The Ground Mourns: Malcolm Muggeridge and the Ukraine Famine

Presentation for Treasures of Wheaton, Homecoming 2003, Wheaton College, by David Malon, Director of Wheaton Archives & Special Collections.

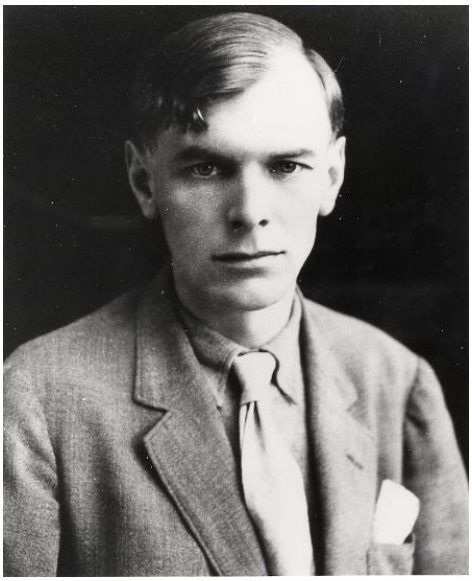
Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation.

Joel 1:2-3

Though the prophet Joel speaks of locusts and their symbolism concerning Israel's failure to serve God, his recounting of despair and destruction is not unfamiliar to many. His prophetic words call for remembrance and action. Through the recollection of past events, in Joel's instance God's continual grace and ever-present mercy to Israel, we may be called to our own courageous action.

I wish this morning to look at the insight, despair, and courage of Malcolm Muggeridge in light of the Ukrainian famine of the early 1930s.

Ever since Karl Marx articulated his economic and social dialectic, his ideas garnered adherents, particularly in Britain where he had lived for many years. The strict class-divisions of Victorian and Edwardian England, along with doses of Christian social gospel, helped foster aspirations for a classless society that sought the good of all individuals. Marx emphasized that an increasingly industrial society alienates the worker from the product of their labors. Mitigating somewhat against more extremist elements, the British Fabian Society was committed to using Marxist ideas to gradually bring about social change. They heartily welcomed the promises of the Russian Revolution in 1917. Early members of the Fabians were H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and Beatrice and Sydney Webb.



Malcolm Muggeridge, SC-04, #138

It is in this environment that Malcolm Muggeridge was born and reared. His father, Henry Thomas Muggeridge, was a Labour Party member of Parliament. The context of Muggeridge's childhood and education reinforced socialist and Fabian ideals to the point that he eagerly anticipated moving to Russia and to participate in the Utopia that was being developed there. In fact, when Muggeridge resigned from the Manchester Guardian, where he had been a leader writer and "favored child", he and his wife, Kitty, sold all their belongings and expected not to live in England again. They were in search of a country with a future and wanted to leave behind a country that they believed only had a past. [Green Stick, 25] The Russia that they would find, however, would not be the Russia that was reported in the newspapers or discussed in the halls of the Fabian Society.

After World War I, the former dynasties of East and Central Europe crumbled creating a region of nations struggling over territory and borders. During the Russian Revolution, Ukraine sought to maintain its independence fighting against Russian, German, and other armies. After the battles from 1917 to 1921, however, Ukraine was conquered and divided between the Bolsheviks and the newly established Polish Republic. Afterwards, Ukraine's harvests which had fed Europe since the days of Ancient Greece, became a prized resource and the communists immediately tapped the vitality of this new region. Resistance cropped up against the Bolshevik's plans and guerilla fighting ensued. [Famine, p. 1-2] The Ukrainians were quite hostile to the Russians and said, "you have made the revolution go and live with it and don't come to us." [Famine, p. 161] After conquering Ukraine, Lenin sought to ease relations and allowed Ukraine to sell its own grain on the open market. Ukraine—its people and culture—began to thrive and grow. In 1923 efforts were made throughout the Soviet Union to integrate newly acquired lands and peoples into the Soviet system and "Ukrainization" was instituted. By allowing and aiding cultural development and expression the Soviets hoped to gain a foothold in Ukraine and bring them in line with the Soviet order.

