

# Useful Idiot

By Mark Herring

***Stalin's apologist : Walter Duranty, the New York Times Man in Moscow,***  
**by S.J. Taylor, (New York : Oxford University Press, 1990)**

Contra Mundum, No. 15, Final Print Issue

Copyright © 1995 Mark Y. Herring

---

Reporters have gained a reputation almost as opprobrious as that of lawyers. For irascibility and truth telling, reporters, like lawyers, rank high on the one and low on the other. Among the respective parties, however, reporters and lawyers mutually assure the adoration of their peers, what we might call MAA—Mutually Assured Adoration. Reporters, to hear them tell it, are kind, considerate, only concerned with the truth of an issue, and could not be bought off for all the money Midas could make.

Those of us living in the post-Woodward and Bernstein world find this attitudinizing laughable. Reporters are, however, by virtue of controlling the communication media, still able to pull a fast one on the public (Bill Clinton comes to mind, for example). Even with the public's collective bad attitude against them, they keep repeating the same lies; and sure enough, someone other than a reporter begins to believe in them.

Such is the case with Walter Duranty, long held in high esteem as the consummate reporter—a reporter's reporter, if you will. So it is with some amusement that, once in a while, we are allowed to see a liberal icon bite the dust with such crashing force and noise, that the subsequent deafening sound and pother leaves us with some feeling of exhilaration. This should not be misconstrued as so much schadenfreude; rather, just the warm, almost alpenglow of happiness that we were right all along.

Duranty was a chain-smoking, Scotch drinking vulgar sort of man who made no apologies for his admiration of Stalin. He was held in awe by other journalists, especially young female journalists. He did not fail to use the awe to his advantage, or rather their disadvantage. As Fascism rose in Europe, and Japanese jingoism emerged in the East, Duranty wrote glowing accounts of Stalin's Five-Year Plan. Almost single-handedly did Duranty aid and abet one of the world's most prolific mass murderers, knowing all the while what was going on, but refraining from saying precisely what he knew to be true. He had swallowed the ends-justifies-the-means-argument hook, line and sinker. Duranty loved to repeat, when Stalin's atrocities were brought to light, "you can't make an omelet

without breaking a few eggs”. Those “eggs” were the heads of men, women and children, and those “few” were merely tens of millions.

As Stalin exiled untold numbers of Soviet citizens to die in Gulags, the Soviet propaganda machine glossed this over, never expecting to get a reasonable hearing, but prepared to deny everything. Duranty’s acceptance of the official line exceeded even Stalin’s wildest expectations. Taylor’s book is a *tour de force* on the vile, brutish, and nasty life that was Duranty’s. His fall in this book is as if from a skyscraper. That his own paper, the *New York Times*, refuses to acknowledge his perfidy only makes the read all the more savory. Readers now know that the “paper of record” knows that we know. When this story is added to yet another media icon crash, H.L. Mencken and his anti-semitic, booboisie racism, the liberal downfall is complete. Not only are we able to see liberalism’s clay fee; we are now treated to the certifying papers of its alleged dementia.

What an oddity of life—or is it rather God’s inexhaustible sense of humor?—that Duranty would come from an affluent middle class family with a Harrow-Eton education. His nuclear family was Presbyterian to its core. Though the rumor of a “public school” education dogged Duranty as part of the myth of the rugged reporter, Duranty’s facility for reading Latin, Greek, French and, later, Russian belied any such nonsense. For all his posturing, Duranty was perhaps the best-educated reporter in all Europe.

But if this did not seal his intellectual credentials, Duranty’s progressive intellectual effluvia did. His embrace of homosexuality—he thought it part of every boy’s upbringing—and his unbridled sexual immorality, underscored what comes with a first-rate education in this country. The only difference between Duranty’s education then, and a public school education now, was that the Dewey revolution was not yet complete. While gaining a classical education, Duranty also gained the Dewey pother of moral myopia. Today, with Dewey’s humanism complete, classical education has vanished entirely, but immorality is everywhere abundant, right down to the condom-on-the-cucumber exercises in grade schools.

## The Socialist Omelet

George Orwell once asked a Stalinist, “Why all the bloodshed?”

“You cannot make an omelet without breaking a few eggs”, came the reply.

“But”, replied Orwell, “where is the omelet?”

“Oh, well, it takes practice to get it right”, said the other.

Utopians, in short, can live for a long time in the future; the present does not prove anything to them. In the mid-70s, I was talking to Jacques Attali, later to be a special advisor to President Mitterrand and, in 1990, president of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

“You socialists”, I said, “never compare capitalism as it is with socialism as it is. You compare capitalism as it is with and ideal socialism that, you claim, will be in the future.”

