

Walter Duranty and the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-1933

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Did Walter Duranty, the *New York Times'* Pulitzer Prize winning Moscow correspondent, seek to downplay, explain away or otherwise "cover up" the Ukrainian famine of 1932-1933? The evidence is not kind.

In January 1930, the communist party news organ *Pravda* announced a full-fledged campaign to collectivize Soviet agriculture. The effort to force farmers in the grain rich Ukraine and North Caucasus to sell their produce at state mandated prices, which had actually begun two years before, was met with furious resistance. Rather than accede to the state's collectivization policy, prosperous peasants known as "kulaks" slaughtered their livestock. According to S.J. Taylor, author of Stalin's Apologist: Walter Duranty, The New York Times' Man in Moscow, "by 1934, the Seventeenth Party Congress announced that more than 40 percent of all cattle in the country had been lost, together with well in excess of 60 percent of all sheep and goats. Western estimates were even higher." (Taylor 163) The party thus barred kulaks from working on collective farms and dictated they be "liquidated as a class." Between six and seven million kulaks were exiled to Central Asia and Siberia, where they were used as forced labor. The deportments led to widespread starvation in the Ukraine. At least five million people perished due to the famine.

The *New York Times*' Walter Duranty, the most famous of all Moscow journalists, repeatedly sought to diminish the effects of the famine, and even to deny its existence altogether. Duranty, the *Times*' man in the Soviet Union from 1921 to 1934, won the 1932 Pulitzer Prize for best news correspondence but had long been accused of pro-Soviet sympathies. (He claimed, for example, that the peasantry was foursquare behind collectivization.) So vociferous was the criticism of Duranty's reporting that the *Times* was referred to as the "Uptown *Daily Worker*" by detractors.¹ In March 1930, Duranty saw a train carrying kulaks to exile while visiting Central Asia, but wrote nothing at the time. In late December 1932, the Soviet Union instituted a system of internal passports for its citizens, restricting migration from the countryside to cities. Then, in the spring of 1933, Soviet authorities decreed peasants could not leave jobs at collective farms "without a contract from future employers" – effectively condemning them to death by starvation. Duranty reported these developments without probing their true purpose, and lauded the efficacy of the Soviet state in preventing urban overcrowding. (Taylor 199-200)

As Whitman Bassow writes in *The Moscow Correspondents*, by March 1932, when reports of hunger had reached Moscow, Duranty "advised the *Times* 'to the best of my knowledge there is no famine anywhere although

¹ Managing editors at the *Times* had voiced concerns about Duranty's reporting as far back as 1921. Beginning January 7, 1930, the *Times* audited Duranty's stories for pro-Soviet sentiment. Simeon Strunsky, an editorial writer for the paper and ardent anti-Bolshevik, dissected stories from Moscow in an attempt to prove bias. The result was inconclusive, but Duranty's work remained under scrutiny.

partial crop failures [had occurred in] some regions.' " In November, Duranty wrote that despite falling living standards among peasants, no evidence of "either famine (or) hunger" had been uncovered, adding in a later story, "nor is there likely to be." (Bassow 69)

After a three week tour of Rostov, Gareth Jones of the *Manchester Guardian* reported on March 30, 1933 that people in the area were suffering mass starvation. Just a day later, Duranty disputed the claim. Duranty wrote that the "novelty" of collective farming, in tandem with "spoilers" who hoped to dash its success, were principally to blame for the "mess of Soviet food production." He went on to observe, in a phrase soon to enter the popular lexicon, "you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs." There had been "serious food shortages," conceded Duranty, but he added "there is no actual starvation or deaths from starvation." Rather, there was "widespread mortality from diseases due to malnutrition." S.J. Taylor certainly had it right when condemning this transparent bit of sophistry as "the most outrageous equivocation of the period."

A ban on journalists traveling to the Ukraine prevented Duranty from witnessing the famine firsthand until September 1933. This impediment didn't stop him from writing in mid May that while an outbreak of typhus had hit the region, conditions weren't epidemic. In late August 1933, the *New York Herald's* Ralph Barnes, who had toured the Ukraine with Richard R. Stoneman of the *Chicago Daily News* in March, returned stateside and wrote

of the travel ban. Barnes speculated that Soviet officials were covering up a catastrophic situation in the countryside, and that a million people had died due to disease and starvation. Shortly thereafter, Duranty wrote an article intimating his previous stories denying the famine were due to Soviet censorship.

In an August 24 article, Duranty sent mixed signals. The story began, "The excellent harvest about to be gathered shows that any report of a famine in Russia is today an exaggeration or malignant propaganda." Later in the same paragraph, however, Duranty wrote of "the food shortage ... last year" that "has ... caused heavy loss of life." The deaths were not attributable to "actual starvation," but "manifold disease." Duranty then employed "certain approximations" to deduce that the death rate in the North Caucasus would quadruple, and that minus deaths from natural causes, two million had died in the Ukraine and lower Volga. (Bassow 70, Taylor 218) On August 25, *New York Times* colleague Fred Birchall filed a report from Berlin that conservatively placed the death toll at four million. The story made lurid reference to cannibalism. Covering his bets, Duranty quickly followed suit with an article asking why, if collective farms were "interesting tourist attractions," reporters were not allowed to visit them. Collectivism was proving more difficult to master than Soviet authorities assumed, the journalist offered rhetorically.

