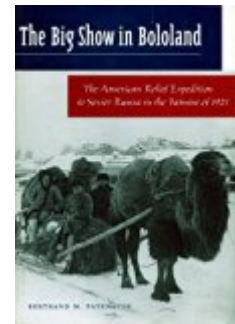


Bertrand M. Patenaude. *The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. viii + 817 pp. \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-4493-5; \$77.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4467-6.

Reviewed by Nellie H. Ohr (Independent Scholar)
Published on H-Russia (June, 2003)



The Doughboy and the Commissar, or, Tales from the Famine Front

The Doughboy and the Commissar, or, Tales from the Famine Front

It is tempting to begin with the photographs. In one, skeletal children, naked except for a few filthy rags, line a sleeping platform at a children's home on the Volga. In another, entitled "Corpse-eaters," several miserable-looking women stare suspiciously at the camera, surrounded by disembodied human heads and limbs that they have allegedly been eating or selling (both after p. 323). A third shows throngs of children in felt boots, kneeling on a barren plain with a Russian church in the background. They hold out their hands in supplication toward a tall American with a fedora hat and tie. In another, the man in the fedora measures grain into a sack held by a bearded peasant in a worn sheepskin coat and felt boots. In a most heartwarming picture, children sit at long tables drinking cups of hot cocoa, in a room adorned with banners proclaiming "American Relief Administration. Gift of the American people" (all three after p. 710).

These are scenes from the American Relief Administration's mission to Soviet Russia during the famine of 1921, which devastated that country on the heels of World War I, revolution, and civil war. Less well known than the one that accompanied collectivization a decade later, the 1921 famine nevertheless left perhaps twenty million people hungry and killed one or two million people through starvation or related disease.[1] It hit hardest in the Volga region as well as the North Caucasus and parts of Ukraine. The American Relief Administration,

headed by then-Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover, at its peak in mid-1922 fed over ten million people a day (p. 178). It was one of the first encounters between "bourgeois" Americans and the population of this new Soviet society.

The subject matter—involving tragedy and salvation in an exotic setting—was gripping for the American congressmen and donors at the time on whose funding the relief effort depended and for whose benefit these photographs were composed. The story remains intrinsically fascinating today, especially because this episode has been little studied: only one or two monographs, a circumspect official history, and scattered memoirs on the subject have been published. More importantly, Bert Patenaude's light touch makes it a joy to read. If only it were not over seven hundred pages long, it would be an excellent assignment for students of either Russian or American history, cultural history, sociology, or international relations. Undergraduates or graduate students, if they found the time to read it, would have plenty to discuss, for it touches on conceptions of peasant culture and national character, the effects of revolution, bureaucratism, and early-twentieth-century diplomacy. It does not present a strong argument of its own but instead comprises a series of evocative anecdotes. The book could provide data for a major student paper or for scholarly work on these topics. However, its major appeal may lie outside academia. It would make perfect summertime reading for the non-specialist reader, who can savor it in small chunks and live with it for many weeks.

The title, *The Big Show in Bololand*, exemplifies both the Soviet-American encounter and Patenaude's approach. "Bololand" is the "irreverently exotic appellation" (p. 8) used by ARA workers for Bolshevik Russia. The words "Big Show," which had also been used to describe the First World War, evoked the Great Adventure in which these men played a role (p. 50). In addition it could refer both to the major production they managed to pull off, and to the fact that they were self-consciously putting forth an image to their domestic American audience.

The book itself operates on several levels: first, it recounts the saga of the 1921-22 Russian famine and the enormous relief effort from the point of view of the American aid workers; second, it shows these men crafting their self-presentation; and third, it explores the cultural encounter between this particular subset of American society and the Soviet officials, peasants, and employees with whom they dealt.

I. The Saga of Russian Famine and Relief

This time period is Patenaude's specialty, and his knowledge shows in the succinct background information he gives at appropriate points. For example, at the beginning of the book Patenaude recounts the American relief workers' first impressions, interspersed with explanations of the political, military, and diplomatic events that had led them to be there. The early 1920s were an odd time of mixed motives and strange bedfellows. As Lenin reversed course economically, introducing the semi-capitalist New Economic Policy, the Soviet government sought diplomatic recognition and aid from the same capitalist countries they had recently denounced. This atheistic regime even sought help from religious groups. The Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Quakers in the American Friends' Service Committee, a Papal Famine Relief mission, and other sectarian groups served in Russia under the umbrella of the ARA, although ARA workers took pains to distinguish themselves from these supposedly sentimental missionaries. The Soviet authorities gave surprising latitude to the ARA. In an agreement made at Riga in August 1921, the ARA agreed that it would pay for shipping food to Russia and would administer its distribution through a network of kitchens and warehouses whose staffs would be chosen by the Americans. The Soviet officials pledged to provide transport and other cooperation. For their part, although Hoover hoped that food aid would bring down Bolshevism (pp. 31-32), the Americans promised to stay out of politics.

