THE 70th ANNIVERSARY OF THE FAMINE-GENOCIDE IN UKRAINE

A tale of two journalists: Walter Duranty and Gareth Jones

by Dr. James Mace

On June 24 the Pulitzer Prize Committee was sent an open letter by Dr. Margaret Siriol Colley and Nigel Linsan Colley of Bramcote, Notts, United Kingdom, too long to be recounted here in full, but which can be read on the Internet at http://colley.co.uk/garethjones/soviet_articles/duranty_revocation.htm. (The letter was published in The Weekly on July 20.) The lady is the niece of one Gareth Jones, a journalist who had had the courage to tell the truth about the despicable things he had seen in Ukraine in the spring of 1933. For his courage he paid with his professional reputation and being long all but forgotten.

The hatchet man in this tale was one Walter Duranty, winner of the 1932 Pulitzer Prize for writing stories from the Soviet Union, reportage that he had already freely confessed "always reflected the official Soviet point of view and not his own." And here begins a tale of one journalist being crushed for his honesty and another rewarded for his mendacity. It is a tale that touches directly both on the ethics of journalism and the history of Ukraine.

Journalists often like to think of themselves as fearless fighters for the public's right to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. To reward those who actually did so an extremely successful Hungarian-born American journalist named Joseph Pulitzer willed that his legacy be used in part to fund prizes in his name for outstanding achievements in drama, letters, music and journalism. The prizes, modest in money but tremendous in terms of the honor they convey on their recipients, have been awarded annually since 1917.

In reality, journalists, like everyone else, are rarely completely faithful to the ideals they profess. And prizes, even prestigious ones like the Pulitzer, sometimes go to scoundrels. Dr. Colley demands the revocation of the Pulitzer Prize from the scoundrel who led a campaign for Stalin's Soviet Union from the most prestigious newspaper in the United States, The New York Times, to discredit her uncle for honestly trying to do what journalists are supposed to do: for telling people the truth.

Walter Duranty, born in Liverpool (England) in 1884, was always something of a scoundrel and openly relished in being able to get away with it. In S. J. Taylor's excellent biography, "Stalin's Apologist: Walter Duranty: The New York Times's Man in Moscow" (Oxford University Press, 1990), he is seen lying even about his own family origins, claiming in his autobiography to have been an only child orphaned at 10, neither of which was true: his mother died in 1916 and his sister 14 years later, a spinster; when his father died in 1933.

After finishing his university studies, he drifted to Paris, where he dabbled in Satanism, opium and sex on both sides of the bed-sheets. By the time World War I broke out, he had a job as a reporter for The New York Times and could thus avoid actual combat. Duranty seems to have known that the key to success in journalism can often be in first determining what the readers want and then gauging how the facts might fit in with it. His reportage was always lively, eminently readable, and usually – but by no means always – had some relationship to the facts.

Still, he realized that in the American free press, newspapers are made to make money for their owners, and the reporter's job is to write something people would want to read enough that they would go out and buy his employer's newspaper. It is the classic relationship between labor and management in a market economy: the more effective a worker is at helping his employer make more money, the better chance he stands of getting higher pay, a better job or other attributes of worldly success.

For Duranty, this system seems to have worked quite well. After the war, he was sent to the new independent Baltic states and in 1921 was among the first foreign reporters allowed into the Soviet Union. This latter achievement was a major one, for the Soviet Union was never shy about exercising control over who could come or leave. A Western reporter in the Soviet Union always knew that if one wrote something offensive enough to the Soviet authorities, he would be expelled and never allowed to return.

Thus, there was a strong professional incentive not to be that person. Duranty understood this better than anyone else, but just in case someone among the journalists forgot this simple truth, there was a Soviet press officer to remind him. During the First Five-Year Plan, the head of the Soviet Press Office was Konstantin Umansky (or Oumansky: he liked it better the French way).

