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## **A Blanket of Silence:**

### **The Response of the Western Press Corps in Moscow to the Ukraine Famine of 1932-33**

It is a chilly autumn evening in 1933. At the imposing edifice of New York's Waldorf-Astoria, some fifteen hundred dignitaries have gathered to celebrate one of the great events of history: diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union by the United States of America. It has been a long time in coming--many believed it could never happen--and in the hall where this throng of interested parties has gathered, optimism courses through the air like electrical impulses.

For the Western capitalists in attendance, there is the possibility of a new trading partner, much needed in these troubled times; for the Soviets--the satisfaction not only of survival, but also, of success. They have prospered when others wished them ill.

On occasions like these, men cast about for a symbolic figure--a single person who embodies the spirit of the moment. On this night, they find him in Walter Duranty. As each dignitary is introduced to the audience, he stands to receive a modest round of applause. But when Walter Duranty's name rings out over the loud speaker and the master of ceremonies identifies him as "one of the great foreign correspondents of modern times," the crowd spontaneously rises to its feet and, for the first time, cheer. For Duranty, it is the crowning glory of a brilliant career--a personal triumph for the man who had predicted that the Bolshevik regime, against all odds, was here to stay.

Duranty seemed an unlikely candidate for such heroic stuff. Short, bald, less than handsome, he walked with a limp from the loss of a leg in a train wreck some years before. Yet, to all those assembled at the Waldorf-Astoria that night, Duranty, more than anyone else present, was the man of the hour. He, more than any other figure, helped bring this union to fruition.

Walter Duranty was the *New York Times'* man in Moscow, with more than a dozen years in the Soviet capital under his belt. He had covered the early years of Militant Communism, the death of Lenin, the rise of Stalin, the expulsion of Trotsky. His dispatches on Stalin's Five-Year Plan had won him, in 1932, the Pulitzer Prize. The panel reaching the decision said Duranty's stories were "marked by scholarship, profundity, impartiality, sound judgement and exceptional clarity..." Walter Duranty was a world figure--the best known foreign correspondent in the world, the most highly paid and certainly the most controversial.

A much traveled man, Duranty was at home in all the major capitals of the world. He was a brilliant intellectual, educated at Cambridge, with a keen sense of humor and an aggressive way of speaking. As the world's leading expert on the Soviet Union, he delighted in taking a pro-Soviet stance, causing consternation to many. He saw Stalin as one of the world's great statesmen. Most recently, there had arisen a typical Duranty controversy, one that reached the newspapers in the form of a debate. It began when a translator working for Eugene Lyons--one of Duranty's fellow correspondents--found a tiny account in a local newspaper of "a rampage" against the then secret police, the GPU, that had taken place in the Kuban. Lyons didn't bother going. A couple of other Americans did.

Ralph Barnes of the *New York Herald Tribune* and William Stoneman of the *Chicago Daily News* saw, or believed they saw, famine and both wrote stories describing the conditions they witnessed. Knowing these would be rejected by the censors in Moscow, they sent them out "by an obliging German Jewish fur buyer" who was returning to Berlin.

Despite his friendship with both men, Duranty publicly resisted the idea. He had covered the famine of 1921 and knew how one tale leads on to another--especially with the Russian peasants who, in any event, were prone to wild exaggeration. Privately, however, Duranty had--at least three months before Barnes and Stoneman's report--noted "a breakdown in agriculture" and a worrying shortage of labor and draft power. His report to this effect found its way into the papers of the British Foreign Office, after it was duly recorded by William Strang, Counsellor to the British embassy in Moscow. Duranty told Strang that the peasants' slaughter of livestock in 1930 in resistance to forced collectivization, and its continuation "by fits and starts" since then, plus a serious shortage of fodder, meant that the livestock population of the country had shrunk to "only about 40 per cent of the population in 1929." Current grain collections, Duranty conceded, were "going badly." Providing enough food for the workers was a problem, even now, when fruit and vegetables were still available from the summer before. "But what of the late winter and early spring?," he asked Strang.<sup>1</sup>

Within a month of this exchange, on the 6th of December, 1932, Duranty again visited the British embassy, this time as a result of a dispatch he had written on the agricultural situation. It seemed the Soviets had viewed his report as being far too unfavorable and shortly after its publication,

Duranty was visited by emissaries . . . who reproached him with his unfaithfulness. How could he, who had been so fair for ten years, choose this moment to stab them in the back and when the prospects of recognition by the U.S.A. were brightening? What did he mean by it, and did he not realise that the consequences for himself might be serious? Let him take this warning.<sup>2</sup>

Strang duly recorded the conversation and sent it, as was customary, along to the British Foreign Office in London, where staff participated in a favorite pastime: speculation about the motives and sympathies of the Moscow colony.

