

# BOOK REVIEWS

At the height of the famine emergency in 1985, a few journalists sat around a restaurant table in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, considering analogies for the food crisis in the Horn of Africa. Of course Biafra and Cambodia came to mind. But Robin Knight of *U.S. News & World Report* had the last word when he compared Ethiopia in the 1980s with the Soviet Union in the 1930s—at the start of the campaign against the kulaks. Knight had no idea how prescient he was: as if on cue, in early 1986 came the first reports of a brutal campaign of relocation and collectivization against relatively prosperous Oromo peasants in the Hararghe region east of Addis Ababa.

I was reminded of the incident while reading Robert Conquest's *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror Famine*. Having logged many miles of travel in famine-stricken Ethiopia, I found that Conquest's account of the deportation of the kulaks and the resultant famine in the Ukraine between 1929 and 1933 gave me a chilling sense of *déjà vu*. In everything except sheer numbers—more than ten times as many people died in the Ukraine—the two tragedies are strikingly similar.

In the Soviet Union, a regime largely composed of ethnic Russians inflicted untried and theoretical principles of collectivized agriculture upon a Ukrainian peasantry burdened by centuries of feudalism. In Ethiopia, half a century later, a regime largely composed of ethnic Amharas used the same Stalinist agricultural principles to collectivize an Eritrean, Tigrean, and Oromo peasantry also burdened by centuries of feudalism. In both cases, the result was famine.

The Kremlin kept figures for livestock mortality but not for human mortality. The Ethiopian ruler, Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, once spoke to a group of Western visitors about the famine's cost in human and animal lives, as if one was not necessarily more important than the other.

In both cases, the famine was used as a weapon against peoples whose nationalistic yearnings were never fully grasped by the Western public. In their

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## THE HARVEST OF SORROW: SOVIET COLLECTIVIZATION AND THE TERROR FAMINE Robert Conquest/Oxford University Press/\$19.95

Robert D. Kaplan

history and culture, both the Ukraine and Eritrea are separate nations under the domination of Soviet Russia and Ethiopia—two nineteenth-century empires that have managed to retain their possessions throughout most of the twentieth century. Because the Ukraine has never really been thought of as separate and distinct from Russia, the millions of deaths became—in Western eyes—an internal Soviet affair. Meanwhile, the West's failure to see Eritrea—and to a lesser extent, Tigre—as distinct entities within the Ethiopian empire caused the famine to be viewed purely as a sequel to drought, rather than as a combined sequel to drought and ethnic war. Thus, instead of a perpetrator of terror, the Marxist government in Addis Ababa became a mere victim of nature.

In both Ethiopia and the Soviet Union, collectivization was carried out

against starving peasants by a well-fed militia, for which special food was transported into the countryside. Churches were destroyed in the Ukraine. According to the testimony of Oromo refugees, mosques were burned in Ethiopia.

In 1921, crop requisitions by the new Communist government during a drought led to a famine in the Volga basin, claiming five million lives. America contributed \$45 million to ease the suffering. The aid helped buttress a shaky regime which survived to inflict an even greater loss of life a decade later. In the mid-eighties, America gave hundreds of millions of dollars to help famine victims in Ethiopia. This benefited another hard-pressed Marxist regime, which, according to recent surveys commissioned by the Agency for International Development, is creating the necessary conditions for

another famine, by failing to reform its agricultural policies. Both Stalin and Mengistu have—to use Conquest's own words—"thought of genuine economic trends as obstacles to be overcome by the power of State decrees."

I dwell on the similarities between these two tragedies not just because of what they imply about the present situation in Ethiopia—a far-off African country—but because of what they imply about the failure of modern memory, then and now.

On the scales of human suffering, Stalin's assault on the Ukrainian peasantry is—World War II aside—the most significant and dreadful event of the twentieth century. More people died as a result of dekulakization and collectivization than in all of the First World War. More than twice as many Ukrainians and other nearby peoples died at the hands of Stalin than Jews at the hands of Hitler. However, though dutifully reported in the world press at the time, the tragedy has never really registered in the consciousness of the West. Conquest, a Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, is forced to employ the vocabulary of the better-known Nazi holocaust in order to describe the magnitude of this one—depicting the Ukraine of fifty years ago as "one vast Belsen."

Incredible as it may be, the selective memory of the liberal West has so obscured this seminal event of twentieth-century history that the author is under the burden of proving that it actually happened. Pages upon pages are therefore expended upon the extrapolation of death rates from census reports and other documents. Grain figures and other leaden paraphernalia are delved into. First-hand accounts, many of which are redundant, abound. But what the book lacks in readability it more than makes up in its worth as a historical document.

By Conquest's "conservative" estimate, Stalin's terror claimed 14.5 million lives in the Ukraine: seven million as a result of famine, four million due to dekulakization, and 3.5 million due to deaths in prison. Though millions died, the author reminds us that "each unit among these millions was a person, and suffered an individual fate." Thus the mass of statistics is brought down to earth with personal accounts:

A woman seven months pregnant in Khar-syn village, Poltava Province, was caught



plucking spring wheat, and beaten with a board, dying soon afterwards. In Bil'ske [in the same province], Nastia Slipenko, a mother with three young children whose husband had been arrested, was shot by an armed guard while digging up kolkhoz potatoes by night. The three children then starved to death. In another village in that province the son of a dispossessed peasant gleaning ears of corn in the kolkhoz field was beaten to death by the watchman "activist."