“Why not, “ laughed this brilliant man, “since socialism is the future!”

—Jean-François Revel, *Democracy Against Itself*, pp. 96, 97.

The young Duranty showed a penchant for the novelist's—not the reporter's—flair, however, a flair that would serve him well in later years. An instructor pointed this out to him and Duranty himself would later admit to it. His flair—though it might just as well be called a flaw—was that he saw “too many sides to a question to be sure which one of them was quite true.” His instructor called it the “curse of Reuben, instability”. But Duranty saw Reuben's curse—“unstable as water thou shalt not excel”—as hardly anything to be too concerned about: “I did not particularly want to excel.” Rather, Duranty wanted to “see and hear new things.” He did both. But his propensity to see all sides, or too many, prevented Duranty from discriminating between a new good thing, and a new, but murderous one.

Early in his life, Duranty went to Paris and met up with Aleister Crowley. Crowley proved to be a schoolmaster for Duranty's sexual and drug-taking orgies. Indeed, Duranty's sexual prowess became proverbial. He did nothing to dispel this report, often bringing women home for a short stay even after he married. He drank gallons of liquor, and slipped into and out of opiate miasmas. Moreover, he liked to talk about the effects of opium on his penis. In some cases, he even wrote to friends about it in kind of salvific language. To anyone who would listen, Duranty would talk about his or another's “stick, staff or rod” as he called it. This cannot be discounted as the locker room ravings of a puerile and immature young man. The records for these conversations come to us after Duranty had turned thirty.

Duranty's big break came while he was living in the Latin Quarter in Paris. He reported on Alphonse Pegoud, an aviator who flew a plane upside down for the first time. From Duranty's friend Wythe Williams, the head of the Paris bureau for the *New York Times*, Duranty learned how copy for a story was created. This resulted in Duranty's first byline. Without a nickel in his pocket, Duranty parlayed the rather nondescript piece that, for all we know, Williams had written, into a paying job with the paper of record.

Later that year, Duranty, Crowley and Victor Neuburg in a mock Mass, with Duranty reciting and composing Latin verses, attempted to sodomize each other. When asked later about these unspeakable events, Duranty would only say that he had “ceased to believe in anything,” more of an obvious observation than an explanation. Apparently, Duranty did not know that this would mean he would therefore release himself to be capable of everything.

Though Williams probably wrote Duranty's first story, or at least the lion's share of it, Duranty's reporting efforts were no fluke. But he would always remain more writer than reporter. While this certainly made Duranty stories more than the run-of-the-mill 5Ws, it also lured him into the reporter's bane. The more often Duranty composed while he wrote, the more likely he was to allow the fiction part of writing to take over. In one important case, Duranty was asked by the Allied forces to write a false story. Duranty wrestled with the idea and finally wrote his “eye-witness account”. Later, in e.e. cummings style, he wrote a poem asking whether the “end justified the means”. He decided that it didn't. But in the same poem, he wrote, “whether a noble end justified any

means/i wasn't so sure about that.” In fact, Duranty went even further, musing that perhaps a “noble end might justify a somewhat doubtful means.” That the “somewhat doubtful means” would come in the form of the Soviet Union serves to reveal “what mighty portents rise from trivial things.”

But more myth-building had to occur. In a train accident that nearly cost him his life, Duranty instead lost his left leg. He was on a train from Paris to Le Harve in 1924. The wreck sent him twenty-five yards through the air and splintered his shin. After surgical repair and a cast, the leg was found to be gangrenous. The surgeon told Duranty it would have to come off. This tragic event left Duranty in a slough of despond. But eventually, it became part of the myth. Again and again, young reporters would tell of the story of how Duranty, in search of truth, lost his leg. Later, some would report how he lost it covering the war. The stories were embellished and recast so that Duranty sounded the war-hero/reporter. Duranty exulted in these stories and did little to discount them.

While covering events all over Paris, Duranty had little success. He did write and publish in the *Times*, but his stories, he felt, lacked something. Then, as he recounts, “luck broke my way in the shape of the great Russian famine which threatened to cost about 30,000,000 lives, and probably did cost 5,000,000 or 6,000,000 including deaths from disease.” It did not prove too lucky for the Russians, neither then, nor over the next seventy years. But it did help establish Duranty as the premier reporter in Europe, and the number one Useful Idiot for Lenin first, and flater or Stalin.