But exhaustive as these were, no mention ever reached the Foreign Office files of a new and unexpected event in Walter Duranty's personal life. His Russian mistress Katya had become pregnant at the end of the summer and was expecting their child in the spring. Duranty's son, Michael, would be born in April 1933 --at the height of a famine that would result in the death of between seven and nine million peasants. From the point of view of Duranty, the timing couldn't have been worse. From the point of view of the Soviet authorities, it couldn't have been better--not even if they had planned it themselves.

It was during the lead-up to this famine that Malcolm Muggeridge arrived in Moscow, in September of 1932, accompanied by his wife Kitty, the niece of prominent British socialist Beatrice Webb. Muggeridge had made arrangements for a time to string for the *Manchester Guardian* in order to support himself and his growing family, but this he viewed as only a temporary expedient. His real purpose in coming to the Soviet Union was to join in the great effort of "building Socialism." And he had every intention of relinquishing his British citizenship and becoming a citizen of the new Soviet state.

In the course of his movement, he visited the Moscow markets and was suitably delighted by the ebb and flow of deals taking place there. In his fictionalized account of the experience, *Winter in Moscow*, it is this visit to the marketplace of the character Pye, who was in actuality Muggeridge

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<sup>1</sup> Strang on Duranty, British Embassy Dispath, 14 Nov. 1932.

<sup>2</sup> British Embassy Dispatch, 6 Dec. 1932.

himself, that is the turning point of his stay in the Soviet Union. Watching a piece of sausage change hands, he sees a bearded peasant stuff it "greedily into his mouth; then, as he gobbled, retched."

Something in his face as he gobbled and retched; something animal, desperate, fearful; appetite and disgust mingled in the two actions of gobbling and retching, brought a sudden doubt into Pye's mind. The man is starving, he thought. Were the others starving? Was there the same look in their eyes as in his? Were they, like him, pale and agonised with starvation?

The doubt haunted him on his way back to his hotel. He saw hunger everywhere; in the faces that hurried past him, and in the patient queues, and in the empty shops, dimly lighted and decorated with red streamers, whose windows contained only busts of Marx and Lenin and Stalin. Stone busts exposed to ravenous eyes. Instead of bread, the law and the prophets offered as tasty morsels to a famished population. . . .

Pye thought things out over dinner. In the first place it was absurd to imagine that the Dictatorship of the Proletariat would serve such an excellent meal to him, a foreigner, if their own people were going short . . . He must keep his head. Not get hysterical. The great English Liberal newspaper wanted facts, the truth, and not impressions of sudden emotional reaction.<sup>3</sup>

This was the fictional character's response. The real Malcolm Muggeridge put the idea out of his mind, at least for the time being. For one thing, his wife had become seriously ill, and it suddenly became necessary for him to devote all his time to caring for her. For another, the idea--viewed in the cold light of day--seemed utterly preposterous.

A young Arthur Koestler, later to make a name for himself as a writer of philosophy and fiction, passed the winter of 1932-33 in Kharkiv, then the capital of Ukraine. It was a terrible time, he wrote later, that winter when the famine began to claim the lives of the children in the Ukrainian countryside. They looked to him like "embryos out of alcohol bottles." <sup>4</sup> Traveling through the countryside by rail was "like running the gauntlet; the stations were lined with begging peasants with swollen hands and feet, the women holding up to the carriage-windows horrible infants with enormous wobbling heads, stick-like limbs, swollen, pointed bellies." <sup>5</sup> Soon after, Soviet authorities began to require that the shades of all windows be pulled down on trains traveling through the North Caucasus, Ukraine, and the Volga basin. To Koestler, it was most unreal to see the local newspapers full of reports of industrial progress and successful shock workers, but "not one word about the local famine, epidemics, the dying out of whole villages. . . The enormous land, " he wrote, "was covered with a blanket of silence." <sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, the Soviets, dismayed with the adverse publicity caused by the publication of Barnes' and Stoneman's reports in the United States, put a ban on further visits by foreign correspondents to the area. Despite this, the increasingly disenchanted Malcolm Muggeridge began to report events in the countryside with a new toughness. In early January 1933, he wrote a penetrating article for the *Guardian* pointing to the major problems of collectivization. The most competent farmers who were expected to produce the raw materials for export to finance planned industrial programs were

