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Angel's in Stalin's Paradise
by James William Crowl
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CHAPTER VI

CONCEALING THE FAMINE, 1932-1934

Introduction

The Soviet countryside neared collapse in 1932 and 1933 as a result of a famine that took a toll estimated at about five million lives, a figure that would place it among the worst such disasters in history. The 1932-1934 famine is noteworthy for reasons other than the number of casualties, however. It was perhaps the only size-able famine ever that was caused not by a natural calamity such as drought, but by the deliberate policies of the governing regime. Moreover, perhaps alone of history's worst famines, word of it was suppressed and its existence was emphatically denied by Soviet authorities. Indeed, the Soviets mounted an intensive and remarkably successful effort to conceal the famine from the rest of the world, and the manipulation of foreign correspondents in Moscow was a significant ingredient in the success of the cover-up.¹

The reason for the famine's concealment, apparently, was to protect the goals of the Five-Year Plan, then nearing completion, and the prestige of the Soviet Union. If the industrial objectives of the plan were to be met, the Soviets had to have Western machinery. Grain exports were the chief source of capital for those imports, and, had the Kremlin acknowledged the food shortage or if the West had been aware of it, the Soviets would have been compelled to scale down their industrial program. Apart from such losses, however, Stalin had staked his prestige on the outcome of the economic plan, and the famine threatened to expose the fact that a major feature of it--collectivization--had led to disaster. Stalin apparently believed that he could not afford such a revelation, and he was determined to conceal it even if that meant the loss of millions of lives that might have been saved.²

The famine might even have served a useful

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function for the Kremlin in that it struck hardest at the peasants who remained outside the kolkhozes. By concealing the famine and allowing it to continue, the Soviets were able to drive the free peasants into the collectives.³ It is noteworthy that resistance to collectivization crumbled during the famine, and by 1935 most of the peasants and nearly all the arable land had been collectivized.

TABLE II. PERCENTAGE OF PEASANT HOUSEHOLDS
AND CROP AREA COLLECTIVIZED, 1930-1936

The Emergence of the Famine

The collectivization campaign of 1930 and 1931 formed the backdrop for the famine by demoralizing the peasants and making them indifferent toward the operation of the kolkhozes. It was not only the loss of their land that caused them to be dispirited, for the closing of the private production and marketing of consumer goods left the peasants with little incentive to work. Collectivization had also eliminated the kulaks, the most productive and industrious of the peasants. Instead of kulaks being able to direct the kolkhozes, the Kremlin had to turn to Party workers with little knowledge of agriculture. The result was that frightful inefficiency and disorganization appeared in the kolkhozes on the eve of the famine and added to its

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severity. Finally, collectivization had brought about such a massive slaughter of livestock that there was no surplus of cattle to fall back upon when the grain supplies were exhausted.

If collectivization left the peasants poorly prepared to cope with the famine and even contributed to it, the chief factor in the calamity was the government's grain procurement program. Procurements were grain levies that both individual peasants and kolkhozes had to surrender to the state in return for prices fixed by the government.⁴ Excellent weather had made the harvest of 1930 one of the best in history, and it had allowed the peasants to stockpile grain despite unusually large procurement demands by the state in that year. In 1931, however, less favorable weather caused the harvest to be well below that of 1930 and even slightly below the average for the years 1925-1929 (See Table I, p. 115). Yet the state took a record amount of grain, and the peasants were forced to deplete their reserves in order to meet the procurement demands.

By early 1932, then, the peasants were on the brink of starvation. Fortunately weather conditions were no worse than they had been in the previous year and the harvest was fractionally higher. Yet, while the state lowered its procurements from the 1931 level, they remained well above the amounts taken during the years 1925 to 1929. The 1932 procurements, then, took much of the grain that the peasants needed for their own consumption. It should be emphasized that the weather was a factor in that it caused the harvests of 1931 and 1932 to dip below the average for the five previous years. But the weather reduced those harvests by only about 12 to 15 per cent, and by no means was such a loss sufficient to produce a major famine. It was, therefore, the ruinous procurements that were the principal cause of the starvation.⁵

As early as the spring of 1932 there were indications of trouble in the countryside. Peasant indifference to the planting was manifest, and there

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were problems of grain thefts and even unruliness. Perhaps in an effort to ease those conditions, the state scaled down its grain quotas for 1932 from the original goal of 29.5 million tons to what was a still outlandish goal of 18.1 millions. In addition, the

so-called “May Reform” enabled peasants to sell surplus grain in private markets at unregulated prices once the state had fulfilled its procurement quotas.

Such “concessions” were of little practical value since the new grain quotas were still unreasonably high and peasants would be left with no surplus to sell. Yet the peasants apparently took the spring decrees as a sign that the Kremlin was retreating on its grain policy. By mid-summer the grain procurements were lagging well behind schedule as grain was illegally diverted to the private markets. To curtail this unforeseen threat to procurements, the Kremlin ordered the death penalty for those who pilfered even small amounts of grain from kolkhoz or sovkhoz fields and granaries and for those who failed to carry out their work assignments on the collectives. In addition, regions where the grain quotas were not filled had their consumer goods supplies cut off, and a purge of local Party officials struck areas in the Ukraine and the North Caucasus where procurements were lagging. Finally, the Machine Tractor Stations, state-owned repositories for the tractors and equipment used by the collectives, were given increased power and responsibility so as to ensure that grain quotas would be filled. Each MTS was provided with a political section or politotdel which functioned like the political commissars in the Soviet armed forces during World War II. The politotdels played a key role in extracting the grain from the peasants.⁶

Such an approach guaranteed that the state’s need for grain would be met, but it also helped to make the famine a certainty. Indeed the state avoided even the simplest measures that would have eased the crisis. Instead of halting grain exports, they were merely trimmed (See Table III), and no outside help was sought or accepted as had

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been the case in 1921.

Dimensions of the Famine

Because of the effectiveness of the cover-up, statistics for the number of deaths, the areas affected, and the duration of the famine can be fixed only approximately. Estimates for the number of deaths range from just under five million to more than ten million--figures that include deaths from such famine-related diseases as typhus, as well as those who died from starvation. ⁷ Perhaps the safest figure is the 5.5 million deaths estimated by Naum Jasny after a study of Soviet population growth for the early 1930’s. Jasny finds demographic evidence that at least 5.5 million deaths occurring in 1932 and 1933 above the normal mortality rate.⁸

The famine seems to have been felt throughout the Soviet countryside, but it apparently fell hardest upon the Ukraine, the middle and lower Volga regions, the North Caucasus--especially the Kuban and Kazakhstan. Otto Schiller, the German agricultural attaché in Moscow, was one of those who traveled through the stricken areas and insisted that the famine was widespread.⁹ A number of other Western visitors and correspondents reached areas where famine was raging or had just subsided, and Soviet defectors offered further confirmation. Additional evidence comes from the records of the Smolensk archives, which were captured by the

Germans and then taken by the Americans at the close of World War II. Finally, a 1965 article published in the Soviet press indicates that the central black-soil region of the Ukraine, an area previously believed by Western authorities to have been spared, had also been ravaged by famine.¹⁰

Most of the famine areas were grain-growing regions, but a notable exception was Kazakhstan. According to Jasny, approximately 1.5 million Kazakhs died of famine - a higher percentage than for any other element of the Soviet population. Jasny explains that collectivization had rendered the Kazakhs especially vulnerable to famine because so much of their livestock had been destroyed during the collectivization campaign. Since little grain was grown there, the people were dependent upon their livestock for food, and their position during the famine, then, was particularly desperate.

The duration of the famine varied from region to region, but generally it seems to have begun by mid-1932 and intensified through the rest of that year. For most of the country the famine was at its worst during the period from November 1932 until September 1933. The Smolensk archives, for instance, indicates that these were the critical months for that area. Fedor Belov, a Ukrainian who defected to the West in the 1950's, remembered that May and June of 1933 were the worst months.¹¹

For most of the Soviet Union the harvest of 1933 marked the turning point of the crisis. The harvest was better than it had been in the previous two years (See Table I, p. 115), and conditions began to ease. For parts of the countryside, however, the famine went unchecked until the beginning of 1935. Harry Lang, an American reporter for the Jewish Daily Herald, visited areas late in 1933 where the famine was unabated, and Victor Serge, a sometime anarchist, Trotskyite and Bolshevik, was exiled to Orenburg in mid-1933, and found that conditions there worsened during 1934.

