

The Stalin Beat

Reporting on the real Russia

by **Zack Barnett**

Blood flooded Red Square. The Red Army was mutinous. Moscow's streets were strewn with bodies. And Stalin, dark, mammoth, sinister Stalin, was dead – assassinated by anti-Bolshevik forces. That was the rumor making its way from Riga to Berlin and eventually to New York in the autumn of 1930. In reality, Moscow was bathed not in blood but the first snow of the year. And as United Press Moscow correspondent Eugene Lyons noted in his memoir, the only corpse visible in Red Square was that of Lenin, embalmed and under heavy guard.

Lyons, along with other journalists stationed in the Soviet capital, tried hard to dispel rumors of chaos with reports of a stable and calm Russia. The reporter's denials, however, did little but fuel gossip of Stalin's demise. Most of the ten or so correspondents who reported regularly from Moscow for news services, such as the Associated Press, United Press and International News Service; for daily city papers, such as the *Chicago Daily News* and *New York Herald*; and for national publications, such as the *Christian Science Monitor* and *The Nation*, sent telegrams to the Kremlin, urging Stalin to quash the snowballing news of his demise with an exclusive interview.

Lyons' frequent requests for a sit-down with Stalin were routinely rejected. So as darkness descended on the afternoon of Saturday, Nov. 23, the 32-year-old American journalist had reason to doubt when he answered his phone.

"Mr. Lyons? This is Comrade Stalin's office," a man's voice said in excellent English.

"You don't say," Lyons retorted. "Give him my kindest regards, and Mrs. Stalin, too." But it was no joke.

"This *is* Comrade Stalin's secretary," the man said. "Comrade Stalin received your letter and would be glad to talk to you in an hour in his offices at the Central Committee of the Party."

It was the break of all breaks, the scoop of all scoops. Nobody would ever know for certain why Stalin had selected Lyons for the honor. Maybe the young journalist with a jutting jaw and a boxer's strong chin was an easier target for charm than some of the older, cagier news vets. (And yes, believe or not, Stalin could charm. H.G. Wells, who interviewed the leader in 1934, found him to be charismatic.) Stalin no doubt knew that Lyons, who'd been working in the USSR for two years, had for a time sympathized with the party's aims. Maybe Lyons' query was simply on the top of a stack of telegraphed requests. He never knew for sure.

All Lyons could think of was the glory of sitting down with a leader held by many in both ominous and high regard. It would be Stalin's first interview since he came to power seven years earlier. Lyons, whose wife and small daughter had moved to Moscow to be with

him, breathlessly arrived in the anteroom of the leader's office. It was a simple place, without gold braids, bright colors or symbols trumpeting authority. It didn't show wealth. It conveyed only power, "naked, clean and serene in its strength," Lyons recalled in his memoir.

It was a power to which Lyons himself soon fell victim. His pulse raced as a boy led him to Stalin's office, the inner sanctum of the seemingly reclusive leader, the center of a budding empire. The high-ceilinged study was furnished only with portraits of Marx, Lenin and Engels. It was, Lyons speculated in his memoirs, the only office in all of the USSR without a portrait of Stalin. The leader himself wore a drab, olive jacket, and his trousers, of similar color, were tucked into black boots.

"What to ask? What to ask?" thought Lyons. The leader had given the journalist less than an hour to prepare, less than an hour to formulate pointed questions on such weighty matters as the progress of a five-year-plan, which called for substantial growth in production of coal, iron and electricity in an all-out effort to catch and overtake the industrial West. Rather than come up with pointed questions about rumored suffering in the countryside, about trials convicting the innocent for political gain, or about anything of substance, Lyons -- as he later confessed in his memoir -- fell victim to his own awe. Stalin, he was shocked to find, was a real man, with a powerful physique, a fleshy, large-featured face with skin a touch darker than he imagined. Stalin's shock of unruly black hair was tinged with the gray of the man's 51 years.

In the interview, the best Lyons could do was probe with the blunt instrument of generality. He asked about the progress of the five-year-plan but lacked specifics to press Stalin when the leader responded with the party line. Without sharp, evidence-backed enquiries, the only way to stretch out the conversation was by asking about the leader's wife, his children, his beloved youngest daughter. An hour became two.

As the conversation came to a close, Stalin told Lyons that he would be interested to see the story that came of the conversation. "I am anxious that you read my dispatch before I send it," Lyons answered, committing a journalistic sin by not only agreeing to such an arrangement but by *suggesting* it. It was a Saturday night, Lyons told Stalin, and getting the story written and approved while also making the early deadline for Sunday papers might not be possible. Stalin waved off the matter, unconcerned that anything in the interview would be sensitive enough to merit a close reading. Lyons, however, was unrelenting in his effort to please. "If I could get a Latin-typewriter," he told Stalin, "I could type the story right here and let you see it immediately." Once the typewriter was found, Lyons pounded out his scoop with speed and precision, stopping only to call his wife to brag that he was, at that very moment, sitting in Stalin's office.

