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First-hand Accounts? Walter Duranty, William Henry Chamberlin and Eugene Lyons as Moscow Correspondents in the 1930s

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies on Moscow correspondents in the 1930s have prioritised the work of individual reporters over the infrastructure that actually conditioned how Western journalists could operate. This article addresses that imbalance, setting the careers of three correspondents – Walter Duranty, William Henry Chamberlin and Eugene Lyons – against the system of censorship and the control over information that prevailed in the Soviet Union. Using their published writing rather than newspaper reports, it considers how they made sense of their circumstances, and rationalised their subordinacy to Soviet oversight. It argues that for a range of reasons – ideological sympathy, financial improvement, and professional security – all three journalists themselves became parts in the machinery of censorship, learning to self-regulate and calibrate their reports to satisfy the requirements of the host regime. With the exception of Duranty, this process was subconscious as much as it was deliberate, demonstrating how the system eroded individual agency and journalistic integrity. In affirming systemic constraints on the activity of Moscow correspondents, the article also delineates Duranty as a special case of journalists who themselves became clients of the authoritarian states that they covered.

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Malcolm Muggeridge (1934, ix), a Moscow correspondent for a short-lived period from November 1932 until the following year, thought Western news coverage of the Soviet Union was "a joke, being either provided by men whom long residence in Moscow has made completely docile, or whose particular relationship with the Dictatorship of the Proletariat puts its words into their mouths, or by men who, while trying to say more than they can, are forced, for interested and quite legitimate reasons, to be discreet." His contempt for the foreign press corps in the Soviet capital was immortalised in the novel, *Winter in Moscow*, a parodical satire on journalists, "fellow travellers" and the Soviet regime itself. And Muggeridge's cynicism – that news on the Soviet Union was distorted and propagandised – was often taken as an underlying assumption by Western journalists observing the Bolshevik experiment from afar. Francis Williams (1946, 223), editor of the *Daily Herald* in the later 1930s, affirmed the inherent unreliability of reports from the

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Soviet Union: "No foreign newspaper correspondent in Moscow can cable the news and the truth as he sees it: only as it is officially approved."

The distrust articulated by Muggeridge and Williams invites a simple starting question for considering coverage of the Soviet Union in the 1930s: was the news from Moscow really "a joke"? As this article suggests, a more complex picture emerges of how Western journalists operated, and what they could feasibly convey to Anglo-American audiences about life under the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat." Certainly, Muggeridge's bifurcation of foreign correspondents into either servile puppets or subdued crusaders harms an accurate portrayal of how journalists worked in totalitarian conditions, and a more realistic appraisal of how successful Soviet censorship actually was. This article attempts such a task, using the published testimony of three journalists who between them accumulated over thirty years' experience reporting on the Soviet Union: Walter Duranty, William Henry Chamberlin and Eugene Lyons. Collectively, these three journalists covered the different media forms represented by correspondents in Moscow. As a wire service reporter for the United Press agency, Lyons dealt with the handicap of immediacy, whereas Chamberlin's position with the *Christian Science Monitor* (writing, too, for the *Manchester Guardian* from 1925) allowed him more freedom to cogitate and take a panoramic view of the Soviet experiment. Duranty's role as the *New York Times*' representative in Moscow reflected a hybrid position relative to Lyons and Chamberlin, combining long-view feature writing (often for the *Times*' Sunday magazine) with the more time-sensitive demands of covering day-to-day Soviet affairs.

Historians have often been drawn to these individuals in seeking to document Western reporting on the Soviet Union. However, there has been a notable decoupling between restating what journalists were able to communicate and understanding the system and constraints that largely dictated their marginal autonomy, restricted access to information, and precarious professional livelihoods. Various monographs have been produced on the subject, all without entirely resolving this issue. James Crowl's (1982) work on the careers of Duranty and fellow Moscow correspondent, Louis Fischer, is a straightforward commentary on the journalists' reports and lacks analysis of the practicalities of working in authoritarian conditions. Whitman Bassow's (1988) overarching study is a more romanticised portrayal, reflecting his status as United Press' Moscow correspondent before becoming *Newsweek*'s bureau chief until the Soviet authorities expelled him in 1962. More recently, a further wide-ranging volume by James Rodgers (2020) provides a familiar narrative without breaking new ground on the subject.

Other studies have also featured Duranty, Chamberlin, Lyons and their peers, but again without evaluating their Soviet careers from an experiential and behavioural perspective. Marco Carynnyk (1986) examined Duranty's infamous coverage of the Soviet Famine (1932-33) – the Holodomor – as has James Mace (1988; 1992), further incorporating Fischer's sophistry on the agricultural situation. Additionally, David Engerman (2000), in his study of American observers and economic modernisation, considered Chamberlin and Lyons as critical commentators alongside the perspectives of Duranty and Fischer, although, as will be shown, this distinction is arguably insufficiently nuanced. Allen Johnson's (2000) doctoral thesis on Moscow correspondents provides a useful chronology on Duranty, Chamberlin and Fischer, but rarely reaches beyond biography to decipher the structures and conditions that largely dictated how the Soviet Union was portrayed. Conversely, S.J. Taylor's (1990) study of Duranty is more constructive since it goes further in

understanding the man and the system as well as the substance of his reports from Moscow.