First-Hand Reports of the Suffering

One source of testimony about the famine has

been the defectors who witnessed the famine and later came to the West. Such figures include Fedor Belov, Victor Serge, and Victor Kravchenko, a Party official who was an overseer for several Ukrainian kolkhozes during the famine. In each case, they have given similar accounts of the suffering. Kravchenko, for instance, wrote of finding "inexpressibly horrible" scenes of peasants dying in the villages. "Everywhere we found men and women lying prone, their faces and bellies bloated, their eyes utterly expressionless."¹³ Belov noted that the people were like beasts, ready to devour one another. And no matter what they did, they went on dying, dying, dying."¹⁴

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was told by a veteran of the Medvezhyegorsk labor camp, at the entrance to the White Sea Canal, that refugees from the Ukraine flocked to the outskirts of the camp to beg for food. Solzhenitsyn explains that while the rations of

the prisoners were hardly sufficient to maintain life, the prisoners “brought some of their own food from the camp compound for [the refugees] to eat.”¹⁵ Solzhenitsyn himself notes that during the worst of the Soviet famine of the early 1930’s long lines of [peasants] dying of famine trudged toward the railroad stations in the hope of getting to the cities . . . but were refused tickets and were unable to leave- -and lay dying beneath the station fences in a submissive heap of homespun coats and bark shoes.¹⁶

For many years the Soviets vehemently denied that such conditions had existed, and they prohibited any accounts of the famine from being published within the country. That policy eased, if only slightly, late in the Khrushchev period, however, and a few passages describing the famine have appeared in the Soviet press since then. Generally the accounts are brutally frank, yet encased in works that otherwise laud Soviet policy during the famine years. The earliest of these descriptions was by Ivan Stadnyuk and appeared in the journal *Neva* in 1962. It was a short novel entitled Lyudi Ne Angely

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(People Are Not Angels), and it told of the conditions in a Ukrainian village. According to Stadnyuk, “the first who died of hunger were men. Then women. But before the people died they frequently went insane and stopped being human beings.”¹⁷

In addition to those reports, there were a number of foreigners who traveled through the famine areas with little interference from the authorities, even during the first six months of 1933. Thus Otto Schiller, the German agricultural attaché, Whiting Williams, an American steel company official, and Fred Beal, an American working at the Kharkov tractor factory, each have written about the frightful conditions that they saw in the Soviet countryside.¹⁸

The Position of the Foreign Correspondents

While foreign visitors apparently traveled with few restrictions, the Kremlin seems to have regarded the foreign press in Moscow as a more serious threat to spread word of the famine to the West. Consequently, efforts were made to keep reporters from observing or even learning about the famine. Travel restrictions were placed on the reporters to keep them out of the countryside, while an internal passport system was imposed on Soviet citizens in December 1932 in order to keep starving peasants away from the cities.¹⁹

Nevertheless information about the famine seems to have been commonplace within the Moscow press corps. Western travelers returned to Moscow with reports of what they had found, and correspondents discovered that they could verify such accounts by checking the suburbs and railroad stations of the major cities. Peasants seemed to flock to such locations despite the efforts of the authorities. Still more important, several reporters learned that they could slip onto trains and spend days or weeks in stricken areas despite the travel ban. During the early months of 1933, Ralph Barnes of the New York Herald Tribune made such a trip, as

did Gareth Jones and Malcolm Muggeridge of the Manchester Guardian. Thus information about the famine seems to have been plentiful among the correspondents in Moscow, and it seems unlikely that any reporter could have been unaware of its existence. According to Eugene Lyons, “the famine was accepted as a matter of course in our casual conversation at the hotels and in our homes.”²⁰ William Henry Chamberlin has gone even further by stating “to anyone who lived in Russia in 1933 and who kept his eyes and ears open the historicity of the famine is simply not open to question.”²¹

Reporters who circumvented the travel ban and then avoided the censors by mailing their dispatches were, of course, risking the loss of their posts. The Soviet denial of re-entry to Paul Scheffer in 1929 was an example of what could happen to such a correspondent, and there were few in the Moscow press who were willing to take the chance. Moreover, other reporters might have stood up to the Soviets had they been convinced that their dispatches would have been received with interest. What concerned them was that the early famine accounts were greeted with indifference or disbelief by the public and with outright hostility by liberals. A few years before, word of famine in Russia might have been big news in the West. With the rise of fascism and with Litvinov and Stalin making anti-fascist overtures to the West, however, reporters sensed that the news value of the famine had diminished. The West seemed in no mood to accept the fact that millions were dying in Russia and that the starvation was the result of deliberate Soviet policies.²²

Most of the reporters took shelter behind the censorship and kept quiet about the famine. They wrote about it only when they left Russia, and even then they found that their accounts were met with disbelief. Eugene Lyons, for instance, returned to New York late in 1933 and began to write cautiously about the famine. Soviet sympathizers and liberals treated him as a renegade, he recalls, though his first descriptions of the famine fell

far short of the horrible conditions that he knew had existed.

A few correspondents, among them Duranty and Fischer, went beyond mere compliance with the censorship. While most of their colleagues passively accepted the famine cover-up, they echoed Soviet denials of the famine and blasted anyone who carried word of conditions to the West. Their distortion of the news, then, went beyond the demands of the censorship and was a vital factor in convincing the West that there was little or no truth to the famine stories. Moreover, by their active role in the cover-up they made it more unlikely that the foreign press in Moscow might force some kind of showdown with the censors or confront the West with the truth about Soviet conditions.

The reason for Fischer’s participation in the cover-up apparently, was his belief that the truth could only damage Soviet efforts to gain diplomatic recognition, stall Litvinov’s anti-fascist initiatives, and, most important, set back the Five-Year Plan. Though he seemed to waver at times, for the most part Fischer seemed convinced that the Soviets were on the eve of creating a better way of life. He seemed anxious to buy

time for the Kremlin so that it could bring the nation through the difficult period and into the socialist epoch.

Duranty also seems to have served the Kremlin for the same reasons he had in the past. Perhaps, as Lyons, Chamberlin, and Muggeridge have charged, Duranty had received money and special treatment from the Soviets over the years. Yet it is difficult to think of Duranty as just a Soviet hireling. For years he apparently had admired the Soviets and had been convinced that they were doing what was best for Russia, even though the cost in lives and suffering was high. It is possible, of course, that this apparent admiration was only a mask or a ruse to cover the fact that he was a paid Soviet apologist. Yet, lacking proof of that, it seems probable that Duranty responded readily to the famine cover-up, with or without Soviet prompting

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or money, because he had come to believe that few in the West were tough enough or realistic enough to understand that the harsh modernization program was necessary.

Duranty's Pulitzer Prize

An additional consideration which may have reinforced Duranty's views on the eve of the Soviet famine had to do with the Pulitzer Prize that he won in May 1932. In picking him for the award, the Pulitzer selection committees cited Duranty's 1931 articles on the Five-Year Plan as the best by any foreign correspondent for an American newspaper. The committees said of his work:

Mr. Duranty's dispatches show profundity and intimate comprehension of conditions in Russia and of the causes of those conditions. They are marked by scholarship, profundity, impartiality, sound judgment and exceptional clarity and are excellent examples of the best type of foreign correspondence.²³

Because of such praise, it may have seemed to Duranty that after years of offering his opinions to a skeptical American audience, he had finally won their understanding. He may have felt a greater stake than before in protecting his conception, therefore, at the very time that the famine put his views to their greatest test.