Eugene Lyons, who had known Umansky at a distance since he had been a TASS correspondent in the United States and the latter chief of its Foreign Bureau, probably knew this little man with black curly hair and gold teeth as well as any of the foreign correspondents. He described the system as more one of give-and-take with the foreign correspondents sometimes backing the censor down through a show of professional solidarity (it would have been, after all, too much of an embarrassment for the Soviets to expel all the foreign correspondents), often in a spirit of give- and-take and compromise. But the telegraph office would simply not send cables without Umansky's permission.

Moreover, convinced that the Soviet experiment was so much superior to the all too evident evils of capitalism, a huge segment of the West's intellectuals wanted desperately to look with hope on the Soviet experiment, which, for all its failures, seemed to offer a beacon. And in a world where access to newsmakers is often the only thing between having something to print or not, access to power itself becomes a commodity.

As Lyons himself put it in his memoir, "Assignment in Utopia" (1937):

"The real medium of exchange in Moscow, buying that which neither rubles nor dollars can touch, was power. And power meant Comrade Stalin, Comrade Umansky, the virtuoso of kombinatsia, the fellow who's uncle's best friend has a cousin on the collegium of the GPU. To be invited to exclusive social functions, to play bridge with the big-bugs, to be patted on the back editorially by Pravda, to have the social ambitions of one's wife flattered: such inducements are more effective in bridling a correspondent's tongue than any threats ..."

Whether in Moscow or Berlin, Tokyo or Rome, all the temptations for a practicing reporter are in the direction of conformity. It is more comfortable and in the long run more profitable to soft-pedal a dispatch for readers thousands of miles away than to face an irate censor and closed official doors.

Both Lyons and Duranty knew the rules of this game so well that both had been rewarded before the Holodomor by being granted an interview with Stalin himself, the Holy Grail of the Moscow foreign press corps. Umansky knew how to award and punish foreigners. Perhaps this is why he would later move on into the diplomatic beau monde of Washington.

Lyons, who came to Russia as an American Communist sycophant, then becoming a disillusioned anti-Communist, paid the price. His lady translator, it seems, brought to his attention an item in Molot, a newspaper from Rostov-on-Don, designed to cow the local inhabitants but not for foreign consumption, announcing the mass deportation of three Ukrainian Kozak stanitsas from the Kuban. Nine months after he broke the story, he was gone from the Soviet Union for good.

Into this world walked a young English socialist, Malcolm Muggeridge, who had married the niece of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, then icons in the Soviet Union for their work to turn the Soviet experiment into an icon for socialist intellectuals in the West. Coming from such a background, young Malcolm and his wife even sold their furniture, convinced that they would remain in the Soviet Union as he reported for the Manchester Guardian.

Yet, when he arrived, he quickly saw that the Five-Year Plan was not quite all it was cracked up to be. Perhaps the first inkling of the panoply of characters he happened onto was at a reception at the British Embassy in Moscow in the fall of 1932 when he found himself sitting between old Soviet apologist Anna Louise Strong and the great Duranty, the most famous foreign correspondent of his day and fresh from his Pulitzer Prize.

Miss Strong, he wrote in his memoirs, "Chronicles of Wasted Time" (1972), "was an enormous woman with a very red face, a lot of white hair, and an expression of stupidity so overwhelming that it amounted to a strange kind of beauty."

Of Duranty, Muggeridge wrote: "Duranty, a little sharp-witted energetic man, was a much more controversial person; I should say there was more talk about him in Moscow than anyone else, certainly among foreigners. His household, where I visited him once or twice, included a Russian woman named Katya, by whom I believe he had a son. I always enjoyed his company; there was something vigorous, vivacious, preposterous, about his unscrupulousness which made his persistent lying somehow absorbing. I suppose no one – not even Louis Fischer – followed the Party Line, every shift and change, as assiduously as he did. In Oumansky's eyes he was perfect, and was constantly held up to the rest of us as an example of what we should be."

It, of course, suited his material interests thus to write everything the Soviet authorities wanted him to – that the collectivization of agriculture was working well, with no famine conditions anywhere; that the purges were justified, the confessions genuine, and the judicial procedure impeccable. Because of these acquiescent attitudes – so ludicrously false that they were a subject of derision among the other correspondents and even [Soviet censor] Podolsky had been known to make jokes about them - Duranty never had any trouble getting a visa, or a house, or interviews with whomever he wanted.