When he finished the story, the journalist took two carbon copies to Stalin. Lyons had signed one with a note of thanks for the Soviet leader. The other, he asked Stalin to sign. "It might make it easier to get it past the censors. There is censorship on the news here," Lyons joked. Stalin obliged, signing in Russian, "More or less correct. J. Stalin." Lyons kept the signed copy for the rest of his life.

Lyons' story appeared all over the world. Not only was Stalin alive, he was a real person, with pink flesh and a love for his children, Lyons dutifully reported. In the weeks after the interview, Lyons enjoyed notoriety and congratulations. Although he wrote in his memoirs, "Amidst the telegrams and jubilation of my employers, I was depressed by the feeling of a magnificent opportunity frittered away."

Two years later, Lyons, along with most of the other regular Moscow correspondents would fritter away another opportunity, one that might have been the scoop of the decade. By 1932, conditions in the USSR, especially in the countryside, had grown dire. A famine was sweeping through villages in Ukraine and southern Russia. Today's estimates show that five to seven million peasants starved in the famine of 1932-33. The conditions weren't accidental or as with many famines, climate-induced. It was government-caused. Red Army soldiers appropriated grain, sometimes at gunpoint, from the farmers who grew it. Peasants were shot for hoarding food. Villagers ate the bark off trees and seeds they picked out of manure. They slaughtered livestock rather than hand over the animals to the state's collective farms.

Historians disagree about what accounts for the zealotry of the grain appropriations. Stalin, some say, wanted to punish peasants for reluctance to trade their private property for places in large collective farms. It was Stalin's way of re-educating them from capitalists into Soviets, they assert. More recently, however, experts have argued that the Soviet government was starving its peasants to feed enormous industrial growth. Grain was one of the few sources of the revenue Stalin had to purchase foreign machinery for a belated industrial revolution. Factory workers in the cities also needed food. The peasants, the ones growing the food, were, in the eyes of Stalin, ignorant and backward people, who were not only expendable but were slowing the Soviet Union's progress.

Lyons and the rest of the cadre of American and British journalists in the USSR in the early 1930s in large part ignored human suffering, oppression and starvation and instead created and maintained a longstanding image of a socialist utopia. This image, set against the backdrop of the Great Depression and a collapsing world economy, fueled a worldwide boom in the communist movement. During the 1930s, a decade in which the number of unemployed Americans reached 20 million, membership in the American communist party tripled, peaking at 100,000 in 1939.

Like Lyons, most of the Moscow reporters produced soft features describing the curiosity and novelty of the Soviet experiment rather than covering the rocky terrain of politics, economics, or worse yet, human suffering. Human suffering and starvation rarely made the front page. For example, in 1931, rather than cover politics or economics or the precursors to the coming famine, the journalists were charged by their home editors with covering playwright George Bernard Shaw's tour of the USSR. For two weeks, the reporters grumbled as Shaw took in the ready-made Potemkin sights, such as a well-run factory, a faux hospital, and farmers primed to look prosperous. Shaw, Lyons later recalled, judged "food conditions by the (grand tourist hotel) Metropol's menu, collectivization by the model farm, ... and socialism by the twittering sycophants."

The playwright later recounted his trip in the *New York Times* as if setting up the idyllic opening act of a play. As the U.S. slipped deeper into the Great Depression, as American families went without food and workers without jobs, Shaw praised the regime overseeing the 14-year-old Soviet experiment as "the ablest and most enlightened in the world." He wrote to New Yorkers, whose jobless ranks would swell to 630,000 by 1933, that "In Russia, there is no unemployment, and the people are healthy, carefree and full of hope." Like Shaw, thousands of enthusiastic Americans, artists and professors flocked to the USSR, where official guides led them on carefully defined tours, showing off well fed farmers and efficient, happy factory workers.

In 1929 only 2,500 Americans visited the USSR. Two years later, in 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, 10,000 Americans visited. In the U.S., an English translation of a book for Soviet school children, "New Russia's Primer," was among the top ten nonfiction bestsellers of 1932 – the same year the government-instigated famine started in Ukraine and rural Russia. Many historians now count the forced starvation of 1932-1933 in Ukraine among the 20th century's worst genocides. Yet it wasn't even among the top priorities of the Brits and Americans reporting from Moscow.

In fact, the Moscow foreign press corps was essentially just a collection of journalists covering the Kremlin – not Russia or the Soviet Union. The reporters' every dispatch was subject to the blue pen of a censor before it could be cabled to the states. The process became one of negotiation and euphemism, in which censors and reporters often hashed out wording face-to-face. It was a rather liberal form of censorship compared to the oppressive environments foreign correspondents sometimes encountered in places such as Italy, Japan and, under some regimes, France and Germany. In those countries, at various times in history, censors sliced sections out of stories without discussing their actions with reporters, who sometimes didn't learn of the editing until weeks later when they received copies of their home newspapers. The Moscow journalists, by contrast, knew exactly what the censors were cutting.