The article conceives Soviet censorship in psychological terms as much as the physical infrastructure of control. There is a growing body of literature on self-censorship in contemporary authoritarian settings (Tong 2009; Yesil 2014; Schimpfössl and Yablokov 2020), but less attention has been paid to historical antecedents. Taras Fedirko (2020, 13), in writing about domestically based journalists, sees self-censorship as "the interplay between free will, coercion and obligation", and this interpretive framework can be repurposed for considering the external perspective of Moscow correspondents in the 1930s. They too operated in a system that was designed to be self-sustaining, engendering conformity with direct intimidation held in reserve; a form of gradual behavioural modification that was subconscious rather than open and instantaneous. Identifying how and why this transmutation of professional norms occurred is easier in retrospect. Hence, the principal sources that this study draws upon are the published memoirs and historical accounts of the three journalists. This material, precisely because it constitutes "a constructed and selective representation of experience" (Thomson 2012, 102), can be more valuable than daily reports. Selectivity offers a glimpse into the active process of self-rationalisation or repudiation, with greater distance – both spatial and temporal – promoting self-scrutiny and reflective accounts of covering the Soviet Union.

Duranty, Chamberlin and Lyons all wrote prolifically during and subsequent to their postings in Moscow. Of Duranty's work, his collection *Duranty Reports Russia* (1934) and his autobiography *I Write as I Please* (1935) offer the most sustained engagement with conditions on the ground for journalists. Chamberlin returned to his experiences more frequently, firstly in *Soviet Russia* (1930), followed by the more critical *Russia's Iron Age* (1934), his autobiographical account *Confessions of an Individualist* (1940), and, in the midst of the Second World War, *The Russian Enigma* (1943). Lyons' *Assignment in Utopia* (1937), in equal measures autobiography and polemic against Bolshevik rule, is arguably the most illuminating written reflection on the practice of covering Soviet affairs. He also edited and contributed (alongside Chamberlin) to a general volume on foreign correspondents: *We Cover the World* (1937).

"Truth" has been described as "the baseline of the space accorded to journalism in market democracies" (Lloyd 2017, 110), but this was a largely quixotic aspiration in authoritarian conditions. A binary conceptualisation – as seen in Muggeridge's moral absolutes of right or wrong, truth or lie – could never survive the oppressive nature of Soviet censorship, where a spectrum of possible truth was the reality. Reporters had to determine what could be communicated without provoking bad favour from the regime, and whilst attempting not to mislead or betray the trust of their readers. Consequently, a form of osmotic restraint prevailed; journalists as self-regulators who, for a time at least, contained their inhibitions to accommodate the expectations of their employers and reconcile ideological sympathies and professional ambitions. Moscow correspondents found themselves working within a culture of dependence, ceding individual agency and allowing the regime to control the dissemination of information about Communist rule. The journalists attempted to rationalise their circumstances, but the article shows that, for varying reasons, they inevitably compromised their integrity and engaged in self-censorship to remain viable in their positions. In confronting this dilemma (or willingly acquiescing as will be demonstrated in Duranty's case), the

journalists were arch-pragmatists, revealing what they could – implying or omitting what they could not – to produce an informed but derivative portrayal of Soviet affairs that was first-hand in terms of proximity, but not in veracity. Investigation of this case study also reveals contemporary parallels with foreign correspondents working in authoritarian states even today.

Personal Background

None of the three journalists operated in a professional vacuum, divorced from their own backgrounds and ideological predispositions. Chamberlin and Lyons both went to Moscow with enthusiasm for the Soviet cause, in Chamberlin's case arriving in September 1922 accompanied by his wife Sonya, a native Russian who had migrated to the United States as a child. He quickly turned an informal arrangement with the *Christian Science Monitor* into a more permanent posting as the paper's Moscow correspondent, working also for the *Manchester Guardian* on an unattributed basis. Chamberlin spent his post-college years immersed in Soviet affairs. He reflected that "when I read books or news despatches on Russia it was with the eye of a partisan" (Chamberlin 1940, 69). This ardour was evident in his early career as a journalist; indeed, from 1920 onward he wrote for *Soviet Russia*, the paper of the unofficial Soviet bureau in New York, using the pseudonym A.C. Freeman (Chamberlin 1937, 207). Hence, Chamberlin departed for Moscow already favourably disposed to the Soviet experiment, or with "a strong sentimental sympathy" as he described it (Chamberlin 1937, 205).

Lyons (1937a, 96) viewed Chamberlin's journalism as "always exact and scholarly and passionless." Muggeridge (1972, 233), however, thought that Chamberlin, in common with other Western reporters, consciously maintained an equilibrium in his overall coverage of the Soviet Union, using "his complaisant coverage in *The Guardian* to offset any sharp criticism of the regime he might essay in the *Monitor*. By playing off one against the other he managed to achieve the delicate balancing act of keeping on his feet in the USSR without becoming its committed stooge." In his writing, Chamberlin accepted this hypothesis for describing his Soviet career, although this was by no means a static picture during his twelve years in Moscow. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, he saw his defence of Communism as inversely proportional to the depth of external denunciation: "The violence of many of the attacks on Bolshevism acted as a boomerang and helped to strengthen the faith of believers like myself" (Chamberlin 1940, 69). However, exposure to the Soviet Union led to a gradual shift in Chamberlin's ideological perspective.