What is so remarkable about Duranty's selection for the Pulitzer is that, for a decade, his reports had been slanted and distorted in a way that made a mockery of the award citation. Probably without parallel in the history of these prestigious prizes, the 1932 award went to a man whose reports concealed or disguised the conditions they claimed to reveal, and who may even have been paid by the Soviets for his deceptions.

The Correspondence Jury which initially recommended Duranty for the Pulitzer, was the first of the committees that passed on his nomination. It was a three member committee consisting of two

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faculty members from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, Carl W. Ackerman and Allen Sinclair Will, and the editor of the Harford (Conn.) Courant,

George B. Armstead. No record was kept of the Jury's discussions, and there is no indication of who put forward the nomination. 24 One possible clue to Duranty's selection by the Jury, however, is provided by Leland Stowe, then a correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune, and himself the Pulitzer Prize winner for correspondence in 1930. Stowe "suspects's that "one big reason" for the choice was that the New York Times had "its representatives on Pulitzer committees--or others influenceble." Stowe indicates that if there was a bias governing Duranty's selection, it was a pro-Times rather than a leftist political bent on the part of the committee members.²⁵

The Jury's report, dated March 11, 1932, seems to support the notion that Duranty's choice was not an ideological one. Though the Jury hailed his "impartiality and sound judgment," the only other reporter cited for similar distinction was Herbert R. Knickerbocker of the New York Evening Post and the Philadelphia Public Ledger. Knickerbocker's reports on "Fighting the Red Trade Menace" were singled out as some of the best articles of the year, but the Jury recommended that he not be selected, as the 1931 award had gone to him. Knickerbocker, who worked for Hearst newspapers, was certainly not a Soviet enthusiast. The Jury noted the work of eight other correspondents in its report, but faulted their work for various reasons, none of which seems to have been political.²⁶ Thus, aside from any pro-Times' sentiment that they may have had, it appears that the Jury members, like many Americans in 1932, were dispirited because of the Great Depression and were impressed by Duranty's claims concerning the Five-Year Plan.

The Correspondence Jury's recommendation of Duranty appears to have been the key to his winning the Award. Indeed its citation of his work was adopted without change by the remaining selection committees. It seems that particular blame should fall to the Jury, therefore, since it ignored the

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inadequacies in *Duranty's* reporting. Most notably, the Jury showed an appalling disregard for the lack of research that went into his articles. It was a deficiency that should have been evident to anyone who read his reports, since Duranty never visited a collective farm, a factory, or a worker's apartment in 1931. Indeed he had never traveled to another city or even another section of the Soviet Union during the year for which he received the award. In fact, his articles showed that he relied entirely on official sources of information. Anyone in the West who cared to subscribe to a Soviet newspaper could have written much the same descriptions of Soviet conditions that the Jury hailed as "excellent," "profound," and showing an "intimate comprehension of conditions."

One example of Duranty's contempt for investigation stands out in 1931. In January of that year, a New York Times reporter, Marcus A. Tollett, interviewed an OGPU official who had fled from Russia to Finland. The Times carried the police official's account of Soviet labor camps where kulaks worked and died under frightful conditions.²⁷ Though Duranty did not even pretend that he had first-hand knowledge of such conditions, he sloughed off the charges by noting that because of the Five-Year Plan "in a certain sense all Soviet labor is or will be or may be "forced." Duranty conceded that labor camps existed, but he explained that conditions in them were far

from difficult since “the Kremlin has a spark of softness in its heart for ‘political.’” The labor camps offered life in “communes” that were “comparatively free,” according to Duranty. He added that “political” were paid trade union wages for work that was “for the good of the communist” and allowed them to win back their civil rights.²⁸

Since the Pulitzer’s Correspondence Jury scarcely could have been impressed with Duranty’s research, it seems more likely that it was taken in by his soothing but specious parallels between the Five-Year Plan and parts of English and Hebrew history. Duranty was particularly artful when it

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came to softening the brutalities of the Soviet economic drive by likening the Five-Year Plan to heroic episodes in history. At times during 1931, Duranty claimed that the Soviets were exiling “malignants” to labor camps in the same way that Oliver Cromwell had shipped them to Virginia. Duranty insisted that a comparison could even be made between Cromwell and Stalin, since, like the sixteenth century Englishman, Stalin was teaching his people a work ethic and a sense of personal responsibility.²⁹

Similarly, Duranty argued that the five-year plan era had a parallel in Hebrew history. He explained that “Moses and Aaron can become Lenin and Trotsky, Joshua becomes Stalin, Caleb, Molotoff.” The Hebrew Exodus Duranty likened to the 1917 Revolution, while the “golden calf nicely translates into the Nep experiment,” and the Five-Year Plan was a kind of Promised Land. Duranty found a parallel between Stalin and Joshua that, like the one with Cromwell, seemed designed to allay his readers fears concerning the Soviet dictator. He explained that, like Joshua, Stalin was faced with teaching self-reliance to people who had been slaves for centuries. The impression was an appealing one, and it may have been what the Correspondence Jury had in mind when it cited his “profundity” and “sound judgment.”

The Advisory Board on the Pulitzer Prizes, which received the Correspondence Jury’s recommendation, was a thirteen member committee, made up of editors, journalists, and educators. As with the Jury, no account of the Board’s deliberations were kept. Yet two points concerning the Board’s deliberations are noteworthy. First, for over a year in the early 1920’s, Duranty had shared an apartment with Herbert Pulitzer, the youngest of Joseph Pulitzer’s three sons. Duranty and Herbert Pulitzer seem to have been close friends, and that friendship may have lasted into 1932. Though Herbert Pulitzer was not himself a member of the Advisory Board, both of his brothers, Joseph Pulitzer II and Ralph Pulitzer, were members and it is possible only to speculate about their attitude toward Duranty. It should

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be noted, however, that Ralph Pulitzer was not present on April 28 when the Board voted on the nomination.

There was surprisingly little reaction to Duranty’s selection either from supporters or critics. A check of leading magazines and newspapers reveals only that the award

stirred almost no public comment. It seems, as Leland Stowe argues, that given the climate of opinion in America at the time, Duranty's selection seemed a logical one. Stowe points out that Duranty was a veteran reporter, widely known and widely read. If the Pulitzer committees had made little effort to confirm the accuracy of his reports, according to Stowe, scarcely anyone else did either. Americans, Stowe writes, "had too many worries to be critical . . . about news coverage from [the] USSR."³⁰

One of the most persistent critics of the Pulitzer Prize committees during the early 1930's was Malcolm Cowley, editor of The New Republic. Himself a Soviet enthusiast during those years, Cowley regularly blasted the Pulitzer committees for their conservative selections. In a 1935 editorial he even urged the Advisory Board to "go out of business" since it was "afraid of ideas, afraid of blood, revolution, and, of course, language."³¹ Yet Cowley remembers that Duranty's selection was not very controversial at the time. He recalls that conservatives may have grumbled privately about the choice, but after the start of the Great Depression they generally had their hands full defending free enterprise. Cowley points out, too, that the early 1930's had seen enormous interest in the Soviet Five-Year Plan. Indeed, a Soviet book, New Russia's Primer, an explanation for children of the Five-Year Plan, was a bestseller for seven months in 1931 and a Book-of-the-Month Club selection for May 1931. In fact, this work of Soviet propaganda finished in the top one hundred of nonfiction bestsellers in the decade 1921-1932. In light of the attention that this book received, it seems understandable, according to Cowley, that Duranty's selection drew so little critical response.³²

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One additional measure of the acceptance of Duranty's views by many Americans came a few months after he won the Pulitzer Prize, when Franklin Roosevelt, fresh from securing his party's presidential nomination, called Duranty to the governor's mansion in Albany for discussions about Soviet-American trade and diplomacy. Duranty dined with Roosevelt and spent several hours giving him advice that apparently did not include any of the cynical views he often shared with colleagues in Moscow. Duranty later claimed that he had been told that the session would be entirely private, but was surprised and pleased when Roosevelt released the story to the press and described his conversation with Duranty as "fascinating."³³

The Pulitzer Prize, the session with Roosevelt, and the praise and attention that he received from liberals and intellectuals in the spring and summer of 1932 may have confirmed and reinforced Duranty's point of view about Soviet Russia on the very eve of the famine.

