

# A Letter to a Soviet Historian

*Robert Conquest*

**D**ear Andrey:

In our recent discussions you were kind enough to say that my work on Soviet history was superior, because it was “more honest” than similar work by Soviet historians (and indeed a similar comment has appeared in *Pravda* itself). But you still felt that, given the abandonment of Stalinist and sub-Stalinist falsification, the longstanding Soviet aim of a “scientific” history could be achieved.

Rather than repeat to you what I believe to be wrong with the Marxist approach as such, I would like to offer you some thoughts on what appear to many historians in the West to be some of the objections to the whole idea of scientific history in the sense you imply. There is a good deal more to be said than what I have managed to cover here. My hope is merely to give some feeling of our idea of history, in the context of such a discussion.

We are all set in history. Our lives, in their relationship with other lives, constitute history as it unrolls from day to day. They emerge in a vast complexity that is the product of the events of earlier history. That earlier history constitutes the experience of the human race, and it is only from that that we can draw any lesson on how best to conduct ourselves with a view to a reasonable future.

No one can escape from the real history of his country or culture, which has molded the whole mental and physical ambience in which he is immersed from birth. But it is only a fuller and more conscious knowledge of that real history, and in particular of its errors and disasters, which can enable a citizenry to avoid the potential troubles of its future.

Thomas Jefferson thought that education in a democracy should be “chiefly historical,” since history “by apprising them of the past, will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views.”

Obviously, not the entire population, or even the entire educated population, is ever likely to have a clear and full grasp even of the history of their own country. But, equally obviously, they almost all nourish some general ideas about it. And these ideas will usually have derived, directly or indirectly, over a longer or shorter period, from the work of professional historians or chroniclers.

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History is, indeed, a matter of broad general interest. As the great medieval Arab historian Ibn Khaldoun put it, "The wise and the ignorant are unanimous in their appreciation of history, since in its external aspect it is no more than a series of anecdotes which tell us of how external circumstances upset human affairs, while in its internal aspect it implies a just perception of the causes and origins of phenomena."

It is thus vital that historians are neither false as to fact, nor mythological as to interpretation.

Neither the establishment nor the interpretation of the facts is easy even in principle. Ranke-ites (and others) thought they could describe everything "as it actually was"; Marxists (and others) thought they had discovered general theories comparable to those of the hard sciences. Both enterprises, for different reasons, presented unforeseen difficulties.

So: how is true, or valid, history to be provided?

First, the question of evidence. Of course, there are historical events enacted in public whose outcome is clear: the Battle of Waterloo, for example. But very often less public, though equally decisive, matters are harder to know. To take an example: the date of Kirov's death and the name of his assassin were known in 1934. The real responsibility, the reasons behind the assassination, were still in dispute half a century later. But even events that are less crucial are still often incompletely ascertainable. For example, the memoirs of members of Harold Wilson's Labour Government in Britain give accounts of confidential cabinet meetings that often differ greatly in substance, sometimes even in detail.

In these matters, evidence, in fact, is imperfect. A witness may exaggerate or misrepresent his personal role in events or take a partisan stand or be muddled in his time sequence, and yet give useful, even vital evidence. Another may grossly distort, or even invent. So may official documents, as we all know. On the history of the Stalin period, a number of Westerners tended to rely on "official"—that is Stalinist—sources, and give the unofficial less credence. Not all unofficial sources were sound; but at any rate official sources were massively falsified.

Again, firsthand evidence is in principle to be preferred. But of course this is not a rigid rule: eyewitnesses can be liars and secondhand reports can be accurate. In any case, the absence of firsthand reports does not destroy the possibility of history.

We may turn for a parallel to ancient history. Some years ago there was an attempt to discredit Polybius' account of Hannibal's invasion of Italy. Polybius, it was said, did not come to Rome for fifty years after the invasion and was not a historical witness, let alone an eyewitness. This was approximately true, but it was truth put forward to suggest a falsehood—that Polybius had no opportunity to get good information on his subject. Since he was himself a soldier and a military historian, and lived in the household of the Scipios, of

all people, the hostile case collapses!

The British historian John Morris points out that “the historian may not insinuate, like an advocate whose plea that the evidence falls short of absolute truth covertly invites his listeners to disbelieve the evidence,” and adds that falsehood may not be casually implied by labeling a source “dubious.” Almost any source may be erroneous or unreliable on certain points, but this does not automatically invalidate all its evidence. As Gibbon says, a historian may use such material without making himself “answerable...for all the circumjacent errors or inconsistencies of the authors whom he has quoted.”

We may also note that the mere accumulation of evidence, especially of documentary evidence, may not always be helpful. Prof. Parkinson, the great student of bureaucracy, notes what happens when information becomes excessive:

Head office is finally swamped with information, whole departments being engaged merely in filing it away. Floors are stacked with steel cabinets and clerks are absorbed in a lifework of cross-reference. The central sorcerer demanded facts and the sorcerer's apprentice has started a process by which facts in quadruplicate arrive by the bucketful. So far from anyone looking at the paper, people have barely the time to put each document in the right folder. Each office is swamped in a foaming torrent of information, no one knowing how to turn off the tap.