Chamberlin (1940, 97) identified 1924 as the time when "the last traces of partisanship slipped away", although he also saw the wider period of 1922–1929 as "progress to a halfway house in my Russian education" where his partiality gave way to "a kind of detached neutrality" (Chamberlin 1937, 218). His remaining years in the Soviet Union are perhaps best distinguished as a period of silent antipathy that was released when he relinquished his Moscow posting in March 1934. In *Russia's Iron Age*, published later in the year, he had formed the conviction that "the Soviet regime … can only be understood as an example of historical tragedy of the deepest and truest type, a tragedy of cruelty" that was rooted in "perverted, fanatical idealism" (Chamberlin 1970, 374). Communism, as it had evolved under Stalin's leadership, had become "thoroughly reactionary" and could be compared

"to an amazing extent in practice to the patterns of Fascism" (Chamberlin 1937, 234–5). As a form of personal penitence, Chamberlin (1940, 170–1) "rediscovered and cherished with tenfold conviction my instinctive individualist faith." In subsequent decades he even became an uncompromising right-wing conservative, supporting the anti-Communist crusade of Senator Joe McCarthy (Taylor 1990, 235).

Lyons' emotional state followed a similar trajectory to that of Chamberlin. He grew up in poverty in the East Side of New York, and this seems to have animated a determination to escape the conditions of his formative upbringing, as well as his early affinity for the Soviet project. He was a willing convert; as he wrote in *Assignment in Utopia*, "We envied the men and women who lived and fought within the circles of light shed by the heroes of the triumphant class war. We decked the revolution in the opalescent raiment of our visions. A Fatherland at last, and a focus for our hopes!" (Lyons 1937a, 9) Before leaving for Moscow, he edited the *Soviet Russia Pictorial* run by the Friends of Soviet Russia, as well as working for TASS, the Soviet news agency, between 1924 and 1928 (Lyons 1937a, 37). On becoming United Press' Moscow correspondent, he saw his task as "of immense strategic importance in the further service of [the] cause" (Lyons 1937a, 48).

Lyons arrived in Moscow in February 1928 with his wife and five-year-old daughter. His supportive inclination imperceptibly dissipated as his ideological fervour faded. This was a sub-conscious process, part of an internal battle against a stubborn willingness to self-correct and obfuscate the harsh reality of what he witnessed. He acknowledged how his reports became increasingly marked by "an ironic phrase, a cynical turn of thought, a stress on the untidy side of Soviet life" that would have been unimaginable during the initial phase of his stay (Lyons 1937a, 230). In March 1931 when Lyons returned to the United States on holiday, his doctrinal *volte-face* was still not quite complete: "my old inhibitions, the inner compulsion to save face for the revolution, won out in my mind" (Lyons 1937a, 399). Nevertheless, there seemed to be a teleological dimension to Lyons' mental transformation. He left his posting in January 1934 after reporting rumours of Japanese aggression on the Soviet Union's eastern periphery. United Press withdrew him under threat of expulsion by the Soviet authorities, but such was Lyons disillusionment by this time that it may have been a subliminal act of self-sabotage to bring an end to his tenure in Moscow.

The narrative arc of Duranty's career was notably distinct from that of Chamberlin and Lyons. In their cases, *Russia's Iron Age* and *Assignment in Utopia* were garlanded for their anti-Bolshevism and restored the perception of professional integrity, whereas posterity has been much less generous to Duranty's reputation. Born in Liverpool, a graduate of Cambridge with a first-class degree in Classics, Duranty rose in prominence to become the doyen of the foreign press corps in Moscow. From 1913, he worked as the Paris correspondent of the *New York Times* before being posted to Riga in October 1919 to cover events in Russia. This was as close as Western correspondents could get during the Russian Civil War, and the remoteness to the action and reliance on White Russian contacts caused a speculative quality to reports on the conflict. Duranty's initial coverage was excoriating, a fact that almost curtailed his Moscow career before it had even begun. He was eventually granted a visa to report directly on the Soviet Union in August 1921, becoming part of the *Times*' expensive expansion of its foreign service

which was estimated to cost $100,000 per year for its Moscow bureau alone (Hohenberg 1964, 265).

Duranty saw himself as someone who maintained professional distance in his coverage of Soviet affairs, an impression endorsed, albeit in a clinical sense, by Lyons. He thought that Duranty was "Urbane, clever to a fault, a scintillating talker, [but] he remained, after all his years in Russia, detached from its life and fate, curiously contemptuous of Russians" (Lyons 1937a, 67). In *Winter in Moscow*, Duranty was caricatured as Jefferson, revealed by his oft-repeated refrain that "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs" in shrugging off the worst excesses of the Soviet regime. The phrase originated in a poem entitled "Red Square" that Duranty published in the *Times* in September 1932, but it became more synonymous with his attempt to explain away the Soviet Famine in subsequent months (Taylor 1990, 185). Muggeridge's Jefferson is depicted somewhat pitiably without attenuating the essential venality to Duranty's character; "a little gymnast" caught between acting as the sponsored spokesman for the Soviet state and maintaining a veneer of objectivity to the outside world (Muggeridge 1934, 171).

Whether Duranty was in the pay of the Soviet Union was a matter of open conjecture amongst Western journalists. In an interview with Marco Carynnyk (1986, 84) in May 1982, Muggeridge divulged that "Some people believed that the authorities had a hold on him because he had been involved in some business with money that would have made difficulties for him." Lyons also thought that the relationship was transactional, suggesting to James Crowl (1982, 35) that the Soviets had supplied Duranty with an apartment, car and mistress as remittance for his compliance. This latter detail may have been particularly significant: Taylor (1990, 230) posits that Duranty's Russian mistress, Katya, also mother to his son Michael, probably reported to the Soviet secret police, the OGPU (as well as its successor, the NKVD), using the family connection as leverage against Duranty. More broadly, British observers also designated Duranty as firmly in the Soviet camp. L.E. Hubbard, an official at the Bank of England who met Duranty during a visit to Moscow in 1934, described him as "rather persona grata at the Kremlin, which is another way of saying that he has been more favourable to Russia than most of the foreign correspondents" (Vyvyan 1934, 428).

