The cover-up in the West

By Tobias Whelton

Holodomor is one of the greatest acts of mass murder of the 20th century. Latest estimates have put the death toll at 7 million from 1931-34 and this does not include incomprehensible physical and psychological damage to survivors. Yet despite the destruction, contemporary recognition of the famine was near non-existent, and even today the famine is criminally unknown. This is disastrous since only with knowledge of the famine can the West begin to recognise and eventually reconcile with Ukraine the atrocities of the famine. The cover-up was the result of the Kremlin's extraordinary effort to wipe out all knowledge of the famine through means of violence, repression and the falsification of statistics. However, what enabled the cover-up was the inaction of the West and at times an active repression of its own. The cover-up of the West is what the essay will explore, by focusing on the role of journalists and the actions of Western nations, a conclusion on the accountability of the West will be reached.

James Mace, renowned historian of Ukraine, defined the coverage of the famine as ‘A Tale of Two Journalists’. Mace was referring to Walter Durante and Gareth Jones and their opposing actions.

Walter Durante was a Moscow correspondent between 1922 and 1936, and quickly became admired by the general public. He soon became the most renowned reporter of the USSR working for the New York Times - the largest U.S newspaper - and was seen as giving the objective truth, admitting failures and successes of the USSR, winning the prestigious Pulitzer prize for his work. However most importantly, Durante was happy to play Stalin’s game writing favourable reports in exchange for a mansion, caviar and the position of Commissariat. Consequently, Durante was a key tool for Stalin’s coverup of the famine. Stalin had the ability to control Western coverage of the famine by having the most respected, wide-reaching reporter under his control. Some historians go as far to suggest that Durante played an active role in misleading the West, such as threatening other journalists. Robert Fulford coining him ‘Stalin’s spin Doctor’ and Ukrainian Weekly ‘more of a a propagandist than a correspondent’ suggesting Durante as a perpetrator, actively giving misleading reports to attract more readers. Conversely, Applebaum and Mark von Hagen portray Durante as not malicious, but rather an incompetent reporter, constrained by censorship and conforming to the vast majority of other contemporary journalists.

Here it is important to mention the historiographical debate that has taken place in recent years over Durante, regarding his Pulitzer Prize. In 2003, the UCCLA (Ukrainian Canada Civil Liberties Committee) sparked the debate, leading an international campaign for Durante’s Pulitzer Prize to be revoked, supported by 45,000 postcards sent by ethnic Ukrainians to the Pulitzer committee. This was done on the grounds Durante used the prestige of his Pulitzer Prize to keep knowledge of Holodomor relatively unknown using his award to mute journalist who dare expose the regime having an effect that arguably accounts for the lack of recognition today. However, while the campaign successfully raised awareness, it failed in getting the prestigious award revoked. The other side of the debate maintains that his shameful journalism does not justify writing Durante out of history. That instead, Durante should exemplify the dangers of betraying the core principles of journalism, while also giving an insight into how socialist ideas were fashionable for the time.
However, while Durante’s mendacity is up for debate, it is undeniable Gareth Jones was an extraordinary man. Jones’s former job as private secretary of Prime Minister Lloyd George gave him the ability to travel Russia as a freelancer, giving him more freedom than correspondents who needed constant Russian approval on residential permits. In the spring, Jones bravely snuck off his train into rural Ukraine where he trekked for three days without an official minder or escort. This allowed for a true perspective of the impact of the famine; instead of trips tightly choreographed by Soviet officials which other journalist embarked on, Jones received an unfiltered account speaking to those directly affected. From here he travelled through villages and collectives at the height of the famine noting down thoughts as well as conversations with locals in his notebook. The horrors of the famine were plainly revealed to him hearing many stories of people dying, witnessing bread queues that spanned the whole night in ‘many degrees of frost’ and going to the theatre in Kharkiv where ‘the audience had plenty of lipstick but no bread’. Once Jones had quietly escaped the USSR he was determined to make known the horrors he had seen.

In the coverage of the famine Jones and Durante came head to head. After escaping the USSR, Jones spoke at a press conference in Berlin where he revealed what he had witnessed, reaching many British publications as well as some American newspapers. Just a day after, Durante responded with an article titled ‘Russians Hungry But Not Starving’ that mocked Jones stating Jones’s evidence was ‘a forty-mile walk through villages’ where he ‘found conditions sad’. Durante went on to refute Jones’s claim of a famine infamously stating, ‘you can’t make an omelette without cracking a few eggs’, concluding that ‘conditions are bad, but there is no famine’. However, what makes this piece so disturbing is that, before publication, Durante had told an English diplomat he believed up to 10 million Ukrainians had died in the famine therefore suggesting Durante had full knowledge of the famine, yet deliberately lied and silenced Jones. Despite Jones articulately responding with his sources to the New York Times, Jones was silenced by the press. The Kremlin had shown outrage at Jones consequently introducing even harsher rules on journalist travelling outside Moscow. The press of the West, who were reliant on the goodwill of Moscow, went against Jones, and even when other papers, such as the Manchester Guardian, picked up the story it was overshadowed by bigger stories of Hitler. There were even reports of journalists in Moscow holding a meeting where they jointly worked out a ‘formula for denial.’ True or not, it serves as a metaphor to show the conspiracy-like atmosphere silencing Jones.