Such subservience to a regime that was one of two truly evil systems of the 20th century, for which the term totalitarianism is most often applied, was marked by a veneer of objective analysis and certainly not without insight – he was the first to have "put his money on Stalin," as he put it, and is even credited with having first coined the word Stalinism to describe the evolving system – and he was always fascinating to read, even more to talk to.

He was the most famed foreign correspondent of the time; a nice apartment in Moscow complete with a live-in lover, by whom he did indeed beget a son, and an oriental servant to do the cooking and cleaning; was the social center of the life of foreigners in Moscow; and took frequent trips abroad, as he put it, to retain his sense of what was news.

Simultaneously, there was a strange sort of honesty to his privately admitting that he was indeed an apologist. In the 1980s during the course of my own research on the Ukrainian Holodomor I came across a most interesting document in the U.S. National Archives, a memorandum from one A.W. Kliefoth of the U.S. Embassy in Berlin dated June 4, 1931. Duranty dropped in to renew his passport. Mr. Kliefoth thought it might be of possible interest to the State Department that this journalist, in whose reporting so much credence was placed, had told him that, 'in agreement with The New York Times and the Soviet authorities,' his official dispatches always reflect the official opinion of the Soviet government and not his own.' "

Note that the American consular official thought it particularly important for his superiors that the phrase, in agreement with The New York Times and the Soviet authorities, was a direct quotation. This was precisely the sort of journalistic integrity that was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1932.

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man who had studied Russian and gra duated with honors from Cambridge, and became an adviser on foreign policy to former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. At the age of 25, in 1930 he went to the Soviet Union to inform hs employer what was happening there. His reports were considered so straighforward that they were then published in the London Times as "An Observer's Notes."

The following year he returned and published some of the materials under his own name. Having gained a reputation for integrity in honestly trying to get to the bottom of things, in 1932 he wrote with foreboding about the food situation as people asked, "Will there be soup?"

By the early spring of 1933, the fact that famine was raging in Ukraine and the Kuban, two-thirds of the population of which happened to be Ukrainian, was common knowledge in Moscow among foreign diplomats, foreign correspondents and even the man in the street. In response to Lyon's "revelations" from the regional official Soviet press, a ban had been imposed on foreign journalists traveling to the areas in question.

Upon checking with his colleagues in Moscow what they knew – on the understanding, of course, that their names would never be mentioned – Jones decided it was worth it to defy the prohibition and buy a ticket at the train station to the places affected as a private person, which was not forbidden. Once there, he employed his simple but logical method of getting off the train and walking for several hours until he was certain he was off the beaten track and start talking to the locals.

He spent a couple of weeks, walked about 40 miles, talked to people, slept in their huts, and was appalled at what he saw. Rushing back to Moscow and out of the Soviet Union, Jones stopped off first in Berlin, where he gave a press conference and fired off a score of articles about the tragedy he had seen first-hand. "I walked alone through villages and 12 collective farms. Everywhere was the cry, 'There is no bread; we are dying...' " (Manchester Guardian, March 30, 1933).

Young Muggeridge, who would live to a ripe old age and become one of the most revered journalists of the 20th century, had done much the same, sent his dispatches out through the British diplomatic pouch and published much the same earlier but under the anonymous byline of "An Observer's Notes." But his reports created barely a ripple because his story was the unconfirmed report of some unknown observer.

Yet, now stood the young Jones, age 27, the confidant of prime ministers and millionaires, a young man who was able to get interviews with Hitler and Mussolini. Here Umansky and his superiors in the Soviet hierarchy encountered a problem that could not be ignored. But Soviet officialdom already had a trump up its sleeve, one certain to bring into line any recalcitrant members of the Moscow press corps infected by an excess of integrity, at least for the duration of their stay.

