

Lousy Evidence: On the Uselessness of 'Defector' Testimony (with relation to Xinjiang)

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Some years ago now, there was self-styled 'historian' called Robert Conquest. He began his career, in 1948, working for the innocuously sounding 'Information Research Department', or IRD. This was an anti-communist unit under the auspices of the British Foreign Office. It was kept secret as long as possible (but the Russians knew about it) and was focused on developing anti-Soviet propaganda, in colonial countries and in the British labour movement. It soon became the largest unit in the Foreign Office.

Apart from a significant number of 'defectors' from the Soviet Union – in other words, anti-communist operators from the Russian bourgeoisie and aristocracy – it also employed a certain Robert Conquest. While undertaking this worthwhile task, Conquest also gathered much 'testimony' from the 'defectors'. By 1956, Conquest had more than enough material and set out to become a 'freelance' historian and writer.

The result was a series of works, of which the most well-known are:

1968. *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*.

1986. *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*.

1992. *Stalin: Breaker of Nations*.

I almost forgot the most intriguing work of all, co-authored with Jon White. It is called *What to Do When the Russians Come: A Survivor's Handbook*, published in 1984.

These works appeared at the right time, when the 'West' was desperate for information to demonise not merely Stalin, but communism as such. In these works, we find the beginnings of the notions of 'ethnic cleansing' and the 'Holodomor' (Ukrainian 'Holocaust'). For Conquest, communism was simply an evil, a blight on history, and the communist party was a secretive, paranoid outfit bent on a hellish world domination.

There was one problem: the nature of his 'evidence'. Conquest relied on the material supplied by the aforesaid 'émigrés' or 'defectors', who had escaped the evil clutches of communism to tell their stories. Lurid stories they were, with one competing with the other to tell yet another tale. Let us compare this with 'defectors' from the DPRK

(North Korea). They are paid 1 billion won (almost USD 1 million) if they have 'useful' information. You can imagine what sort of 'information' they are keen to supply.

Real historians have been less than impressed with Conquest's methods. For example, already back in 1986 Robert Thurston described Conquest's methods as 'deskbound parochialism' that made use of 'lousy evidence'. In other words, it is simply unreliable for any serious historical research.

Fast-forward to 2018-2019 and the situation in Xinjiang, China. As the confected narrative of 'ethnic cleansing' among the Uyghur minority nationality has begun to unravel in light of the full story, what have the media in a small number of former colonial countries begun to do? Trot out a 'defector'. This person proceeds to give a heart-rending account of 'torture' at the hands of the evil Chinese authorities (are not all communists incarnations of the devil?).

This is an old trick, used on many occasions in the past – the Soviet Union, DPRK, China in relation to Tibet, and now in relation to Xinjiang, China.

But it remains pure anti-communist propaganda, in the tradition of Robert Conquest. It is simply lousy evidence.