

Duranty's Pulitzer and the hypocrisy of the New York Times

By Bill Vann
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The *New York Times* confirmed last week that a Columbia University professor whom the newspaper hired to assess the reporting of Walter Duranty, the *Times* Moscow correspondent in the 1930s, has concluded that the Pulitzer Prize Duranty received during that period should be rescinded.

The campaign for revoking the award given to Duranty 71 years ago has centered on the reporter's failure to truthfully report the famine that ravaged the Ukraine and much of the rest of the Soviet Union in 1932-33. It has been spearheaded by Ukrainian nationalist organizations that claim the famine was a deliberate act of genocide, and has been championed by a number of right-wing organizations and publications.

It is striking that in all the coverage given by the *Times* to the Duranty matter, there is no reference to another episode in his career that was no less notorious—his reporting of the Moscow purge trials and the Stalinist terror of 1936-39. Duranty's reports from Moscow lent the full international prestige of the *New York Times* to legitimizing these frame-up trials, which led to the annihilation of hundreds of thousands of revolutionary socialists in the cellars of Lubyanka and other killing grounds.

In an article published October 23, *Times* media correspondent Jacques Steinberg cited several articles published previously in the newspaper as proof "that the *Times* regretted the lapses in Mr. Duranty's coverage." These included a reference to Duranty in a favorable 1986 review of "The Harvest of Sorrow"—a tendentious work written by the right-wing historian Robert Conquest—and an editorial four years later calling Duranty's work "some of the worst reporting to appear in this newspaper."

These mea culpas evade some obvious questions. If Duranty's reporting was so terrible, why did the editors of the *Times* continue for a decade to feature it prominently on the paper's front page, and why did the Pulitzer panel decide to give him the award? Was the failure to report the famine merely a "lapse" in Duranty's coverage, or rather part of a broader and systematic distortion of events in the USSR?

This exclusive focus on Duranty's coverage of 1932-33 suggests that the publishers and editors of the *Times* are not beginning with a principled concern for Duranty's general disregard for the truth, but rather exhibiting their long-standing sensitivity to any criticism leveled from the right.

There is no question that Duranty's glossing over the catastrophic 1932-33 famine was appalling. It is, however, a major historical distortion to claim, as his right-wing critics do, that he was engaged in a deliberate cover-up of genocide.

In his reporting of Soviet developments, Duranty, like the majority of Western correspondents, took an entirely superficial approach. At

the same time—and this too was not uncommon—his coverage was colored by widespread popular sympathy for the Soviet government, which was generally understood to be the product of a social revolution.

Among the Western liberal intelligentsia, this sympathy had only been strengthened by the Kremlin bureaucracy's previous turn to the right and its expulsion of the Left Opposition, formed in 1923 under Leon Trotsky's leadership to oppose the bureaucratization of the Communist Party and uphold the revolutionary internationalist perspective upon which the October Revolution had been based.

The 1932-33 famine itself was the outcome of a complex interplay of social and political forces, not a genocidal Kremlin conspiracy to exterminate an entire people. The crisis that gripped the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s was the product of the policies pursued by the ruling bureaucracy under Stalin's leadership over the previous years, under the slogan of "socialism in one country." While turning its back on the problems of the international working class, the Stalin leadership rejected within the USSR any plan to increase the tempo of industrial development and pursued policies in the countryside that only strengthened the better-off peasants at the expense of the poorer ones.

The lack of industrial goods, combined with a growth in the production of agricultural raw materials, led to the break between city and country against which the Left Opposition had warned. The well-off and middle peasants were, by the latter part of the 1920s, receiving lower and lower prices for their crops. They began to withhold their grain, and by the beginning of 1928 the Soviet working class confronted the threat of famine.

The Stalin-led regime reacted with a sudden and reckless swing to a program of forced collection of grain and "complete collectivization." Almost overnight, the small peasant holdings that the Stalinist bureaucracy had previously encouraged were expropriated and merged into large state-run farms.

Carried out without any technical or political preparation, and with no critical analysis of the policy that preceded it, forced collectivization led initially to a catastrophic fall in agricultural production. Resistance to collectivization took the form of armed peasant attacks as well as the destruction of grain and livestock, which, in turn, were met with repression.

Duranty's reaction to these events, as the *Times* has noted, was the infamous phrase, "you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs." At the same time he mocked the right-wing critics of the Soviet Union, asserting that their concern for the loss of life in the collectivization drive stood in sharp contrast to their indifference to the slaughter of the World War of 1914-1918.

The disaster unleashed by forced collectivization, combined with the historic defeat of the working class that resulted from Stalinism's policies in Germany, set the stage for a lurch to the right and the advent of "popular frontism." Faced with a Hitlerite regime committed to the Soviet Union's destruction, the Kremlin pursued diplomatic alliances with "democratic" imperialism in exchange for an explicit renunciation of revolutionary goals and a commitment to defend the international status quo.