It takes a strong stomach to read this book. The atrocities, which included cannibalism, are painstakingly listed, creating an aura of obscene monotony reminiscent of William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Unfortunately, Conquest lacks Shirer's gift of narrative, which means this book is not going to be nearly as widely read. Yet some paragraphs are unforgettable:

Yet another tells of a village . . . that "cattle died for lack of fodder, people ate bread made from nettles, biscuits made from one weed, porridge made from another." Horse manure was eaten, partly because it contained whole grains of wheat. Over the early winter they ate all the remaining chickens and other animals. Then they turned to dogs, and later cats. "It was hard to catch them too. The animals had become afraid of people and their eyes were wild. People boiled them. All there was were tough veins and muscles. And from their heads they made a meat jelly."

At least the Nazis knew who the Jews were. Not so, the case with the kulaks. Though Stalin said the kulak must be destroyed, Conquest points out that by 1930, the kulak—someone belonging to a relatively wealthy peasant caste—had already ceased to exist. What Stalin thought of as kulaks were really peasants only marginally less poor than their neighbors. Many of the so-called kulaks ("mortgagers" or "moneylenders") had less money or property than the Party officials who persecuted them. The definition became so soft that villagers often used it as a pretext to settle scores against each other. The Party's rationale for this state of affairs was summarized in a 1934 novel: "Not one of them was guilty of anything; but they belonged to a class that was guilty of everything."

Because the class as a whole was guilty, children suffered the same fate as adults. Several million of the famine victims were children. Conquest writes that "Arthur Koestler saw from his train starving children who 'looked like embryos out of alcohol bottles.'" The Party activists referred to these little ones as "kulak bastards." This cold-hearted attitude was an outgrowth not of Stalinism but of Leninism. During the 1891-92 famine on the Volga, Lenin refused to do relief work "on the

grounds that famine would radicalize the masses, and commented: 'Psychologically, this talk of feeding the starving is nothing but an expression of the saccharine-sweet sentimentality so characteristic of our intelligentsia.'"

Of the great holocausts of this century, none is more relevant in modern-political terms than the slaughter in the Ukraine. The Nazis who persecuted the

Jews and the Young Turks who persecuted the Armenians are no longer in power. But as the author of this book notes, "what occurred [in the Ukraine] was all part of the normal political experience of the senior members of today's ruling group in the Kremlin. And the system then established in the countryside is part of the Soviet order as it exists today. Nor have the methods employed to create it been re-

pudiated, except as to inessentials."

I fear, however, that Conquest's estimable work may be in vain. The modern mind, especially the minds of those who shape our modern memory, may be beyond redemption. When I related to a colleague the stories told by Oromo refugees about collectivization in Ethiopia, he asked me, by way of justification: "Yes, but these Oromos, aren't they like kulaks?" □

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There was a time when I was very well known among Catholics. Thousands read my books. Alas, today few young people would recognize my name, let alone know my work. I now have better things to do with my time than worry about my books. But what saddens me is that the tradition I cherished, and tried so much to be part of, has often been forgotten along with me.

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CITY OF NETS:  
A PORTRAIT OF HOLLYWOOD IN THE 1940s  
Otto Friedrich/Harper & Row/\$25.00

Mark Falcoff

Hollywood. Few words in the English language—or any other, for that matter—evoke an equal multiplicity of images, all shared in some measure by people in every corner of the world. You see them as tourists on Saturday afternoons in the summer (some in saris, some in leisure suits) patrolling the main boulevard of what is now a rather seedy district of Los Angeles, having finally breached the wall of the magic city, their faces fallen in disappointment. The locals—there are few true natives—know: these people are searching for something which no longer exists. Or perhaps never did. “This place is just like Asbury Park, New Jersey,” the dyspeptic Nathanael West wrote when the legend was at its height. “The same stucco houses, women in pajamas, delicatessen stores, etc. There is nothing to do except tennis, golf, or the movies.” Well, not exactly. As the author of *City of Nets* puts it more acutely, “Hollywood really is an imaginary city that exists in the mind of anyone who has, in his mind, lived there.”

There was, of course, a real Hollywood once—a few orange groves and wheat farms which became a suburb of Los Angeles, “an array of low-lying buildings and streets and people . . . a community that was partly an industry, partly a technology, partly a style and a quality of mind, partly a negation of all those things, partly just a hunger for money and success.” This Hollywood owed its existence to good weather (which made it possible to film outdoors most of the year, at a time when slow-emulsion films imposed massive lighting requirements) and distance from New York and Europe, where the owners of motion picture patents were too far away to enforce their rights. The founders of the motion picture industry were actually a bunch of thugs and gangsters on the make, many born in Eastern Europe and schooled in the hard experience of immigrant childhoods. Grant Mr. Friedrich his brief: as individuals they had no taste, no culture, and no class. All were crude, some were actually evil. Yet, even as the author of *City of Nets* concedes, they

made a permanent contribution to American life and to the common culture of the twentieth century. Their best works—*The Maltese Falcon*, *King’s Row*, *Casablanca*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Shanghai Express*, *Citizen Kane*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, without even beginning to exhaust the list—are still a credit to the process which gave them life, and the town with which they were inevitably associated. This is one of the many paradoxes which enrich Otto Friedrich’s book, and make it one of the few serious works ever written on the subject.

