MY GREAT UNCLE’S LEGACY MUST BE PRESERVED BUT NOT AT THE EXPENSE OF THE TRUTH

Much has come to light in recent years about the Welsh journalist Gareth Jones. He has been lauded as an uncompromising reporter for the part he played in exposing Stalin’s man-made famine of 1932-33. Until my late mother published her book *More Than A Grain of Truth* in 2005, precious little was known about Gareth outside his immediate family. Agnieszka Holland’s 2020 feature film, *Mr Jones* and the 2023 documentary *Les Moissons Sanglantes* have brought Gareth’s endeavours to a wider audience. But there are uncomfortable truths in his story that those now wanting to tell it seem determined to ignore.

The recent call in *Le Monde* for a prize to honour his name as a champion in the fight against “fake news” came as welcome news to my family. But in excising salient details from his biography, the authors are themselves compromised.

In exposing the Great Famine, Gareth had to steer a course between two great revolutionary ideas of his day: Bolshevism and Nazism. Whilst highlighting Gareth’s famous flight with Hitler and Goebbels in February 1933, they omit to mention that he was on stage that same day at the Nazi Rally addressed by Hitler and later dined alone with Dr.Goebbels. Goebbels wrote in his diary: “An intelligent young man. Tells me terrible things about Soviet Union.”

Gareth had observed these “terrible things” on his first visit to the USSR in 1930. Being a Russian-speaker, he listened and learned. Unlike the western intellectual fellow-travellers who visited the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, Gareth was not “led around by the nose” by Soviet officials and was unimpressed by what he saw of the regime’s violent and repressive acts against its own citizens. He knew about the famine, and knew it was caused by the deliberate policy of confiscating grain forcing the peasants to submit to collectivization or die, before he made his final fateful trip to Soviet Ukraine. His purpose was to get an eyewitness account of the tragedy that the foreign correspondents in Moscow were simply not reporting. Did Goebbels, at that dinner, recognise how useful that could be to Germany?

Gareth had been visiting Germany every year since 1922, when he was 17. He spoke fluent German and had firm friends there, some of whom became Nazis. He was intrigued by Hitler’s rise to power and excited to have a ringside seat with Hitler and Dr. Goebbels. Nazi Germany very much wanted to publicise the failings of what it termed Judeo-Bolshevism, but for diplomatic reasons didn’t want to be seen to be the publicist. Whether he knew it or not, Gareth served its purpose.

Certainly he got his famine scoop in no small part thanks to an invitation from the German Vice-Consul in Kharkov, the capital of Soviet Ukraine then. When he boarded the train south from Moscow on 10th March 1933, he was able to assure his Soviet Foreign Ministry minder that he was the guest of the German diplomatic mission and would be under their auspices. This gave him the cover he needed for his unescorted trip south; he merely got off the train several stops short of Kharkov and tramped along the tracks gathering notes and quotes as he went. He then turned up in Kharkov and resumed his schedule, including a visit to the opera with the German Vice-Consul. It is this central detail that is consistently air-brushed out of popular accounts of Gareth’s now famous walk through the famine-struck regions of Russia and Ukraine. A notable exception is George Carey’s and Teresa Cherfas’ 2012 British documentary film, *Hitler, Stalin and Mr. Jones*. 
In Agnieszka Holland’s film *Mr Jones*, Gareth is shown at the end languishing in a Soviet jail, having been arrested by Stalin’s infamous NKVD. It simply is not true. On leaving Kharkov, Gareth travelled by luxury train to Moscow with Consul General Karl Walther where the two of them dined with the German Ambassador von Dirksen. Holland’s film later shows Gareth breaking the news of his scoop in London. The truth is that he delivered his explosive account of the famine at a press conference in Berlin, giving his scoop to everyone rather than taking it back to a newspaper in London.

Months later, the German Vice-Consul’s son, Adolf Ehrt, would become head of Goebbels’ Anti-Komintern agency, tasked with discrediting the Soviet Union as a “Judeo-Bolshevik” conspiracy. Spreading news stories about the famine was a cornerstone of that policy. Adolf Ehrt was also the organiser of *Brüder in Not*, a famine relief campaign for German colonists in the USSR which, despite its innocuous aims, was in fact a covert Nazi organisation, for which Gareth unwittingly helped raise money.

So Gareth’s legendary journey to the USSR in 1933 was bookended by visits to Nazi Germany. That doesn’t mean he was pro-Nazi. But why conceal the nature of Gareth’s German connections? Surely, such nuances make his story an even more interesting reflection of the time? Just six years after Gareth’s famine reports, Nazi troops and their Ukrainian collaborators, murdered some 1.5 million Ukrainian Jews. In keeping silent about Gareth’s connections to prominent Nazis, is it easier to ignore the fact that Nazi propaganda about the “Judeo-Bolshevik” man-made famine played a significant role in that ‘Holocaust by bullets’?

Gareth talked about the “follies of nationalism,” something he thought “was poisoning our whole system.” I wonder what he would think today if he knew the extent to which his own story was being manipulated in the interests of another battlefront. And just as there was no middle ground between Bolshevism and Nazism in the 1930s, political expediency today offers no middle ground.

The obfuscation I have observed in the recent almost hagiographic elevation of my great-uncle does justice neither to his memory nor his commitment to journalistic integrity. He has rightly been praised for his part in exposing Stalin’s famine, but must truth once again become the first casualty of war?

Philip Colley, August 13th 2023

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