

A Faraway Country

To talk about the way the “contemporaneous media” treated the Holodomor, at least in the Anglo-Saxon lands, is to be asked, for the most part, to describe silence, punctuated by interludes of distortion and, just the most occasional flares of truth, of which those set by Gareth Jones shone by far the brightest:

“My tramp through the villages was about to begin...”

Nigel has discussed what Gareth did.

But Gareth was not quite alone.

There were other voices. Some, such as H. R. Knickerbocker of the *New York Evening Post* (March 29th, 1933) merely repeated what Jones had told them.

“Russia [sic] is in the grip of a famine which is proving as disastrous as the catastrophe of 1921 when millions died, reported Gareth Jones of Great Britain...”

And Edgar Mowrer of the *Chicago Daily News* pretty much did the same thing.

But there were others:

My own first encounter with the true story of the Holodomor was in 1979, nearly half a century after Jones’s walk through the emptying villages of Ukraine. I was doing graduate studies in Belgium and had struck up a friendship with a student of Ukrainian heritage, based initially on the fact that I had recognized (and I apologize for the pronunciation) the *Tryzub* on his briefcase for what it was.

One Sunday I was invited to lunch by his family. We were talking about Ukraine—I had revealed that I was interested in Soviet history—and my friend’s father asked me if I had heard about the great famine that had ravaged the Ukraine in the early 1930s.

“Something, yes: a side-effect of collectivization,” I said, “Kulaks.”

Let’s pause to consider the implications of that comment. I was fairly well-read in Soviet history, and I was distinctly anti-Soviet, but Kulaks were what I knew. I had not heard of Rafael Lemkin then.

Well, yes, “Kulaks”, said my friend’s father, but quite a bit more. And then he went to another room and came back with some faded photocopies of old American newspapers. In the space of twenty minutes, my understanding of the Soviet past changed for good. And here I am today.

I cannot remember for sure what those papers were. Perhaps they were the three articles that Jones had himself written for syndication in William Randolph Hearst’s newspapers in January 1935. Maybe they were something written by William Stoneman of the *Chicago Daily News* or

the more cautious Ralph Barnes of the *New York Herald Tribune*, both of whom smuggled reports of the famine out of the USSR early in 1933. Possibly they were an account in none other than the *New York Times*. The Berlin-based Frederick Birchall, citing sources there, referred in an August 25, 1933 article to a death toll of around four million. I don't think Walter Duranty approved. No Pulitzer for Birchall!

Most likely, however, it was one or two out of a series of luridly-illustrated (I remember being appalled by the photographs) articles that Thomas Walker had written for the *New York Evening Journal* (a Hearst publication), also in 1935, describing the immense tragedy that had settled on the Ukraine. You can see them on the display outside. Walker had written of six million dead, and of villages wiped out by starvation. Unfortunately, Mr. Walker's account comes with some rather considerable problems: We will come back to those.

The *Evening Journal* was also to republish a series of articles originally written in Yiddish for *The Forward* by the Russian-born (and socialist) Harry Lang that again made no effort to minimize what had happened, a series of articles that generated such a storm of protest that *The Forward* published a statement saying that Lang had written the piece "on his own responsibility."

On May 8, 1935, *The Nation* sniffed:

"The spectacle of a professed socialist, no matter how renegade, combining forces with the most unscrupulous and reactionary journalist in America in a campaign of misrepresentation regarding the first Socialist country is bound to be misleading... [Hearst] knows that his ends can best be served by throwing a smokescreen over the amazing progress which the Soviet Union has made in the past two years. By attempting to discredit communism in distant Russia, he is merely resorting to an easy and dishonest method of attacking radicalism of all varieties in Russia."

Support from Hearst was a two-edged sword. The good news was that he was keeping the story alive. The bad news was that his reputation (not undeserved) for journalistic unscrupulousness and, shall we say, partisan vigor, could be used to discredit the all too true story that he was on this occasion trying to tell. It didn't help that by 1935 things had improved somewhat. Talk of 1934 and 1935 could be used to obscure 1932/33. Note Fischer's references to *two years*.

And *The Nation* that criticized Hearst was the same *The Nation* that described Walter Duranty's work 'as the most enlightening, dispassionate and readable despatches from a great nation in the making which appeared in any nation in the world.'

