



Written by [Dennis Behrendt](#) on September 8, 2003

## Duranty's Lethal Lies

When it was discovered that *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair's work was shot through with plagiarism, fraud, and fabrication, the BBC described the affair as "the biggest scandal in the history of America's most distinguished newspaper." As is now widely known, the *Times* found inaccuracies, misrepresentations, and outright lies in 36 of 73 reports penned by Blair.

Still, the Blair scandal is hardly as significant, or unusual, as the BBC's report on the matter suggested. The *Times*, in fact, has a long history of misleading the public through selective coverage and the reporting of outright lies and falsehoods. This is especially the case whenever a left-wing tyrant or budding dictator has found himself in need of a friend in the media. In late 1957, for instance, as Marxist revolution swept Cuba, the *Times* published a series of influential reports by Herbert Matthews lionizing a young revolutionary leader named Fidel Castro. The Castro program, the *Times* reported, "amounts to a new deal for Cuba, radical, democratic, and therefore anti-Communist."



In covering for Castro, the *Times* and Herbert Matthews were simply following a blueprint established decades earlier by another *Times* man, Walter Duranty. As the *New York Times'* chief correspondent in Moscow, Duranty established his reputation as the world's leading newsman while covering the rise of Josef Stalin. His later coverage of Stalin's First Five Year Plan garnered a Pulitzer Prize. During the same period, though, Stalin's brutal regime was carrying out a terrifying genocide.

In the early 1930s, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of innocent victims were deported to Siberia's uninhabitable hinterlands and abandoned to their fates. Millions more, possibly 10 million, starved to death in their ancestral homeland, surrounded by fertile land that once served as the breadbasket of Europe. In a scandalous infamy far worse than the Blair episode, Walter Duranty, in the pages of the *New York Times*, said the genocide didn't happen — even though he and the *Times* knew that it did. For both Duranty and the *Times*, casting Stalin's "workers' paradise" in a favorable light was more important than telling the truth that the Soviet government was murdering millions of innocents.

Thanks to much hard and thankless work by Ukrainians and others around the world, the truth about the terrible genocide in the Ukraine has gradually become known to a wider circle. Now, not only has



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the *Times* begun distancing itself somewhat from the work of Walter Duranty, but the Pulitzer board is reviewing the case with an eye toward the unprecedented revocation of Duranty's Pulitzer Prize. As the sordid tale of Duranty's career in Moscow illustrates, such a move is long overdue.

### **The Devil and Duranty**

Walter Duranty was born in late Victorian England to a family of some wealth. He attended, for the most part, the finest schools, first at Harrow as a boy, and later moving on to Cambridge. Despite possessing a fine mind and academic capability, Duranty ended his higher education prematurely, preferring instead a more exciting life as a poor vagabond frequently journeying between New York and Paris. That he was tapping into the seedy underground world of both cities can be inferred from the fact that during this time he met and befriended Aleister Crowley.

Crowley believed himself to be the Anti-Christ and called himself "Beast 666." He devoted himself to studying the occult and practicing Satanic magic, but, by the end of the first decade of the 20th century, had fallen into a funk. No longer sure of himself, he was on the verge of giving up his life-long quest for evil. It was then that Crowley met Duranty. The new relationship invigorated Crowley, who recovered from his depression and rededicated himself to a life of depravity.

The two men became friends and partners, sharing an interest in the occult, in drugs, and in the affections of Jane "the Scarlet Woman" Cheron. It was now 1913, and by the end of the year Crowley, assisted by Duranty and another partner named Victor Neuberg, began the elaborate Satanic rituals Crowley dubbed "the Paris workings." These rituals were designed to evoke the Roman gods Mercury and Jupiter, whose analogues in the Greek Pantheon are Hermes and Zeus. The first of 23 ceremonies, composed of pagan, Satanic rituals and chants mixed with homosexual encounters between the participants, took place on December 31, 1913. Duranty, serving as "priest," administered what Crowley termed a "sacrament," the key component of which was a homosexual act.

