Knowing the Soviet Union: The Historical Dimension

By Dr. Robert Conquest

Soviet history has, of course, been massively falsified. But it has always been possible to dig out the truth; and by now there is nothing left that is substantially a secret. We do not know every fact, and anyone can still dig up lots of exotic detail. In general, however, we know what went on right from the beginning. The question of "what we know about Soviet history" is thus twofold: the first part covers "what is known," which, as I say, is a lot; and the second part asks "whom does the word 'we' include?" There are people in the West, more than in the East, who are unable to know the Soviet Union's history. This includes academics, perhaps I should say especially academics.

Not knowing Soviet history is one of the great phenomena of our time. I think that, as a political comment, it is also worth registering the strange notion that all the problems between the West and the Soviet Union are due to neither of us understanding the other. This is essentially untrue. U.S.-Soviet relations have always been good when the United States misunderstood the USSR. In 1945, when Roosevelt and others thought of Stalin as a co-operative member of a peaceful world order, the United States had excellent relations with the Soviet Union. Later, when Carter, as he told us, had misunderstood the Soviet Union prior to the invasion of Afghanistan, U.S.-Soviet relations also were fine.

These well-intentioned blunders cannot last long, at least not with politicians who have to live in the real world. However, they can last in the crevices of historiography. And what is it that impedes our knowledge of the Soviet Union? First, especially during the period since 1929 there was a great effort on Stalin's part to suppress the truth, and to publish falsehood. (Incidentally, the two are not quite the same thing.) Reports regarding the terror famine of 1933 were suppressed. It was denied that the famine was occurring and later that it had happened. A Soviet novelist wrote a couple of years ago: "In not a
single textbook of contemporary history will you find the merest reference to 1933, the year marked by a terrible tragedy."

Of course this negative suppression was aided by Western commentators like Walter Duranty from *The New York Times*. Incidentally, in Harrison Salisbury's last book, there is a chapter on Duranty. I had always thought that Duranty might have had some political motives for his denial of the 1933 famine. Apparently, that was not the case at all. Only sheer vanity and careerism. He was not a left-winger. But either way, we had the waters muddied by the truth only coming out indirectly, being denied by the Soviet authorities and that denial being supported by some supposed experts. The result was that the public became very confused.

In addition, of course, to suppression of evidence, we had active falsification. One need hardly go into that. The supreme example concerned the three great trials of 1936 to 1938, which were total fakes.

There is a third major element against which the historian must be on guard. It can be characterized as neither suppression nor falsification alone. This aspect can be demonstrated by addressing the question whether there were millions executed or sent to murderous labor camps during the Stalin period. The official line was not total denial, but the admission that there were some, not many, individuals, who had been justly executed and some, though not many, who were sent to corrective labor camps. This line was sustained, some might say, by not allowing Western visitors to the huge GULAG areas, but even that is not quite true. Vice President Wallace and Professor Latimore spent a day or two in the frightful Kolyma labor complex, saw nothing, and reported enthusiastically. To counter such stuff, all we had was a vast amount of first-hand evidence from prisoners. By the late 1940s, we already had at our disposal full and fairly detailed accounts of the nature and extent of the labor camp system, published by David Dallin, Boris Nicolaevsky, and others.
There are other terror aspects concerning which knowledge was not readily obtained. What happened to the Central Committee members, including Politburo figures and generals, whose names simply ceased to be mentioned? This was not, for some reason, treated as odd by Western authors who wrote about this period. Or take the murder of Sergei Kirov. It was not clear to Western writers whether Stalin was guilty, as Khrushchev strongly hinted. Even now the Soviet Union is having great difficulty with this issue. Obtaining the whole truth is like pulling out a wisdom tooth. The latest development in Moscow involved a prosecutor who gave a press conference recently. He was asked about Yagoda, the former Chief of the Soviet Secret Police. He said that the Soviet authorities had definite evidence indicating that Yagoda was involved in Kirov's murder. He was also asked whether Stalin had been involved. He said he would rather not speculate. That is not exactly a very strong denial. In fact, one or two odd corners in the Soviet press have actually stated that Stalin had been involved, but they have not quite announced it officially yet. It may be because the question of Stalin's involvement is also a moral problem. It undermines even further the moral foundations of Stalinism to say that he killed his alleged best friend and then blamed everyone else for it. It is worse than to have him kill millions of human beings or political enemies. One can kill millions and still be considered a great man. A leader can be said to have risen through blood to create a new society, and to have killed his enemies in the process -- why not? But killing your friends in an underhanded way does undermine Stalin's last remnant of prestige with the Party and that is why, I think, the authorities were having great difficulty admitting this fact.