A couple of weeks earlier the GPU had arrested six British citizens and several Russians on charges of industrial espionage. An announcement was made that a public trial was in preparation. This was news. Putting their own people in the dock was one thing, but accusing white men, Englishmen, of skullduggery was something else. This promised to be the trial of the century, and every journalist working for a newspaper in the English-speaking world knew that this was precisely the type of story that their editors were paying them to cover. To be locked out would have been equivalent to professional suicide. The dilemma of to tell or not to tell was never put more brutally.

Umansky read the situation perfectly, and Lyon's summed up what happened in a way that needs no retelling:

"On emerging from Russia, Jones made a statement which, startling though it sounded, was little more than a summary of what the correspondents and foreign diplomats had told him. To protect us, and perhaps with some idea of heightening the authenticity of his reports, he emphasized his Ukrainian foray rather than our conversation as the chief source of his information ...

"Throwing down Jones was as unpleasant a chore as fell to any of us in the years of juggling facts in order to please dictatorial regimes – but throw him down we did, unanimously and in almost identical formulas of equivocation. Poor Gareth Jones must have been the most surprised human being alive when the facts he so painstakingly garnered from our mouths were snowed under by our denials.

"The scene in which the American press corps combined to repudiate Jones is fresh in my mind. It was in the evening and Constantine Umansky, the soul of graciousness consented to meet us in the hotel room of a correspondent. He knew that he had a strategic advantage over us because of the Metro-Vickers story. He could afford to be gracious. Forced by competitive journalism to jockey for the inside track with officials, it would have been professional suicide to make an issue of the famine at that time. There was much bargaining in the spirit of gentlemanly give-and-take, under the effluence of Umansky's gilded smile, before a formula of denial was worked out.

"We admitted enough to soothe our consciences, but in round-about phrases that damned Jones as a liar. The filthy business having been disposed of, someone ordered vodka and zakuski, Umansky joined the celebration, and the party did not break up until the early morning hours. The head censor was in a mellower mood than I had ever seen before or since. He had done a big bit for Bolshevik firmness that night."

Duranty took the point position in the campaign against Jones. On March 31, 1933, The New York Times carried on page 13 an article that might well be studied in schools of journalism as an example of how to walk the tightrope between truth and lie so masterfully that the two seem to exchange places under the acrobat's feet. It is called "Russians Hungry, But Not Starving" and begins by placing Jones' revelations in a context that seems to make everything quite clear:

"In the middle of the diplomatic duel between Great Britain and the Soviet Union over the accused British engineers, there appears from a British source a big scare story in the American press about famine in the Soviet Union, With 'thousands already dead and millions menaced by death from starvation.' "

Of course, this put everything in its proper place, at least enough for the United States to extend diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union in November of that year. So much so that when a dinner was given in honor of Soviet Foreign Minister Maksim Litvinov in New York's posh Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, when it came time to pay tribute to Duranty, the cheers were so thunderous that American critic and bon-vivant Alexander Woolcott wrote, "Indeed, one quite got the impression that America, in a spasm of discernment, was recognizing both Russia and Walter Duranty."

At the same time that Duranty was so actively denying the existence of the famine in public, he was quite open in admitting it in private. On September 26, 1933, in a private conversation with William Strang of the British Embassy in Moscow, he stated, "it is 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." The little Englishman indeed seemed to have gotten away with it.

But his further career was a gradual sinking into obscurity and penury, his Katia in Moscow berating him for taking no interest in the education of their son and asking that he send more money, that is, of course, when he could. He married on his deathbed in late September 1957. A week later, on October 3, he died from an internal hemorrhage complicated by pulmonary emphysema at the age of 73. Nothing further of his son is known.

Jones had attempted to defend himself in a letter to The New York Times and Malcolm Muggeridge, once out of the Soviet Union, declined to write a letter in support of Jones, although Jones had publicly commended Muggeridge's unsigned articles in the Manchester Guardian. Various organizations, mostly on the right, took up the cause of telling the world about the Great Famine of 1932-1933, but within two or three years the issue faded into the background and was largely forgotten.