In addition, the Soviets employed constant intimidation to control foreign reporters. At any time, the Soviet government could take the journalists' visas, cut off the flow of information, or even arrest, harass or punish their Russian wives or girlfriends. As a result, American reporters tried in large part to stay friendly with the Soviets. Few reporters left the comfort of Moscow apartments, bars or mistresses for other cities unless on a government junket. The Western journalists knew what was happening in the countryside. Their many memoirs and other documents tell of terror reigning in the villages. They saw the emaciated villagers who migrated to cities in hopes of finding food or work. Some correspondents hinted at discontent and discomfort in Russia in their dispatches. Few, however, tackled the true suffering head on.

Two men tried. Ralph Barnes, of the *New York Herald Tribune*, and William Stoneman, of the *Chicago Daily News*, were known for their forays into what some called the "Real Russia." As correspondents for individual papers, the men didn't have to stay in Moscow to wait for possible breaking news as wire service reporters such as Lyons had to. In early 1933, traveling together, Barnes and Stoneman headed south through Russia and sent by mail their stories of forcible evacuations of entire towns in the North Caucasus. Shortly

after that, Soviet officials began strictly enforcing a ban on travel for journalists. No correspondent could leave Moscow without formal permission of the Soviet government. Stoneman begged a censor for permission to travel to Ukraine, where millions were rumored to be starving. The censor flatly refused, telling Stoneman "as a friend" that he "had better postpone" his trip. Stoneman was one of the few Moscow correspondents to even ask. Once he was refused, it was clear that the story of the Soviet countryside, a story of starvation and deportation, couldn't be told by regular Moscow correspondents, all of whom were subject to censors and closely monitored by the secret service. It would take an outsider, someone who could move through the country on his own, without an interpreter, to expose the horrors.

A 27-year-old Welshman with a taste for adventure was just such a person. Gareth Jones had twice before visited the Soviet Union, where his fluency in Russian allowed him the freedom to travel and communicate. Jones could sneak into the Soviet countryside and find for himself a story few others were telling.

Jones was intellectually – but decidedly not physically – imposing, with jug ears, short, dark hair and large round glasses. More than a reporter or student of history, Jones was uniquely prepared to tell a story about the dark side of the Soviet experiment. Although young, he had a rare combination of academic, professional and journalistic experience. The son of a headmaster, Jones left his native Wales for university, graduating from Trinity College in Cambridge in 1929 with high honors in German, French and Russian. He honed his Russian when he spent time with immigrant families during stays in Britain and America. He had language skills that few, if any, of the British and American correspondents could rival. Although he'd dreamed of working as a journalist, until now he'd made his living as a foreign advisor, first to former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and later to American public relations icon Ivy Lee.

As a young intellectual, Jones wanted to believe in the Soviet experiment. He was captivated by Bolshevik ideas of educating "even the humblest peasant," of industry that benefited the workers, and of a classless society. "Then," he would write later, "I went to Russia." The first of his Russian trips had been on behalf of Lloyd George, the second on behalf of Lee, as a guide to Jack Heinz, heir to a culinary empire. This time, however, Jones was traveling for himself.

In March 1933, Jones arrived in the USSR with a tourist visa and an eye toward escaping Moscow and secretly reaching the "real Russia," a place he'd found on previous visits to the Soviet empire. He dreamed of writing a book about his travels. But to have any travels at all, he knew he had to do more than visit Moscow.

Shortly after arriving, Jones went to the British embassy in Moscow and asked for advice about how to best travel in the Soviet countryside. "It is dangerous now," a diplomat warned. "But if you really want to go, do not tell any communist, for you will be stopped. Then beware of walking by night, for you will be attacked and your food will be taken away from you, and everything you have, perhaps even your life, will be lost." Soviet authorities would never allow a foreigner to buy a train ticket to a small town, the man at the embassy explained to Jones. If Jones really wanted to see the countryside, the man told

him, he should buy a ticket from Moscow to another big city. Then, somewhere along the way, he might slip off the train and into the countryside.

That's exactly what Jones did.

He bought a ticket from Moscow to Kharkov, then the capital of Soviet Ukraine. Jones was jammed onto a hard, wooden seat in the third class car, amid peasants, workers and a handful of young, enthusiastic communists. He pulled from his rucksack a piece of bread and began to eat. A piece of crust fell to the dusty floor. A glassy-eyed peasant dove on it and stuffed it into his mouth. Jones then took an orange from his bag. He hadn't been outside Moscow long enough to realize the commotion a simple piece of fruit might cause. He tossed the peel into a spittoon. The same man who salvaged his bread crusts fished out the peel and shoved it into his mouth. As he was so adept at doing, Jones struck up a conversation with him.

