in failing to rearm in depth. His army and industrial base were paid for, of course, with the grain stolen from peasants during forced collectivization—at a cost of millions of lives. But judged in purely military terms, the shoemaker's son had succeeded where his old master, Czar Nicholas II, had failed.

Robert Conquest is not only a distinguished Soviet specialist, but a poet, science-fiction writer, critic, and parodist—almost certainly a unique combination. It is this that makes Conquest himself, and not only what he learned, so interesting. The link between his literary and political-historical interests has to be guessed. But it might be as follows.

Conquest has spoken of

that wide variety of modern attitudes which has added to the Orwellian slogans "War is Peace," "Freedom is Slavery," "Ignorance is Strength," one he unaccountably forgot to predict: "Rubbish is Art." Being, like the others, contrary to all good sense and good taste, this one needs, and obtains, a wide range of pretentious and authoritarian double-think.

Conquest doesn't like lying, doesn't like pretentiousness, and he sees them both in Communist politics and in establishment literature (and criticism) of the modernist persuasion. Like his friend Kingsley Amis, Conquest craves naturalness; he has an aversion to establishments that crush human vigor and free expression with ambitious pretense. These attitudes attracted people like Conquest and Amis to the Left in the Thirties and Forties; Conquest himself was briefly a Communist. Now he finds his natural place on the Right. Conquest and Amis learned during the postwar decades that in our times the establishment, in politics as in culture, is to the left. If you do not want to be bound personally by convention, you have to experiment with conservatism.

When Conquest first published *The Great Terror* in 1968, the Western establishment homed in on him, as on Solzhenitsyn. They sensed that Stalin's terror was above all what one had to get around in order to achieve the broader goal of demonstrating "that the Soviet Union was not an outsider in the family of nations, a pariah." The terror makes Stalin look like a Hitler



Alice Mooney

who triumphed. In fact, when in the time of détente our President kissed Brezhnev on his flaccid cheeks or our journalists looked with hope to Yuri Andropov, they were honoring the very men who had gotten ahead in 1937–53 by denouncing their co-workers or by supervising the forced-labor projects in which human refuse was worked to death and then flushed away. So historians arose against Conquest who argued that the terror came from below as from above, and that (in J. Arch Getty's words) "the Soviet government [under Stalin] . . . was not totalitarian" because the lower bureaucracies were not competent enough to carry out orders efficiently. Others questioned Conquest's evidence. If he cites so many testimonies from Moscow's intellectuals and Communist officials, how do we know what happened to the workers and peasants? Hearsay doesn't count.

On the scale of the terror, Jerry Hough suggested that as few as fifty thousand may have died, in contrast to Conquest's early estimate of twenty million for the entire Stalin period. Demographers such as Stephen Wheatcroft, Brian Silver, and Barbara Anderson argued that "These wild unscholarly estimates serve neither science nor morality," drawing Conquest

and Steven Rosefielde into a long exchange of acrid polemics in *Slavic Review*. Conquest and his opponents argued from different planets: Conquest believed the 1939 census was a "fake" because it replaced a 1937 census that was suppressed, its authors having been shot for minimizing the Soviet population. Silver and Anderson, who do believe Stalin killed several million

people, see no reason to believe he would have issued false statistics. Before the Soviet Union went out of existence in 1991, its official high-school textbooks were using figures like Conquest's.

In this argument, contemporary social science became the excuse for dismissing Conquest's work, which was labeled "political journalism." It is now easy to forget the enormous claim made by scientific social science in the Sixties—namely, that it would develop by specialization a value-free science of man that was as rigorous and precise as natural science. In retrospect these hopes seem as much an expression of the millenarian strain in the modern psyche as Marxism–Leninism itself.

Thus, Conquest became caught in a conflict of cultures. One culture sees learning and writing as the natural expression of an entire human life, the other as a profession, a specialty that must be carefully separated from the rest of life to make progress. To the adherents of the second culture the first can seem not only muddled but condescending and pretentious.

In our time everything is being whirled apart, like a pile of autumn leaves scattered every which way by the wind. The thinker is no longer a "writer," the administrator no longer a man who reflects, the man who proves things no longer a man of feeling. Conquest has brought back together for one lifetime some of these ever more disjointed possibilities. Why? If he wanted to nail down what was going on in the Soviet Union, why has he wasted his time with poetry? Perhaps he gained understanding of his Soviet specialty from his profligate dispersal of energies. To know that tyranny really did exist in Byzantium or in Baghdad is to open yourself to the possibility that it might exist among people who look and talk like us. Conquest's literary world, the world of his bawdy verses, is populated by people

like the aimless but endearing boozer Lucky Jim, in Amis's comic masterpiece. If real people are like that, are they good raw material for the vast utopian social experiment planned by the humorless Lenin?

