Before Bush, there was Duranty: the coverup of Ukraine's holocaust

by Mark Burdman

Stalin's Apologist: Walter Duranty, the New York Times's Man in Moscow
by S.J. Taylor
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This reviewer was motivated to read S.J. Taylor's *Stalin's Apologist* in the context of the criminal behavior of U.S. President George Bush in Ukraine on Aug. 1. His speech before the parliament in Kiev was filled with diatribes against "local despotism" and "suicidal nationalism based on ethnic hatred," to the point that it virtually amounted to a call for a crackdown from Moscow center. Only 18 days later, certain people took their cue, and carried out the failed putsch of Aug. 19-21.

But there was another, and perhaps even more destructive, aspect of Bush's behavior in Ukraine. He omitted any reference to the genocide perpetrated against the Ukrainian people during the Stalin-organized famine of 1932-33, when millions died. It was, from all appearances, a calculated omission. Bush visited Babi Yar, site of the Nazi massacre against Jews, and held forth about the genocidal horrors done there, subtly implying that this could never have happened without the complicity or acquiescence of local Ukrainians. But again, no mention of Stalin's mass murder. Instead, he presumed to declare that "any nation that tries to repudiate history—tries to ignore the actors and events that shaped it—only repudiates itself."

Whatever Bush's motives may have been in so "repudiating history," Taylor's book, written about one year before Bush's visit, certifies that he is part of a specific and ignoble tradition. His forebears are those who strove, at the time, to hide the facts of Stalin's mass killing of Ukrainians, southern Russians, and others, in the Bolsheviks' drive to eliminate independent agricultural producers and to collectivize agriculture. Taylor minces no words about what happened then, saying that "the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33 remains the greatest man-made disaster ever recorded, exceeding in scale even the Jewish Holocaust of the next decade."

'You can't make an omelette. . . '

Stalin's Apologist is not a book about the famine per se, but about how the truth about it was hidden from the world. The book documents one of the more shameful episodes of the 20th century, namely *New York Times* senior Soviet correspondent Walter Duranty's willful coverup of the famine and genocide in Ukraine and southern Russia during the 1930s. As Taylor shows, the evidence of what Stalin and his henchmen were doing was available, in great detail, to various Westerners stationed in the U.S.S.R., ranging from British embassy officials, to agricultural experts visiting the U.S.S.R., and to certain journalists, some of whom, in contrast to Duranty, tried to publicize the facts.

Yet much of this information was denied to the world, or was so obfuscated as to blunt its impact. Taylor writes that what transpired in the early 1930s was "a disaster that cost the lives of millions of peasants, a calamity of incalculable dimensions. For later generations, as the sheer magnitude of that event began slowly to emerge, questions would arise as to why nobody knew, why the Americna public hadn't been told. How did Stalin manage to conceal the greatest man-made disaster in modern history, when perhaps as many as 10 million men, women, and children were allowed to die by slow starvation as a result of their refusal to conform to Stalin's plan to collectivize agriculture?"

The answer, in significant part, is Walter Duranty. In his dispatches and/or correspondence, he would either lie about the reality, or find every excuse or alibi for it. In June 1933, he wrote to a friend, "The 'famine' is mostly bunk." Somewhat earlier, he had characterized reports of the famine as anti-communist propaganda promulgated in "an eleventh-hour attempt to avert American recognition [of the U.S.S.R.] by picturing the Soviet Union as a land of ruin and despair." In 1935, he would claim that the sensation about the famine was part of Hitler's intrigues with subversive Ukrainian nationalists. He didn't maintain this view for long, but by 1944, he had invented another story, asserting that "the so-called 'man-made famine' " of Stalin was a "misconception," since what Stalin was really trying to do, was to divert food in anticipation of war with Japan.

When Duranty couldn't get away with denying that something horrifying was going on, he would blame the peasants themselves for resisting the government's requisition poli-

cies, or he would portray the ruthless Stalinist measures as something objectively necessary in the pursuit of the Bolsheviks' aims, and as something not worth getting angry about, since the Bolsheviks would keep on doing such things no matter what anybody said. Malcolm Muggeridge, a British journalist who opposed Duranty's antics, recounted a discussion with him, during which Duranty erupted: "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. They'll win. . . . They're bound to win. If necessary, they'll harness the peasants to the ploughs, but I tell you they'll get the harvest in and feed the people that matter."