To some degree this worked, however, after Lenin's death, Joseph Stalin became alarmed at the autonomy that Ukraine enjoyed, and he sought to remove all traces of Ukrainian nationalism. This was accomplished through the First Five Year Plan, which called for the collectivization of agriculture. In the broad Soviet ideal collectivization was a means to bring together privately-

owned resources for the good of the worker—the proletariat. In some cases, communalism was taken as far as the sharing of clothing and footwear. [Famine, p. 18] In the Soviet system the worker—the humanity in the middle of industrialization—was valued above the farmer. One historian noted that "collectivization was extractive rather than productive and taking people's implements and livestock to the center of the village and forcing them to plant and harvest in common did nothing to raise agricultural output, but it made it much easier for the state to take a greater share of the harvest directly from the floor of a single threshing room." [Famine, p. 5]

Joseph Stalin. Associated Press photograph.

The Soviet response to those who resisted collectivization was to raise the quotas established for small independent farmers. This met with little success and eventually the quotas on the collectives were raised as well. To further subdue the Ukrainians Stalin implemented food rationing and internal passport programs. These steps were implemented to crush any form of resistance. When the rationing was instituted all private stores of food were confiscated. Over 100,000 Soviet troops were brought in to protect crops from theft and sabotage.

Soviet officials confiscate grain from a peasant household in Ukraine, 1932-1933. Picture from History / Universal Images Group via Getty Images

To further control the Ukrainians Stalin liquidated the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church in 1929, leaving behind only the state-influenced Russian Orthodox Church. [Famine, p. 5] The goal of this was to further destroy Ukraine as a political and social entity and to destroy any Ukrainian self-assertion all the way down to the peasant class. [Famine, p. 2-4] These actions were so successful that folk song lyrics incorporated references to the oppression of Ukraine. "Ah

Ukraine, bread producing, And fertile. You surrender tax in kind, And yourself go hungry." [Famine, p. 161]

Again, the words of the first chapter of Joel echo the plight of Ukraine:

> *The fields are ruined, the ground is dried up; the grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, the oil fails. Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers; grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed. The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree- all the trees of the field-are dried up. Surely the joy of mankind is withered away.*
>
> Joel 1:10-12

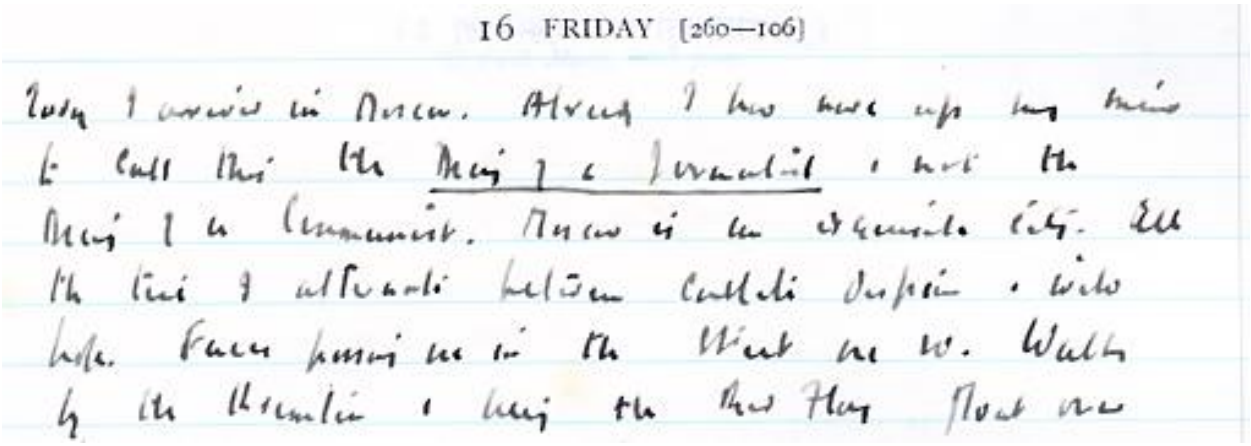
By 1928, Stalin had solidified his power and in the following years instituted a purge of Ukrainian intellectuals. Thousands, including bishops, priests, and writers, were arrested, imprisoned, and executed.