And this was the same *The Nation* that, in the shape of its Moscow correspondent, Louis Fischer (later in life a repentant figure and a contributor to the distinctly penitent *God that Failed*), had reversed earlier criticisms of Soviet grain procurement policy (let's use the euphemism) and instead opted for the Stalinist script blaming the mounting crisis in Ukraine on sabotage and wrecking. On April 1, 1933 the *Denver Post* reported that, during the course of a lecture in that

city, Fischer had been asked whether a million had died in Kazakhstan (a question that is itself evidence that these events were better known in the West than we now like to tell ourselves). Fischer conceded that people there were “desperately” hungry but doubted that so many could have died.

“Who counted them? How could anyone march through a country and count a million people?”

Decades later, when Nikita Khrushchev turned to the question of how many millions had died in the famine he simply said that “no one was counting”.

And Gareth Jones was not alone in publishing these stories in Britain either.

Even if we do not look too deeply into questions of where Malcolm Muggeridge actually went, the role played by him in publicizing the Holodomor is not without controversy. He was less forceful than he could have been in backing Jones in his dispute with the *New York Times*. And then there’s the matter of how he appeared to have appropriated increasing amounts of Jones’s work over the years, something that may explain why he did less than nothing to keep the memory of the brave young Welshman alive.

Nevertheless, given his own political background, he took a considerable career risk in publishing articles exposing the famine in the left-leaning *Manchester Guardian* in late March 1933, articles, articles that were regarded by his fellows in the country’s liberal left establishment as having been in very poor taste.

Too bad.

The population, wrote Muggeridge, was starving;

“I mean starving in its absolute sense; not undernourished as, for instance, most oriental peasants...and some unemployed workers in Europe, but by having had for weeks next to nothing to eat: “We have nothing. They have taken everything away...”

And

“It was true...the famine was an organized one.”

And so it was; one of the greatest horrors in the history of humanity.

But, as Ray Gamache notes in his fine new book on Gareth Jones, “no further articles in the Soviet Union were published in the major British newspapers beyond August, 1933”.

And we have to ask why. Soviet restrictions on travel, plus the constant denials and, of course, the work of Duranty and his crowd had all played their part. At the same time, the knowledge that something monstrous had happened *was* out there, but the British public did not seem to care.

In the US, the story seemed to have more staying power, helped, I suspect, by an active Ukrainian diaspora (thus there were street protests in New York City over the famine in 1933, which were reported beyond the émigré press). Then there was the work of journalists such as William Chamberlin (a writer who was to move from Marx to McCarthy, a transition that was used to tarnish his earlier work on the Holodomor). He had earlier published a series of articles for the *Manchester Guardian* very much in the vein of what Muggeridge had written before, but then returned to the topic in the following year, when on May 29, 1934 he published a piece in the *Christian Science Monitor*, in which he put the death toll in the previous year at some four million.

And, in a way, even some of the later reports from Duranty, the man, who, as we all know, had, not least by trashing Jones's reporting, done so much to suppress the story of the Holodomor, acknowledged that something terrible had taken place. Thus in a *New York Times* report dated September 11, 1933 he referred to the "decimation" of the Ukrainian peasantry, an understatement, but a start. Even the tortuous—and patently absurd—circumlocutions Duranty so often deployed were a clue to anyone who was paying attention that here was a man with something to hide. Some did. In *Kapoot* (the title speaks for itself), an account of a journey across the USSR published in 1933 by the travel-writer Carveth Wells that includes a sequence set in a starving Ukraine, Wells takes Duranty to task for his dishonesty.

But most people did not, despite the evidence that was out there. Again, why not?

The last great surge of contemporary reporting of the Holodomor in the US was coordinated by William Randolph Hearst at the beginning of 1935, a lapse of time that allowed critics to use the improved 1933 and 1934 harvests to mask the horrors of the winter of 1932. These 'new' reports included the three pieces by Gareth Jones and the articles by Harry Lang mentioned above as well as possibly (I'm not sure) more questionable efforts by Fred Beal, a runaway trade unionist in a somewhat tricky legal position and, even more dubiously, the articles by Thomas Walker, a conman whose lies may have told the truth about the famine, but were, for the most part, based on second-hand sources or fantasy, and buttressed by a series of photos of the Soviet famine of the early 1920s, or tragedies from even before that.