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<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge *Winter in Moscow* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1934), 134-35.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1945). 142.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

being, in Muggeridge's words, "booted about." Vastly over-optimistic estimates for the spring harvest had given a completely false sense of expectation to the authorities, with the probable effect that food supplies for many areas were now under threat. Muggeridge concluded that "not enough grain has been collected to feed the towns properly." <sup>7</sup>

Six weeks after writing this clearly stated account of events, Muggeridge found an equally uncomplicated way of documenting them. Informing no one, he bought a train ticket and simply set off for Kiev and Rostov-on-Don.<sup>8</sup> In a series of articles published in the *Guardian* at the end of March 1933, he confirmed the existence of widespread famine in his eyewitness account. The peasant population, he wrote, was starving:

I mean starving in its absolute sense; not undernourished as, for instance, most Oriental peasants. . . and some unemployed workers in Europe, but having had for weeks next to nothing to eat.

'We have nothing. They have taken everything away. . . .'<sup>9</sup>

"It was true," Muggeridge wrote. "The famine is an organized one." In Kuban, well-fed troops were being used to control and coerce peasants who were in many cases starving to death. The supplies of grain sent into the area were being used to feed the troops who, along with Party activists, were still searching barns and cellars for hidden grain or hoarded food. Meanwhile, Muggeridge reported, there were "fields choked with weeds, cattle dead, people starving and dispirited, no horses for ploughing or for transport, not even adequate supplies of seed for the spring sowing." These facts, along with the ominously "deserted villages," led inescapably to the conclusion that "altogether in the qualitative sense, collectivisation was a failure."<sup>10</sup>

In Rostov-on-Don, Muggeridge found a populace "dressed in tatters" and slowed by "lethargy." Many of the peasants had bodies swollen from hunger, and there was an "all-pervading sight and smell of death." When he asked why they did not have enough to eat, the inevitable answer came that the food had been taken by the government. It was, Muggeridge wrote, an ironic ending to Stalin's optimistic words about collectivization.<sup>11</sup> He concluded: "To say that there is a famine in some of the most fertile parts of Russia is to say much less than the truth; there is not only famine but--in the case of the North Caucasus at least--a state of war, a military occupation."<sup>12</sup> Like Duranty, Muggeridge reported his findings privately to the British Embassy in Moscow and his conversation was duly repeated in Foreign Office reports. They told of "frequent cases of suicides and sometimes even of cannibalism. . . the conditions would have been incredible to [Muggeridge] if he had not seen them with his own eyes."<sup>13</sup>

But the stories, smuggled out via a diplomatic bag,<sup>14</sup> seemed to Muggeridge to have been displayed in a less than prominent position by the *Guardian*--despite a continuing interest in the topic that showed up in the paper's "Letters to the Editor" columns. Later, he would say that they had been

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<sup>7</sup> Muggeridge "The Price of Russia's 'Plan': Virtual Breakdown of Agriculture; Officials Shot; The Problem of Food Supplies," *Manchester Guardian*, 12 Jan. 1933, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Marco Carynnyk "The Famine the *Times* Couldn't Find" *Commentary*, Nov. 1983, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> Muggeridge "The Soviet and the Peasantry; An Observer's Notes; I. Famine in North Caucasus; Whole Villages Exiled," *Manchester Guardian*, 25 March 1933, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 27 March 1933, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 28 March 1933, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> British Embassy Dispatch, 21 March 1933.