The starving peasant was from a nearby village. In desperation, he told Jones, friends and neighbors had pooled their last pieces of silver and gold and sent him to Moscow to buy bread. But his bread had been stolen. "And now they will wait for me every day in the village," he told Jones. "They will expect bread and they will get death instead."

At one stop, a few hours after leaving Moscow, a man approached Jones and whispered to him in German. "Tell them in England," he said, "that we are starving and getting swollen."

Eventually the train came to a stop at a collection of wooden huts. Jones had traveled almost 400 miles from Moscow. He was still 100 miles from Kharkov. It was then he saw his chance to escape into the countryside. He pulled his rucksack over his back and headed for the door. "Be careful," warned a fellow passenger, a young, enthusiastic communist. "The Ukrainians are desperate." Jones stepped into the snowy expanse as the train lurched and pulled away.

And now he found himself exactly where he wanted to be – in the middle of the frigid Ukrainian steppe. Snow crunched under his boots. White stretched for miles. Although it was March, spring had not yet reached this eastern corner of Europe. A freezing wind slapped his face, but he found it refreshing after spending so many hours in the crowded third-class train car. He was alone, carrying a bag stuffed with white bread, butter, cheese, meat and chocolate into a land of desperate, starving peasants. He'd paid exorbitant sums for the provisions at a foreign currency store in Moscow, a place where only tourists and expatriates could afford to shop. He had no map to guide him through the rolling, white hills. He stuck by the railroad tracks to avoid being swallowed up by the chilled, snowy steppe.

As Jones made his way along the tracks, a witness to the human toll of Stalin's first five-year plan, he occasionally made notes in a small, black pocket diary. The plan called for enormous increases in coal, iron and steel production, while also delivering electricity to much of the country. Stalin promised citizens that their six- and seven-day work weeks and their spare, meatless tables, would soon pay off in a higher standard of living.

As he traveled the countryside, peasants would describe to Jones how the Red Army had herded some of the wealthier and harder working peasants – kulaks, they called them – into cattle cars and shipped them to labor camps in the East. It was part of the Soviet Union's effort to eradicate any traces of capitalists, while also securing badly needed free labor for the five-year-plan's massive construction projects, such as steel mills, reservoirs and shipping canals.

Now, ahead of Jones along the tracks, Jones saw a woman bent with age hobbling through the snowy depths. "There is no bread," she told him, when he caught up with her. "We have not had bread for more than two months and many are dying in the village. Some huts have potatoes, but many of us have only cattle fodder left, and that will only last another month." The woman, hunched as if carrying the weight of tragedy on her back, trudged away. If Jones shared any food with her, he didn't note it in his diary.

The notebook's jagged letters, those of a hurried note-taker, reveal word-for-word conversations, which formed the basis for at least twenty freelance newspaper articles that Jones wrote about his trek. His pieces appeared in *The London Evening Standard*, *The Daily Express*, and the *Financial News*, both of London, as well as *The Western Mail*, in his native Wales, where he started full-time as a reporter shortly after his return from Russia.

His route along the railroad tracks took him into another collection of wooden huts. At first, he thought the area was deserted. All was silent. He saw only a few emaciated cows and horses covered with open sores. Then a lone man emerged from the huts. There was no bread, he told Jones. And not only that, the man said, everybody was "swollen" from starvation. Jones moved on, marching along the tracks.

By early afternoon, Jones walked into another village. This time, he saw no cattle, only a group of men outside a sturdy wooden hut. There was no food for the cows, they explained. One of the men walked into the hut and came out holding a hard, red beet. "That's the only food we have in this village, except for a few fortunate people who have some potatoes," the man told Jones. "And that's the food we used to give the cattle." Sometimes villagers fingered his clothing, asking him if it was really possible to buy things in England, where they had been told that people were starving. When Jones shared bread and cheese from his backpack with a peasant woman, she told him: "Now I have eaten such wonderful things I can die happy." Jones shared what he could, but he rarely made notes about giving away food from his rucksack.

By late afternoon, the horizon began to glow red above the white landscape. For a long time, he was alone, working his way south toward Kharkov. In his mind, echoed the refrain, "We are waiting for death." In front of him, a pair of men waited along the track and warned him to go no further. Soon it would be dark. Desperate and starving bandits, they cautioned, might take his food or worse. Jones walked with the men to their home, a hut not far away. Inside, a small child, its belly distended, crawled on a bed. The child's eyes were glassy, covered in a thin film. The child suffered only from a lack of food, his mother explained to Jones. News spread quickly in the village that an outsider was in town. Old men visited and began describing their village's plight.

"You ask how many have died. We cannot tell. We have not counted them, but perhaps one in every ten," a wrinkled old man told Jones. It was just March, with many months before the next harvest. More death, the peasants told Jones, was coming. Into the evening, the villagers recounted how the Soviets took their land, their animals and now nearly every crumb of food. That night, sleep came slowly.