A vast amount of documentation about the Soviet past will soon be available, and armies of researchers will discover much and miss much. We must be ready for it—and we cannot be ready if our minds are a blank. Nor will all the documents be veridical. Meanwhile, we have to cope with evidence as it exists, or becomes available. We have to decide on what is true, or probable, in the testimony, and use it to construct a sound picture.

How is this done?

The refractory art of history consists of wringing the truth out of materials, all of which, official and unofficial, present inadequacies and difficulties. As Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff tell us in *The Modern Researcher*, the process of historical verification is “conducted on many planes, and its technique is not fixed. It relies on attention to detail, on common-sense reasoning, on a developed ‘feel’ for history and chronology, on familiarity with human behavior, and on ever enlarging stores of information.” And, they conclude, “No interesting or important question...can be settled without detailed knowledge, solid judgment, lively imagination and ability to think straight. What to do and how to go about it come with practice; to enumerate rules would be endless and of little use.” This is, in fact, the crux: that “judgment” is needed, that it is a delicate matter, and that no mechanical criteria for validating or rejecting evidence exists. They also note that the sort of judgment that is in the end the crux of the historian's equipment is in all essentials the same as that needed in matters of everyday life, where error and falsehood equally

have to be coped with. Some of the delicacy of such operations is to be seen in Gibbon, when he tells us that testimonies are often "imperfect and partial" but that "as it is unreasonable to expect that each of them should vouch for the whole, so it would be impossible to define the boundaries of their respective property."

In any case, as G. M. Trevelyan notes,

In dealing even with an affair of which the facts are so comparatively well known as those of the French Revolution, it is impossible accurately to examine the psychology of twenty-five million different persons, of whom—except a few hundreds or thousands—the lives and motives are buried in the black night of the utterly forgotten. No one, therefore, can ever give a completely or wholly true account of the causes of the French Revolution. But several imperfect readings of history are better than none at all; and he will give the best interpretation who, having discovered and weighed all the important evidence obtainable, has the largest grasp of intellect, the warmest human sympathy, the highest imaginative powers.

But (it is sometimes argued) a good historian must be "objective" in the sense of not having opinions or emotions concerning his subject. Such postures of objectivity in fact merely conceal opinion. It is the frank admission by the historian that he indeed holds specific views that forces him to treat the evidence as objectively as possible. As Trevelyan puts it: "The dispassionateness of the historian is a quality which it is easy to value too highly, and it should not be confused with the really indispensable qualities of accuracy and good faith." And the greatest and most skeptical of historians, Edward Gibbon, refers to the French historian Tillemont as both sunk in Papist bigotry and at the same time an "incomparable guide" full of "erudition, diligence, veracity and scrupulous minuteness."

John Morris notes that all the leading historians from Thucydides on have put forward their own beliefs, and that it is the "more pedestrian writers" in the field who "are less aware of their own bias....[W]e must be especially wary of the man who claims to set down objective truth free from bias, for the closer he comes to his ideal, the more he is enslaved to the passing prejudice of his own day."

Men like Thucydides and Clarendon had strong political views. But, as Morris puts it, "They found their argument on a careful assessment of their own sources...if we reject their conclusions, we do so on the basis of their own evidence, interpreting it differently."

Indeed, it is reasonable to feel that even successful avoidance of a point of view produces a fatal effect of randomness. Lytton Strachey remarks that for want of any point of view, Samuel Gardiner's treatment of the most exciting period of English history resembles nothing so much as a large heap of sawdust. But the fact that the history of certain events is written from one point of view implies that there are other possible approaches. Today there are good historians who challenge the usual interpretations of James I's reign

in England: indeed, Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War has lately been respectfully but importantly amended.

It is moreover of major importance that a historian such as Thucydides, though presenting a point of view, was not writing political propaganda. It has been said of the first great English historian, Clarendon, that his work was seminal for the political class over five generations, and that both the Tories who agreed with him and the Whigs who disagreed had their perspectives broadened and deepened, and emerged better Tories or better Whigs.

As to Barzun's and Trevelyan's point about "imagination," there are historians, especially in the West, who are unable properly to envisage the motivations and actions of a personality or culture alien to themselves. They cannot put themselves into the other man's shoes. Consciously or unconsciously, they tend to assume that what appears to them to be natural or rational behavior, whether "good" or "bad," must apply everywhere and always. This parochialism is fatal to the study of history.

It is indeed not easy to get into another man's skin, let alone that of another culture. The great Condé once remarked to the Cardinal de Retz that the reason why historians got things wrong was because "*Ces coquins nous font parler et agir comme ils auroient fait eux-mêmes à notre place.*" He noted, in fact, that intellectuals of his own culture would not, or at any rate had not, made the effort adequately.