By the mid-1950s, most serious students of Soviet history had the main body of the truth, including the Kirov case. Only very few individuals were disputing it. The Khrushchev interlude from 1956 to 1964 seemed to put it past argument. But one should never underrate the survivability of certain types of false argument in academia; George Orwell once wrote that one had to be an intellectual to believe certain absurdities because no
ordinary man could be such a fool. Khrushchev made it clear, in the so-called "secret speech" of February 1956, that Stalin had indeed tortured people, issued instructions to torture and slaughter Party leaders and generals, and so on. He did not go further, but some memoirs came out in the Soviet Union confirming the GULAG horrors.

There are other such long obfuscated areas of Soviet history, apart from the main themes of Stalinism. I wrote my first book on the disappearance from the map of a number of nationalities in the Caucasus. It made me curious, I investigated the topic and finally wrote a book called *The Nation Killers*. Subsequently, I became interested in the then unresearched story of the political struggle in the Politburo. On the surface, the Soviet Party leadership seemed to be characterized by total unanimity. But this appearance was broken every few years by disappearances, executions, and expulsions. The factional struggle continued, and I dealt with it in my *Power and Policy in the USSR*.

As an aside, it should be said here, that, in my opinion, the one pitfall to be avoided in dealing with the struggle in the Kremlin is "political science." I dislike "methodology," "models," "parameters," and "paradigms." The State Department has been commissioning mathematical treatments of the present-day situation in the Politburo and the future prospects of the Soviet Union, employing political scientists who admittedly know nothing about the Soviet Union. However, supposedly they know about politics. They go and seek information from experts on the Soviet Union. Then they enter it into a machine, quantify it and weigh it. It is hoped, I presume, that the machine will give us the name of the next General Secretary. I am not sure how it is supposed to work.

There is an experiment I accidentally came across. A real expert on Soviet foreign policy was approached by a graduate student working for a political scientist, with a 20-page questionnaire on the Cuban missile crisis. He commented, "Why should I spend two hours filling this in?" He then asked the researcher, "What are you going to do with it?" She said that when all the answers were in they would be "processed." It would then be determined that 100 experts on Soviet diplomacy rated the chances of war, say, the highest
79, the lowest 3 percent. When averaged out one would find that the chance of war was perhaps 37.4937 percent. Of course, such an approach does not always work. If you ask 100 individuals, about 11 of them will say that they think Warsaw is the capital of the Soviet Union. Therefore, this provides an 11 percent chance that Warsaw is the capital of the Soviet Union!

To come back to the topic of Kremlinology, it is always with us and one of the reasons it does not work too well is that we do not have all the necessary information. Not only do we not know, but members of the Politburo themselves do not know which way they are going to jump tomorrow. I am certain that if one had asked Mikhail S. Solomentsev about the future course of development of the Politburo he would not have had a clue. He was also waiting to see how the political wind blew.

The traditional methods which I used in *Power and Policy in the USSR* were based on deductions from various indicators. Some of them are quite simple, like the order in which Politburo members lined up on Lenin's tomb and the number of constituencies allegedly seeking to "elect" various leaders to the Supreme Soviet. These have always been reliable signs. The complete unity of any leadership is a myth and one can always find or seek differences of emphasis and even policy differences.