The next morning, two Red Army soldiers knocked at the door. They were searching for two thieves who a few nights earlier had sneaked into the outdoor cellar of a peasant and stolen his potatoes. The peasant heard them and rushed from his house to protect his food. One of the thieves fatally stabbed the man in the chest. This was, Jones learned from the soldiers, a common story.

On his walk, which would eventually tally 40 miles, Jones would visit at least twenty villages. In one, villagers described how a group of young communists shot peasants who refused to give up their land and livestock. In another, Jones walked into a school and read a sign, "The Soviet school is foremost among all schools in the world." He walked through twelve to fourteen collective farms, each time finding bewildered peasants who'd either been forced to go to the farms or who had migrated to them on their own, in a last ditch effort to survive. "We don't know where we are," many told him. Another frequent phrase Jones heard, was "Vse pukhli," *All are swollen*. He spent one night with nine other people in a one-room cottage. All the people ate, including Jones, was a watery soup with tiny bits of potato.

Jones heard more than once a joke circulating among the starving. A louse and pig met on the Soviet frontier. The louse was headed into Russia, and the pig was leaving. "Why are you coming into Russia," the pig asked the louse. "I'm coming because people in Germany are so clean that I can't find a place to live. Why are you leaving Russia?" the louse asked. "Because," the pig answered, "people in Russia are today eating what we pigs used to eat. There's nothing left for me."

After a few days of walking along the tracks, Jones came to a village with a small railway station. There he found a collection of peasants headed to the city in search of food. Jones was listening to their stories when a well-dressed, well-fed, uniformed officer of the Gosudarstvie Politicheskoe Upravlenie (GPU), the Soviet secret service, hustled over. Russian curses flew from his mouth as he yelled at the peasants to clear away. "Stop telling him about hunger," he said. "Can't you tell he's a foreigner?"

The officer demanded to see Jones' passport, and then informed him he would be accompanying the journalist on the train to Kharkov. Was Jones under arrest? What would he face when he got to Kharkov? He didn't know. It wasn't unheard of for foreigners to be tried for espionage or sabotage. That very week, unbeknownst to Jones, six British engineers had been arrested and charged with sabotaging power stations. The engineer's fates would merge with that of the reporter in ways nobody could have imagined. As the GPU officer escorted the Welshman onboard a train, all Jones could think about was a harsh sentence in a Soviet prison.

All of a sudden, Jones' walk was over. Now, in March, 1933, six days after stepping off a train during a quick stop at a collection of huts on the snowy steppe, he sat next to a chubby-faced secret service man as their train rattled to Kharkov, and for Jones, an uncertain fate. He worried about going to jail. He worried that he might be convicted of a trumped up charge and perhaps imprisoned for years, without a public trial. He talked fast, explaining to the OGPU officer that he was a journalist and diplomat who had interviewed commissars and high-ranking Soviet officials. He even had interviewed Lenin's widow, he told the officer. "I believed he was thoroughly convinced that any real arrest of myself would plunge Russia and Europe and the United States into a world war," Jones wrote later.

The men eventually arrived in Kharkov, then the capital city of the Ukraine. But rather than haul Jones off to jail, or even a foreign consulate, the officer set him free. Apparently it was enough to escort him out of the countryside and back into a major city. Free to wander, Jones found the horrors of the famine even on city streets. It was in Kharkov where Jones first heard news that would ultimately change his life. He was sitting in a private house and sipping steaming tea with several diplomats when a servant burst into the room with an urgent report. Six British engineers had been arrested and charged with sabotaging the very power stations they were under contract to help build. Jones was shocked.

"Next morning, however, I looked at 'Izvestia,' and there the news stood in black and white," Jones later wrote in an article. He scanned the list of names and hit upon one he knew, Allan Monkhouse, an engineer for the Metropolitan-Vickers company who had been working in Russia for more than two decades. Jones had met Monkhouse during one of his earlier trips to Russia. "I knew the deep respect in which the British colony in Moscow held him. It seemed incredible that he should be at that moment in the Lubyanka, the headquarters of the OGPU in Moscow," Jones wrote later. For weeks, papers from New York to London carried stories on the arrests. At the time, however, Jones still couldn't accept the news as true.

Jones wandered the streets of Kharkov. What he saw confirmed the famine in every way. Beggars from villages stood on nearly every corner. He saw a bread line more than a thousand people long. One woman in line told Jones that she had been waiting for more than two days, with no guarantee of ever getting any bread. A few blocks away, Jones saw police chasing off more than a hundred people waiting in line outside a store. "We want bread," the people cried. "There's none left," police officers bellowed as they ran off the hungry people.