Perhaps motivated by a desire to protect his reputation in retirement, Duranty was more guarded about his personal beliefs and influences than Chamberlin and Lyons. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in April 1932 for his reports from the Soviet Union, the citation describing his work as "marked by scholarship, profundity, impartiality, sound judgement and exceptional clarity" (Conquest 1986, 320). In his acceptance speech, he professed his admiration for the regime, but not as part of wider acceptance of Communist doctrine:

> I discovered that the Bolsheviks were sincere enthusiasts, trying to regenerate a people that had been shockingly misgoverned, and I decided to try to give them their fair break. I still believe they are doing the best for the Russian masses and I believe in Bolshevism – for Russia – but more and more I am convinced it is unsuitable for the United States and Western Europe (Taylor 1990, 183).

Amidst growing unease about the quality of his reports (Bassow 1988, 72), the United States' diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union in late 1933 allowed Duranty a valedictory farewell from his Moscow posting. In the presence of Maxim Litvinov, he was honoured

with special mention and a standing ovation at a banquet at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel to celebrate the landmark occasion. Stalin even wrote to Duranty to praise his efforts to "tell the truth" about the Soviet Union in the wake of diplomatic recognition. In doing so, he effectively confirmed Duranty's client status by observing, "you bet on our horse to win when others thought it had no chance and I am sure you have not lost by it" (Taylor 1990, 192). Duranty left his role as the *Times*' Moscow correspondent in April 1934, although he returned periodically as a special correspondent, including a final visit in 1940.

Sources of Information

The backgrounds and motivations of the three journalists, whether political or pecuniary, undoubtedly influenced their day-to-day practice in covering the Soviet Union. But there were also routine difficulties, notably with the language that meant reliance on translators who could often be compelled to report to the OGPU. Chamberlin avoided this issue by relying on his wife Sonya, but Duranty never mastered Russian, and he and Lyons both had to enlist local support (Bassow 1988, 50–1). This was paramount because foreign correspondents depended to an unwelcome degree on the Soviet press for information. State control ensured that this had already been censored for domestic purposes, such that *Pravda* and *Izvestia* bore minimal resemblance to Western newspapers that had been transformed by the "new journalism" of the early twentieth century. Chamberlin (1970, 138) detailed the rather colourless character of Soviet papers, recording that "Ordinary crime and scandal are rigidly barred from the columns of Russian newspapers. One would also look in vain for household hints, fashion and society articles, crossword puzzles, stock-exchange quotations, professional sport news, rotogravure supplements, and comic strips." Beyond these differences, the underlying nature of the Soviet press was also questioned by the journalists who had to resist equivalence with Anglo-American papers. Lyons (1937a, 105) recognised this challenge, acknowledging that "The press is not primarily a conveyor of news at all. It is first of all an agency of the Soviet regime in accomplishing its political and economic objectives." It was, nevertheless, all that the journalists had to work with and formed the basis of information gathering on the Soviet experiment.

Reading newspapers in an interpretative sense, as opposed to literally, became a staple technique of covering the Soviet Union. Lyons (1937a, 107) wrote about decoding "solid facts behind official euphemisms" and deciphering "the accent of an article" beyond its apparent message. He thought that this constituted three-quarters of a Moscow correspondent's news output, revealing the extent to which coverage of Soviet affairs had been pre-filtered, with Western journalists repackaging an already spoiled product. Inevitably, this had an enervating effect; the "swashbuckling correspondent was quickly reduced to quiescence" by the stultifying routine (Lyons 1937a, 465–6). Duranty, however, saw things differently, crediting the Soviet press with a more open dialogue on the regime's successes and failures. In a report originally filed from Paris in June 1931, he wrote that "It cannot be said … that the Kremlin abuses the terrific power of the press", and praised the tolerance for freedom of expression:

> Its chief beauty is that few save the very highest dignitaries are spared from blame. Some cub reporter on the Communist Youth *Pravda* or an illiterate worker can sling a pebble at the

> railroad commissariat and get away with it if he only has got facts to back his charge (Duranty 1934, 204).

"Self-criticism", as Duranty described this practice, served a function beyond his defence of the regime's illiberalism; in Duranty's writings, it was a theory that primarily vindicated his apparent insight in translating Soviet affairs to foreign audiences.

Beyond the press, journalists also relied on official communiques to follow developments. The release of these updates was deliberately choreographed to foster dependence and discourage individual agency. Duranty wrote about the procedure at length and the impact of overnight statements on his – by Moscow standards – lavish social life. He complained that "No foreign correspondent in Moscow to-day dares to go out anywhere to dinner without leaving a message to say where he can be reached and even the soberest and most respectable reporter who seeks his lonely couch at ten o'clock never knows when he may be roused from slumber" (Duranty 1935, 191). Lyons (1937a, 108–9) recounted that these dispatches were even distributed at the homes of the censors rather than the Foreign Office, reinforcing the journalists' subordinate status.