<sup>14</sup> Muggeridge to SJT, in an interview 27 Oct. 1987.

altered or, in his own words, "mutilated" by his editors.<sup>15</sup> An embittered idealist, Muggeridge left the Soviet Union immediately. Throughout his lifetime, he believed the famine to be "one of the most monstrous crimes in history, so terrible that people in the future will scarcely be able to believe it ever happened."<sup>16</sup>

In answer to these and other charges, on the 31st of March 1933, Duranty wrote an important dispatch, one that was destined to become the rationale for every excess of the Stalinist regime. He wrote:

To put it brutally, you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, and the Bolshevik leaders are just as indifferent to the casualties that may be involved in their drive toward socialism as any General during the World War who ordered a costly attack in order to show his superiors that he and his division possessed the proper soldierly spirit. In fact the Bolsheviki are more indifferent because they are animated by fanatical conviction.<sup>17</sup>

Duranty was ready to agree that there had been "serious food shortages;" there was no question of that. But on the question of starvation, he was adamant: "There is no actual starvation or deaths from starvation but there is widespread mortality from diseases due to malnutrition, especially in the Ukraine, North Caucasus, and Lower Volga" Duranty's statement remains the most outrageous equivocation of the period. Yet, at the time, it seemed to have pacified almost everyone.

"The 'famine' is mostly bunk," Duranty wrote to his best friend in late June of 1933, "except maybe in Kazakhstan and the Altai where they wouldn't let you go."<sup>18</sup>

The story was now several months old, and as William Henry Chamberlin later wrote, "[f]ew correspondents were inclined to risk difficulties with the censorship by sending the story of events which had occurred some months past."<sup>19</sup>

Although the ban lasted six months--from early spring through summer--it was not until late August that Chamberlin, writing for *Christian Science Monitor*, actually mentioned it in one of his dispatches back to America. This occurred only a short time before Soviet authorities allowed correspondents back into the area. Then, in the last days of the month, Ralph Barnes--who had so upset Soviet officials by going into Ukraine with William Stoneman earlier in the year--returned home to the U.S. and published a report on the ban. The only conclusion that could be drawn from this regulation which prohibited travel in Ukraine and North Caucasus, Barnes reasoned, was that there were terrible conditions the authorities were determined to keep under wraps. He estimated that there were "as many as one million now dead from diseases and outright hunger."<sup>20</sup>

Just returning from one of his many junkets abroad, Duranty churned out a rather hurried and uncertain dispatch. In its complete lack of direction, it suggested (while still sticking to his guns) his earlier position on regional food shortages may have been a result of the rigorous censorship to which his work was being subjected. He began by saying that officials in Moscow scorned any "help" that the Nazis in Germany might want to offer in order to alleviate the effects of a famine. As to the famine itself, which was now being reported as worse "than that of 1921," he wished to point out that these

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<sup>15</sup> Carrynyk, "The Famine the *Times* Couldn't Find," p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Duranty "Russians Hungry But Not Starving, *The New York Times*, 31 March 1933, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Duranty to H.R. Knickerbocker, 27 June 1933, H.R. Knickerbocker Papers, Columbia University, New York.

<sup>19</sup> William Henry Chamberlin *The Ukraine: A Submerged Nation* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 61.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Barnes "Millions Feared Dead of Hunger in South Russia," *New York Herald Tribune*, 21 Aug. 1933, p.7.

stories had originated in "uncensored dispatches from Berlin" --whatever that statement intended to imply. He then spoke of the "growing tendency" in recent months for Moscow "to try to cover up or minimize the difficulties--for foreign consumption."

He made cryptic reference to "heavy costs for the Russian people," saying: "until this harvest the picture was dark enough."<sup>21</sup> Despite these tactics, the story came off as a pathetic attempt to sideline his earlier stubborn denial of the famine. It was the kind of thing that made it easy for Malcolm Muggeridge to lampoon Duranty:

He'd been asked to write something about the food shortage, and was trying to put together a thousand words which, if the famine got worse and known outside Russia, would suggest that he'd foreseen and foretold it, but which, if it got better and wasn't known outside Russia, would suggest that all along he'd pooh-poohed the possibility of there being a famine.<sup>22</sup>

Three days later, Duranty gave it another try, but the results remained sadly inadequate. He ventured to suggest that the death rate in the North Caucasus would be quadruple the usual rate. As to Ukraine and the lower Volga area, the normal death rate for forty million would be one million. "Lacking official figures," Duranty wrote, "it is conservative to suppose that this was at least trebled last year in those provinces and considerably increased for the Soviet Union as a whole." Thus, in a roundabout way, Duranty was giving his estimate of the number dead there at two million in addition to the million that would have died anyway from natural causes.<sup>23</sup>

This was the last of Walter Duranty's armchair estimates, for just about the time this report was published, the Soviets lifted the ban on the affected area. At long last, in September 1933, Walter Duranty headed south to report the famine.