Keep Kulaks out of Collective Farms

Throughout the early period of collectivization Stalin directed his attention to a group known as kulaks. The 1929 census defined a kulak household as a farm capable of production valued at more than 800 rubles—not a large sum. A farm of this type would have had "a horse and a foal, one or two cows, a plough, mowing machine and a shed or small barn." Kulaks, thus defined, did not possess a full complement of farm equipment, such as a thresher and winnowing-machine, and their social and economic standing didn't compare to the official descriptions of their wealth made by Soviet leaders. Another way in which kulaks were defined was whether they owned more than 24 acres. If so, they were seen as wealthy and were publicly derided and oppressed by the Soviets. Stalin developed an official policy of restricting their rights and finally eliminating them all together. Along with their farms their possessions were seized as well. From 1931 to 1934 Stalinist policy transplanted nearly 1 million kulaks to remote areas of the Soviet Union where they served as slave labor. In their place Stalin installed activists to foster and force change and to eliminate any nationalist dreams or tendencies. Despite these efforts, the Ukrainians continued to revolt through outright rebellion or through sabotaging crops or refusing to work. Eventually official representations of a kulak came to mean any type of resistor. [Famine, p. 28]

Ukrainian resistance eventually led to stricter measures from Moscow. Villages that resisted were blacklisted from all economic trade. Stores were closed and their goods were confiscated. All resources were removed, and Ukraine's borders were closed making it a prison without food.

As the production and distribution of grain and other food was controlled Ukrainians found themselves in a dire situation. A midwife recounted that she was only able to purchase two loaves of bread a month with her salary—all the while when Ukraine was supplying Europe with tremendous grain exports. To support Soviet industrialization the Soviet system valued the proletariat worker above the agrarian peasant. Great hopes were at the foundation of the 5 Year Plan, but the costs associated with its implementation were staggering. The enormity of the situation was felt everywhere. Muggeridge noted in his personal diaries upon his arrival in Moscow that "Moscow is an exquisite city. All the time I alternate between complete despair and wild hope. Faces passing me in the street are so…." [diary entry, 9/16/32]



16 FRIDAY [260—106]

Today I arrive in Moscow. Already I have worked up my mind to call this the Mecca of Journalists, not the Mecca of Communism. Moscow is an exquisite city. All the time I alternate between complete despair & wild hope. Faces passing me in the street are so. Walks by the Kremlin & buy the New Statesman

Increasingly, Muggeridge would experience despair rather than wild hope. The situation in Russia was desperate. Upon his arrival Muggeridge noted that the 1932 harvest was well below the Government's own statistics. [diary entry, 9/16/32] And, the state of affairs had only gotten worse.

"These people are starving", he wrote, "– that's a fact; they're building up, with some measure of success and a great deal of waste – a number of great industries; the country is governed by the stiffest dictatorship I've ever come across so there is no way of estimating what measure of popular support this grandiose Five Year Plan has – entailing terrible sacrifices, particularly on the part of the poorest people (the peasants) – however, to find out I must learn Russian." [diary entry, 9/22/32]

In 1930, in order to increase grain exports the government began to requisition seed grain, ultimately reducing its availability by 45%. Collective managers suggested rye as a wheat substitute more suitable to the region but were punished as "anti-wheat" agitators. [Famine, p. 20] The wide-eyed Communist reporter from Manchester had not read of this in any British newspaper.