Another mechanism of control was to restrict access to interviews with Soviet officials. When these were granted, especially in Stalin's case, they served as accolades for those journalists who had most faithfully represented the Soviet Union to the outside world. Lyons was the first to receive the favour in November 1930 when the interview coincided with rumours of Stalin's assassination. He (Lyons 1937a, 385) was at a loss to explain his preferential treatment, noting that other "less outspoken" correspondents had been overlooked, but we know from *Assignment in Utopia* that he remained essentially dutiful and pro-Soviet in his outlook at this moment. Lyons was impressed by Stalin, commending his sincerity and geniality, although he regretted that the opportunity had been "frittered away" in his eagerness to please; indeed, he even invited Stalin's oversight after being provided with a typewriter to draft his report on the spot, an apt metaphor for the wider conformity engendered by the Soviet regime (Lyons 1937a, 388–92). Following Lyons' interview, Duranty also received an audience with Stalin in December 1930, a reflection of his stature (or biddable nature) that meant he merited the same treatment (Crowl 1982, 123–4). A second interview followed on Christmas Day 1933 before his retirement from Moscow.

The other conventional means of collecting information about the Soviet Union was via observation and contact with domestic sources, but this was fraught with risk. Chamberlin (1970, 168) observed that "Many Russians would as readily spend an evening with a man in an advanced state of typhus as with a foreigner", and the threat of the OGPU acted as a recurrent source of restraint on both parties. Chamberlin adapted his behaviour to the OGPU's surveillance, conversing with "non-Communist Russians only in the strictest privacy", and further acting on the assumption that his correspondence was checked and telephone calls monitored (Chamberlin 1940, 105). News coverage therefore had to be sacrificed to the underlying inhumanity of the situation, particularly when arrest, exile and worse might follow for Russians who associated with foreign journalists (Chamberlin 1937, 215). However, Duranty, since he was not squeamish about Bolsheviks "breaking eggs", had a different perspective:

> The average Russian would sooner tell you what you want to hear, especially if he suspects that you want to hear something lurid, than any plain, unvarnished fact. He is not consciously

> lying or trying deliberately to deceive … but the division in his mind between romance and reality is more nebulous than with Western nations (Duranty 1935, 125).

Yet this thesis on the acquiescent quality of the Russian people could work both ways, with foreign journalists only seeing what they wanted to of the Soviet experiment. As Chamberlin (1943, 15) accepted, observation was influenced by someone's preconceptions; "the enthusiast saw radiant joy written in every countenance", whilst antagonists could only ever perceive "men and women so bowed down with gloom and fear." The implication is that Moscow correspondents learned to do both simultaneously: recognising as best they could the reality of Soviet rule without provoking the hostility of the regime.

Censorship

However the journalists operated, their efforts were always influenced by the existence of censorship. This was twofold: actual obstruction by the censor based in the Press Department of the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs – the Narkomidel (NKID), nicknamed the "Nark" – but also psychological congruence, working within the reality of censorship rather than trying fruitlessly to evade the constraints placed on foreign journalists. Chamberlin and Lyons both viewed Soviet censorship with varying degrees of acceptance and frustration during their Moscow careers. In *Soviet Russia*, Chamberlin was initially sanguine about the encumbrance, writing that it was "not severe, as censorships go, and shows a slow but steady tendency toward giving the foreign journalist increasing latitude in conveying impressions as well as facts" (Chamberlin 1930, 394). Agreeing dispatches was conducted cordially, and mutual accommodation could be reached with the censor's office; what he called "friendly philological discussions" about the meaning of particular words and phrases (Chamberlin 1930, 394–5). At this stage, Chamberlin (1930, 395) saw censorship as a necessary evil given external animosity towards the Soviet Union, and recalled "very few important pieces of news which have been completely suppressed by the Soviet censorship during the last few years." In Chamberlin's view, the tacit understanding that anything already printed in the state-controlled press could be safely passed on to Western readers allowed journalists to operate with relative independence. He perceived "no insuperable barriers placed in the way of free investigation" (Chamberlin 1930, 396).

Chamberlin saw the situation very differently after departing Moscow. In *Russia's Iron Age*, he admitted that "it was impossible to convey … an absolutely uninhibited, full, and rounded description of the dramatic and sometimes tragic events which I was witnessing" (Chamberlin 1970, viii). In the aftermath of the Soviet Famine, he reversed his earlier belief about the unfettered flow of news, recording amazement about "the number of important events which either were never reported abroad or were described in such evasive fashion as to convey no real idea of what was happening" (Chamberlin 1940, 113). This was perhaps an exaggeration, but it reflected Chamberlin's undisguised discomfort at his own contribution to the operation of Soviet censorship.

Lyons shared Chamberlin's evolving position on the strictures of censorship. His employment as a wire service reporter magnified the issue since time pressures – the incentive to be first in breaking news – often dictated producing dispatches that already framed the story in a manner palatable to the regime. Nevertheless, he was mostly untroubled by censorship during the early years of his stay in Moscow, claiming

that "Except for the attendant physical annoyances, the censorship did not seem to me at all stringent. Most of my dispatches passed muster so easily that I could only wonder why certain of my colleagues fussed and fumed at the restraint" (Lyons 1937a, 110). Even as he became more disgruntled, he had already adjusted himself to the system. Certain stories that were privately discussed between correspondents – for example, the torture methods of the OGPU – were never reported. To do so "would have amounted to open declaration of war" against the Soviet authorities. Moreover, the *omertà* – code of silence – within the press corps meant a reporter could never be sure his indiscretion would be defended by colleagues wary of their own position (Lyons 1937a, 462).