Gareth Jones was himself nonplussed. In a letter to a friend who intended to visit the Soviet Union, he wrote:

"Alas! You will be very amused to hear that the inoffensive little 'Joneski' has achieved the dignity of being a marked man on the black list of the OGPU and is barred from entering the Soviet Union. I hear that there is a long list of crimes which I have committed under my name in the secret police file in Moscow and funnily enough espionage is said to be among them. As a matter of fact Litvinoff [Soviet Foreign Minister Litvinov] sent a special cable from Moscow to the Soviet Embassy in London to tell them to make the strongest of complaints to Mr. Lloyd George about me."

Jones and those who sided with him were snowed under a blanket of denials. When one by one the American journalists left the Soviet Union, they wrote books about what they had seen. Muggeridge wrote a thinly disguised novel, "Winter in Moscow" (1934), in which the names were changed, but it was clear who everybody was. Only Jones, it seems, was really concealed in the fact that the character of such integrity, given the name of Wilfred Pye by the author, was older, a smoker, a drinker, none of which the real Jones was.

In his memoirs, Muggeridge seems to have forgotten altogether the man who actually broke the story of the Ukrainian Famine-Genocide under his own name. Perhaps he felt a little guilty that his courage in this situation was not quite as great as the Welshmans who had the bad luck to have been murdered in China in 1935, probably to prevent him from telling the world that the new state of Manchukuo was not nearly as nice a place as its Japanese sponsors wanted the world to believe.

There is perhaps something of a parallel to the story of Gareth Jones. There was in 1981 another young man, then 29 and a newly minted Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, hired by the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute to study the Holodomor. After nearly a decade, when the Commission on the Ukraine Famine was wrapping up, he was informed that the fellowship he had been offered for an academic year had been cut back to a semester. Having nowhere else to turn, he settled for that. "We expected he'd refuse, but he accepted," a colleague was told. Next year he was invited for a yearlong fellowship to the University of Illinois. Well-meaning Ukrainian Americans were ready to donate a million dollars to endow a chair for this man. Those who taught Russian and East European history led him to understand, however, that, while they would be quite happy to take the money, whoever might get the chair, it would certainly not be he.

It is unknown who exactly played the role of Umansky in this particular tale or whether vodka was served afterward, but the carrot and stick are fairly obvious: access to scholarly resources in Moscow vs. the veto of any research projects. In a world where a number of scholars slanted their journal articles and monographs as adroitly as Duranty did his press coverage, I am tempted to someday venture my own counterpart to "Winter in Moscow," based on the published works that make the players all too easy to discern. For I was that once young man. But, in contrast to Jones, I have found a place to live, married the woman I love, teach, and have a forum from which I can from time to time be heard.

Despite Duranty's prophesies, the Ukrainians did not forget what had happened to them in 1933, and 70 years later the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association and the Ukrainian World Congress, with support from a number of other leading Ukrainian diaspora organizations, have organized a campaign to reopen the issue of Walter Duranty's 1932 Pulitzer Prize with a view to stripping him of it.

As a professional courtesy, the editors [of Den] have already sent an e-mail of this article to all the members of the Pulitzer Prize Board in the hope that it might help them in their deliberations on this issue.

The whole story of denying the crimes of a regime that cost millions of lives is one of the saddest in the history of the American free press, just as the Holodomor is certainly the saddest page in the history of a nation, whose appearance on the world state was so unexpected that there is, in fact, a quite successful book in English, "The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation."

Still, it would be only appropriate if that nation, which was for so long so safe to ignore and then appeared so unexpectedly, expressed itself on the fate of a man who also was victimized so unexpectedly, simply for trying honestly to find out and then tell the truth. Ukrainians abroad want justice done by stripping that young man's chief victimizer of a Pulitzer Prize that makes a mockery of the ideals of journalism. They have been joined by a host of respected journalists in the West.

Is it not only right that the people most affected by the events in which the struggle between truth and falsehood, idealism and cynicism, were so blatant that it reads almost like a melodrama, also make its collective voice heard? By asserting justice in the past, we help attain it for ourselves.

Gareth Jones spent a couple of weeks, walked about 40 miles, talked to people, slept in their huts, and was appalled at what he saw. "I walked alone through villages and 12 collective farms. Everywhere was the cry, 'There is no bread; we are dying...' "