1932: The Onset of the Crisis

Both Fischer and Duranty had expressed satisfaction with Soviet economic progress in 1931, and neither reporter had seemed displeased or uneasy about conditions in the countryside or about agricultural policy. For Duranty, at least, that attitude continued into the early months of 1932. In an April article he wrote that the spring planting was going well and the kolkhozes seemed "fairly well organized." The weather had been so good, he noted, that fifteen million acres of frost-damaged crops from the previous fall had been reseeded, in addition to the regular planting operation. Duranty was

pleased most of all by the expanded role of the Machine Tractor Stations in the planting program. He assured readers that this would mean larger crops since each MTS was staffed with professionals, while the kolkhozes in the past had relied upon “plowboys.” It seemed to please him, too, that the MTS gave the Kremlin the “whip hand” over farmers who persisted in their backward ways.³⁴

During the same months, Fischer was quiet

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about agricultural conditions. It was a sign of his concern, apparently, since he had spent the last weeks of 1931 in the Ukraine and the Caucasus. Fischer lectured in the United States from February through April and avoided the topic of agriculture. Nevertheless, these yearly tours seemed to harden his support for the Soviets, and he declared that “those who suffer from our system may seek solace in Bolshevism,” and “nothing from within the Soviet Union can kill Bolshevism, nor is there anyone who would want to.”³⁵ At a session of Philadelphia’s Foreign Policy Association, the wife of a mining engineer who had just returned from Russia called Fischer a “cad,” and had to be restrained after he praised the Soviet economic system.

Fischer returned to Moscow in June, and discovered that the harvest prospects were not good. Peasant lethargy, unreasonable procurement quotas, and dry weather had created a serious situation, and Fischer was candid in admitting the problems. He wrote:

during the winter and spring of this year many districts in the Ukraine and in other republics lacked sufficient food and fodder. Horses and cattle died in large numbers. Thousands of peasants have been coming to Moscow and other large cities for work and nourishment.³⁶

Fischer explained that too much grain had been taken from the peasants through procurements in 1931, and he noted the reasons for the heavy exactions: the need for exports, the desire for a grain reserve during the Manchurian crisis, and local officials who were insensitive to peasant needs.

If Fischer was unusually open about such difficulties after almost a year of silence, it may have been because he believed that the government had moved to correct them. He hailed the government’s cutback in grain procurements for 1932, explaining that only 18 million tons would be collected in 1932 in contrast to the 22.8 millions collected in 1931. Fischer assured readers that the new quotas would leave the peasants with plenty

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of grain for their own use and even a surplus, despite the less than promising harvest prospects. Yet a careful look at the situation might have shown Fischer that the new quotas were still dangerously high. Since the harvest would be average at best and the peasants had no grain reserves remaining from the 1930 harvest, a more realistic procurement figure would have been the 11.7 million tons collected on the average from 1925 to 1928.

Yet Fischer seemed certain that the peasants would be left with a surplus beyond their own needs in 1932, and he praised the revival of the private food markets by the “May Reform” as a peasant bonanza. He declared that there was already a “considerable flow of village products to the city,” and he insisted that the flow would increase since the state was making “heroic efforts” to provide consumer goods for the peasants. Fischer claimed that “the cities, formerly favored by the Bolsheviks, are being denuded of goods for the sake of the countryside.” He seemed confident that with such goods available, the peasants would have the incentive to grow and market more food. Russia’s food problems, he advised, would be over soon.³⁷

By contrast, Duranty seemed alarmed by what he found upon returning from the West in August. He wrote of the “startling” decline in grain collections and of peasants who were reduced to eating seed grain. Duranty found signs of peasant lethargy everywhere: tractors were in need of repair, the spring crops were unharvested, and the planting of winter wheat was from one-half to three-quarters behind schedule. Duranty traced the problem to “excessive” grain procurements and the lack of incentives for the peasants to produce. Unlike Fischer, too, he dismissed the effectiveness of the “May Reform” by arguing that the peasants had no surplus grain to market.³⁸

His concern increased during September. There was a food shortage in the cities, wrote Duranty, and it was worsening. He reported that peasant indifference had reached the point where factory workers were harvesting the crops, and he noted:

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the word “unsatisfactory” occurs too often in the press to make pleasant reading, and the writer’s earlier forecast that this will be a difficult winter in the Soviet Union seems only too true.³⁹

Such frankness apparently came from a conviction that Stalin was moving toward an N.E.P. -like accommodation with the peasants. It was not his conclusion alone, since the peasants also seemed to take the Kremlin’s permission for the marketing of surplus grain as a sign of an impending policy shift. Duranty may have believed that without such concessions the country would have been faced with serious grain shortages in 1932 and in the succeeding years. He added:

the industrial centers and construction camps must have food, which means the peasants must get goods. And as Lenin found with the earlier NEP eleven years ago, it is illogical to allow private trade without also allowing private traders.⁴⁰

In late September, on the eve of a Central Committee session, however, Stalin broke months of silence to quash rumors of a return to the N.E.P. This action surprised Duranty, and he began at once to offer different conclusions to his readers. After months of arguing for a policy change, he explained that there were only superficial similarities between 1921 and the current difficulties. The economy, he wrote, was far stronger than it had been when Lenin had abandoned War Communism, and the problems were but “growing pains” and “infantile maladies.”⁴¹

In contrast to his frankness during the summer, Duranty dropped only hints about agricultural conditions once Stalin's position was clear. Perhaps to satisfy the censors yet protect himself against future revelations about the situation in the countryside, Duranty wrote of peasant lethargy "in some districts," and the "marked fall in the living standards of a large number of peasants." But, lest readers take alarm, he stressed that there was

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"neither famine nor hunger," and the problems were "embarrassing" but "not disastrous."⁴²

Fischer, on the other hand, was unable to make up his mind about Soviet policy. His attitude fluctuated during the fall of 1932, indicating that he was wrestling over the merits of that policy. After months of optimism about the "May Reform," he became critical of it in late summer, and wrote that the countryside still faced a "critical" shortage of consumer goods. He called for the Party's Central Committee to make "momentous decisions" at its October meeting to ensure such a supply, since "winter crops are being planted now, and unless the peasant knows in advance that he will profit from early and dense sowings he will refrain from making them."⁴³

Although by September Fischer agreed with Duranty about the inadequacies of the "May Reform," he did not share Duranty's belief that it would take N.E.P.-style merchants to expedite the flow of consumer goods. Fischer had deplored the N.E.P. and had no desire to see it revived. Thus while Duranty may have been disappointed when Stalin refused to loosen the restraints on trade, Fischer was pleased. With that question resolved, he expected the Kremlin to provide the peasants with more consumer goods and an equitable grain procurement plan.

Early in October Fischer seemed euphoric about economic prospects. He wrote, "I feel as if this were the beginning of the end of a long Soviet winter which has lasted several years. Now the earth commences to smell of spring." Concluding that the goods shortage would be over soon, he explained:

The difficulties experienced in buying food and clothing mar the perspective of superficial or unphilosophical foreign observers more than they do that of most Soviet citizens, who, when they can pause in the mad course of Soviet life and think, readily distinguish

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between temporary hardships resulting from buoyant growth and permanent, fundamental gains.⁴⁴

A trip through the Ukraine in October and November took Fischer to the center of the crisis, however, and his enthusiasm waned as quickly as it had appeared. In an article written just after his return to Moscow, he told of peasants crowding into cities for food and hinted that there could be famine in the coming months.

Villages near a town like Kharkov normally enjoy greater prosperity than more distant agricultural units. Yet even those I saw within thirty-five miles of the city

limits had no meat or sugar. In the Poltava, Vinnitsa, Podolsk, and Kiev regions, conditions will be hard. I think there is no starvation anywhere in the Ukraine now--after all, they have just gathered in their harvest--but it was a bad harvest.⁴⁵

Fischer blamed the grain procurement program for causing these conditions. The program had destroyed the peasants' initiative, he explained, and he predicted that "the whole system of grain procurements must soon disappear."