### **The War Correspondent**

At this time, Duranty was leading a sort of double life. When not participating in Satanic perversion, he was on the lookout for a vocation, preferably something that would employ his considerable, if still unpolished, literary skills. A few months before the "the Paris workings," Duranty and a companion walked into the offices of the Paris bureau of the *New York Times* and introduced themselves to bureau chief Wythe Williams. Duranty and his partner, a photographer, proposed a story on a French aviator who intended to fly upside down in an airplane, a feat many thought impossible. Williams was not enthusiastic about the idea, but the pair persisted, finally winning the assignment. The next day, Duranty submitted his first manuscript to the *Times*. Though badly written, Williams largely rewrote it and had it published. This initial, modest success motivated Duranty to seek regular employment with the *Times* as a journalist. Though at first frequently rebuffed, his perseverance won the day. "He finally talked himself into a position," Williams recalled, "because he talked so much I could no longer refuse him and arranged with the *Times* to give him a salary."

When World War I broke out in 1914, the still inexperienced Duranty was kept by the *Times* in Paris, rather than sent to the front with the more seasoned reporters. Still, there was plenty to report on in wartime Paris. The biggest story by far came on January 30, 1916. That night, as Duranty sat at a street-side café, German zeppelins appeared over the city. The monstrous, gray airships dropped their payloads of bombs on horrified citizens as police and fire crews scrambled to extinguish lamps to obscure targets. Still, a number of German bombs fell in a heavily populated sector of the city. Duranty



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secured a cab and arrived near midnight at a nightmarish scene of destruction. His report on the aftermath in the *Times* exhibited the easy and lucid but dramatic style that marked his later work and contributed to his journalistic success.

If wartime Paris provided material for Duranty's first serious work as a reporter, it also provided opportunity for his first sellout of journalistic principles. In the summer of 1917, Duranty was asked to write a false report to aid the Allied propaganda effort. The circumstances of this request, as Duranty biographer S.J. Taylor records, have been lost. But Duranty himself felt strongly enough about the episode to record the incident. "I was young and inexperienced," he recalled, "but I had to decide the question alone." He decided to write the story, penning a report about a fictional battle in which the Allies repulsed a German submarine attack. He "fancied," he wrote later, that on occasion "a noble end" justified "somewhat doubtful means." More significantly, Duranty's willingness to fabricate the news, supposedly to achieve "a noble end," would make him particularly useful to the *Times* when it came time to conceal Stalin's crimes.

### **Duranty Goes to Moscow**

After the war, Duranty continued to work for the *Times*, in Paris and around Europe. During this time he frequently reported on happenings inside Russia in relation to the Bolshevik (i.e., Communist) takeover there. Western journalists were not allowed in Russia then, and most of Duranty's reporting, like that of his colleagues, was produced while outside the border. His early work on Russia was notable for its anti-Bolshevik stance. Taylor records that, in Duranty's opinion, at least for a time, Bolshevism was "a compound of force, terror and espionage, utterly ruthless in conception and execution." Unfortunately, Duranty purged anti-Communism from his articles as soon as the opportunity to gain entry to the Soviet Union presented itself.

By 1921, the Communist tyranny in Russia had resulted in a food shortage and famine that took, in Duranty's own estimation, the lives of "5,000,000 or 6,000,000 including deaths from disease." The Soviets sought help from foreign relief agencies. One of those that agreed to help was the American Relief Association, but its assistance was predicated upon the Soviets allowing Western journalists to report from within Russia. Immediately, the *Times* sent Duranty to Riga, Latvia, where he was to attempt to get a visa for entry into the Communist state. Once there, a Soviet press officer told him that he had been rejected for entry into Russia because of his past anti-Soviet bias. Determined to reverse this decision, Duranty wrote a puff piece on Soviet dictator Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP). Lenin had contrived the NEP as a step back from the repressive "War Communism" that had brought about economic stagnation and famine. The main objective of the NEP was to reintroduce into the Soviet system, in a manner controlled by the state, some elements of a market economy in an attempt to recover the economic ground lost under "War Communism." The NEP was tantamount to an admission by the Bolsheviks that Communism, as an economic system, was a dismal failure. Such criticism as this, justified though it was, did not make it into Duranty's report. When it was finished, Duranty's work on the NEP in the *Times* apparently met with favor in Soviet circles, and Duranty was in.