He later reported on homeless boys who wandered the city wearing filthy rags through which you could see skin covered in sores. Their faces, wrote Jones, were "depraved and criminal." At the train station, where Jones was to board a train to Moscow for the first leg of his journey back home, he saw a crowd of more than 300 such boys. One boy sucked air through a wide-open mouth, his face flush with fever. Another lay on the floor, his tattered clothes exposing shriveled flesh. Jones turned away from such sights as he boarded the train to Moscow, but the images of starvation remained etched in his memory.

Before leaving Moscow for Britain, Jones checked into the Hotel Metropol. The tiny bar there was a hot spot for foreigners, especially foreign correspondents, and the hotel's clean sheets offered a welcome respite from the chilled suffering of Jones' trek. In the comfortable confines of the Soviet capital, Jones found plenty of time to reflect not just on the starvation, but also on the arrests of the engineers. Three days after the servant in Kharkov had announced news of the arrests, Jones ran into Monkhouse at the British Embassy. Freed on bail after nineteen hours of interrogation, Monkhouse looked drawn and haggard, but Jones thought the engineer still managed to carry himself with dignity. British Ambassador to the Soviet Union Sir Esmond Ovey was applying as much pressure as possible to free the engineers, who, along with many Soviet engineers, were the public scapegoats for failures to meet lofty and unrealistic goals set out in the five-year-plan. Ovey's efforts had worked well enough to get Monkhouse free on bail, but Jones soon learned that his demands would do little to help the men in the longer term.

Just before heading back to Britain, Jones secured an interview with Maxim Litvinov, Foreign Commissar of the Soviet Union, who agreed to the meeting because of Jones' ties to Lloyd George, Britain's former prime minister. Litvinov greatly admired the prime minister for what he explained to Jones was the man's "boldness." In the interview, Jones acted not as a journalist but as a representative of Lloyd George. In fact, he didn't publish any of the conversation, preserving his notes only in a confidential letter he mailed to Lloyd George from Berlin. In secret, Litvinov told Jones that the Ambassador Ovey's tough talk was actually making the situation worse for the engineers who'd been arrested. Ovey had been "too tactless and too bullying," Litvinov told Jones. "He is seeking a quarrel and the breaking off of diplomatic relations. ... The greater the pressure the less chance there is of my helping because we can't give way to pressure." Litvinov told Jones that the engineers would not be shot and that there would be a trial.

The arrest of the engineers wasn't the only territory Jones covered in the interview. Jones the journalist weaved his way into the conversation, following up easy questions with hard ones. For example, after querying about additional freedoms being granted to Soviet playwrights, Jones abruptly asked, "Would you describe famine in the villages?" After first denying the famine, Litvinov elaborated. "You must take a longer view," he told Jones. "The present hunger is temporary. ... It would be difficult to describe it as hunger."

After the interview, Jones walked the streets of Moscow. Looking across the Moscow River at the golden domes rising above the red brick fortress around the Kremlin, Jones was filled with anger, not only about the famine but about the arrests, as well. "Within that citadel, the Kremlin, lives Stalin. There the whole policy has been framed which has changed the life of every man, woman and child in Russia over the last five years," he later recounted in a newspaper piece. The engineers were arrested, he later wrote, to divert the world's attention from the disaster in the countryside.

Later that night, Jones boarded a train for Germany, never to return to Moscow. The news he carried, of the starvation in the countryside, was too urgent to wait for his return to Britain. As soon as he arrived in Berlin, he described in detail what he saw to H.R. Knickerbocker, a Pulitzer-prize winning correspondent for the *New York Evening Post*.

Knickerbocker wrote a piece similar to the articles Jones soon would pen himself. A day later, Jones arrived in London, safe from his travels and ready to write.

He had done what few correspondents could even have imagined accomplishing. He'd gone to Moscow, taken a secret trip into the countryside where he was one of few Westerners to witness the horrors of the famine. When he returned to Moscow, he'd done what Eugene Lyons failed to do in 1930 when he interviewed Stalin. Jones had pushed a Soviet official to discuss the human costs for the fast pace of industrialization. Although he stuck to his word and didn't write about his interview with Litvinov, the conversation informed his convictions. Litvinov's opinion – that a view of the starving masses required a longer view in terms of progress – did nothing other than convince him that it was essential to expose the suffering. In the month after his return, he published at least twenty stories about his findings. None, however, appeared in *The London Times*, where Jones had long hoped to work, perhaps because the story of the arrested engineers dominated the Britain press.

Still, convinced he wanted to work as a journalist, he finally did what the news veteran at the *Times* suggested years earlier. He started work at a paper in Wales, *The Western Mail*, in Cardiff. Little did he know that his toughest battles were still ahead.