Fischer scoffed at the reasons listed by the Soviet press for the crisis. By failing to discuss the real issues, he argued, the "Communists either mislead the people, or, more frequently, undermine the average citizen's faith in their incomplete analysis of current events." Fischer insisted that forced procurements should be abandoned and the country's resources should be directed to the production of consumer goods. He added:

Stalin must not only say these things. In some way he must make the peasants believe that this new policy is "serious and for a long time," for the people no longer take Moscow at its word. There has been too much arbitrary ruling and too much superimposition of authority What the Soviet Union needs to make necessary reforms

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real is self-interest, initiative, and responsibility from below instead of dictation from above--more economic democracy.⁴⁶

It was remarkable bluntness from one who ordinarily followed the Kremlin line. In contrast to Duranty's quick retreat from criticism, Fischer was revealing more independence than he had shown since the start of the Five-Year Plan. His advice to Stalin hit at the center of Soviet economic policy; he was questioning not just procurements but the Kremlin's priorities and its management of the economy. He insisted, too, that action be taken at once to import \$100 million worth of food and consumer goods from the West. Such a supply, he argued, would ensure that peasants would plant an adequate crop in the spring of 1933. It was an indication that Fischer was aware of the gravity of the crisis.

Famine: Early 1933

Fischer's switch from criticism to support for Soviet agrarian policy came as abruptly in the early months of 1933 as Duranty's shift had been three months before. By February 1933, he was defending the Soviets with his former vigor and denying that there was a famine. The cause may have been due in part to the Soviet decision to replace the grain procurements with a grain tax, beginning in the spring of 1933. Such a change was announced in mid-January 1933, and it assured the peasants that a tax would be fixed at the start of the growing season and grain produced in excess of that tax could be consumed or sold as the peasants wished.⁴⁷ Fischer had warm praise for the decree, and claimed that it was the most important law enacted since the start of the Five-Year Plan. He seemed confident that, freed from the arbitrary procurements, the peasants would take more interest in their crops and produce impressive surpluses. This conviction stirred Fischer's hopes, once again, and he claimed that

collectivization would be given a chance at last to prove its superiority over private farming- -a superiority that he seemed confident it would demonstrate.⁴⁸

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Fischer's readers may have wondered about the other demands he had written about in December. The grain-tax might remedy the long-term problem, but what of the immediate food crisis and the shortage of consumer goods? Though he had written urgently about them late in 1932, he ignored them two months later when he praised the new grain tax. There were also the "recent draconian measures" that he was anxious to explain. Fischer gave few details, but he was referring to the laws issued in late January 1933, designed to ensure that the remaining grain procurement quotas would be filled. These were punitive decrees that supplemented and expanded the measures enacted in mid-1932 to compel the peasants to meet the procurement quotas. One of the new decrees created political sections (politotdels) in each machine tractor station in order to increase the Party's control over procurements at the kolkhoz level. Another measure provided harsh penalties for kolkhozniks whose work was unsatisfactory, while a final decree put the North Caucasus, where procurements were especially far behind schedule, under martial law. That measure provided some relief to the area in the form of seed grain, but its main purpose was to intimidate the peasants and terrify the local Party officials.⁴⁹

Fischer may have felt that since the Soviets had announced the shift from procurements to a grain tax, it was important that he help cover for them through the remaining procurement crisis. Thus, in contrast to his blunt and accurate analysis of the grain situation in the previous December, Fischer's February 1933 article was packed with excuses for the lagging procurements. He argued that "many" Party officials in the North Caucasus and the Ukraine were being unmasked as former lieutenants of Deniken, Makno and Petlura. They had used the procurement issue to turn the peasants against the state, he argued and were partly responsible for the food shortage and the problems affecting the collectives. "Whole villages" contaminated by these men, he explained, had to be deported to "lumbering camps and mining areas or to distant agricultural districts which are just now entering

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upon their pioneering stage." He admitted that it was a project "which other nations would probably conduct with less vigor," but he insisted that it was a temporary step, forced upon the Kremlin. He claimed that the Soviets were learning to govern through "wise administration."⁵⁰

In fact, Fischer could hardly have been as gullible as he appeared to be. "Wrecking" was, indeed, one of the bogeys and phony issues that he had railed against in December. In fact, years later in his biography of Stalin, Fischer noted that Stalin had uprooted "millions of peasants" from their villages and shipped them to new locations. The reason for this massive operation, Fischer wrote, was to break peasant resistance to collectivization. It was not, he admitted, because these peasants were "wrecker~ or supporters of Denikin, Makhno, or Petlura."⁵¹

The grain tax was probably not the only factor in Fischer's change of attitude early in 1933. He had been in the United States in the opening months of the year and learned that the incoming Roosevelt administration was considering diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union. Early in February, Fischer talked with Idaho's Senator Borah and the out-going Secretary of State, Henry L. Stimson. Both men were convinced that Roosevelt would overcome the objections of his foreign policy advisor, Cordell Hull, and normalize relations with Moscow. Fischer may have worried that he might jeopardize recognition by writing negative reports on the grain crisis.

The American economic depression may have influenced him, as well. Economic conditions were at a nadir when he arrived for a brief speaking tour at the start of 1933, and he saw banks closing and found soup lines and unemployed at each of his stops. Fischer may have concluded that he had been too severe with the Soviets, and he may have decided to give Stalin more time to work out a solution for the country's grain problem.

Finally, Soviet pressure may have figured in his change of attitude. As conditions worsened late

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in 1932, efforts increased to keep word of the situation from reaching the West. Eugene Lyons claimed later that when Maurice Hindus tried to return to Russia early in 1933, his visa was withheld for a month until he agreed not to travel through his native Belorussia- -a trip he had made yearly in the past.⁵² If Lyons is correct, then there may have been pressure on Fischer to conform, or he may have been intimidated by Hindus' experience.

Fischer lectured in America from February to May and praised the Soviets without reservation. The early part of the tour was almost a crusade for the recognition of Russia, but his subject changed to the famine by the close of March. It was at that point that Gareth Jones, a reporter and former aide to Lloyd-George, returned to Great Britain and published an account in the Manchester Guardian of the famine conditions he had seen in the Ukraine. Though Fischer probably knew that the report was correct- -he had hinted in his December article that such conditions were likely-- he tried to discredit Jones. When he was asked in Denver about Jones' estimate of a million famine deaths, Fischer scoffed:

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.⁵³

He was even more emphatic later in the tour. "There is no starvation in Russia," he told an audience at Mills College in Oakland. Though Fischer had known Jones and may have been aware that he had been a graduate student in Russian history under Sir Bernard Pares at the University of London, he dismissed him as a visitor who had spent a few weeks in Russia and claimed to know all about the country.⁵⁴

It would have been meaningless for the Soviets to pressure such correspondents as Hindus and Fischer into denying the famine, unless they were sure of Walter Duranty's cooperation in the cover-up. As

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the New York Times' reporter and the dean of the foreign press in Moscow, he was the linchpin in the Kremlin's plan to suppress news of the famine. Had Duranty refused to conceal the famine and returned to the West with news of it, no Soviet efforts would have quieted the sensation, and other reporters would have been compelled to tell the truth. Moreover, Duranty seemed relatively immune to pressure. Not only was his prestige greater than that of any of his colleagues, but he was nearing the end of his career in Russia. Malcolm Muggeridge recalls that even in 1932 Duranty seemed worn down and was considering moving to New York to write for the Saturday Evening Post.⁵⁵ While other reporters were vulnerable to threats that their visas would be revoked, Duranty probably was no longer concerned by such a prospect.