Finally, in September 1933, Duranty went to the Ukraine. His dispatches extolled the virtues of collective farming, rhapsodized about "mile after mile of reaped grain in the fields," and related tales of well-fed peasants and their plentiful stores of food. On September 14, he dismissed reports of famine as "sheer absurdity." Yet by the time he reached Kharkov, the character of Duranty's stories changed. He was forced to admit, he wrote, that fear of war in the Far East had prompted Soviet officials to extract too much grain from the Ukraine. "The flight of some peasants and the passive resistance (to collectivism) of others (combined to produce) a very poor harvest last year. ... Just as the writer considered that his death-rate figures for the North Caucasus were exaggerated, so he is inclined to believe that the estimate he made for the Ukraine was too low." Incredibly, as his visit to the afflicted areas came to a close, Duranty regurgitated the optimistic tone of his initial articles, contending that despite problems, even opponents of collectivism were now convinced of its merit.²

As S.J. Taylor recounts to devastating effect, in the intervening years Duranty sought to rewrite history, and his less than flattering role in reporting it. Duranty's 1935 autobiography, I Write As I Please, ignores the famine. In 1941, he admitted it was "man-made." Three years later, Duranty found at least partial explanation for the famine (and a convenient means of

² Duranty's report to the British Embassy upon returning to Moscow was less sanguine. "The Ukraine (has) been bled white, the population (is) exhausted," he admitted. "As many as ten million people may have died directly or indirectly from lack of food in the Soviet Union in the past year." (Taylor 221)

self-exculpation) in the Soviet government's diversion of Ukrainian grain to feed Red Army troops, who in 1932-1933 were preparing for war with Japan:

That was the dreadful truth of the so-called 'man-made famine' of Russia's 'Iron Age,' when Stalin was accused of causing the deaths of four or five million peasants to gratify his own brutal determination that they be socialized... or else. What a misconception! Compare it with the truth, that Japan was poised to strike and the Red Army *must* have reserves of food and gasoline. (Taylor 239)

By 1949, Duranty wrote, "Whatever Stalin's apologists may say, 1932 was a year of famine in Russia, with ... mass migration of destitute peasants from the countryside to towns and cities (and) epidemics of typhus and other diseases of malnutrition." He went on to blame the Soviet government for failing to anticipate the famine or ameliorate its effects. Given his steady defense of the Soviet regime and disavowals of the famine while it was in progress, such statements are beyond scandalous. ("Thus 'the Great Duranty,' concludes S.J. Taylor, 'wriggling on a spit of his own making.'") Whatever else Walter Duranty lacked, it certainly wasn't gall.

Still, when singling out Duranty for disapprobation, it should be noted he was not alone in discounting news of the famine. Louis Fischer, a pro-Soviet correspondent for *The Nation* and the *Baltimore Sun*, never even mentioned the famine in his stories. When Gareth Jones' piece alleging mass starvation and a million dead appeared in the *Manchester Guardian*, Fischer (then on a speaking tour in the U.S.) questioned its veracity ("Who counted them? How could anyone march through a country and count a million

people?") According to S.J. Taylor, United Press correspondent Eugene Lyons knew of the famine early on, but never went to the Ukraine to confirm the story. Taylor quotes Louis Fischer, who remarked that Lyons "limited his Russian experience to Moscow social circles, rather than studying villages or factories." Lyons, who detested and envied Duranty, asserted the *New York Times'* journalist consorted with the KGB to obtain favored treatment. Reporters who knew Duranty laughed off the charge and nothing of the kind was ever proven.

The stronger charge is that Duranty softened his coverage of the famine to preserve access to top Soviet officials, which in turn ensured his continuing status as the preeminent Western correspondent in Moscow. More than anything, this seems to be what motivated Duranty.³ His editors at the *New York Times* were surely aware of these priorities, but failed to address the situation in any meaningful way. The result, let it be said, was shameful. Fittingly, Joe Stalin has the last word on Walter Duranty:

You have done a good job in your reporting on the U.S.S.R. Although you are not a Marxist, you tried to tell the truth about our country and to understand it and explain it to your readers. I might say that you bet on our horse to win when others thought it had no chance, and I am sure you have not lost by it. (Bassow 89)

³ *Manchester Guardian* journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, who immortalized Duranty as the fictional Moscow correspondent "Jefferson" in his novel *Winter in Moscow*, drew the measure of the man: "His basic impression of the world (was as a) place where men, in their unutterable folly, tore out each other's hearts and probed cruelly into each other's souls; but where an intelligent minority, standing apart, directing, controlling, orating, buying and selling, writing, was able, not merely to be immune from, but even to profit by, these disasters." (Muggeridge 180-181)

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