Before actually discussing its content, it might be useful to make two methodological points. Apparently since the 1950s the American book-reading public has shown an inexhaustible curiosity about movies and the people who make (or rather, made) them. A glance at Friedrich’s bibliography, which runs a full twelve, double-column pages of six-point type, gives some sense of the vast store of memoirs, gossip, and scandal literature through which the author had to wade in order to find his material. Most of it is trash which no intelligent person would wish to waste time reading, but in the hands of a truly cultivated, witty, and charming narrator such as Otto Friedrich, it can be converted into material worthy of attention.

Secondly, Friedrich is a “progressive” historian, in the sense of Charles and Mary Beard or Gustavus Meyers. He is out to expose malefactors of great wealth, and to discredit what he regards as the myth of capitalism and the free

market—and truth to tell, in the case of the movie industry, he has happened upon a treasure trove of evidence. But that much said, there is a huge difference between his outlook and that of what passes for historians at most American universities today, New Left or post-New Left “revisionists” who are out to vindicate the American Communist Party and its supporters and apologists. Friedrich is balanced, careful, fair, and often admits that interpretations uncongenial to him personally may be true anyway. This is particularly evident in his treatment of the activities of the Hollywood Ten and the House Un-American Activities Committee—a chapter entitled “Un-Americanism (1947),” which is worth the price of the book.

The book itself is divided by year and by theme. Thus chapter one is entitled “Welcome (1939),” chapter four “Americanism (1942),” chapter eleven “Expulsions (1949),” and so forth. This is useful to the author as a means of organizing a vast amount of material, although inevitably he finds himself shifting back and forth in time even within his prescribed limits, and many of the same themes appear and reappear throughout the book.

One such is the sheer incompetence, stupidity, and philistinism of the production moguls. Far from being bold innovators, they “had stumbled into the use of sound almost by accident and they were reluctantly beginning to experiment with color.” No less a legendary figure than Irving Thalberg, producer of the immortal *Jazz Singer*, is on record as having said that “talking pictures are a passing fad,” and when offered an option on *Gone With the Wind*, dismissed the proposal with the remark, “No civil war picture ever made a nickel.” And then there is the unforgettable memo from the MGM Music Department to its stable of composers: “From this day forward, no MGM score will contain a minor chord.” By discussing carefully the

production decisions surrounding some of the more successful films—particularly *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*—Friedrich shows how fine was the line between a turkey and a towering artistic achievement.

Friedrich also emphasizes the remarkable cosmopolitanism of the industry, at least in the 1940s. That was, of course, the era in which Hollywood fell heir to some of the best talents of Central Europe—not merely film makers like Fritz Lang or dramatists like Max Reinhardt, but writers like Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Maurice Maeterlinck, Franz Werfel, and the ubiquitous Bertold Brecht, and composers and conductors like Igor Stravinsky, Hanns Eisler, and Bruno Walter. Nor were refugees the only ones to gather under the roof of the Brown Derby: such American writers as Theodore Dreiser, James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, Robert Sherwood, Dorothy Parker, even William Faulkner, earned fabulous salaries as members of script-writing stables (the term “collective,” though politically compatible, was not yet in vogue). Some misguided souls might imagine that these people despised Hollywood, its works, and themselves for selling out to it, but as Friedrich points out, this was far from the case. Even committed Marxists like Bertold Brecht and Hanns Eisler were ready for “money and success,” and when their material failed to win approval from their superiors, it often reappeared elsewhere in a different, more “serious” form.

Then there was the sheer kinkiness of the people who made up the film community. This is not merely legend, but fact: these folks were very, very strange, made so perhaps by the context, or other people’s expectations, or merely the absence of restraints so far from the centers of civilized life in the United States. One tale, dealing with aircraft-cum-cinema mogul Howard Hughes, gives an example of Friedrich’s wry narrative style, and also summarizes the subject for the entire book:

Hughes apparently suffered an affliction known as ejaculatory impotence, which rather surprised Bette Davis, who had taken him quite seriously. So much so, in fact, that her husband, Harmon Nelson, who spent his evenings as a bandleader in the Blossom Room of the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, became suspicious. Nelson hired a detective to wire the bedroom, and then, as required by the primitive technology of the day, established himself in a sound truck parked in a nearby canyon. After listening for a while to his wife and Hughes struggling to achieve some sort of climax, Nelson went running down the hill to his home, burst into the bedroom, and threatened to make his recordings public. Hughes swung wildly at the cuckold but missed. Miss Davis went into hysterics. Nelson decided to salvage his honor by blackmailing



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