Jones wasn't ready for the reaction to his pieces. He wasn't the first to write about what he saw in Russia outside of Moscow. Barnes' pieces, as well as three unsigned articles in the *Manchester Guardian* by Malcolm Muggeridge, who for a short time freelanced from the USSR, depicted very similar scenes. But Jones' work, probably because of its graphic and descriptive nature, was now causing a stir. Kremlin officials were scrambling to discredit his claims. Meanwhile, editors in America and Britain were curious why their correspondents didn't chase a story that Jones, in their eyes an inexperienced freelancer, seemed to have gotten so quickly and easily. The correspondents, under pressure from home to make up for or at least justify their lack of famine coverage, and the Soviets, desperate to blur the truth, formed a convenient alliance.

At the time of Jones' return to the West, the arrest of the engineers was filling column inches from London to New York. Mostly because of the pending trial, but in part because of Jones' news of the famine, people in high places in the West, including Britain's government and even in the U.S. Department of State, were questioning the Soviet experiment. The Kremlin, wrote Jones, was in a panic. But, as Jones' former boss Ivy Lee had learned, every crisis in public relations presents an opportunity. And the upcoming trial of the Brits gave the Soviets a chance to save themselves. It's unclear exactly how the message was conveyed. Lyons, the young United Press correspondent who'd interviewed Stalin, wrote in his memoir, "Assignment in Utopia," that the chief Soviet press officer called the correspondents to a meeting at a hotel to make a bargain.

Discredit Jones, the Soviet told the men, and they would be allowed to cover the trial of the engineers. Those who refused to do so would be barred from the courtroom. The deal gave the correspondents a chance to cover themselves for missing a story a far less experienced reporter had gotten. More importantly, the agreement would mean they wouldn't have to explain to their editors why they had been shutout of one of the world's highest profile trials. Failure to cover the trial, wrote Lyons, would have been career suicide. The correspondents, Lyons wrote, unanimously toasted the agreement with the press officer

over vodka and appetizers. Lyons didn't name names in his memoir, and nearly forty years later, when historian James Crowl asked him in a letter about the incident, Lyons answered that he could remember little about the meeting other than what was written in the book. He told Crowl in a letter that the Soviet press officer merely hinted at what needed to be done.

Regardless of how it happened, *The New York Times'* man in Moscow, Walter Duranty, denounced Jones' findings more forcefully than anyone else. Among those on the Stalin beat, it was often Duranty who stood out. He had a bald head, a wooden leg and a way with women. Dubbed the dean of the Moscow correspondents, Duranty was the *Times'* only regular reporter in Moscow from 1921 to 1934. He also was the center of a social circle including Western engineers, businessmen and most of the twelve or so British and American Moscow correspondents, many of whom ignored the story Jones was trying to tell. During most of his time in the Soviet Union, Duranty had a wife on the French Riviera and a young mistress in Moscow. One female admirer recalled that an "evening with him was like an evening with no one else."

He sometimes played as fast and loose with the facts as he did with women. Yet he was widely seen in the U.S. as an expert on the USSR. In fact, Franklin Delano Roosevelt privately sought advice from Duranty about granting diplomatic recognition to the nascent empire. Widely seen as a pundit of sorts, Duranty received little if any editing from his superiors. After all, if leaders such as FDR were taking Duranty's advice, who were the *Times'* editors to question the reporter?

In a prominent *Times* story, Duranty called Jones's articles nothing but "scare stories," based on "hasty and inadequate" investigations of the countryside. Duranty, who had not traveled where Jones had been, called the food shortage serious, but wrote that nobody was starving. "There is no actual starvation or deaths from starvation but there is widespread mortality from diseases due to malnutrition."

Lyons, in his memoir, called Duranty's words, "verbal finessing" and "philological sophistries." Duranty, however, justified the suffering about which he wrote. In Duranty's piece, he compared the deaths to casualties incurred in a crucial battle in a war. The deaths in both cases, Duranty wrote, were regrettable but necessary. He concluded chillingly, echoing a phrase he used earlier in his ode to Red Square, "You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs."

Duranty's article, headlined "Russians hungry but not starving," quickly reached Jones, who now was working full-time at the provincial paper in Wales. On May 13, 1933 – two months after he returned to Britain from Russia – the *New York Times* published Jones' letter to the editor in which he stood by his statements. Censorship, wrote Jones, had forced the regular correspondents into "masters of euphemism and understatement." Jones then went on to congratulate the Soviet Foreign Office for its "skill in concealing the true situation in the USSR." Moscow, he wrote, "is not Russia at all, and the sight of well-fed people there tends to hide the real Russia."

Despite Jones' efforts to preserve his integrity, the damage had been done. Once facts are called into question in a paper with the credibility of the *New York Times*, a reasonable doubt is raised, allowing readers to evade inconvenient truths. While even Duranty later reported suffering and death, no correspondent was ever given credit for definitively explaining the famine. By blurring the truth, the Soviets managed to disguise millions of deaths for generations. Later in 1933, as harvests came, and the Soviets backed off the amount of grain they took from the peasants, officials slowly opened up the countryside, granting Duranty access a few weeks sooner than any of the other reporters.