Within the USSR, it turned to the physical liquidation of all those who had been associated with the October 1917 revolution.

It was in this period that Duranty's writings took on a qualitatively different character. In the face of monstrous acts of wholesale judicial murder, the *Times* did more than remain silent. It published Duranty's apologetics and support for the frame-ups.

The Moscow Trials indicted the principal leaders of the October 1917 revolution—the exiled Trotsky being the foremost defendant—as fascist collaborators supposedly guilty of crimes ranging from industrial sabotage to plots to poison the population's water supply and assassinate Stalin.

The only evidence presented to substantiate these fantastic charges were the confessions of the accused, extracted through the method personally recommended by Stalin of "beat, beat and beat again." The Soviet prosecutors' tales of secret meetings and conspiratorial intrigue, supposedly confirmed by confessions extracted from the defendants, were subsequently exposed as crude fabrications.

For example: at the first trial, held in August of 1936, a supposed 1932 meeting in Copenhagen of an alleged conspirator with Trotsky's son, Leon Sedov, was said to have taken place at the Hotel Bristol. The Hotel Bristol, it was pointed out soon after the frame-up, had been torn down in 1917.

At the second trial, held in January of 1937, one of the accused, former head of Soviet industry Yuri Piatakov, was said to have flown to Oslo in December 1935. It was soon revealed, however, that no planes had been able to land in Norway for the entire month of December 1935 because of foul weather.

None of this gave pause to the *Times* and its Moscow correspondent in their favorable coverage of the frame-ups. Reporting on the first of the Moscow Trials in 1936, Duranty wrote: "It is inconceivable that a public trial of such men would be held unless the authorities had full proofs of their guilt."

In January 1937, after the second trial, Duranty wrote: "It is a pity from the Soviet viewpoint that no documentary evidence was produced in open court." Nevertheless, he concluded, "taken all in all, the trial did stand up."

Behind this coverage lay definite political motives, and not merely the personal predilections of Duranty. Joining the *Times* in defending the trials was the US Ambassador to Moscow, Joseph Davies. What were then the leading journals of American liberalism, the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, lauded these frame-ups as models of fairness. Within ruling circles in both Europe and America, the three-year blood purge was recognized—and welcomed—as an irrevocable break with the revolutionary perspective of 1917.

Trotsky pointed to the political source of this liberal defense of the Moscow Trials. In his *Their Morals and Ours*, written in 1938, he commented that "the big bourgeoisie of the democratic countries, not without pleasure, though blanketed with fastidiousness, watched the execution of the revolutionists in the USSR. In this sense, the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, not to speak of Duranty, Louis Fischer, and their kindred prostitutes of the pen, fully responded to the interests of

'democratic' imperialism."

Trotsky described Duranty as the "correspondent of the *New York Times*, whom the Kremlin has always entrusted with the dirtiest journalistic tasks." ("Toward a Balance Sheet of the Purges," published in *Socialist Appeal* June 30, 1939 and included in *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1938-39*, Pathfinder Press). Duranty's record on the Moscow Trials remained an issue of active controversy for decades to come.

The publishers and editors of the *Times* have never expressed any remorse about this aspect of Duranty's reporting. On the contrary, they have proven impervious to any protest from the left over their falsification of history in relation to the Soviet Union.

While the newspaper distanced itself from the Stalinist bureaucracy—first in response to the 1939 Stalin-Hitler pact and then by joining the anti-communist witch-hunt of the post-World War II years—it has never bothered to reexamine its role as an apologist for the Stalinist terror. On the contrary, the former "friends of the Soviet Union" at the *Times* passed over easily to vulgar anti-communism. Where they once put a plus, they merely substituted a minus.

Among those interviewed in last week's *Times* story on Duranty was the newspaper's editor, Bill Keller. "It's absolutely true that the work Duranty did...was credulous, uncritical parroting of propaganda," Keller declared. He added, however, "As someone who spent time in the Soviet Union while it existed, the notion of airbrushing history kind of gives me the creeps."

Keller was the *Times* correspondent in Moscow from 1986 to 1991. While the *Times*' distortion of the situation in the Soviet Union during this period may not have reached the grotesque levels set by Duranty, its version of events was hardly free of the influence of the US government. Keller's lionizing of Mikhail Gorbachev dovetailed neatly with the official policy of Washington, which then backed the Soviet leader as the most consistent proponent of capitalist restoration within the bureaucracy.

Since then, the *Times* editor has actively contributed to the new and officially sanctioned falsification of history—the slandering of the October 1917 revolution and the facile equation of Stalinism and fascism.

Keller's remark last week about his supposed distaste for "airbrushing history" is cynical, given that this was precisely the method used by the Stalinist bureaucracy against its Marxist opponents, led by Trotsky—a method supported by Duranty and continued in its own fashion by the *Times* to this day.

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