Then, of course, there is the clue provided by the promotion or demotion of a lesser figure associated with a given leader. Here, we have to exercise care, because if a group comes to Moscow, say from Moldavia or an even smaller area, then its members probably all constitute one group. If a couple of persons come from the Leningrad region, they may or may not be members of a single group, since such an important, heavily populated Party stronghold is more likely to be divided into competing factions. Such factors one must always consider. The other phenomenon, which does not bode well for quantifiers in "political science," is that individuals change sides. Consider, for instance, the famous case of 1957, involving Khrushchev's erstwhile protégé, Dmitri T. Shepilov, who was
singled out by Khrushchev, when the latter denounced his opponents in the "Anti-Party" group, always adding "and Shepilov who joined them."

Another point to keep in mind is that political leaders who have strongly visible political characteristics, like Khrushchev, are fairly easy to associate with specific positions. While Brezhnev was the General Secretary, I focused mainly on pre-Brezhnev events, while Michel Tatu worked on the Brezhnev period itself. The latter seemed much more difficult to me, because Soviet leaders were almost indistinguishable from one another during Brezhnev's tenure. Of course, the top leadership was continually having rows and individuals kept being ousted. But it was much more difficult to determine the factional lines, than during the pre-Brezhnev period. Now it is becoming easier again. And we are back to reasonably well defined political personalities in Moscow.

I presume that no one minds very much when there are arguments about Kremlinology. It is not a very sensitive subject, although an interesting and useful one. But the more central issues of Soviet history and of the Stalinist terror do still arouse hostility, and not only among old Moscow Stalinists. There is the notion that Stalin was really naughty, but did not kill millions of human beings because of two factors: One is that it was an unreasonable thing to do; the other is that the evidence for Stalin's terror comes from prejudiced and dubious sources.

The first question, pertaining to Stalin's actions and whether they are reasonable, is where many go wrong. I was reading Jerry Hough's reedition of Merle Fainsod's work, originally called How Russia is Ruled. Hough asserts that it is impossible for two or three million Soviet citizens to have been executed or to have died in Stalinist camps between 1936 and 1938 because this would have affected an "improbably" large number of adult males. The answer is: "Yes, they were killed." It is now more or less confirmed. And it was an unreasonable number. But what is "unreasonable"? How does one define it? Unreasonable for Hough is not unreasonable for Stalin. Then one gets the argument that Stalin could not have organized the killing of millions of peasants in 1933 because it would
have been counter-productive. I remember an academic saying that to me and I responded, "Well, do you know that Tamarlane built a pyramid of 70,000 skulls outside Isfahan? He could not have done that, could he?" (Obviously it had to be economically self-defeating). In the Ukraine during the 1930s, 15 or 20 percent of the peasantry were killed. But similar massacres had been committed by conquerors throughout history. It is called "laying waste". There is nothing strange or odd about it, but one has to have some background in general history to comprehend it. One has to assume that Stalin was not the moral equivalent of Calvin Coolidge.

The second objection heard is that the evidence regarding the Stalinist purge of the 1930s was prejudiced or dubious. These are two separate arguments. One is that persons who say that Stalin killed a lot of human beings are anti-Stalinist. If you are anti-Stalinist you are prejudiced. So, on that basis, one could argue that no prosecution case can ever be true. If anyone prosecutes a criminal the case must be dismissed because the prosecution's case cannot be valid. That is the rough argument. It has been put not only against myself. Khrushchev too was anti-Stalinist, therefore he had an axe to grind. The answer, of course, is that all evidence is given by individuals and all individuals have opinions. Of course, some evidence might be false. I have seen stories about Stalin which, I am certain, are false. I am told he did not ever really say that "you've got to shoot Russians, otherwise they won't die, because they live to be 95" (like Kaganovich). This is a slander on Stalin, I must admit. But the evidence has to be treated on its own merit. This applies to all history, not only to Stalin. Our evidence for practically all ancient, medieval, and much modern history depends on evidence "prejudiced" or secondary.

