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Inhuman power of the lie: "The Great Terror" at 40

by [Michael Weiss](#)

On the anniversary of the definitive work on Stalin's purges.

I met Robert Conquest two summers ago in Palo Alto, which he has made his home, as a fellow of Stanford University's Hoover Institution, for the past two decades. Christopher Hitchens had sent Conquest, the *primus inter pares* of Sovietology, a review I had written of a recent Stalin biography that evidently impressed him, and a lunch was arranged at the Hitchens's household. For a few hours I got to chat with the premier truth-teller of the most sustained totalitarianism of the twentieth century.

As it happened, Conquest had just completed another series of light verse—"bawdy," as he prefers to call it—at which I was fortunate enough to get an advance peek. Those familiar with the full oeuvre of this extra-ordinary man, responsible for Margaret Thatcher's "Iron Lady" speech and dubbed, at the last plenum of the Central Committee, "anti-Sovietchik number one, ...

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