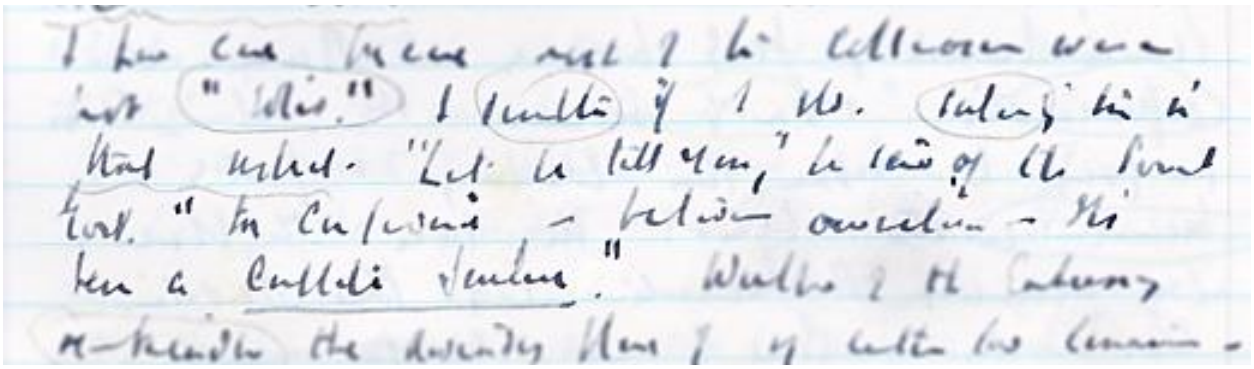
As the internal allocations from harvests were reduced the Ukrainians suffered great privation while their grain was dumped on European and Western markets. Despite the poor harvest of 1932 it was enough to feed all of Ukraine for two years. As word of the famine emerged Ukrainians abroad along with international relief agencies raised funds to provide famine relief, but the Soviets denied that any famine existed and stalled shipments at her borders.

Great confusion grew in the West as conflicting reports emerged about food shortages and starvation. All of these were denied by the Soviet government, as they reinforced their claims with examples from Western news reports. The Soviets pointed to reports from correspondents like Walter Duranty of the New York Times to keep its borders closed to international aid organizations. In the midst of this Duranty was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his "dispassionate" reporting of the news from Russia [Famine, p. 67] Duranty was also granted another award along with the *New York Times*, from the *Nation*, for the "most enlightening, dispassionate, and readable dispatches from a great nation in the making…." [Famine, p. 83] This is quite interesting because Duranty skirted the truth and had some of the densest and circuitous reporting that could be found. To reporters in Moscow, he was known as Walter Obscuranty. [Famine, p. 85]

Walter Duranty

Soon after Muggeridge's arrival in Russia in September 1932, he began to move beyond intuition and began to face the sources of despair. Less than two weeks after his arrival, he wrote, "On the station platform we got into conversation (much broken Russian!) with a peasant woman who said she came from Kiev where bread was three rubles a pound and other food unobtainable. She had come here in search of work and now could only find a room at 100 rubles a month. She told her story, not bitterly, not even in despair – just told it smilingly as though it was all in the nature of things. From the point of view of the Russian peasant, I suppose, starvation is in the nature of things. A girl from the Germany colony in the Volga said that in the factories workers sometimes dropped down for want of food…. To a newcomer like myself it seems inconceivable that things could go on like this." [diary entry, 9/28/32]

However, those in England still "towed the party line" as they wistfully believed in the ultimate goals of the Soviet experiment. Muggeridge recounted a story told to him by the wife of Christian Science Monitor correspondent William Henry Chamberlin. "Bernard Shaw told Mrs. Chamberlin that everyone was well fed in Russia. She explained to him that if her child had only had the milk to which she was entitled by virtue of her food card she would, to all intents and purposes, have had none. 'Why don't you feed the child yourself?' he asked. Mrs. Chamberlin pointed out that the child was four years old. 'That's nothing,' he replied, 'Eskimos feed their children till 14 years.' He is a preposterous old fool. Quite senile." [diary entry, 9/28/32] A few days earlier a French reporter had said of the Soviet government, "'Let me tell you … in confidence – between ourselves – it's been a <u>complete</u> fantasy.'" [diary entry, 9/23/32]



Immediately upon his arrival in Russia Muggeridge found himself torn between many competing demands. He left England without a fixed position or income serving as a free-lance reporter. Kitty and he had sold all their possessions and that had only created a small bank account. He was under contract to finish a novel by January 1st. They had no suitable or permanent housing. And Kitty was expecting their second child and became dreadfully ill with typhus soon after their arrival. All of these pressures kept the severity of the famine from being a main focus of his attention and writing.