Duranty spent the first few days going around the towns and markets in the North Caucasus, interviewing heads of the central administration and other officials. At the beginning, he and AP correspondent Stanley Richardson, who travelled with him, were limited to a radius of about twenty to thirty miles. Later, they ventured further afield.<sup>24</sup>

His first three stories were datelined from Rostov-on-Don, the heart of the famine district. Consisting mostly of the praise for the operating procedures used on the communal farms he visited, they merited such headlines as "Soviet is Winning Faith of Peasants," "Members Enriched in Soviet Commune" and "Abundance Found in North Caucasus." He spoke of happy workers, plentiful harvests, congenial conditions. Any talk of famine, he said in a dispatch published on the 14th of September, was "a sheer absurdity." Duranty now felt safe enough to take back his original estimate of two million victims, and his dispatch was smug and self-congratulatory.<sup>25</sup>

But he spoke too soon.

Once he reached Kharkiv, new evidence forced him to change his tack dramatically. Early last year, under the pressure of the war danger in the Far East," he reluctantly admitted,

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<sup>21</sup> Duranty, "Famine Report Scorned," *The New York Times*, 21 Aug. 1933, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Muggeridge *Winter in Moscow*, p. 171.

<sup>23</sup> Duranty "Famine Toll Heavy in Southern Russia," *The New York Times*, 24 Aug. 1933, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> British Embassy Dispatch, 30 Sept. 1933.

<sup>25</sup> Duranty, "Abundance Found in North Caucasus," *The New York Times* 14 Sept. 1933, p. 14. The other two stories were published 11 Sept. 1933, 0. 11 and 15 Sept. 1933, p. 11.

the authorities took too much grain from the Ukraine. Meanwhile, a large number of peasants thought they could change the Communist party's collectivization policy by refusing to cooperate. Those two circumstances together--the flight of some peasants and the passive resistance of others--produced a very poor harvest last year, and even part of that was never reaped. The situation in the winter was undoubtedly bad. 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.<sup>26</sup>

That estimate had been three times the normal death rate, but since Duranty did not mention in his dispatch the number of inhabitants or what the death rate was, the actual figure remained unspecified. The only clue he offered to the devastation was a comparison of the famine to the Battle of Verdun. By this, Duranty no doubt intended to indicate the extreme gravity of the famine. But his symbol of ultimate carnage fell short of the mark. As scholar Marco Carynnyk has pointed out, during World War I, people were dying at the rate of 6000 per day; in Ukraine, peasants had died at the rate of *25,000* [italics mine] per day.<sup>27</sup>

There was a moral to all this, Duranty concluded, a lesson well learned: "Those who do not work do not eat."<sup>28</sup>

By the end of his ten-day trip into the area, Duranty had returned to the original tone of reporting that marked his first three stories -- statements of praise and support for the commune in general. The government, he believed, had youth on its side, and even those who had once been skeptical of the success of the communal way of farming had now been convinced. But, he stressed, the workers on the farms were new to the area, and many had been there for only six months. As to where they had come from and why they were there, he offered only vague and unsatisfactory answers. "The Kremlin," he wrote quite accurately, "has won its battle."<sup>29</sup>

Within days of returning to Moscow, Duranty turned in a full spoken report of his trip to the British Embassy. It painted a much grimmer picture of what he had seen than the one in his found it necessary to send everyone on the farm into the fields, with the exception of the top two administrative officials. The fields there had been full of weeds. Some settlements had been completely deserted and among those that were populated, the differences were enormous. He noted the low numbers of livestock everywhere and a complete absence of small cattle and poultry. In Kharkiv, conditions were much worse, and Duranty's movements were constricted by close supervision. Throughout the difficult year, peasants had flooded into the city, dying off "like flies." There was mention of houses standing open and deserted, and of corpses.