It is at least possible that left to his own wishes, Duranty would have retired from Russia in mid-1932, after winning the Pulitzer Prize. It may be that the Soviets pressured him to stay because they feared that the coming months would be difficult ones and that without Duranty they would have been hard pressed to conceal those difficulties. Though it can not be proven that Duranty was ever paid by the Soviets, it is conceivable that he was paid handsomely to remain during 1933. Certainly if he was as weary in 1932 as Muggeridge indicates, it would have been easier for him to retire at the height of his career in mid-1932 than to risk writing lies about the famine which might at any time have been revealed for what they were.

Yet the possibility seems still greater that Duranty was not simply paid or forced to stay in Russia for the duration of the famine. Instead it seems likely that he hesitated to retire until the Soviet economy had begun to fulfil the promises of the Five-Year Plan. Duranty seems genuinely to have believed that the economy was nearing that point, and that, in the end, the sacrifices involved would prove to have been justified. He may have believed that his own role was a key one in concealing those sacrifices until they could be shown

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to have been necessary and worthwhile. Duranty may have feared that if he retired too soon, Soviet management of the news might break down and the human cost of the economic plan would be revealed prematurely. In that event, the Five-Year Plan might be reined in before it could demonstrate its worth, and Duranty's own deceptions and distortions would be revealed.

Even then, Duranty seemed worried that the West suddenly might become aware of the famine, or that the suffering and the prospect of economic disaster might stampede the Kremlin into an unexpected policy shift such as had occurred in March 1930. To protect himself from such possibilities, Duranty seems to have salted his reports with veiled references to the suffering and hints of criticism about the human

cost. Muggeridge claims that he once found the “little gymnast,” as he called Duranty,

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.⁵⁶

Duranty’s articles in the last weeks of 1932 seemed particularly obfuscated. There was “an element of truth” to reports of a food shortage, he admitted, but the shortage was “not alarming, much less desperate.” He noted that Russians would eat less well than they liked that winter, and meals would consist of bread, potatoes, and cabbage, with fish three times a week and meat “perhaps once a week.” He declared, however, “there is no famine or actual starvation, nor is there likely to be.”⁵⁷ Duranty described the problem as “insignificant as compared with conditions in 1920,” and added that grain stockpiled during the Manchurian crisis could be released.⁵⁸

Inevitably there was also Duranty’s war motif. For readers troubled by the report of hardship, he

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drew a parallel between the Kremlin’s attempt to modernize Russia and the effort by the West to defeat Germany in World War I. He explained that the Soviets would not abandon their goal because of the food shortage, any more than the Allies had been deterred by casualties. The Soviets had the “same iron determination” to win, and their goal was “far nobler than the conquest of a foreign enemy.” Duranty invited his readers to see a different side of the struggle; did they remember, he asked, the “thrill and wonder” of the war years? There had been hardships, he recalled, but also the “comradeship and the stimulus of struggle, for which no sacrifice of money, comfort or even life itself seemed over-great.” His conclusion was chilling. In his words:

Enemies and foreign critics can say what they please. Weaklings and despondents at home may groan under the burden, but the youth and strength of the Russian people is essentially at one with the Kremlin’s program, believes it worthwhile and supports it, however hard be the sledding.⁵⁹

Duranty continued in this vein until the famine report by Gareth Jones caused a stir in the West in late March. Jones was not the first to write about the famine—Ralph Barnes and Malcolm Muggeridge had written earlier accounts—but Jones’ article attracted more attention, and the Kremlin was eager for the foreign press in Moscow to deny its claims. The timing of Jones’ article gave the Soviets a special advantage. Earlier in March, a raid on the Moscow office of Metropolitan-Vickers, a British export firm, brought the arrest of four of its employees, all British citizens, who were charged with plotting to sabotage Soviet power stations. The arrests received much attention in the West, and the trial was scheduled for early April. In Assignment in Utopia, Eugene Lyons wrote that the Soviet press chief, Constantine Oumansky met with some foreign correspondents in a hotel room and warned that inside information about the trial would go only to reporters who denounced Jones. Lyons wrote that because the trial story was certain to be

major news, it would have been “professional suicide” to have denied oneself such information. According to him, the correspondents agreed to cooperate with Oumansky, and then:

the filthy business having been disposed of, someone ordered vodka and zakuski. Oumansky 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 him in before or since.⁶⁰

Years later, Lyons remembers little more about the meeting with Oumansky than the description of it in Assignment in Utopia. It was not a “general session” of the foreign correspondents, he recalls, nor did Oumansky have to do more than “hint” as to what should be done.⁶¹ Lyons cannot remember who attended or even more specifically where the meeting was held. He adds, however, that “presumably” Duranty was there.⁶²

If Duranty indeed attended the session with Oumansky, he upheld his part of their bargain by writing the most notorious article of his career. He wrote that Jones had concocted a “big scare story,” based on a “hasty” and “inadequate” glimpse of the countryside. Duranty did not mention the travel ban that caused Jones’ haste and kept even loyal reporters like himself from seeing the stricken areas. Instead he claimed to have made an “exhaustive” investigation into Jones’ charges. Soviet newspapers, officials, and friends in rural areas, he wrote, provided “more trustworthy information than I could get by a brief trip through any one area.” He wrote that he had “tabulated” their findings and could report that the food shortage was still serious, but that there was no famine. In trying to explain just how serious the shortage was, Duranty added a statement, so preposterous, that it has become a classic of the famine cover-up. “There is no actual starvation or deaths from starvation,” he wrote, “but there is widespread mortality from diseases due to malnutrition.”⁶³ Eugene Lyons termed such statements by Duranty “verbal finessing” and “philological

sophistries,” and they were clearly an example of the contortions he used in order to leave a shred of the truth in his denials of the famine.

Having admitted that there was a good deal of suffering, Duranty insisted that, “to put it brutally,” the cost was worthwhile. He stretched his analogy between the modernization of Russia and the Allied war effort to its limits. In the past he had justified casualties in both campaigns as regrettable, but necessary. In this story, however, he likened the Bolsheviks to a commander in “the World War who ordered a costly attack in order to show his superiors that he and his division possessed the proper soldierly spirit.” For readers who found this justification for Soviet actions alarming, he added: “you can’t make an omlette without breaking eggs.”⁶⁴

Concealing the Famine: May to September, 1933

The second phase of the famine cover-up was easier for the foreign press, since excellent weather and a massive Soviet effort early in 1933 brought success both to the spring planting and to the harvesting of winter wheat. Ironically, just as conditions began to improve, newspapers in the West gave more attention to the reports of famine. With the crisis beginning to ease, however, correspondents were able to argue that the worst was over and that conditions were improving.

The Kremlin helped to combat famine reports by lifting, in stages, the ban on travel by foreign reporters. Only those who had been most reliable in the earlier phase of the cover-up were allowed to travel, and, not surprisingly, Duranty was the first to receive permission. Yet even he was denied a careful look at the countryside. In late April and early May, Duranty traveled by train across the Ukraine and stayed for several days in Kiev and Odessa. The trip only confirmed his stated view that conditions had been hard in the past, but there were signs of improvement.

In a report from Odessa, Duranty argued that

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the more he saw of the Ukraine, the more he was convinced that the rumors of hardships had been exaggerated. To prove his point, Duranty fell back on his characterization of Russian peasants as simple-minded and superstitious. He had learned years ago, he explained, that word of famine could cause hysteria among the peasants. He claimed that even though they were not suffering themselves, peasants would tell about villages nearby where there was a terrible loss of life. Duranty recalled that he had crossed the Ukraine years before and encountered these stories repeatedly, but whenever he reached the village where the suffering was supposed to be greatest, he found only more accounts of famine somewhere else.⁶⁵

Fischer, at last, was in complete agreement with Duranty. When he returned from America in the early summer of 1933, he wrote articles that read just like his colleague's. He reported that the early months of the year had been "very difficult indeed," and he explained:

Many people simply did not have sufficient nourishment. The 1932 harvest was bad, and to make matters worse, peasants refused to reap what they knew the government would confiscate under the polite guise of "collections." These circumstances . . . reduced food reserves to an uncomfortable minimum. Human resistance to disease is consequently very low.⁶⁶

Fischer's point, however, was to show that the hardships were over. He wrote that, the spring planting had been so successful that each kolkhoz family would get nearly 18,000 pounds of grain in 1933. Since "a good crop in Russia covers a multitude of past mistakes," he concluded that the peasants would forgive the state for waiting so long to announce the grain tax. The scarcity of consumer goods in rural areas was over, too, he advised. Although it was months before he would be allowed into the countryside, Fischer claimed that the "trickle" of goods he had found there late in 1932 had become a "sizeable stream," and he called it "the most striking change of the last

Still, Fischer’s role in this phase of the cover-up was surprisingly small. During the months from May through September he wrote a number of articles on other topics, but only two brief reports on Russia. At a time when the Soviets were anxious for denials of the famine, Fischer seems to have done the minimum necessary to satisfy the Kremlin. He may have felt that conditions were improving since the adoption of the grain tax, yet he seemed to have been reluctant to conceal or apologize for the famine conditions earlier in the year, conditions that he knew could have been avoided.