Muggeridge did not shy away from negative reporting on Stalin's efforts in Russia. However, for him reporting was not simply drafting and cabling dispatches to Manchester. For Muggeridge, and other reporters in Russia, his dispatches went through official censors. This greatly restricted what was reported. Along with restricted reporting came controlled news gathering. Many Western reporters relied on the official Russian newspapers for any sort of news and were dependent upon translators to understand the content. As he noted in his autobiography, "nothing happened…until it was reported in the newspapers." [Green Stick, 215]

Muggeridge sought to learn Russian to get past these barriers. He was so frustrated with the system that he reacted as he did so often by developing an idea for an article. Late in 1932 he wrote, "One thing I want to write about and shall write about, sometime, is the Journalistic Racket in the USSR. The racket is based on the fact that the Soviet Government can always, by withdrawing a visa, deprive a journalist of his livelihood. Also, as journalists come to settle down here and perhaps marry a Russian wife; form economic links with the country, it can get at them by arresting hostages. Therefore, nearly all foreign journalists is Russia are frightened of the Government, and frightened to write anything that will seriously displease the bosses. Cholerton's sister-in-law has been sent, they think, to Siberia and his wife's relations have been persecuted in order to bring pressure on him…."[diary entry, 12/1/32]

It is in light of "journalistic persecution" that one can begin to understand, only slightly, the state of journalism and accurate reporting in Russia. But, this does not explain it all. Though the Russian newspapers told their own story, it doesn't fully explain how Western reporters like Duranty could use euphemisms in his descriptions of the famine in Ukraine, calling them "food shortages." His down-playing of the famine minimized the great suffering and sorrow associated with it. Duranty certainly took his lead from the Soviets whose official death records often cited "bodily emaciation" as the cause of death rather than starvation. [Famine, p. 32]

The Soviet Union used food as a weapon. It engineered a famine to quell the desire for independence in the Ukraine, all the while using its harvests to finance urban industrialization. It was clearly known throughout Russia what was happening. Word was leaking out to the West about the famine. As Muggeridge later noted, this was all done with a "total absence of sympathy." Western leaders and sympathizers were unable to believe that the Soviet Union would subject its citizens to this sort of systematic treatment, especially as it sought to have its grain export quotas raised in foreign markets. Foreign visitors and reporters who requested to investigate the famine first-hand were given guided tours that diverted them from the real problem. Streets were cleaned and shelves were stocked with food to avert focus from the rural areas where many were dying.

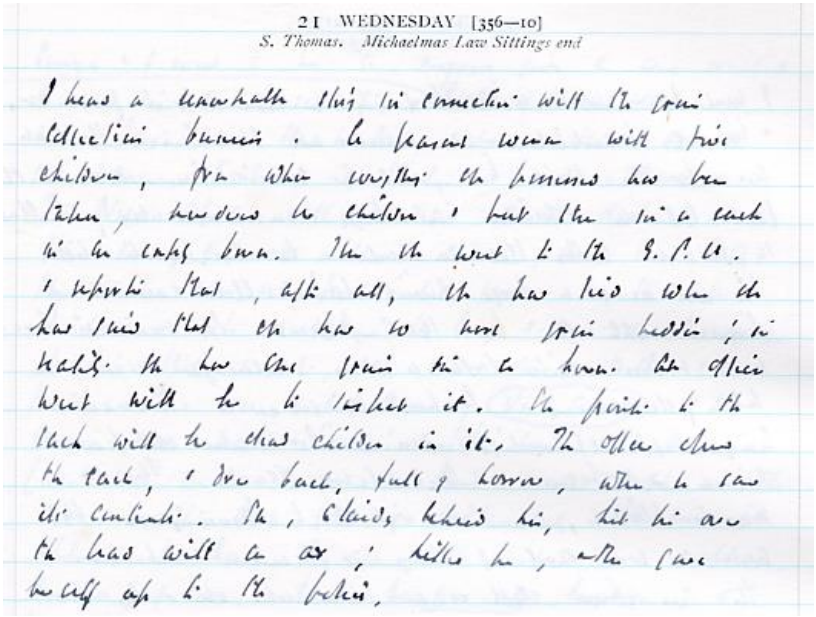
The victims of hunger. Pedestrians and corpses of starved farmers on a street in Kharkiv. G. Pchenichny Central State Kino and Photo Archives of Ukraine

At the beginning of the famine one town of 2,000 inhabitants had a four-room schoolhouse and a vibrant village life. By the end of the famine less than half of the town remained and the school was unable to reopen because there were no children to attend. [Famine, p. 22] A government official had not received reports from another town and decided to visit and obtain the information firsthand and chide local leaders for not submitting required reports. Upon arrival the official found the town empty of survivors, only greeted by corpses.