In fact, the cruelties of totalitarianism are not unrelated to the loss of common sense that takes place most easily in small, closed groups like the Politburo or Hitler's *alter Kämpfer*. Every small closed community has its idiosyncratic way that seems utterly normal and natural to it. The Manson gang had its way, the Symbionese Liberation Army its way, the cultists who committed suicide in Guyana their way. In such groups, there is terrific pressure to conform. Take Communist "democratic centralism": at the Moscow trials, brave and intelligent men confessed to baseless charges and went to their deaths rather than be separated from the Party. In this atmosphere mass murder becomes the thing to do.

For us, the tribe has vanished and the family is sickly. More and more, the small closed community means the professions, the interest groups, and the academic disciplines. Common sense suggested that a lot of people were killed in Stalin's terror, or that the Soviet Union of Brezhnev still did not look like a "pluralist" system with "extensive political participation." But within the field of Soviet studies, with its wider sources, its special methods, its refinements, and its distinctive in-group psychology, we were unable to enunciate these truths clearly or, if we did, we paid the price Conquest paid. Likewise the concept "sexual harassment" seems to common sense to lump together actions of unequal seriousness, but to the "women's movement" it is a closed matter. Affirmative action looks a bit dubious to common sense, but obviously right to the "civil-rights community." To the "arts community" it is obvious that any obscene self-exhibition is art and deserves public funding, and so on.

Thus there is an intrinsic compatibility between specialization and the agenda of the Left, which sees society as a mosaic of minorities, each exacting from the public the tribute due: that its particular obsession or jargon pass unreviewed by some wider American or Western or human awareness. And, since the New Deal, the word "expert" has been essentially synony-

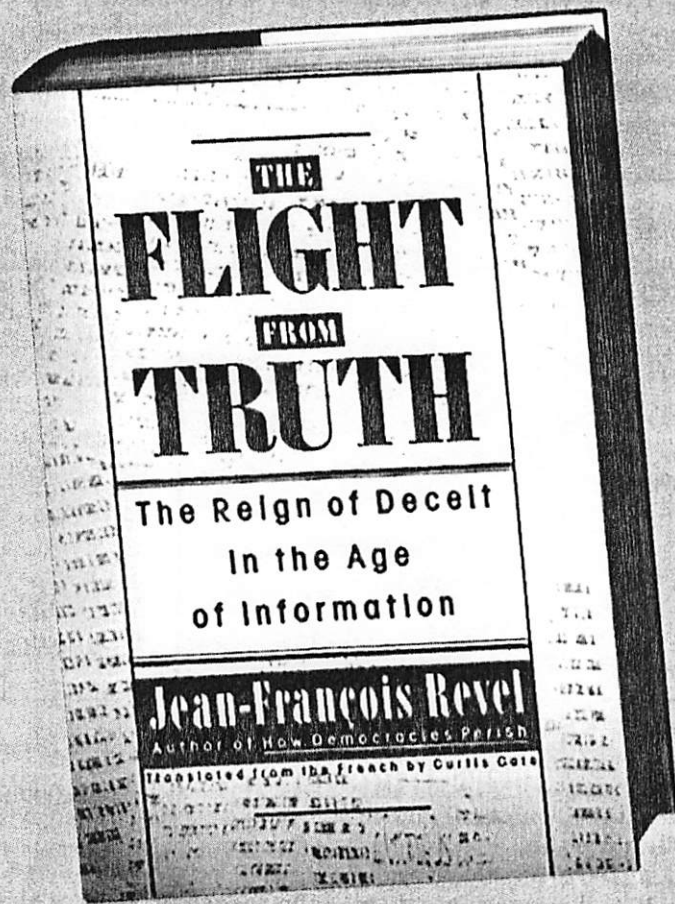
One of the world's great intellects examines one of Democracy's greatest threats: lies

Brilliant, passionate, controversial — France's most prominent philosopher/journalist demonstrates through fascinating examples that the pervasive, driving force in modern life (particularly American life) is falsehood.

"I have read this book with a fascination I have not felt for a long time for any essay or novel." — Mario Vargas Llosa

"Jean-François Revel is one of the finest minds of our epoch." — Françoise Giroud, *Le Figaro Littéraire* (Paris)

"The species of *grands polémistes*...from Voltaire to Chamfort, from Paul-Louis Courier to Léon Daudet — now seems on its way to extinction. Fortunately there is still Jean-François Revel." — Paolo Romani, *Il Giornale* (Milan)



At bookstores now

RANDOM HOUSE

mous in America with "Democrat." Finally, the political defeat of the New Left, from McGovern to Reagan, forced its retreat into the ivory fortresses of the universities and the boggy fastness of the mainline churches. From here the Left has now embarked on a new offensive under banners such as multiculturalism, post-modernism, and deconstructionism.