As summer gave way to fall, Duranty, with a driver, set off on a 300-mile auto tour. Conveniently, the Soviets approved Duranty's trip to coincide with a season of harvest. In a piece he wrote datelined Rostov, in southwestern Russia, near Ukraine, and published on Sept. 14, 1933, Duranty described mile after mile of fields flush with wheat. In contrast to the glassy-eyes and distended bellies about which Jones wrote six months earlier, Duranty said he found "plump babies" and "fat calves" tended by healthy children. "Husky girls and women are hoisting wheat to the threshing machines," he wrote.

"A child can see that this is not famine, but abundance," Duranty wrote. Reports of suffering and starvation, he wrote, were nothing but exaggeration. In fact, Duranty concluded, the good peasants of the Soviet Union had suffered nothing but a "hardish" winter.

EPILOGUE

Unable to quench his thirst to see the world, yet banned by the USSR from ever returning, Jones in 1934 sold editors at the *Manchester Guardian* on a series of travel articles, dubbed a "World-Wide-Fact-Finding Tour." His final destination on the tour was Manchukuo, or Japanese-controlled Manchuria. On his way to Japan, Jones lunched on New Year's Day 1935 at the Hearst ranch in San Simeon, California. There, William Randolph Hearst personally commissioned Jones to write about the famine of 1932-1933. The stories appeared less than two weeks later in Hearst newspapers across the country, including the *New York American* and the *Los Angeles Examiner*. But rather than have the impact Jones so desperately wanted, the stories were, instead, suspect for being published in newspapers known to favor headlines over truth.

A month after the pieces ran, Hearst published another series of articles and photos about a supposed 1934 famine. (By then, because of a strong harvest and lowered government quotas for grain collection, famine conditions had significantly improved.) Thomas Walker, the author of the series, claimed that like Jones, he had escaped into the Soviet countryside and returned to the West with tales of starvation. But that wasn't exactly the case, claimed Louis Fischer, the Moscow correspondent for *The Nation*. Walker's story was a fabrication, Fischer reported. His photos, Fischer alleged, were actually from the documented 1921 famine, during which the Soviets solicited foreign aid. Furthermore, Fischer wrote in *The Nation*, Walker was really Robert Green, a convict escaped from a Colorado prison, who only spent five days in the USSR. Fischer's claims were never entirely verified. But because Walker's work came under suspicion, and because of Hearst's

reputation for sensational reports, the credibility of Jones' stories was damaged for decades.

Meanwhile, Jones continued his world tour, spending a month and a half in Japan before a German company – later discovered to be a front for the Soviet secret service – volunteered to take him into Inner Mongolia. Once there, Jones and his companion stopped in a town that had been recently taken over by the Japanese and found troops massing for an incursion into Siberia. The Japanese questioned Jones and his German companion for several hours before releasing them on the condition that they follow a specific route out of Inner Mongolia. The men followed the prescribed path but were captured a couple days later by bandits. Jones was held for ransom and later killed on Aug. 12, 1935, the day before his thirtieth birthday. The only Westerner to witness his murder, his German companion, was, like the German company for which he worked, an agent of the Russian secret service.

The years have not been kind to the reputation of Walter Duranty. In the hallway at *The New York Times* building where photos of the paper's Pulitzer Prize winners hang, Duranty's is absent. The paper's Web site carries a note on Duranty's work, which states that he dismissed "more diligent writers' reports that people were starving" in 1932 and 1933 in Russia. The Pulitzer committee declined in 2003 to withdraw the award from Duranty, despite arguments of Jones' family and Ukrainian-Americans.

Jones' family is working to keep him in the public eye. Jones' niece and her son maintain a Web site, garethjones.org, in his honor. In addition to the notes, letters and documents that greatly aided in the creation of this narrative, the site details a scholarship in Jones' name and a plaque erected in his honor. Shortly after Jones' death, a group led by editors at the *Western Mail* in Wales created the Gareth Jones Memorial Scholarship. (William Randolph Hearst contributed £100 to the initial fund.). A bronzed bas relief of Jones' face adorns a memorial plaque erected in 2006 at the University Wales, Aberystwyth, where Jones finished a "First Class Honours Degree" before moving on to Trinity College at Cambridge. In three languages, English, Welsh and Ukrainian, the plaque reads: "In Memory of Gareth Richard Vaughn Jones... One of the first journalists to report on the Holodomor, the Great Famine of 1932-33 in the Soviet Ukraine." Lord Elystan Morgan, the president of the university, said at a church service before the unveiling of the plaque that Jones' "assiduous studies of the cultural and economic trends of his day, ... his deep understanding of diplomatic intrigues, his finely honed intelligence and his hunter's instinct for significant news ... combined to place him, young though he was, at the very pinnacle of his profession." *The London Times*, among several news outlets, noted the unveiling.

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