However, while Durante and other journalists played their part in covering up the famine and silencing Jones, they cannot entirely shoulder the blame. The West had received countless sources of the famine: some Ukrainians had escaped enabling them to recount their experience; some got letters through censors to relatives of other countries such as Germany, U.S, Canada; and some sent letters to religious leaders. These sources were partially recognised at the time, such as ethnic Ukrainians in Poland and Canada protesting the famine as well as raising political awareness bringing it up in Polish parliament. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian National Council of Canada sent letters to president Roosevelt and other cities enclosed with sources of the famine. News also filtered out via the Catholic Church. In Poland, Ukrainian Greek-Catholic priests took collections for victims, held a day of mourning and hung black flags on churches. The Church hierarchy was also alerted with the Vatican received two letters of written description of the famine, and Pope Pius XI ensured both were published in the Vatican newspaper.
Many European ministers were convinced of the famine, with ample amounts of information; however, European politics meant that nothing meaningful was to be done. One factor was the increasingly polarized climate of Communists and Nazis creating a political trap. This is exemplified in the Vatican that kept mostly silent despite a constant stream of information, due to the fear that denunciation of the USSR would be interpreted as support for Nazi Germany. This political trap was translated in many other places. In 1932, the Poles signed a non-aggression pact with the USSR and increasing fear of Hitler meant a Franco-Soviet and an Anglo-Soviet alliance necessary, which limited the ability to share information. The British foreign office even wrote ‘We do not want to make [information about the Holodomor] public...because the Soviet Government would resent it and our relationship with them would be prejudiced’. Meanwhile, Former French Prime Minister Potemkin ridiculed the notion of a ‘terror-famine’ after a tightly choreographed tour of Ukraine.

Not only were the allies deterred, but the fascist states of Germany and Italy had little incentive. Italy and Germany were some of the best informed with Italian consul, Gradenigo, reporting there is no doubt that ‘the hunger is principally the result of a famine organized in order to teach a lesson to the peasants’ and German consul, Gustav Hilgar stating the famine was ‘deliberate’ and ‘organized’. However, Mussolini not wanting to be seen showing pity did not mention the famine and perhaps prioritised a potential trade pact with the USSR, evidenced by the non-aggression treaty of September 1933. Germany, with a ruler who saw the Slavic people as sub-human, also took no action.

In the background of all this were soviet sympathies amongst Western intellectuals that still saw the USSR as a beacon of hope to the blatant evils of capitalism evidenced by the Wall Street Crash. This can explain Roosevelt administration seeing the USSR as an economic success, always looking for a reason to ignore the bad. This is evidenced by Roosevelt using the USSR as a source of inspiration for his interests in central planning, despite the immense suffering the Five-Year Plans caused. In combination with a need to contain Japan and affirmed by Durante’s reports, Roosevelt looked to a commercial relationship with the USSR. To consolidate, Soviet Foreign Minister, Litvinov, was invited to a banquet in America with 1,500 people to confirm the alliance and Durante was the star of the show. Applebaum goes on to call this cover-up complete in the West. The two factors that caused the cover-up in the West were united here: journalism and Western politics. Arguably both factors working in tandem is what made the cover-up possible. Journalists were incentivised to report what the West wanted to hear, with their career dependant on it (the fall of Jones for example), while biased reports reinforced western prejudices and gave evidence to ignore the sources that stated the truth.

In conclusion, the famine had been successfully silenced in the West; however, the question of culpability remains. It is clear that the USSR were the orchestrators of the cover-up, evident with the sheer energy and resources they invested into preventing information disseminating into the West. However, ultimately the USSR had limited power over foreign coverage thus the West must shoulder a degree of responsibility. Moreover, the responsibility should be directed at Western nations and their leader, not so much the journalists. This is because, in a sense, individual journalists were powerless, with their career dependent on both the Kremlin and Western nations. In the case of Durante and Jones, the only reason one was celebrated and the other shunned was because only one of their reports corresponded with pre-existing Western beliefs showing what journalists reported was subject to what the West desired. Furthermore, the motivation of Western nations can’t simply be pinned on the polarized political climate, even if it did play an important role for countries such as
England and France. America, who played the biggest role in an active repression of the famine, seems to have been primarily influenced by economics and to a lesser degree ideology, not so much the fear of Hitler and Japan. Thus, in conclusion, while the cover-up was orchestrated by the USSR it was primarily the actions of foreign nations that enabled the Kremlin to be successful. Given this conclusion, it is clear that now, more than ever, the Western nations have a responsibility to officially recognise the atrocities of Holodomor in honour of the victim's family as well as the hope of eventually reconciling their shameful compliance in the cover-up.
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**Notes**


2. Robert Fulfort, *Duranty was Stalin’s Spin Doctor*, The National Post (2003)


When the city fathers buy a second-hand computer to cover up their financial shenanigans, they promote Figg to look after things, Dr. Jesse Heywood's penchant for being timid and nervous, and bumbling provide some pretty funny moments. Knotts is pretty funny here, but I really loved Barbara Rhoades as Penny. I loved her spunky and...