Duranty was more circumspect in his ruminations on censorship, a reflection of the extent to which his career in Moscow hinged on reciprocity; privileged treatment in return for a favourable or legitimising presentation of the Soviet regime. He thought that censorship was "applied with intelligence and moderation", though he regretted its existence, arguing that it encouraged Western audiences to place their faith in reports from Riga and other centres of "anti-Soviet information" where "monstrous inanities … gain ready credence" (Duranty 1934, 206–8). In an article in *The Spectator*, Duranty (1932) criticised the British press for not stationing correspondents in Moscow (*The Times*' representative, R.O.G. Urch, remained in Riga) and propounded his belief that "In principle anything may be telegraphed if the correspondent can establish its truth." For the most part, however, Duranty remained indifferent to the effects of censorship since he had broadly aligned himself with the Soviet interest. He therefore, as Taylor (1990, 178) suggests, knew well enough "what would and would not pass, and he didn't waste time writing what wouldn't go out."

In his historical account, Whitman Bassow (1988, 77) described the censorship process as a negotiation, where "bargaining skills and tenacity" could, by implication, prove decisive and allow problematic stories to be approved. But this credits more agency to foreign reporters than they could ever realistically exercise. Muggeridge's (1972, 223–4) characterisation portrayed journalists as deferential observers rather than "free agents", "watching anxiously … dreading to see a pencil picked up to slash something out." Indeed, Chamberlin described how conformity became a mental condition, with prolonged exposure to "indirect pressure" breaking down the correspondent's resistance. He believed that this could be detected in a universal "bowdlerisation of style … a tendency to resort to ambiguous phrases in describing unpleasant facts", and the reticence of reporters to even bother to draft stories that would certainly be rejected by the censor (Chamberlin 1940, 113). In this way, censorship became self-perpetuating without the Soviet authorities needing to intervene more directly.

Censorship was also underpinned by practical constraints beyond the approval, modification or rejection of individual stories. Visas were only granted to visiting journalists on a rolling six-month basis, and leaving the Soviet Union even for a short period required a new application. The effect, as Chamberlin (1970, 149) wrote, was that they acted as "a convenient Sword of Damocles to suspend over the head of an unruly correspondent." Delays in approving visas were interpreted as a warning that the individual had transgressed in their reports. Lyons (1937a, 546–7) found himself in this position following a holiday in Berlin in January 1933 having filed a story about the forced deportation of 40,000 Cossacks from towns in Kuban in the North Caucasus. Duranty also felt threatened when a report on the Soviet Famine in December 1932 was deemed

dangerously accurate in contrast to his usual obfuscation. In conversation with William Strang, a member of the British Diplomatic Service at the Moscow Embassy from 1930 to 1933, Duranty confided that

> emissaries from governing circles … reproached him with unfaithfulness. How could he, who had been so fair for ten years, choose this moment to stab them in the back, when critical negotiations were taking place and when the prospects of recognition by the U.S.A. was brightening? What did he mean by it, and did he not realise that the consequences for himself might be serious. Let him take this warning (Strang 1932, 209).

He clearly took the reprimand seriously, not least because the Soviet authorities had previously made an example of foreign reporters who had incurred disfavour, as in the case of Paul Scheffer, correspondent for the *Berliner Tageblatt*, who was refused re-entry in November 1929 (Johnson 2000, 539).

Travel could also be prohibited, most notably between March and September 1933 to prevent Western journalists from witnessing the death toll caused by the famine. With some exceptions (including Muggeridge, Ralph Barnes of the *Herald Tribune*, and the visiting Welsh journalist, Gareth Jones), the foreign press corps was confined to Moscow. British officials recorded cases where the Soviets had "too curious visitors removed in motors and private trains from cities where conditions are particularly bad" (Ovey 1933a, 218). Chamberlin (1930, 395–6) had previously cherished his freedom to travel, declaring that accusations of official supervision were "baseless" and that the OGPU's reach did not extend far beyond Moscow. He viewed the ban as "unprecedented", but in both instances his assertions did not quite reflect the reality of travelling in the Soviet hinterland (Chamberlin 1970, 82). Rhea Clyman, a Canadian journalist who published a sensational five-part series in the *Daily Express* on her unsanctioned visit to Kem on the edge of the White Sea – the "town of the living dead" (Clyman 1932) as she described it due to the OGPU's labour camp in the area – was arrested at gunpoint and deported in September 1932 for what the Soviets regarded as "lying and provocative" articles about her experience (Anon. 1932a). By 1936, journalists could only travel after meeting strict conditions, including submitting a detailed itinerary to the required agencies (Margulies 1968, 137–8).

Access to means of communication also inhibited reports on Soviet affairs. Here, a basic quandary preoccupied journalists: the telegraph offered speed but was always subject to censorship; dispatches via mail could be more open but would arrive belatedly and the story might be lost to a rival agency or publication. Greater latitude was initially allowed with telephone communication when this became more commonplace, with Lyons (1937a, 562) suggesting that the Press Department "winked at the procedure." However, this method, as well as sending mail via diplomatic pouches, brought its own risks since, as Chamberlin (1937, 214) recorded, the Soviets maintained close scrutiny of even "the smallest and most obscure" Western newspapers. In March 1933, Lyons' use of the telephone was threatened with the cancellation of his correspondent's card and expulsion from the country if he continued (Ovey 1933b, 320). The only recourse, especially when the telephone was proscribed, was to employ "cryptic and ambiguous phrases" and hope that "uninitiated" readers understood the underlying message (Chamberlin 1934; 1943, 4–5).