Now that he had gained entry to the Soviet Union, the old Duranty who had been skeptical of the Bolshevik regime was quickly replaced with the new Duranty who was willing to heap praise on the Communists. On January 18, 1923, he provided his readers with a glowing critique of Stalin and the Soviet system:

[D]uring the last year Stalin has shown judgement and analytical power not unworthy of Lenin. It is to him that the greatest part of the credit is due for bringing about the new Russian Union,



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which history may regard as one of the most remarkable Constitutions in human history. Trotsky helped him in drawing it up, but Stalin's brain guided the pen.

In the coming years, Duranty would cement his reputation as the leading journalist in Russia and the top journalistic expert on Russian affairs by covering such important events as Lenin's death and the rise to power of Stalin, whom Duranty referred to as "a remarkable personality."

## **Genocide**

In 1928, the Stalin regime adopted the first of the Five Year Plans. The plan's goal, as stated by party propaganda, was to "catch up and bypass the capitalist world." The plan called for rapidly developing industry, especially heavy industry, which the commissars pledged would grow by 330 percent. Stalin intended to finance this expansion by collectivizing the USSR's agricultural sector. By confiscating the land and assigning the peasants to collective farms, the Soviets hoped to increase agricultural output by 150 percent. From this output they expected to reap a bloody profit sufficient to finance their dreams of industry.

The drive for completely collectivizing agriculture, Stalin and his henchmen realized, would be resisted by those peasants who had been farming their own meager holdings and retaining what profits could be made. These "kulaks" thus became enemies of the state, and Stalin, in a chilling proclamation, called for the "liquidation of the kulaks as a class." This order led to deportation, famine, and genocide, primarily in the Ukraine.

To carry out the "dekulakization" campaign and force the peasantry onto the collective farms or "kolkhozes," the Kremlin dispatched brigades of loyal Communists and Komsomol (Young Communist League) members to the Ukraine and to other agricultural areas to organize and enforce the effort. These fanatical party functionaries used whatever means necessary, up to and including the frequent use of lethal force, to expropriate the land from the peasants and force them to labor on the collective farms. Those unfortunate enough to be deemed kulaks — the official definition was sufficiently vague so that nearly anyone could be designated as such — were the first to come under fire.

Ukrainian historian Orest Subtelny noted that "the 'dekulakization' process reached its high point in the winter of 1929-30." Kulaks who resisted were simply shot. Most of the remainder were forcibly relocated to Siberia and the Arctic. "Hundreds of thousands of peasants and their families," Subtelny writes, "were dragged from their homes, packed into freight trains, and shipped thousands of miles to the north where they were dumped amidst Arctic wastes, often without food or shelter." Approximately 850,000 peasants were removed in this way. Many did not survive the journey. Many more died of exposure and related ailments shortly after being abandoned in the inhospitable wilderness.

Those allowed to remain in their ancestral homelands also suffered the confiscation of their property and livestock. Predictably, a fierce resistance developed. This resistance was principally a homemade scorched-earth policy. Rather than relinquish their assets to the state, the peasants did what they could to destroy them. Professor Nicholas V. Riasanovsky of the University of California at Berkeley notes that "from 1929 to 1933 in the Soviet Union the number of horses, in millions, declined from 34 to 16.6, of cattle from 68.1 to 38.6, of sheep and goats from 147.2 to 50.6, and of hogs from 20.9 to 12.2"

In response, Stalin determined to destroy the population through starvation. Soviet agents actively worked to enforce strict collection quotas on agricultural production, leaving little or nothing for consumption in the Ukraine and other affected areas. In conjunction with this, the GPU (a KGB precursor) was ordered to ban "by all means necessary the large-scale departure of peasants from the



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Ukraine and the Northern Caucasus for the towns. Once these counter-revolutionary elements have been arrested," the order continued, "they are to be escorted back to their original place of residence."

Without food, and without an ability to seek relief by leaving the region, a terrible and brutal famine developed. In testimony to the San Francisco regional hearing of the U.S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine in 1987, Ivan Kasiianenko, who in 1932 at the time of the famine was only a boy, described in a chilling account the horrors he witnessed:

My father was always on the run during the day and would only come at night. We had nothing; they had taken everything from us. They came with their pikes, poked around, asked questions and grabbed my mother by the hair. They tore off my mother's earrings and her cross. We children cried, but nothing helped. No one paid any attention to our tears.