Summing up, Duranty said: "The Ukraine has been bled white. The population was exhausted and if the peasants were 'double-crossed' by the Government again no one could say what would happen." Finally he thought it "quite possible that as many as 10 million people may have died directly or indirectly from lack of food in the Soviet Union during the past year."<sup>30</sup> This estimate was the highest ever ventured of victims of the famine of 1932-33.

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<sup>26</sup> Duranty "Big Soviet Crop Follows Famine," *The New York Times* 16 Sept. 1933, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Carynnyk, "The Famine the *Times* Couldn't Find," p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Duranty "Big Soviet Crop," p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Duranty "Big Ukraine Crop Taxes Harvesters," *The New York Times*, 18 Sept. 1933, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> British Embassy Dispatch, 30 Sept. 1933.

In another trenchant scene from Malcolm Muggeridge's political satire *Winter in Moscow*, the character Jefferson, who is in fact Walter Duranty, explains the proper interpretation of events going on in the countryside at the time:

'Of course there's a shortage in some districts,' Jefferson said in a tone of emphatic finality. 'No one denies that. You might even call it in certain rare cases a famine. But, as I said in a piece I sent a few days ago, you can't make omelettes without cracking eggs.

'You sure can't,' Stoope agreed enthusiastically. 'I like that phrase. No omelettes without cracking eggs. Very illuminating. Thank you.'<sup>31</sup>

The phrase did seem to take on a life of its own, turning up again and again in Duranty's work and in the work of others. It was to become the historical rationale for the whole of the process of modernization as epitomized by the Five-Year Plan.

It was only a few weeks after he returned from Ukraine that Duranty was to make his well-publicized trip to the United States, crossing the Atlantic alongside Maxim Litvinov, himself on his way to Washington to work out the few remaining details before the United States was to officially recognize the Soviet Union. What awaited Duranty was a "cheap triumph" predicted by a cynical staff member at the British Embassy.

He found that moment of triumph at the celebratory dinner in New York in late November 1933, when the crowd went wild, cheering and applauding their approval of "the great Duranty." He also found it in the exclusive interview granted him one month later, on Christmas Day, by Stalin himself. The sentiments of the great dictator, recounted so often by Duranty as proof of his importance on the world stage, seem in retrospect to take on new and sinister meaning. Said Stalin: "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."<sup>32</sup>

Close quarters, a keen sense of competition, jealousy, and gratuitous ill-will: these were the realities beneath the surface among the Western press corps in Moscow during the 1930s. Young reporters were quickly initiated into the personal rivalries among factions. The Soviet Press Office not only knew a great deal about this but also exploited the situation as often as possible in a policy of 'divide and conquer' which, for the most part, worked out better than even they themselves could have hoped.

There was the Cholerton-Duranty split, which tended to spill over into the memoranda of the British Embassy Staff. A.T. Cholerton reported mainly for English newspapers, and his wit rivaled even that of the "the great Duranty." Asked by ingenuous Western visitors whether or not the Soviets respected the principle of *habeas corpus*, Cholerton responded that it had been replaced by the concept of *habeas cadaver*.

William Henry Chamberlin came into the Soviet capital at about the same time as Cholerton, and had been there long enough for most people to forget that his original sympathies had been with the Bolsheviks. It was only after a considerable period of attrition that he earned his reputation with the British Embassy as the most dependable of the Western reporters.

Louis Fischer, who wrote for *The Nation* and the *Baltimore Sun*, began as a fellow traveller, sticking to his version of the truth until well after the purges. He consistently reported the more favorable side of the Soviet experiment and generally stayed out of the venomous exchanges among his colleagues.

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<sup>31</sup> Muggeridge, *Winter in Moscow*, p. 90

<sup>32</sup> Duranty, *I Write As I Please* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1935), pp. 166-67.



