

Starving the Ukraine

SIR: The exchange between Robert Conquest and myself which began as a controversy over the Ukrainian famine of the early Thirties has unfortunately gone beyond the interpretation of historical sources and by now probably risks boring your readers. But I should like to clear up one point contained in Mr Conquest's recent letter (*LRB*, 1 October). He writes that historical revelations in the USSR are 'at this very moment massively and continuously refuting all the "revisionist" estimates and assertions'. This is not true; indeed it is Conquest's estimates that are being refuted. On 13 April of this year, a lecture at the Central House of Writers in Moscow became the forum for the release of important new information on political repression in the Thirties. A young scholar named Dmitrii Iurasov announced the results of his research in the Special and Military Collegium Archives of the USSR Supreme Court. According to his lengthy remarks from the floor (which were apparently pre-arranged and continued without interruption), the Chairman of the Supreme Court had written to Nikita Khrushchev that 612,500 persons had been rehabilitated (exonerated) from 1953-1957: about 200,000 by military tribunals, another 200,000 by local courts and the balance by other bodies. Among them, the Military Collegium had rehabilitated 31,000 who had been sentenced to death, all apparently between 1935 and 1940.

These are horrifying but interesting figures. If, as Roy Medvedev and others have written, the Khrushchev-era rehabilitations included the vast

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majority of those arrested in the Thirties, then we now have something resembling solid numbers on Stalinist repression. It is not clear whether the 612,500 rehabilitations include those arrested in the Forties and Fifties, or pertain only to the period of the Great Purges of the Thirties. In either event, if these figures are accurate, we might presume that the total number of arrests in the Great Purges was well under a million and the total number of executions was near 31,000. Readers might be interested to know that Mr Conquest in his classic *The Great Terror* estimated, in a series of curious extrapolations from literary sources, some seven to eight million arrests and roughly one million executions. Conquest's arrest estimates would appear to be high by about elevenfold; his execution guess by a factor of nearly 32. Even if some of the 612,000 arrested were subsequently shot—and we know this sometimes happened—it is clear that Conquest's estimates are, as we Americans say, not even in the ball park, while those of the revisionists are closer to the mark. Once again, archival evidence has contradicted rumours and stories. Of course 31,000 executions are in no way 'better' than a million and the lower numbers must not diminish the moral revulsion we feel at this criminality. Lives were taken and ruined on a massive scale. At the same time, it seems important to be accurate and careful in our scholarship and to avoid inflating the truth for polemical purposes.

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