Duranty, on the other hand, was the mainstay of the cover-up during these months. He insisted that the food shortage was ending, and he added that collective farm operations had made so much progress since the start of 1933 that “one might even go so far as to say that the collective farm problem is already solved in its essentials.”⁶⁸ As the summer progressed, he grew increasingly candid about earlier conditions, yet his reports were spaced in order to cushion the impact, and his comments were so contradictory that they must have confounded his readers. Early in August, for instance, he admitted that food supplies had increased in July, at the “eleventh hour.” He acknowledged that, until then, there had been “deaths and actual starvation” in “some districts” and “among the large floating population of unskilled labor.” Even those remarks were sandwiched between denunciations of those who claimed that the famine was continuing and those whom he accused of exaggerating the conditions.⁶⁹

The most serious test of the cover-up during mid-1933 came in late August, when Ralph Barnes of the New York Herald Tribune returned from Moscow and estimated that the famine had taken at least a million lives.⁷⁰ Since his report appeared at a time when there was growing interest in the famine in the West, it placed a new strain on the cover-up. Three days later Duranty seemed to attack Barnes by declaring that “the excellent harvest about to be gathered shows that any report of a

famine in Russia is today an exaggeration or malignant propaganda.” But Duranty agreed that earlier there had been a “heavy loss of life” in grain-producing areas. Perhaps since Barnes’ count of a million deaths was far less than the apparent actual count of five millions or more, Duranty was willing to lend some credence to that estimate by admitting that the death rate in the stricken areas was three to four times normal. He insisted, however, that few of the deaths could be attributed to starvation. He explained, again, that most of the fatalities had resulted from diseases associated with malnutrition.⁷¹

In September, the harvest brought a sharp reduction in the suffering in many areas, and the Kremlin relaxed its restrictions on travel by reporters. The Ukraine and the North Caucasus were the most important areas affected, and, according to Eugene Lyons, as a reward to Duranty, he was given a two-week head start over his colleagues.⁷² His response was so enthusiastic that it may have surprised even the Kremlin. Instead of confusing readers with nonsensical phrases and bits of the truth,

he pictured the countryside as overflowing with grain and well-fed peasants, a place where it was unthinkable that famine could have existed months before.

At Rostov-On-Don, Duranty insisted that conditions were so good that there should never have been a travel ban. He called it “inexplicable that the Moscow authorities have restricted freedom of travel for any foreign correspondent, even on the plaintive grounds that ‘some correspondents earlier wrote some distressing articles.’” He claimed that the government had been too sensitive about reports written by “certain anti-Bolshevik elements abroad and some credulous American correspondents.” Such reports were “exaggerated,” according to Duranty, and he argued that even he had overestimated the death rate in previous dispatches. Duranty recalled that he had visited the Rostov-On-Don region after the 1921 famine and found peasants dying everywhere, while those who survived were haggard and listless. He contrasted that scene with

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the “flourishing” countryside and the well-fed people he saw in 1933. To encourage that impression Duranty studded his account with references to “husky girls and women,” “plump babies,” and “fat calves.” He argued that it was “sheer absurdity” to speak of famine when he could see “mile after mile of reaped grain in the fields” and “gigantic piles of wheat.” Village markets, he insisted, were “flowing with eggs, fruit, poultry, vegetables, milk and butter at prices far lower than in Moscow. A child can see that this is not famine but abundance.”⁷³

This was the same area where two weeks later William Henry Chamberlin found the fields overgrown with weeds and cattle and dogs all eaten to avoid starvation. Chamberlin concluded that there had been a “major famine” there only a few months before.⁷⁴ Even Duranty did not picture the area as free of hardships. He noted that local officials were reluctant to discuss the early months of the year, and it indicated to him “that the pinch must have been tighter than they are willing to admit.” He insisted again, however, that there was no evidence of famine, and that the peasants told him:

yes, that they had been hungry; yes, their animals had died; yes, they had to borrow grain from the state for sowing. That showed how tight the pinch was. But, as far as the writer could learn, there was nothing like famine conditions. When he mentioned the word golod-literally “hunger,” which has meant famine in Russia for the past thousand years-- they smiled. “Not golod,” they said, “but it was difficult.”⁷⁵

According to Eugene Lyons and Malcolm Muggeridge, when Duranty returned to Moscow he gave a different account of what he had found. Muggeridge remembers him telling of an “appalling” food shortage and justifying the Soviet reaction to it by “banging the sides of the sofa” and

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declaring “‘you can’t make omelet’s without cracking eggs!’”⁷⁶ Lyons recalls that he was having dinner with his wife and Anne O’Hare McCormick, another New York Times’ correspondent, when Duranty joined the party. Lyons explains that Duranty:

gave us his fresh impressions in brutally frank terms and they added up to a picture of ghastly horror. His estimate of the dead from famine was the most startling I had as yet heard from anyone.

“But, Walter, you don’t mean that literally?” Mrs. McCormick exclaimed. “Hell I don’t . . . I’m being conservative,” he replied, and as if by way of consolation he added his famous truism: “But they’re only Russians”⁷⁷

Even one of Duranty’s close friends admits that he knew more about the famine than he revealed to his readers. Lilian T. Mowrer, widow of Edgar Ansel Mowrer, European correspondent for the Chicago Daily News, defends Duranty as a “damn good reporter,” whose articles were generally more informative than those of his colleagues. According to her, Duranty was “immensely well informed” about conditions in Russia. But she admits that he was “somewhat cynical” about the famine and that his dispatches were “watered down.”⁷⁸

Concealing the Famine: After 1933

Duranty wrote about conditions in 1933 on several occasions after he left Russia. In his autobiography, written in 1934, he denied again that it had been anything more than a difficult year for Russia, but he seemed unsure of the reason for the distress. At one point he remembered only that “something had gone wrong with the harvest.” He was more certain about his admiration for the Soviet decision not to back away from collectivization, despite the hardships. He claimed that “what impressed me most was that there was no sign of faltering on the part of the Kremlin, none of the rumors about wobble or change of policy that had been current a year before.”

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Once more Duranty’s sympathies were with the strong and the resolute, rather than with those who suffered.

In his autobiography, Duranty remembered conditions in southern Russia very differently from those he had described at the time. Instead of the “miles and miles” of grain he had written of in 1933, he recalled having driven “for miles through a wilderness of lofty weeds which had been golden wheat fields only three years before.” He had seen “empty cottages” and a “marked scarcity of animals and poultry,” while peasants had told him “grim tales of their sufferings in the past two years.” Duranty’s conclusions had not changed, however. He argued that the Kremlin’s program was what Russia needed. The hardships and the casualties, he claimed, had been worthwhile.⁷⁹

A decade later, in his book USSR, Duranty finally told the truth about what he had seen during that trip in September, 1933. He recalled having found miles of weeds, “many deserted villages,” and a horde of peasant beggars.” For the first time, Duranty admitted that there had been a famine and that it had taken from four to five million lives. Still, however, he offered an explanation that supposedly cleared the Kremlin of responsibility. He claimed that the Japanese threat to Siberia late in 1932 had compelled the Soviet to build a grain reserve for their forces. He admitted that by seizing the peasants’ grain the Kremlin had precipitated the famine; yet he insisted

that there had been no alternative. Duranty blasted those who put the blame on Stalin. "What a misconception!" he charged. "Compare it with the truth, that Japan was poised to strike and the Red Army must have reserves of food."