The same could not be said of Eugene Lyons, whose relentless attacks on Walter Duranty contributed to a continuing over-simplification of his character, especially in the years after Duranty's death. Lyons had always been baffled by Duranty's psychological distancing from what was happening in the Soviet Union. He himself had come in full of enthusiasm, an eager admirer of Stalin, the Five-Year Plan, and all things Soviet. Ever since Duranty upstaged Lyons after he wrote up a cloying interview with Stalin in 1930, he had been gunning for Duranty.<sup>33</sup>

It would be Lyons who would later say that Duranty had been provided an automobile, a particularly comfortable apartment and a mistress by the KGB. The car apparently always rankled Lyons, and he said that the loss of a leg seemed a small price to pay for the convenience of having an automobile in crowded Moscow.<sup>34</sup>

Putting aside the trivial and misleading accusations of Lyons about Duranty's apartment and car--both paid for by *The New York Times*--what about those concerning Duranty's mistress Katya? We can certainly assume that Katya was reporting regularly to the NKVD, and to the GPU before them, since shakedowns of the Russian servants, translators, and secretaries of foreign correspondents were commonplace in Moscow. Western newsmen generally assumed that any Russian associates would be required to report on a regular basis, and most of them put it down to their employees and girlfriends doing what they had to, in order to survive. If a reporter needed to talk privately, he usually went to a public place or took a long walk.<sup>35</sup>

There were other misleading accusations not only from Lyons but also from Cholerton, from Fischer, from Chamberlin--from virtually everyone. In all this intellectual crossfire of accusation and belittlement, there was an unpleasant smell of fear. Beyond the normal professional frictions among competing reporters, the corruption and treachery of Stalin's regime does appear to have made itself felt on this tiny elite community. Later, in the aftermath of the famine and of the purges, when the true nature of the regime at last became widely known, they would turn one against the other as they searched for someone to carry the blame.

As for Walter Duranty, he was a complicated man, "more than a simple crook," as Muggeridge put it, and his motivations are not easily divined. Particularly confusing was Duranty's amoral stance. Duranty consistently discarded "moral issues," believing them to be irrelevant to the job of a reporter. Indeed, such issues had never interested the unconventional Duranty, who affected an immunity from any kind of morality throughout his life. The deeply held moral convictions of other men served only to make Duranty uncomfortable, and he liked to believe that he was better than them because he was free from the bonds that tied their hands.

At times, he appeared to worry about his remarkable lack of interest in the outcome of human affairs, and felt obliged to make public apologies of a sort:

I did not particularly ask myself whether a path was right or wrong; for some reason I have never been deeply concerned with that phase of the question. Right and wrong are evasive terms at best and I have never felt that it was my problem--or that of any other reporter--to sit in moral judgement. What I want to know is whether a policy or a political line or a regime will work or not, and I refuse to let myself be side-tracked by

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<sup>33</sup> Eugene Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1937). p. 519.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 214-15.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Kerr to SJT, in an interview 15 March 1979.

moral issues or by abstract questions as to whether the said policy or line or regime would be suited to a different country and different circumstances.<sup>36</sup>

Duranty did not believe he was less realistic about the Bolshevik regime because he "failed to stress casualties so hard as some of [his] colleagues" any more than the fact that, in his war reporting, he had stressed victories more than the losses in human lives.

I saw too much useless slaughter in the World War--for that matter I think the War itself was useless, unless you believe that Hitler in the Kaiser's place is a benefit to humanity--to allow my judgement of results to be biased by the losses or suffering involved. I'm a reporter, not a humanitarian, and if a reporter can't see the wood for trees he can't describe the wood. You may call that special pleading or call me callous, and perhaps it is true, but you can't blame me for it: you must blame the War, because that was where my mental skin got thickened.<sup>37</sup>

Those were the reasons Walter Duranty advanced as to the source of his failures as a reporter, perhaps as a man.

But what of the other members of the Moscow press corps? How much better had they fared?

Ralph Barnes and the young William Stoneman had indeed travelled into the famine-stricken area earlier, with the result that a ban was imposed against further trips by journalists. The only person who had actually defied the ban was the implacable Malcolm Muggeridge, who broke a story he discovered most people didn't want to hear about--one which proved to be the signal event of his life. As well as Muggeridge, William Henry Chamberlin, Duranty's keenest competitor, turned in impressive reports of what had happened. Oddly enough, Chamberlin's dispatches to the *Christian Science Monitor*, sent directly from the stricken areas shortly after Duranty's in September 1933, were thin and watery, no doubt under the threat of the Soviet Press Office. They amounted to little more than four short rundowns which, like Duranty's, were more notable for what they did not reveal than for what they did.