This became his leitmotif. In a March 31, 1933 *New York Times* dispatch, Duranty wrote: "To put it brutally, you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, and the Bolshevik leaders are just as indifferent to the casualties that may be involved in their drive toward socialism as any general during the World War who ordered a costly attack in order to show his superiors that he and his division possessed. . . ." He admitted that there were "serious food shortages," but insisted, "There is no actual starvation or deaths from starvation but there is widespread mortality from diseases due to malnutrition." Says Taylor: "It was cutting semantic distinction pretty slim, and it remains the most outrageous equivocation of the period. Yet the statement seems to have pacified almost everyone." One journalist who was trying to report the truth, Gareth Jones, attacked the "masters of euphemism and understatement" who "give 'famine' the polite name of 'food shortage,' and [by whom] 'starving to death' is softened to read as 'widespread mortality from diseases due to malnutrition.' " (Such "masters of euphemism" are common today, not least among those who are covering up George Bush's genocide-by-famine against Iraq.)

What made all this vastly damaging, was that Duranty was not just a journalistic hack on the job, but a figure with enormous influence. Duranty was the senior correspondent in Moscow for the leading newspaper of the American liberal establishment, and thereby became the single most influential chronicler of events from a Soviet Union that was still relatively cut off from the outside world. As Taylor documents, he was a talented manipulator of prose. She writes: "Had Duranty, a Pulitzer Prize-winner at the peak of his celebrity, spoken out loud and clear in the pages of the *New York Times,* the world could not have ignored him, as it did [other journalists], and events might, just conceivably, have taken a different turn. If Duranty had taken a stand, he might now be accounted one of the century's great, uncompromising reporters. But he did not. When it came to discretion and expediency, the Western establishment that feted him, no less so than the Kremlin, had found their man."

The conception of "the Western establishment that feted him" is crucial. Duranty was heralded in those U.S. establishment circles, typified by Armand Hammer (who "remembered Duranty as 'a close personal friend,' " writes Taylor), who sought to achieve U.S. diplomatic recognition of the U.S.S.R. and to support the Bolsheviks. When diplomatic relations were established in 1933, and there was a big dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel bringing together 1,500 influentials to celebrate, only one man attending received a standing ovation: Walter Duranty. Indeed, as already noted, one of his stated motives in covering up Stalin's horrifying decimation of Ukraine, was not to jeopardize the establishment of relations. This view was shared by the U.S. State Department, which, as Taylor writes, "under instructions to bring about recognition between the United States and the Soviet Union, viewed reports of famine in southern Russia as 'unhelpful,' rebuffing entreaties to intervene."

The Aleister Crowley connection

But there is more to the story than just this. With Duranty, we are dealing with a senior American journalist, British-born and Cambridge-educated, whose early years included being a partner of satanist Aleister Crowley, the seminal figure in the "New Age" movement.

Duranty and Crowley used drugs, and shared as a lover one Jane Cheron, who later became Duranty's wife. "It was an affable *ménage à trois:* sex with the one partner, drugs with the other, a little magic on the side. Duranty patiently tutored Crowley upon the rather startling side effects of continued use of the drug opium. . . . Sometime during the summer of 1914, [Duranty] had already been reporting for the *New York Times* for about six months, and he was still heavily involved with Crowley and Cheron, as well as with the sticky substance of the poppy." A mutual friend of Duranty and Crowley was William Seabrook, one of whose claims to fame was visiting African cannibals and eating human flesh, the taste of which he described to his readers as "stringy."

Duranty and Crowley went their separate ways, although they were in correspondence at least through the 1930s, at which time Crowley "still believed himself to be the incarnation of Satan," writes Taylor.

From the evidence presented by the author, Duranty, whether he was indulging in satanic perversions or not, was a *satanist personality* who had an affinity with Crowley's worldview. Duranty's personal creed was a variant of Crowley's "do what thou wilt is the only law." In his 1935 book, *I Write as I Please,* he proclaimed: "I did not particularly ask myself whether [a course of action] was a right path or a wrong path; for some reason, I have never been deeply concerned with that phase of the question. Right and wrong are evasive terms at best and I have never felt that it was my problem—or that of any other reporter—to sit in moral judgment. What I want to know is whether a policy or a political line or a regime will work or not, and I refuse to let myself be side-tracked by moral issues or by abstract questions as to whether the said policy or line or regime would be suited to a different country and different circumstances. . . . I'm a reporter, not a humanitarian, and if a reporter can't see the wood for the trees he can't describe the wood. . . ."