In Duranty's reportage of this event he attempted to stress the New Economic Policy of Lenin, rather than the loss of life. He compared Lenin's work with that of the Allies after World War I, an association that could not have been missed by Red Party members. Duranty began the story on the NEP in high dudgeon:

Lenin has thrown communism overboard. His signature appears in the official press of Moscow on August 9, abandoning State ownership, with the exception of a definite number of great industries of national importance—such as were controlled by the State in France, England and Germany during the war—and re-establishing payment by individuals for railroads, postal and other public services.

On the basis of this story, Duranty was given provisional admittance to the Soviet Union.

The initial admittance grew to several years. Duranty set up house with a Russian peasant girl named Katya, even in the presence of his wife, Jane. But Jane could hardly have cared for too long. She was far more interested in drug-taking. Duranty would later refer to these years, 1922-1924, as the most pleasant of his entire stay in Moscow.

During this time Duranty met everybody who was anybody, it seemed. He made friends with Isadora Duncan, William Bolitho, Alexander Woolcott, Beatrice and Sidney Webb,

George Seldes and many others. He also collaborated with H.R. Knickerbocker on a series of short stories. He and “Knick” as he was called, wrote six stories together, but all under Duranty’s name. The agreement allowed that the next six would be under Knickerbocker’s name, Duranty going first since he was more “famous”. To the surprise of Duranty and everyone else, one of the stories was voted Best Short Story of 1929. Most likely, the first draft had been Knickerbocker’s. True to form, however, Duranty never once mentioned to the award presenters that the work was not entirely his own. Later, after he had received a congratulatory letter from Knick, he wrote back saying how “noble and honest” Knick was since the story was “your work as much as mine”. Duranty told Knick that if he would compose a letter to the O’Henry people, “I’ll be glad to sign [it].” Knickerbocker never did.

Amid the evolution of the Soviet Union came reports, typically from one source—Malcolm Muggeridge—that all was not well in stars and scythe. Duranty shrugged these stories off by telling those who dared to inquire that eggs have to be broken in order for an omelet to be made. But others began to see the discrepancies between Duranty’s stories and what they saw when they visited, men such as e.e. cummings and economist Charles A. Beard. Again, Duranty brushed them off as so many lumpenproletariat: “If a foreign correspondent is looking for a bed of roses, he would do well to go into floriculture.” But what Duranty was loathe to admit was not that anyone thought the Soviet Union a bed of roses. What they objected to was a garden of thorn as sharp as knives being referred to as a soft cushion worthy of worldwide emulation.

Even when the purges were at their height, Duranty grew hostile to anyone who questioned his reporting, or cast aspersions his way. When, in 1930, Duranty saw firsthand the exiled kulaks, he dismissed it, saying “[I’ve] seen worse debris than that, trains full of wounded in the Front in France going back to be patched up for a fresh bout of slaughter.” Though he argued against the notion that “Patriotism and Progress” were worth the Allied effort, he rarely applied the same logic to Stalin’s killing machine. Duranty even linked Stalin’s persona to the survival of the Communist Party and, ultimately, the Soviet Union. The irony was apparently missed by Duranty: that a man single-handedly responsible for tens of millions of deaths of his own people could be inextricably linked to their survival. Just how many eggs it took to make this omelet, Duranty was happy to let Stalin decide.

After these stories, Duranty got an interview with Lucifer incarnate, Stalin himself. In the interview, Duranty praised Stalin’s progressive ideals, his firm control of a wild country, and his brilliant political instincts. Stalin came out of the subsequent story a world figure on the order of Roosevelt or Churchill.

Duranty had accomplished the impossible: he had taken a mere thug whose bloodshed was unparalleled in Europe at the time, and unsurpassed until Mao, and lifted him to the status of world leader, superpower. What Duranty had done for Stalin did not begin to compare with what Stalin did for Duranty. Once the story appeared, Duranty went from well-known reporter to world-class celebrity.

Duranty lived up to his celebrity status, or rather, lived it to the hilt. He stole men's fiancées, slept with other men's wives, cheating on his own wife, practically in front of her. He entertained royally, taking advantage at every turn. When Will Rogers toured Europe, he wanted to see “the great Walter Duranty”. Thankfully, Rogers stayed out of politics. Duranty also played the role of sage-reporter. He once told a young reporter, “What people are interested in are sex and gold and blood, and if you get a story in which the lead combines all of those, you've got something.” Apparently between Stalin's bloodletting, Duranty's immorality, and the money the two of them made in service of each other, Duranty had gotten it right after all.