But in the middle of the following month, in what were clearly uncensored stories, he published a series of five hard-hitting and thorough articles in *The Manchester Guardian*, describing in detail what he had seen in the Soviet countryside. They were a logical follow-up to Muggeridge's dispatches written seven months before. On his return to Moscow from the famine area, Chamberlin, like Muggeridge and Duranty, had reported his findings to the British Embassy. He estimated four to five million dead -- about half as many as Duranty had indicated.<sup>38</sup> Later, Chamberlin would revise and increase his estimate to seven million.

Like Muggeridge, Chamberlin would find the famine the turning point in his life and he returned to the United States a hard-line right-wing conservative. During the 1950s, he would become a staunch supporter of Senator Joe McCarthy, moving from one extreme to the other in a reactive attempt to halt the growth of a system he knew was malignant.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Duranty *I Write as I Please*, p. 197.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>38</sup> British Embassy Dispatch, 14 Oct. 1933.

<sup>39</sup> Muggeridge *Chronicles of Wasted Time. The Green Stick*, Vol. 1 (London: Collins 1972), p. 241.

The leftist Louis Fischer, on the other hand, never reported the famine at all and was in Denver when reports began to surface. Even from that great distance, Fischer was not content to let the matter go. From Denver, he called into question estimates of a million or more dead:

Who counted them? How could anyone march through a country and count a million people? Of course people are hungry there--desperately hungry. Russia is turning over from agriculture to industrialism. It's like a man going into business on small capital.<sup>40</sup>

In a way, Eugene Lyons's record on the famine was even worse than Fischer's. He had been among the first to hear of it, initially suggested by the investigations of his own secretary and later confirmed by the findings of Barnes and Stoneman. But Lyons declined to go into the famine-stricken area, or, as Bill Stoneman later put it, he "never went down to view the performance."<sup>41</sup> The zealous Lyons fulminated about moral and ethical issues, but he had shown little inclination himself to interrupt what was an unusually successful social life in Moscow by documenting what he would later not hesitate to call "Stalin's wholesale destruction of human life."<sup>42</sup> Suffice it to say that Lyons learned quickly that it was easy enough to divert blame from himself and onto others by protesting much, long and often.

Consider the entire Moscow press corps -- Muggeridge, Chamberlin, Fischer, Lyons, Duranty, and all the rest--and their editors back home; add the reports carried in the newspapers of France, even of Canada, the whole lot. What kind of record did they make? In the free and unfettered press of the West, fewer words were actually published on the subject of the famine than the number of men women and children who had perished. Even by the most conservative estimates of famine victims, the average must have been something like one word printed for every one hundred forty deaths.

The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33 remains the greatest man-made disaster every recorded, exceeding in scale even the Jewish Holocaust of the next decade. It was Walter Duranty's destiny to become the symbol for the West's failure to recognize and understand it at the time.

When all is said and done, he alone, of all the witnesses to the terrible events, had sufficient prestige and prominence to exert an influence. Walter Duranty stood perhaps in a unique position in the history of journalism. There had been before him and would be after, journalists who told their particular stories, took their chances, and let the chips fall where they might: men with a compelling regard for the truth. Had Duranty, a Pulitzer Prize-winner at the peak of his celebrity, spoken out loud and clear in the pages of *The New York Times*, the world could not have ignored him as it did Muggeridge and Jones and events may have, conceivably, taken a different turn. If Duranty had taken a stand, he might now be considered one of the century's great, uncompromising reporters. But he did not.

When it came to discretion and expedience, the Western establishment that feted him, no less so than the Kremlin, had found their man.

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<sup>40</sup> James William Crowl, *Angels in Stalin's Paradise* (Lanham, Maryland: The University Press of America, 1982 quoting Fischer, p. 157).

<sup>41</sup> William Stoneman to Harrison Salisbury, 16 May 1979.

<sup>42</sup> Eugene Lyons, *Stalin: Czar of all the Russias* (New York: Lippincott, 1940), p. 16.