Some techniques were developed to gather and communicate news more accurately and expediently, but these made minimal difference in mitigating censorship. Lyons (1937b, 9–10) noted that the foreign press corps possessed a group consciousness that could reveal previously unknown stories if one listened correctly, but it mostly provided a source of solidarity between correspondents. Chamberlin (1937, 216–7) also referenced the "art of reading between the lines" of press reports and scouring Party lists to see whose stock was up or down in the Soviet hierarchy. However, this method had to be considered in light of the intended audience. This encompassed the readers of newspapers, but also in an intermediate sense the proprietors and editors on whom a journalist's position in Moscow was contingent. Chamberlin's role with the *Christian Science Monitor* allowed him greater freedom to produce "dispatches of a solid interpretative character", but too much interpretation would alienate the regime and lead to "a cold reception" for the correspondent from his employer (Chamberlin 1937, 211–5). Moreover, Lyons contended that journalists always struggled to communicate the alienness of the Soviet Union to the West. This was true of the "Industrial Party" show trial in November 1930 that acted as a precursor to the grander set-piece occasions of Stalin's subsequent purges. The audience, Lyons (1937a, 379) thought, "read of witnesses and evidence and confessions, judges and verdicts, and translated those words in the language of his own experience." Audience demands also brought other pressures by the 1930s. Interest in the Soviet Union was heightened in capitalist democracies by the experience of economic depression and mass unemployment, and readers wanted hopeful narratives rather than harsh reality. Moscow correspondents had to adjust their coverage to this new expectation.

Self-Reflection

For the most part, correspondents rationalised their circumstances and made the best of a bad situation. This became second nature to Duranty. He saw his role as that of a mediator between the Soviet Union and the watching world, absolving himself of responsibility for a faithful portrayal of totalitarian rule. In a remarkably dispassionate explanation in *I Write as I Please*, Duranty (1935, 197) admitted that "I did not particularly ask myself whether it [Bolshevism] was a right path or a wrong path … What I want to know is whether a policy or a political line or a regime will work or not, and I refuse to let myself be side-tracked by moral issues". No apology followed for finessing his coverage; the only regret was that he became too good at his job and "gauged the 'Party Line' with too much accuracy": "I had tried to make myself think like a true-blue Stalinist in order to find out what true-blue Stalinists were thinking, and had succeeded only too well" (Duranty 1935, 277–8).

Duranty's theory of "self-criticism", originally proposed in a report from August 1930, allowed him to defend his record by reinstating a pluralistic element into Soviet affairs. He defined the practice as a "safety valve" that satisfied the Russian people's "streak of anarchic iconoclasm" and held the regime to account (Duranty 1934, 204). By relaying criticisms published in the Soviet press, he maintained his apparent impartiality – or what James Mace (1992, 120) has described as "pseudo-objectivity" – because he was passing on a semblance of dissent and highlighting the state's failings as well as its triumphs. Duranty's skill, or so he thought, was to see through "self-criticism" to divine the reality: "To employ it rightly brings the rhythmic charm of perfect balance; to

misuse it means disaster" (Duranty 1934, 204–5). As he wrote in the *Times*' Sunday magazine in an article entitled "Russia's Ledger: Gain and Cost", the foreign correspondent's craft entailed reporting in such a way that "The full picture marks the black spots but does not omit the rosy glow, and balances errors and shortcomings by success and achievement" (Duranty 1934, 330). Instead, this high-wire act – remaining "critical and truthful, but not malevolent and hostile" (Anon. 1932b) – was a veil for a more covert willingness to self-censor and publicise the regime's approved face to the wider world.

Lyons was more honest about his shortcomings. On a practical level, journalists had "jobs to protect and families to feed" (Lyons 1937a, 287). He and his colleagues were also "lulled into conformity" due to their privileged status in relative terms, "insulated against the physical shocks of Soviet conditions" (Lyons 1937a, 467). Conversely, Chamberlin was more defensive about his own record. He wrote about eschewing the "cheap publicity" that would have accompanied expulsion from the Soviet Union, believing that this fostered "a natural suspicion … that a correspondent … may be prone to exaggeration from a sense of personal grievance" (Chamberlin 1940, 165). This would potentially reinforce Soviet counter-claims about the journalist's credibility, as in the case of Rhea Clyman. Chamberlin could only regret that his early work, distilled in *Soviet Russia*, "suffered somewhat from the self-imposed censorship dictated by the desire to remain in the Soviet Union." This admission, however, was further qualified; he thought that "the margin between what I wanted to write and what could be written in the circumstances was not unduly wide" (Chamberlin 1937, 222).

This equivocation can be seen in Chamberlin's five-part series on the aftermath of the Soviet Famine that was printed in the *Manchester Guardian* in October 1933. Following Duranty, who was the first Western journalist to receive permission, Chamberlin and his wife toured the famine-affected regions of Ukraine and the North Caucasus after the travel ban had been lifted. Duranty, replicating his earlier paralogism that the Holodomor had seen "no actual starvation or deaths from starvation but … widespread mortality from diseases due to malnutrition", pronounced himself satisfied that an abundant harvest "is already mitigating conditions to a marked extent" (Duranty 1933; 1934, 323). Chamberlin (1933a) was franker about what he witnessed, reporting that "hunger, accompanied by quite abnormal mortality, had prevailed with varying degrees of intensity from January until June", but he also praised Soviet "organisation and discipline" in responding to the catastrophe. His second article, detailing a visit to Kazanskaya on the Kuban River, recorded that the town's "ordeal … had been terrible", but also suggested that mortality figures were contradictory, allowing the numbers provided by local Soviet officials to stand with equal merit to his own observations (Chamberlin 1933b). The contrast with *Russia's Iron Age* is stark; freed from a compulsion to self-censor, he stated plainly that "I have no hesitation in saying that the southern and southeastern section of European Russia during the first six months of 1933 experienced a major famine" (Chamberlin 1970, 82). The famine was, Chamberlin (1970, 88–9) continued, "deliberately employed as an instrument of national policy." A private estimate that the famine had caused 4–5 million deaths was noticeably absent from his contemporary reports (Strang 1933, 334).