Muggeridge heard more and more tales of woe from the countryside. His diary contains, "I walked back with Moore and Sloane. The latter turned up from a three months walk in the Caucasus. He was very smelly and dirty, but not unpleasant. His enthusiasm for Communism had diminished as a result of finding himself amongst under-fed and deprived peasants…. A large number of people would emigrate from Russia if they had the chance. There is a certain wastage even amongst the picked men sent abroad." [diary entry, 10/10/32]

Later he recounts that "One day a young man came to the door and asked to see the Correspondent from the Manchester Guardian…. He said he had secret information to impart…. He was, he said, from the North Caucasus where people were starving and being shot for storing grain. He left us a pile of newspapers and a pamphlet. These we went through and made notes. They told an appalling story. The treatment of the peasants by the Soviet Government is, in its way, one of the worst crimes of history. I shall send an account of it to the Manchester Guardian. 'Ask them abroad not to buy our food,' he kept saying. 'Tell them to stop buying. Otherwise we are ruined.' He had been employed in a canning export agency and knew what was being sent abroad and at what prices. Cholerton gave him some food and money. He was so hungry that, when he saw food, he had to keep swallowing because the saliva came so much into his mouth. Whether he was genuine, or a spy, or just a cadger, I have no idea, but the newspapers tell their own story…." [diary entry, 12/1/32]

And further, "I heard a remarkable story in connection with the grain collection business. A peasant woman with five children, from whom everything she possessed had been taken, murdered her children and put them in a sack in her empty barn. Then she went to the GPU and reported that, after all, she had lied when she had said that she had no more grain hidden; in reality she had some grain in her barn. An officer went with her to inspect it. She pointed to the sack with her dead children in it. The officer opened the sack, and drew back, full of horror, when he saw its contents. She, standing behind him, hit him over the head with an axe, killing him, and then gave herself up to the police…." [diary entry, 12/21/32]


21 WEDNESDAY [356—10]
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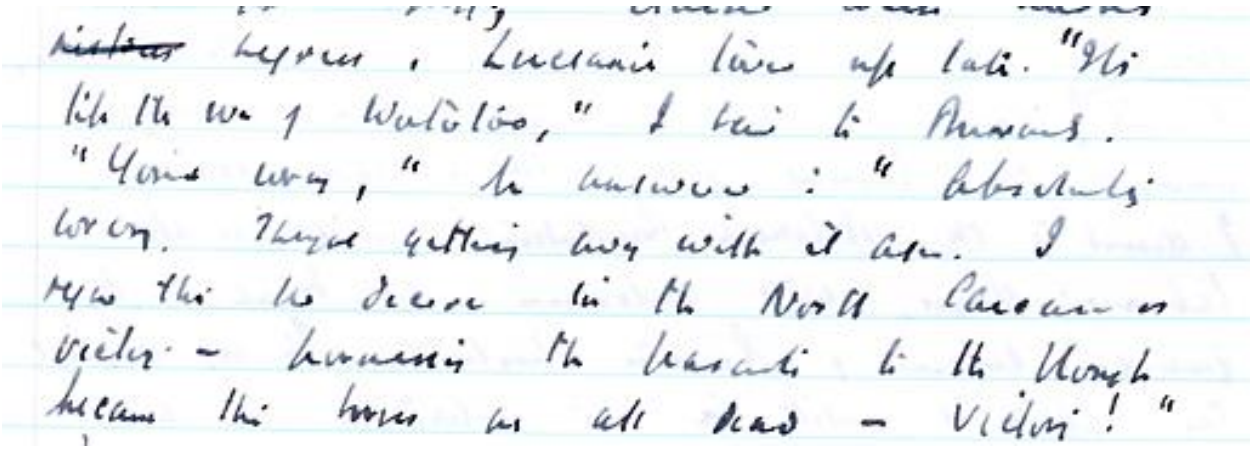
It was in this context that Malcolm Muggeridge began to realize that he needed to get out of Moscow and into the rural regions, particularly Ukraine. After the New Year and the completion of his novel and with Kitty back in England to give birth to their second child, Muggeridge was

able to devote his energies to the tragic situation around him. After a dinner party with other correspondents he recorded in his diary, "…Luciani turned up late. 'It's like the eve of Waterloo,' I said to Duranty. 'You're wrong,' he answered. 'Absolutely wrong. They're getting away with it again. I regard this new decree in the North Caucasus as victory – harnessing the peasants to the plough because their horses are all dead – Victory!'…" [diary entry, 1/24/33] Duranty admired the "strong and ruthless" power of Stalin and his regime. [Green Stick, 255]