They locked our mother in the basement. So there we were, five of us children with me the oldest, and our father nowhere to be found. They came back to see if they had missed anything and found one egg that had not been taken. They took it away....

After two weeks they let mother out of the basement. But what could she do when there was nothing to eat? In March or April 1933 they took our cow. The first to die was my youngest sister, then another sister. Then my brother and a third sister died at the same time. Father died and was buried on Holy Thursday. Mother died two days later, and they threw her in a hole on Easter Sunday. I remember how a neighbor came and comforted me, saying that although my parents had gone, they had died on holy days, Holy Thursday and Easter. It was a terrible time for me. I was starving myself, to such an extent that I could not walk.

Ivan Kasiianenko's testimony goes on at length describing the grisly horrors he witnessed, from "starving people on the verge of death" to "even mothers, [who] sometimes lost their sanity and turned into animals who smothered their own children and ate them."

### **Whitewash**

At the height of the famine, Duranty was living in relative comfort in Moscow with his mistress, Katya, and enjoying the acclaim that results from winning the Pulitzer Prize. He was given that prestigious honor in 1932 for his reporting on developments in Russia during the previous year. "Mr. Duranty's dispatches show profound and intimate comprehension of conditions in Russia and of the causes of those conditions," the official announcement of the award enthused. "They are marked by scholarship, profundity, impartiality, sound judgement, and exceptional clarity, and are excellent examples of the best type of foreign correspondence." In the very acceptance of his award, however, Duranty put the lie to the myth of his impartiality. "I learned to respect the Soviet leaders," he said, "especially Stalin, whom I consider to have grown into a really great statesman, and their [the Bolsheviks'] planned system of economy, despite present imperfections."

During this period, Duranty worked hard from his Moscow quarters to dismiss and belittle reports that the Soviet regime was engaged in a campaign of genocide. Both Duranty and the *Times* knew the truth, of course. In an absolutely incredible admission, Duranty confessed that his writings reflected the official Soviet line. As Soviet expert Leonard Leshuk notes in his recent book *US Intelligence Perceptions of Soviet Power, 1921-1946*, in June of 1931, Walter Duranty "admitted to A.W. Klieforth of the U.S. Embassy in Berlin ... that 'in agreement with *The New York Times* and the Soviet authorities' his official dispatches always reflect the official opinion of the Soviet regime and not his own." That is, the *New York Times*, the most powerful, most respected news organization in the United States, served



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as a Soviet mouthpiece. Undoubtedly, the *Times* was much more effective than *Pravda*, the Moscow-based Communist newspaper, at burying the truth, since the *Times* was much more highly respected, was supposedly impartial, and had a much wider readership in the West.

And Walter Duranty, based in Moscow, was the *Times'* key propagandist popularizing the lie that there was no genocide in the Ukraine. On November 11, 1932, the *Times* published a front page report from Walter Duranty entitled "All Russia Suffers Shortage of Food; Supplies Dwindling." Through clever semantics the report minimized the tragedy in the Ukraine by claiming that all Soviet citizens faced the same difficulties. But more to the point, Duranty dismissed the prospect of famine altogether. "There is no famine or actual starvation, nor is there likely to be," he wrote.

The very next day the *Times* published a follow-up report in which the celebrated reporter, parroting the official Stalinist propaganda, blamed the food shortage on the peasants themselves. In a report headlined "Food Shortage Laid To Soviet Peasants," Duranty wrote that "the food shortage must be regarded as a result of peasant resistance to rural socialization, or, perhaps more accurately, as a result of the measures taken to overcome that resistance. The measures have proved effective and the resistance has been overcome...." Still, Duranty placed the blame most squarely with the peasants rather than with Soviet policy because, he wrote, "food production dwindled as the peasants killed their livestock and abandoned the production of surplus food stocks." This was shockingly false. The root cause of the food shortage was the Soviet government's systematic oppression of the peasants, its outright murder and deportation of the most successful "kulak" farmers, and the brutal, state-sponsored and organized theft of all remaining peasant assets.