It is not even as if Condé himself was an intellectually musclebound thug of a professional soldier. Those who delighted to frequent his chateau when he was in disgrace—Molière, Racine, Boileau, La Fontaine, Bossuet—make almost a roll call of the genius of the Grande Epoque. But if academics fail to understand the temperaments of the generals of their own culture, they are all the more unlikely to grasp the temperaments producing and produced by other traditions. Similarly, Napoleon was able to tell an Austrian negotiator (during the 1813 truce) that others had difficulty in understanding a man like him, to whom the death of a million men meant nothing.

Richard Whatley, in a paper written a few years after the Battle of Waterloo, argued that the evidence for his career made Napoleon appear so extraordinary that it would certainly not have been accepted if attributed to some Israelite or other king in ancient times. He was also able to show that contradictory accounts existed of most of the major events of the Napoleonic period. And he concluded ironically that there was no reason to believe that Napoleon even existed, though there might have been someone of that name to whom these legends had become attached.

Similarly there is the "moderate" with his mediocre political philistinism, his conviction that the truth probably lies somewhere between two "extreme" views. The first of these principles was what led similar circles in the thirties to feel that it was difficult to believe that Stalin was framing Old Bolsheviks as it was to believe that the Old Bolsheviks were trying to assassinate Stalin, and

that the truth probably lay somewhere between—the charges were doubtless exaggerated but contained an element of truth. In fact, the truth was entirely one-sided.

In part this is simply parochialism, the application of merely local standards to other and different circumstances. But the parochialism is reinforced by the fact that in recent years Western historians have usually been academics, and nothing else, during their whole careers. The historians who emerged in the 1940s and 1950s had often been involved in war or in international politics. This may remind us that the great English historians—Clarendon, Gibbon, Macaulay, Acton, Lecky—were men steeped in public life: in this sense “men of the world” as well as scholars. But even experience in itself, though a great help, may indeed not bring the historical talent fully to life. We must add that some people have the makeup of historians, just as others are mentally or temperamentally adapted to be mathematical physicists.

Having discovered, or amassed, a store of facts, the historian must now achieve a synthesis. He must, in a few hundred pages, in some way present the experience of millions of people over years of time. As Macaulay put it, no history can present us with the whole truth, “but those are...the best histories which exhibit such parts of the truth as most nearly produce the effects of the whole.”

Here too we have a process that cannot be reduced to formula any more than the intuitions of a detective could be. It is intellectual—indeed it uses the intellect at its highest level—but it is not thereby amenable to tabulation.

In fact, no conceivable modeling method could achieve that. For the procedure implies the forming of general impressions from a mass of material, considered not only in itself but in the perspectives of other historical and similar knowledge. The whole process reminds me of a comment by the novelist Anthony Powell, “I am often astonished at the way that critics will lay down the law about novel writing, because it seems to be, both from what one reads and what one experiences oneself, such an extraordinary delicate and complicated affair.”

The creation of a fictional, and the putting forward of a factual construction have a certain similarity. The differences are obvious, but in history, too, questions of selection, of proportionate emphasis, of interpretation are multitudinous, refractory—and imperative.

What is the use of history? As I have suggested in the case of Clarendon, it broadens the whole mind, the whole cultural background of the reader. He is better able to judge his own present if he is deeply aware of his own and others' past. This will enable him to influence his country's future for the better. But it will not enable him to predict it. Here again, or even more so, we find in modern Western academe political “scientists” who claim a predictive method—a mathematical one at that. We know that even weather prediction, incomparably easier, is no longer thought to be mathematically feasible

beyond a few days, regardless of the amount of information available. How much more so with history.

One reason for history's inability to predict is that, as Marx himself noted, "Happenings which are strikingly analogous but which occur in different historic milieux, often produce totally different results." It is impossible to develop a single structure of cause and effect between "events," for, in Trevelyan's words, "An historical event cannot be isolated from its circumstances any more than the onion from its skins, because an event is itself nothing but a set of circumstances, none of which will ever recur."

And this is to say nothing of the extremely important role of chance concatenations, and of mere accident, in history.

History teaches us the perspectives and the diversity of human societies. The telling of it teaches us something about the nature of objectivity and the craft of presentation and above all about the exercise of informed judgment. Nor should we be misled by the description of certain types of analyses as "scientific" when all that meant is "in accordance with some theory." All general theories of history have proved erroneous in the long run. And even in the areas where they seemed strongest, they were reductionist, constrictive of the totality by ignoring and omitting what did not fit their Procrustean bed. Historical study indeed requires all the powers of the intellect; but at bottom it is humanism, not mechanism.

Such, at least, are some of the points I would raise in any discussion of science and objectivity in history, of where and how historians go wrong, and of the mental exercises needed to remedy this.

Yours sincerely,  
Robert Conquest