Though other reporters saw signs of the famine in early 1932 it was not until October that Duranty was willing to concede that *some* form of food shortages may have existed. His reporting made it clear that any shortages were due to the efforts of the peasants and their "resistance to rural socialization." [Famine, p. 70] According to Duranty, "there is no actual starvation or deaths from starvation, but there is widespread mortality from diseases due to malnutrition…. [the] conditions are bad, but there is no famine." [Famine, p. 76]

RUSSIANS HUNGRY, BUT NOT STARVING

Deaths From Diseases Due to Malnutrition High, Yet the Soviet Is Entrenched.

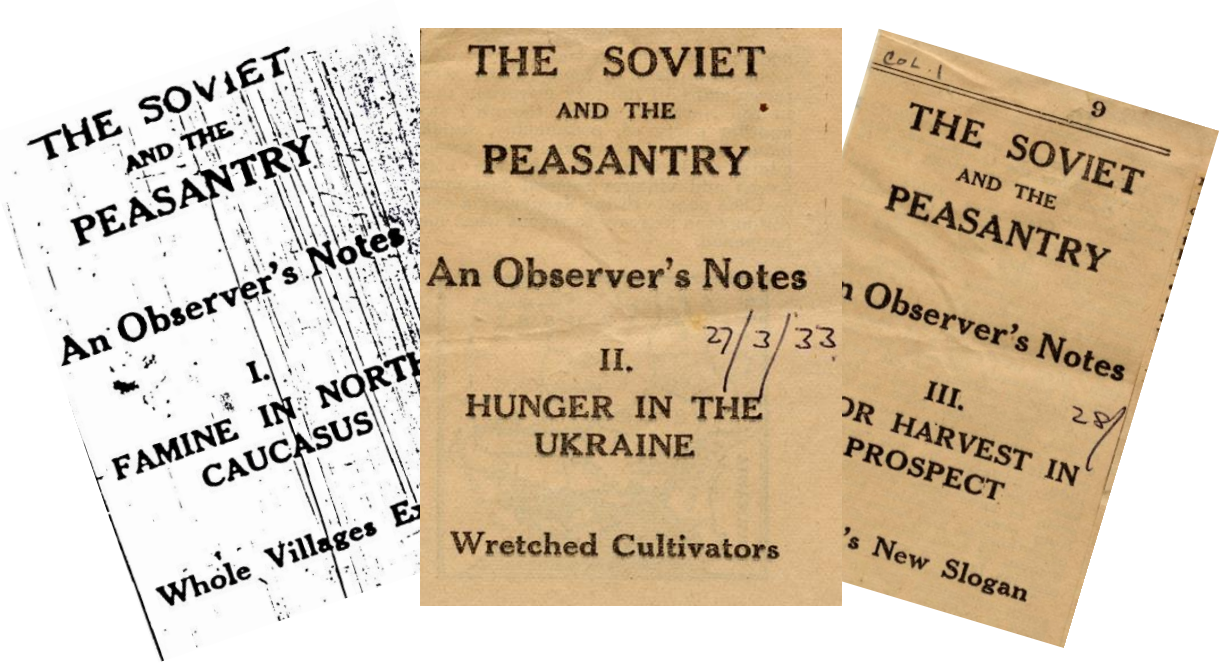
LARGER CITIES HAVE FOOD

Ukraine, North Caucasus and Lower Volga Regions Suffer From Shortages.

However, after his meager reporting of the "famine scare", as he called it, he collaborated with the Soviets to keep news of the famine from others and openly ridiculed reporters who had smuggled news out of Moscow. To further keep news from the West, Moscow placed restrictions on travel and limited what reporters could write about. [Famine, p. 72] Leading papers of the West were willing to live with the contradiction between official reports of exceptional harvests and the letters from Ukrainians and others detailing the death and starvation.