Walker's piece was thoroughly debunked by Louis Fischer in *The Nation* in March, a debunking that probably mattered less for what it said about Walker than for the spurious legitimacy it gave to the far more consequential dishonesty displayed by the West's apologists for Stalin. And the fact that Walker's piece had been sponsored by Hearst, a demon to the left, only whipped waverers into line. These claims of a man-made famine were false, it was said, part of a scheme to denigrate the marvelous Soviet experiment that many hoped would act as an inspiration back home to, a thesis reinforced for many on the left or left-leaning by the fact that Germany's new Nazi regime was also making hay out of the Holodomor.

In February 1935, the *New York Times* (them again!) noted acidly that “there has been a fresh outburst of “starvation propaganda” in the German and Austrian press, with appeals for charity for the “unhappy victims of the Soviet famine. Their writer heard in Berlin that this campaign was supported by photographs taken earlier. Some were even said to date from the Volga famine in 1921. This was indeed a favorite trick of anti-Bolshevik propagandists.

This is primarily a reference to *Muss Russland Hungern* (1935) by Ewald Ammende, and the criticism has quite a lot to it (a number of the photos were to crop up in the Walker pieces).

In a *Harper's* magazine article from June 1935, Gene Lyons (another of the western journalists involved in the attempt to discredit Jones, but who came to repentance rather earlier than Fischer) related how he had been invited to lunch by the “editors of a liberal weekly... The Ukrainian famine... the death decrees and heresy hunts still smarted in my memory”. I alluded to a few of these things. A chill seemed to come over the luncheon.”

But this wasn't just a matter of *ideological* sympathy.

For the most part the national dimension—so brilliantly summarized by Roman Serbyn yesterday— was missing from any understanding of what was going on. This was about peasants, not Ukrainians. As Robert Conquest noted in *The Harvest of Sorrow* (1986), “The Ukraine... does not declare itself in the Western consciousness as Poland or Hungary or even Lithuania do.” But the only people who did appear to grasp this element of the story were on the left, if in a back-handed way. That they did it at all is ironic, given their modern reluctance to concede that nationality had anything to do with the fate of the murdered millions.

How different it was eight decades ago: In their monstrous *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?* (1936), Beatrice (the aunt of Muggeridge's wife, awkwardly) and Sidney Webb wrote that “the peasants are passive resisters everywhere, but in Ukrainia the resistance has assumed the character of a national struggle. The opposition of the Ukrainian population [later, the Webbs talk of “continuous deliberate sabotage”] caused the failure of the grain-storing plan of 1931, and still more so, that of 1932.”

Officialdom in the west was, for the most part indifferent to the fate of the Ukrainian peasantry (it had other more important fish to fry, trade, diplomatic relations, a quiet life, you know how it goes), and despite the flow of horror stories coming out of Ukraine (there were many more than I have mentioned today), the peoples of the west were not bothered overmuch either. Burdened by economic crisis, still haunted (and, I think in Duranty's case, corrupted) by memories of the Great War, and in Europe probably a little spooked by the recent arrival into power of Adolf Hitler they had concerns of their own. Besides, the events in Soviet Ukraine were to borrow Neville Chamberlain's phrase from the time of another betrayal, that of Munich, just another “quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing” and, in this case cared less. The peasants of Ukraine had long been portrayed as weird, retrograde creatures (unlike say Metro-Vickers engineers), as alien to the inhabitants of London and New York as,

say, the people of Rwanda might have appeared sixty years later, a failure of empathy that was to have similar, appalling consequences, and not just then: think of the postwar repatriations, think of Yalta.

And it was these attitudes that allowed the Soviets to get away with an attempt at deception that was far less complete than we like to tell ourselves now. As we have seen, something approaching enough of the truth was out there who wanted to read it. Yes, the Soviets lied, yes, Walter Duranty and his crew lied, and, yes, those lies were echoed by true believers in the West and a procession of useful idiots all too ready to visit Golgotha and report back that it was paradise. But these often contradictory and incomplete fables would not have worked, without an audience already predisposed either to accept them, or too incurious to reject them.

“Years after the event,” wrote Gene Lyons in *Assignment in Utopia* (1937), “when no Russian communist in his senses any longer concealed the magnitude of the famine—the question whether there had been a famine at all was still being disputed in the outside world.”

Disputed, no? No-one could be bothered to do even that. Lyons wrote that the Soviets and their journalist-accomplices had “concealed the catastrophe”. Not quite, I would argue, but by bringing what Lyons referred to as “confusion, doubt and contradiction into the whole subject” they had done enough to allow a largely indifferent world to look away, and to pave the way for a great forgetting, a forgetting, in most cases that there had even been a famine, and, almost always, what it had been designed to do.

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