Objections have been raised that some of our evidence is second-hand and unconfirmed (for obvious reasons) by official or other sources. True, in court we do not permit circumstantial evidence, but of course we admit it in history. Courts let out individuals whom everybody, the judge and the jury, know to be guilty. They are let off on one technicality or another. If they were being judged by history they would not be let
off. Naturally, second-hand evidence has to be treated carefully and critically, but this applies to first-hand evidence as well.

Those who reject evidence unconfirmed by official documents often do so because it may come from a victim of the labor camps. This is first-hand evidence, but it is unacceptable to some because it comes from a "prejudiced" source. It is extraordinary that while such evidence is dismissed and laid aside, the "official evidence" is taken seriously. Yet, we know that official evidence can be as prejudiced as it is possible for evidence to be. It is also known that it is at least in part falsified. Therefore, we actually have more reasonable cause for doubting "official evidence," even when it is uncontradicted by other sources.

The propounders of these defenses of Stalin hate Gorbachev because what has been revealed recently in Moscow confirms the views we have taken over many years: not only I myself, but others before me, for instance Leonard Shapiro, and others.

The latest revelation involved an official report to Stalin by the Soviet minister of State Security in 1952. It stated that there were twelve million in the labor camps and that there were twenty million peasants listed as belonging to the families of "enemies of the people," still surviving after they had been sentenced in the early 1930s. These are the sort of figures that are coming out now. In Moscow the number of Stalin's victims is routinely put as between ten and twenty million; yet, I have heard in this country and in Holland the figure of twenty thousand being put forward. However, it was perfectly clear already thirty years ago that such was not the case. And now it is being freely stated in Moscow. Again, official circles in the Soviet Union are on the edge of identifying Stalin's role in Kirov's assassination, though it has not been stated ex cathedra. Let us be fair, however, there is now an official Soviet commission dealing with Stalinism and, according to Gorbachev, the preliminary report is to be published soon.

The Soviet leaders are on the brink of saying more, it is just on the point of boiling over. Recently, fascinating details have been made available regarding Beria's
interrogation after he was arrested in 1953. They show that one must not throw away hearsay or even dubious evidence. A Yugoslav student some seven or eight years ago found an account of Beria's interrogation in the Soviet archives. He was not supposed to get access to that particular file, but he received it in error and he wrote a book based on his discovery. His account and the version recently made available in Moscow are pretty much the same, as far as I can see, in almost every detail, except that the Yugoslav's study added Beria's report to the Politburo of the labor camp numbers at the end of 1938 (around 7 million).

From the Stalinist point of view (and from the point of view of persons who treat the terror period differently from the way I and many others would), the number of Stalin's victims matters enormously. If only a few thousand or a few tens of thousand victims were killed or imprisoned, then the terror was not necessarily the most important aspect of the 1930s. Many academic treatments of the period have been produced which consider the social, economic, and administrative changes as important. Nevertheless, they find efforts to deal with the issue of terror rather vulgar.

But killing ten million odd peasants is, amongst other things, a social matter. Killing ten thousand persons does not attack the society as a whole, while killing ten million does. It hits the society in the solar plexus. Having a quarter of the adult male population in the forced labor camps is not simply an economic phenomenon, though it is partially an economic phenomenon. In the Party itself, killing off the bureaucracy, not just in the tens of thousands but the hundreds of thousands, killing off the whole ruling elite, straight down from the top, and replacing it by denouncers is more than a mere administrative change. It is a change of the very spirit of the administration, of the tone of the administration.

To sum up, all the information given to us by the glasnost' writers destroys a whole way of thinking about the Soviet past. I think this is a positive factor because previous assumptions were based on a parochial inability to envisage a totally alien political culture.
It was an expression of the view that the whole world is rather like us. Moreover, the new information demonstrates the absurdity of the old attitude towards evidence. Finally, the new revelations are positive because they show us which way is not going to lead us to true history and to the truth in general.