Abandoning himself to finding the truth, Muggeridge defied Soviet travel bans and purchased himself a train ticket out of Moscow. He told no one of his plans and was not stopped in his efforts. As Muggeridge traveled in comfort by train to Ukraine he found it "tempting not to get down at any stations along the way as [he] had planned, but just to continue in the train." [Green Stick, 257]. This is the test and temptation that we all feel when we are set up against a wrong that is clearly visible yet stands unchallenged.

After his trip he wrote his dispatches and sent them back to England in diplomatic pouches skirting the official Soviet censors. In England his dispatches were held up at the Manchester Guardian—a citadel of socialist journalism—waiting, as Muggeridge believed, for other articles that would serve to neutralize the severity and shock of what he saw. In his articles that appeared on the 25th, 27th, and 28th of March 1933 he told of "abandoned villages, the absence of livestock, neglected fields; everywhere famished, frightened people and intimations of coercion, soldiers about the place, and hard-faced men in long overcoats." He recounted a scene of rope-bound peasants being herded into cattle cars at gun-point. [Green Stick, 257]. Muggeridge was the first foreign journalist to report after having gotten into the famine areas without official supervision. After his reports were printed, they were denounced by many, particularly Walter Duranty. He called Muggeridge's reports fabrications. Years later it would become clear that Muggeridge's testimony proved true.

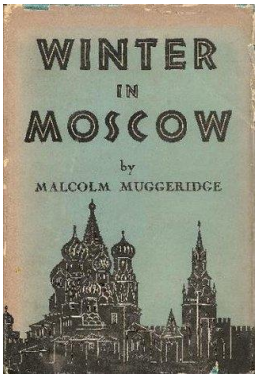


At the height of the famine roughly 25,000 people, mainly peasants, were dying daily in Ukraine. Some even resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. This is quite stark when compared with 6,000 daily deaths during World War I. Eventually in private and strictest confidence, Duranty conceded that as many as 10 million people died from lack of food during late 1932 into late 1933. [Famine, p. 87] In 1941 Germany invaded Ukraine already aware of the reality of the famine, which the Nazis sought to use to discredit the Soviets by exposing the mass graves of famine victims. Not until the fall of Soviet communism was any official acknowledgement made of the famine.

One may wish to believe that time has separated us from such things; that we've progressed beyond the severities of this type of inhumanity. We each tell ourselves that if "I was there I would say or do something." But, regularly we find out differently. The Scriptures clearly outline that despite clear natural and special revelation that leaves us without excuse, we have

exchanged the truth for a lie. We have confounded wisdom with knowledge. Recently I was discussing this presentation with another faculty member, and he recounted the Chinese famine under Mao from 1958 to 1961 in which it is estimated that 30 to 40 million died of starvation replicating many of the policies and practices of the Soviet famine. But one may argue that we learned so much in the last forty years, certainly with global news coverage these types of tragedies can't continue to happen. However, an April 11th article in the New York Times proves this thinking wrong. In it, Eason Jordan, chief news executive for CNN News, told of the "life and death decisions at CNN Bagdad." His article, titled "The News We Kept to Ourselves," recounted tales of intimidation, torture, and un-reported news. Seventy years has passed since the initial stifling of the truth in Russia, and it looks like little has changed in that time.

Muggeridge went to Russia believing in nothing, save the promise of communism, but left clearly believing in something, the very existence of evil. [Winter, xiv] Though not immediately addressing the evils he saw upon his arrival in Russia, Muggeridge eventually stood against the tide of apathy and personal interest and reported the truth placing his professional career at great risk. In the introduction to *Winter in Moscow*, Muggeridge's novel about his time in Russia, Michael Aeschliman notes that "Muggeridge reminds his reader of the prerogative and the duty of the individual soul to know the truth, to serve the good, however darkly visible; to try to live decently and honorably in a "murky age" rife with fraud, lies, horror, and varieties of barbarism, whether narcotic commercial nihilism or lethal communist tyranny." [Winter, xxiii]



Winter in Moscow, 1934

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