In our time it is only a few rare human beings like Robert Conquest who defy the iron law of specialization. What will become of his lifework now? For the rest of his lifetime, he can rightly feel a sense of triumph. With the revelations of *glasnost*, almost everything Conquest wrote about the terror has been confirmed, and his work has become popular in Russia. It is his old critics who are now embarrassed and out of tune with the times, and the verdict of Russian opinion will react in turn on the Western field of Soviet studies. Sadly, the world judges by success, and the excuses Western scholars made for Communism will not long survive the collapse of Communism. For those of us who feel the need to rethink the meaning of the twentieth-century totalitarian experience, Conquest's works will offer an enormous resource and a direction to pursue.

But for the remoter future, isn't all this purely academic? Totalitarianism in its twentieth-century form is clearly doomed, and Stalin may become what Attila and Genghis Khan have become: a joke. The Gulag will turn into *Hogan's Heroes*.

This outcome would be regrettable. It presupposes that the possibility of totalitarianism is excluded in the future. To assume this is to forget that totalitarianism is that curious double of modern democratic civilization, the secret sharer in our normal life.

Concretely, the dissatisfaction with the status quo and with its establishment, which so inspired the young Conquest, remains a permanent possibility, ever-beckoning to the young, the restless, the ambitious, and particularly to the intellectuals. The blemishes of the status quo suggest inevitably an alternative, a counter-order, which easily turns into a utopia. In the history of the West, the greatest barrier to this dangerous evolution was religion, which argued that the good social order is not attainable on this earth. But in our secular society

religion occupies the place of a hobby among other hobbies. Science and the taste for progress are far more powerful forces, and they implicitly suggest the opposite: the availability of radical improvements and of the truth made practical, as in technology.

The greatest problem is the problem of the intellectuals. Every specialist is conscious of understanding something we believe important but which is shockingly muddled in the public discourse, in the newspapers and TV. This is cause for a natural pride in no way rewarded by democratic society. Democratic society will never treat intellectuals as aristocrats. Hence arises the attachment of the intellectuals to the adversary culture, Lionel Trilling's term for the intellectual's critical or judging stance toward the surrounding culture. Of course, the attachment of the intellectuals to the adversary culture is speeded by the real defects of the status quo, defects that will not soon vanish.

In our lifetime, the intellectual homes of the adversary culture have been Marxism and Fascism. They provided the adversary culture with a definition of the problem, a source of hope, a vision of an alternative order, and tactics for getting there. With the hauling down of the red flag on the Kremlin in December 1991, these structures are no longer habitable.

What will be the next home of the adversary culture in history? It is impossible to say, but we *can* probably say two things. First, the new locus of the adversary culture will have a high potential to become the locus of a political totalitarianism that will reenact the horrors of the twentieth century. Second, it will loose these horrors on our grandchildren or great-grandchildren when they are utterly unsuspecting, unprepared, because the next period after the collapse of Communism will probably be as sunny, for Americans and Europeans, as the Victorian Age. The likely return of totalitarian politics in a new and different form will repeat our experience with the arrival of Fascism. At that point the Left had been around since the French Revolution; its shape and its potential dangers were somewhat understood. Because Fascism was so new, because it did not fall neatly into the Left or Right, it was peculiarly hard to understand and hard to resist.

Robert Conquest has been, with Solzhenitsyn, the bard of terror for my generation. In the epoch of which I am speaking now the frightful things he records will seem as far away as the world sung by Homer. But his works are something we can hand down to our great-grandchildren, lest they be surprised. □

This Campbell Person

MORTIMER J. ADLER

IN *A Fire in the Mind*, an idolatrous biography of Joseph Campbell by the brothers Stephen and Robin Larsen, we learn that while he

A Fire in the Mind: The Life of Joseph Campbell, by Stephen and Robin Larsen (Doubleday, 636 pp., \$30)

was still an undergraduate at Columbia University in 1924, Campbell found reading Thomas Aquinas's *Summa contra Gentiles* tough going, but before the semester started he got through "420 pages of this profound Aquinas person."

That Campbell found Aquinas un congenial does not surprise me, as I was an undergraduate at Columbia

before Campbell arrived, and while he was there a member of the faculty. In my judgment, his education there was formed by admiration for the wrong authors and the wrong books: by Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, by James Stephens's *Crock of Gold*, by William Graham Sumner's *Folkways*, not by the study of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and William James. His knowledge and understanding of philosophy and psychology were derived

Mr. Adler is the author of 49 books, most recently Desires Right and Wrong: The Ethics of Enough (Macmillan). He is Chairman of the Board of Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica and director of the Institute for Philosophical Research.