To support his claim that the Japanese were responsible, Duranty tried to shift the time of the famine to the last months of 1932 when the threat of war was greatest. He claimed that the food shortage eased in January 1933 when the threat of an attack receded and grain reserves were released. The Soviets had hidden the famine, he

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acknowledged, rather than reveal such a weakness to the Japanese.⁸⁰

Writing in 1944, Duranty claimed that, considering the secrecy, he had done a good job in reporting the food shortages late in 1932. Looking back on his articles, he concluded:

I seem to have known what was going on, without in the least knowing why, that is without perceiving that Japan was the real key to the Soviet problem at that time, and that the first improvement coincided almost to a day with the Japanese southward drive against Jehol. My dispatches refer constantly to "food shortages" and to "trouble in the village" and to the "difficulties of the peasant situation." Then in January their tone changes, and I write of a "new wave of energy" and of "the Bolsheviks being galvanized into action."⁸¹

Duranty had one more discrepancy to explain. If the threat of war had caused the travel ban at the end of 1932, as he claimed, then why was that ban continued until September 1933? Duranty's answer was even more preposterous than his claim about Japanese responsibility for the famine. He argued that the railroads were too overworked in these months to permit reporters to travel on them. Travel by automobile was also out of the question, he declared, because of a gasoline shortage.

In his last book, Stalin and Co., written in 1949, Duranty's admission that there has been a famine and that he had seen evidence of it on his September 1933 trip, was firmer than before. He wrote again that "in the summer I drove nearly two hundred miles across country between Rostov and Krasnodar through land that was lost to the weeds and through villages that were empty." Then, in what might be termed self-inflicted condemnation, he insisted:

Whatever Stalin's apologists may say, 1932 was a year of famine in Russia, with all the signs of peasant distress which I had seen in 1921;

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the mass migration of destitute peasants from the countryside to the towns and cities; epidemics of typhus and other diseases of malnutrition; great influx of beggars into Moscow and Leningrad.⁸²

Fischer was just as inconsistent in his treatment of the famine in the years after 1933. In 1934, as in the previous year, he ignored the subject, but it was an awkward silence since he visited the countryside for the first time since late 1932. In the summer of 1934, Fischer led an American tour group on a forty-day trip from Leningrad to the Caucasus. It was billed as an intensive look at conditions and included stops at two sovkhoses and four kolkhozes in the Ukraine and the North Caucasus.

What Fischer's group found in the countryside may not have been encouraging. Less than ten of the two hundred pages in his book about the trip, Soviet Journey, touch on what they saw, and even then his remarks are vague. Fischer claimed that collectivization had helped the peasants, but he admitted that "the Russian countryside was so unprogressive, so illiterate culturally and agriculturally that almost any change would have been a change for the better." After previous visits, Fischer had written long descriptions of the collective farms and quoted peasant after peasant on the progress being made, but there were no such accounts in Soviet Journey. Yet, nowhere in the book was there any indication that Russia had been through a famine.⁸³

Fischer took a more active role in the cover-up in 1935, though, as he shook off his doubts about Soviet policy. The second Five-Year Plan was one reason for his renewed enthusiasm, since he seemed convinced that it would provide the long-awaited supply of consumer goods. More important, he was evidently impressed by Soviet foreign policy, and alarmed by Nazi anti-Semitism. Stalin and Litvinov had been untiring in their efforts to maintain the peace and contain Hitler since 1933, and Fischer was anxious to defend them at a time

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when they were constructing a network of alliances that, he hoped, might contain the Nazi threat.⁸⁴

When the Hearst newspapers published a new series on the famine, Fischer apparently saw it as a threat to the Kremlin's diplomacy. In an article for The Nation, he attacked the reports in a manner reminiscent of Duranty's best efforts. Fischer claimed that the Hearst reporter, Thomas Walker, had spent a month in Russia gathering material from anti-Soviet elements. Walker had never tried to verify that information, he charged, and the articles were no more accurate than Hearst's past fabrications. Fischer suggested that Walker's photographs of famished peasants "could easily date back to the Volga famine of 1921." The object of Walker's reports, he concluded, was simply to "spoil Soviet-American relations and encourage foreign nations with hostile military designs upon the U.S.S.R."⁸⁵

Fischer was mistaken if he hoped to discredit Walker so easily. In a letter to The Nation, William Henry Chamberlin challenged Fischer to admit that Russia had been through a terrible famine in 1933. Chamberlin described the conditions he had seen after the travel ban had been lifted and explained that the famine was the result of 'the state's grain requisitions. He noted:

I feel justified in recalling my personal observations of this famine because, although it happened two years ago, I think it will probably still be "news" to

readers of The Nation who depend on Mr. Fischer for their knowledge of Russian developments. I have searched in vain in Mr. Fischer's well-informed and sometimes brilliant articles on other phases of Soviet life for a single forthright, unequivocal recognition of the famine, although he was in Russia during the period of the famine and was scarcely ignorant of something that was common knowledge of Russians and foreigners in the country at that time.⁸⁶

Fischer's reply was embarrassingly evasive.

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He complained that it was unfair of Chamberlin to hold him responsible for reporting the famine when he had not even been in Russia for much of 1933. Fischer pointed out that upon returning to Moscow in the summer of that year, he had written "about the difficult period in the first half of 1933 when 'many people simply did not have sufficient nourishment. " He insisted, too, that if Chamberlin had "really searched 'for a single forthright, unequivocal recognition of the famine,' he would have found the unequivocal words 'the 1933 Ukrainian famine,'" in an article in The Nation of April 18, 1934. It was an absurd defense, however, since the phrase was buried in an article on Spanish politics.⁸⁷

Fischer did not stop with manipulating his own record of the famine, but charged that Chamberlin was blaming the Kremlin for conditions that the peasants had brought upon themselves. He had seen great quantities of grain rotting in the fields late in 1932, Fischer explained, because the peasants refused to harvest it. 'If the famine was 'manmade,' he insisted, "the peasants were the men who made it." The argument crumbled, though, when he admitted that excessive grain requisitions had caused the peasant apathy. Nevertheless he argued that his own account of the reasons for the famine was fairer than Chamberlin's. While Chamberlin put the blame on the Kremlin, Fischer explained that he blamed both the government and the peasants. He seemed genuinely proud of what he called his brand of objective journalism. "I write what and as I please," he declared in an ironic and apt paraphrase of the title of Duranty's autobiography, and he concluded with an excellent statement of his kind of journalism:

I am convinced that the trend of Soviet developments is steadily and rapidly forward. In emphasizing this trend, therefore, I create a correct impression. Those prejudiced observers who harp on difficulties and mistakes distort the picture. The art of reporting is selection. Many correspondents select true facts to tell untruths⁸⁸

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Even in later years, after he had broken with the Soviets and excoriated Stalin in book after book for his role in the Great Purge and other crimes, Fischer apparently had difficulty in admitting that there had been a famine in Russia during the early 1930's, and that he had helped to conceal its existence. Only twice in his later writings did Fischer indicate that there had been a famine, and then his remarks were confined to a single phrase in one case and a few brief sentences in the other. In The God That Failed, Fischer stated only that in the famine of "1931-32" "several million people"

perished.⁸⁹ Several years later in his biography of Stalin, Fischer again noted that “several million lives” had been lost during the winter of 1932-33.” At last he attributed the blame to Stalin, as well as to the peasants. Pointing to the excessive grain procurements, Fischer now said that Stalin had deprived the peasants of the grain they had needed to survive.’ It was, even then, a gross underestimation of the famine, and it made no mention of his own role in concealing the tragedy. Nevertheless, at last Fischer had acknowledged the essential facts on a subject he had glossed over for more than twenty years.

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