The worst whitewash of the famine perpetrated by the *New York Times* with the help of Duranty came in the spring of 1933. During the height of the famine, a young British traveler named Gareth Jones spent three weeks walking through the affected region. After his trip Jones, who had once been secretary to British Prime Minister Lloyd George, announced to the world, at a press conference in Berlin and a lecture in London, that he had seen starvation on a massive scale. According to Eugene Lyons, a Western reporter with left-leaning sympathies, the head of the Soviet Press Office, Constantine Oumansky, demanded that Western journalists based in Russia denounce Jones' report, under penalty of losing their credentials. "The scene in which the American press corps combined to repudiate Jones is fresh in my mind," Lyons wrote in his book *Assignment in Utopia*. "It was in the evening and Comrade [O]umansky ... consented to meet us in the hotel room of a correspondent.... There was much bargaining in a spirit of gentlemanly give-and-take, under the effulgence of Umansky's gilded smile, before a formula of denial was worked out." According to biographer S.J. Taylor, Walter Duranty was one of the reporters to attend that meeting. In Duranty's subsequent report repudiating Jones, published by the *Times* on March 31, 1933, Duranty wrote that "there is no actual starvation, or deaths from starvation," and, though "conditions are bad ... there is no famine." Moreover, he crassly dismissed hardships caused by Soviet policy. "[T]o put it brutally," he wrote, "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs...."

The omelette the power elite on both sides of the Atlantic hoped to concoct included normalizing relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. On November 17, 1933, the still-new administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt granted full diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union, despite the massive campaign of genocide underway there. The deal was brokered from the Soviet side by Foreign Minister Litvinoff, who traveled to Washington earlier in the month aboard the steamer *S.S. Berengaria*. The only Western journalist on board for that trip was Walter Duranty.



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Diplomatically, Duranty was little more than a sidelight to the proceedings, but his reporting from Russia certainly facilitated the normalization of relations. Almost certainly, if the true nature and scale of the Soviet genocide in the Ukraine had been truthfully reported, the Roosevelt administration would have found it impossible to grant diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union. Indeed, Stalin himself congratulated Duranty for his reporting not long after the normalization of relations. "You have done a good job in your reporting the U.S.S.R.," the dictator told Duranty on Christmas Day, 1933.

### **The Truth Comes Out**

For public consumption, Duranty was happy to deny the famine and thereby help the *Times* cover for the Soviets. Privately, though, he was willing to concede that the famine was real and disastrous. "In private conversation with British diplomats," writes Soviet expert Leonard Leshuk, "he [Duranty] estimated that as many as 10 million people may have starved to death." Similarly, in *Assignment in Utopia*, Eugene Lyons describes Duranty's estimates of the death toll following the latter's return from a trip to the Ukraine. Lyons writes that he and his wife, Billy, were dining with Duranty, Anne O'Hare McCormick (also of the *Times*), and McCormick's husband. Duranty, Lyons recalled, "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."

Despite the artful misrepresentations made by Duranty and many others who covered the Soviet Union during the famine years, the existence of this monumental crime would prove impossible to deny. Thanks to the tireless work of many Ukrainian-Americans and several groups representing Ukrainian immigrants to America, the genocide in the Ukraine has become more well-known, as has the shameful role of Walter Duranty and the *New York Times* in its cover-up.

Now, 70 years after the famine, a push is on to have Duranty's Pulitzer Prize revoked due to the slanted and partisan nature of his reporting and his role in covering up the man-made famine. In announcing earlier this year its campaign to have the prize revoked, the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America noted that Duranty not only disregarded the famine in his dispatches but "called other journalists outright liars for reporting about Ukraine's Famine Genocide." The publicity generated by a new interest in uncovering this monstrous atrocity is having an effect. According to CBS News, "more than 15,000 postcards and thousands more letters and e-mails were sent to the Pulitzer Board" by concerned Ukrainians and others around the world asking that the prize be taken from Duranty.

As a result, a committee of the Pulitzer Board is undertaking a review to determine if the prize should be revoked. Calls placed by THE NEW AMERICAN to the Pulitzer panel seeking information on the status of the review have not been returned as of this writing. Still, the review is a step in the right direction. For its part, the *New York Times* remains proud of Duranty's Pulitzer, if one can judge by the paper's actions. Though it has posted a disclaimer on the prize indicating that "other writers in the *Times* and elsewhere have discredited this coverage," the paper has neither apologized for Duranty's lies on its behalf nor returned the prize.



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