During the Ukraine famine, Duranty argued that the stories were “bunk” which predicted pestilential deaths. Although Duranty never witnessed first hand any of the actual places where the deaths occurred, he made reference to the tragedy by alluding to the Battle of Verdun, when allies died at the rate of 6,000 per day. But the horns of the dilemma by which Duranty sought not to be gored (but which Muggeridge pointed out, did in fact finally gore him) were these: he wanted to write in such a way that if the famine became generally known outside of Russia, he could appear to have predicted it. On the other hand, if it remained known only in Russia, he could appear to have pooh-poohed it. Even when Ukrainian peasants were dying at the rate of 25,000 *a day*, the story remained within the clenched and bloodstained fist of the tightly censorious Stalin.

Duranty overlooked the horrors of the Soviet Union by frequently taking flight from the carnage. Several times a year he would go to Europe and forget all he'd seen. But even Duranty could not get away from everything. One night in a hotel in Athens, as he was sitting by the window enjoying the breeze, he suddenly noticed his shirt smelled like burning flesh. He instantly thought the management was robbing its customers and burning the bodies of its victims. Duranty left immediately and checked into another hotel, sending a cab over to get his things the next morning. Perhaps all Duranty smelled was the filth of his own equivocations in the deaths of millions.

At fifty-one, Duranty published *I Write as I Please*. The book became an instant best-seller. The book sparked a long and involved controversy over whether Duranty was the greatest living reporter, and whether he could be trusted to report accurately on the Soviet Union. About all the dispute did was stir up more sales for Duranty.

As the work of scholars grew, and the outbreak of dissention between Trotsky and Stalin widened, Duranty began to feel the heat. The exiled Trotsky openly criticized Duranty and his work, sparking so many exchanges in *The New Republic* that the magazine had to call a moratorium on the letters. At first, this seemed exactly what Duranty wanted because it sold his name again and again. But as the controversy dragged on, it began to cast aspersions on the famous reporter.

Duranty's work not only aggravated Trotsky, but it also began to weary Stalin. Duranty now found himself in the position of being denied dispatches when he wrote on certain topics. Shortly thereafter came Litvinov's removal as Minister of Foreign Affairs over the

German question. His replacement was Vyacheslav Molotov. The news came in so unexpectedly that the two stringers for the *Times*, Duranty and Denny, were caught unawares. Denny proved too drunk to write the story. Duranty wrote his, but gave the whole event a very innocuous interpretation. One of Duranty's friends, Henry Shapiro, bet him the Germans would attack the Soviets. Duranty laughed and bet him ten to one it would never happen. His friend raised the odds to 100 to one. Duranty later paid up.

After World War II, as his usual communications with Stalin became less and less frequent, Duranty decided to take on Hollywood. It seemed fitting, really, given all the fiction Duranty had managed to write about the Soviet Union. But the ploy failed miserably, and Duranty found himself in the inestimable position of having to borrow money from anyone who would lend it to him. He found respite in a kind of sideshow performance between him and Knickerbocker. But night after night of shows and hotels took their toll and Duranty finally gave it up.

One further incident will, perhaps, help readers to understand just who Walter Duranty was. The prolific and hugely successful writer, John Gunther, had always befriended Duranty, even after Duranty hit on Gunther's wife. But more than that, Gunther lent Duranty huge sums of money, knowing it would never be paid back. Tragically, Gunther's only son was diagnosed with a brain tumor during the boy's junior year in college. The operations (both unsuccessful) and the medical care, drained the wealthy Gunther of virtually all he had. He became indentured to publishers who would loan him \$10,000 as an advance. Gunther would take the money and pay for his son's medical expenses, then stay up all day and night for weeks writing a book, or completing a piece.

While Gunther's son went down hill rapidly, Duranty visited him on two successive afternoons. With the young man covered in bandages, half blind, and unable to use his left side, Duranty tried to cheer him up. So far so good. But it turns out that, though he had made the visit to see Gunther's son, Duranty managed to "borrow" \$500 from Gunther before he left. Duranty had pulled Gunther away to a restaurant for drinks and conversation. As Gunther handed Duranty the check, the restaurant management told Gunther he had a phone call. The voice informed him his son had just died.

Duranty's own end occurred some years later at the age of seventy-three. An internal hemorrhage complicated by pulmonary emphysema finally took him. He died a broken and gaunt man, hardly the celebrity he had been, save for the myth he had helped create. Taylor's book, if widely read, should help demythologize this opprobrious man and his more noxious philosophy.