The final article in Chamberlin's *Guardian* series epitomised the stifling effect of Soviet censorship. Even at this stage, the desire to remain *in situ* induced accommodation with Soviet narratives on the causes of the famine. He obtained testimony from several villages

in the Kiev region, but defaulted to the state's hypothesis for explaining deaths amongst the peasantry, shifting blame from the policy of forced collectivisation to the individual:

> Perhaps those who died were often old-fashioned peasants who simply could not conceive of life without their individual farm. The ordeal seems almost incredible; yet one remembers that in the seventeenth century there were thousands of authenticated cases of Old Believers who burned themselves alive as a protest against what they regarded as the sinful heresies of a changing time (Chamberlin 1933c).

In the end, Chamberlin's rationalisations ring hollow to a modern audience. His conclusion, which emphasised the toll of hunger and disease, retained an optimistic tinge; the collectivist spirit as a potential cure rather than the cause of the suffering. In contrast, he wrote later that "The horror of this last act in the tragedy of the individual peasantry is perhaps intensified by the fact that the victims died so passively, so quietly, without arousing any stir of sympathy in the outside world" (Chamberlin 1970, 88). He was not an apologist on Duranty's scale, but alongside Lyons, he played his own part in exculpating the Soviet regime.

Conclusion

Chamberlin's retrospective mindset is perhaps the most interesting of the journalists. He was not unrepentant like Duranty, nor did he subscribe to the acerbic self-abnegation of Lyons. But even in Duranty's case, the individual cannot be neatly separated from the system; indeed, ascribing agency when often the only choice was to acquiesce or be expelled risks historical anachronism. Moscow correspondents saw their autonomy and professional standards marginalised by the determinism of Soviet censorship. They could chip away at the edifice of official rebuttal, but they also had to conform to protect their livelihoods. If they resisted, they would be replaced by someone who was more compliant, that is if their publication was not blacklisted by the regime. Coverage of the Soviet Union was far from "a joke" – this denigrates journalists who, with varying degrees of commitment, did seek to genuinely explain the Soviet experiment to Western audiences – but nor did first-hand contiguity ensure veracity in how news was framed or whether it was even reported at all.

The experiences of Duranty, Chamberlin and Lyons presaged those of the next generation of Moscow correspondents during the Second World War. Just as journalists acclimatised to operating in totalitarian conditions, so did the Soviet state use the period to formalise its approach to censorship. Wartime enabled more rigid restrictions on the activity of visiting reporters working in what Henry Cassidy (1943, 7), Associated Press' correspondent, called "the censor-tight cylinder of Moscow." As the *News Chronicle*'s Paul Winterton recalled, "The sinister thing about all this is that of course when we can't get first-hand news … we try and justify our existence here by re-writing the tripe which the Russian newspapers print, dressing it up attractively and sending that" (Cockett 1988, 521). He could have been writing about his predecessors of a decade earlier. They experienced the same demoralising pressure to "play the game" as Lyons (1937b, 14) put it. However, it was a game where the Soviets set the rules and, consequently, were always likely to emerge victorious.

Nevertheless, in acknowledging the systemic constraints on Moscow correspondents, Duranty's case merits special consideration. His pusillanimity and lack of introspection

ensured that his career continues to serve as a lightning rod for historical criticism of the Soviet Union and "fellow travellers" in the West. There have even been calls – led by Ukrainian émigré organisations – for the Pulitzer Prize Board to revoke Duranty's award (McCollam 2003). In November 2003, the board refused the demand on a technicality, arguing that Duranty's submission – thirteen articles covering the period 1931–32 – was not undermined by the flaws present in his subsequent reports on the Soviet Famine. Perhaps more constructively, Duranty's Moscow career reminds us of the road not taken by the majority of foreign correspondents, and the risks to personal safety shouldered by reporters working in anti-democratic arenas. As Steve Rosenberg (2022), the BBC's Russia Editor, wrote of the invasion of Ukraine in March 2022 – Russia's "Special Military Operation" in euphemistic terms – he had witnessed the country turn into "a parallel universe, Orwellian, where invasion is liberation, where aggression is self-defence and where critics are traitors." In the 1930s, Duranty would never have made comparable comments even if conditions allowed.

The findings of this article suggest historical parallels with the contemporary world, not least because the same tactics are still being employed to constrain media freedoms and the work of foreign correspondents. The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China noted in its annual report for 2021 that coverage of China is becoming increasingly remote due to the harassment of journalists, including the weaponization of visas in at least twenty-two cases (Foreign Correspondents' Club of China 2021, 2–3). The practice has also been reprised in Russia. The BBC's Sarah Rainsford was refused a visa renewal in August 2021, arguing that this was indicative of "an increasingly difficult and repressive environment" for foreign reporters (Rainsford 2021). Many media organisations, such as Bloomberg and the *New York Times*, withdrew their representatives in the wake of the Ukrainian invasion after the passage of legislation criminalising freedom of speech, although some have subsequently returned. Self-censorship also reflects historical continuity. In April 2022, the board of the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club, in a first for the organisation's history, stifled a protest against the arrest of local journalists, deeming that this would invite "unwanted attention" on the club (McLaughlin 2022). In short, the experience of Moscow correspondents in the 1930s is not an isolated example, and we need further research into the historical antecedence of self-censorship to better understand its enduring pervasiveness in our own time.

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