At the peak of its activity in the summer of 1922, 199 American organizers oversaw the feeding of over 10 million adults and children (p. 178). One staple food was something that in better days the recipients might have considered only fit for animals: American corn grits. Using an adjectival form they had created from the ARA's name, Russian students even made up a song gently mocking this "Aravskaia kasha" (p. 510). Children received white bread as well as cocoa made with American evaporated milk (p. 511). The ARA also delivered food packages that had been ordered for specific people by acquaintances or well-wishers in the United States.

Developing the infrastructure to move these mountains of food required unceasing organizational, administrative, and accounting work. Hiring and supervising Russian employees, haranguing and negotiating with Soviet officials, travelling on typhus-infested trains to check on field offices, the ARA men built and set in motion an impressive structure. Summing up the ARA's achievement, one relief worker wrote:

"After ... living in the village and talking with the people whose hopes of life have been built on the possibility of securing American corn one cannot refrain from thinking of the vast chain, administrative and physical, which has been forged link by link for thousands of miles from American [grain] elevators in the Middle West where corn was being used as fuel, to the seaboard across the Atlantic, to ports in the Black Sea and in the Baltic, and thence, drawn by crippled engines in broken down cars over many snowy miles of a decadent rail system, manned and guarded by half starved crews to serve villages such as those I had been through where life and hope was almost extinct." (p. 168)

While this writer highlights the ARA's accomplishment, another pointed to the difficulties they faced:

"ARA has tackled the biggest and hardest job of its existence and I shall breathe a sigh of relief when our organization has left this country. It is working against almost insurmountable obstacles, against a government that is suspicious, against railway officials and employees who are thinking how to steal most for themselves, against a transportation system that is on its last legs, against dishonesty, trickery, demoralization, incompetence, apathy, famine, typhus etc. God help us all." (p. 172)

II. How the Tale was Told

The relief workers called their effort a "show." As mentioned above, "show" could refer partly to a major

production, as in “getting this show on the road”; but a show also implies an audience. ARA workers and chiefs were very conscious of their audiences, not only the Soviet officials and the recipients of their aid, but also their domestic American audience, without whose support the show could not go on.

ARA officials carefully crafted an image to present to the American public. They took films and photographs, such as those reprinted in this book, designed to highlight Russian need and American benevolence. Sometimes they staged scenes and shot several takes of films to achieve the right effect (p. 506). In particular, official chroniclers of the mission were to highlight its administrative efficiency and to make “American work methods” the hero of their tale (p. 588). Not that they were fabricating: they genuinely seemed to feel themselves missionaries of the American way and the Protestant work ethic. As Patenaude writes:

“Looking back on them now, listening to them talk about themselves and their mission, we find them almost cartoonlike. As they self-righteously contrast their can-do, energetic, efficient selves with the Asiatic, fatalistic, long-suffering Russians, they often sound programmed. It is as if they are reading their lines from a story authored by Herbert Hoover as told to Walter Duranty, based on an original concept by Max Weber.” (p. 594)

The name of Walter Duranty will be familiar to students of early Soviet history and American leftism; a reporter for the *New York Times*, he sympathized with the Soviet experiment. While not directly connected with the ARA, he partially served its purposes. However, Duranty was also an inveterate liar, serving up “choice bits of fantasy” (pp. 316, 475). Describing one incident, in an ironic allusion to Duranty’s famous memoir, Patenaude says Duranty was unacquainted with the incident and was therefore “free to write pretty much as he pleased” (p. 318). Duranty is currently in the news again, as the Pulitzer prize committee considers revoking the prize it awarded him in 1932, when he denied the existence of famine in Ukraine that year.

Duranty is not the only unreliable witness. Other ARA workers sometimes told various versions of certain events (e.g. pp. 318-321, 356-357, 405), whether to save face, to cover for friends, or to impress their audiences. Patenaude attempts to peel away the most egregious falsehoods. He has scoured memoirs, newspaper articles, and ARA newsletters and correspondence, as well as published Soviet documents and memoirs, and even interviewed a few children of ARA workers. He

has scrupulously compared versions and assessed their credibility; however, he acknowledges that in the end we will never know the whole truth. He is playful about this. Describing the later career of a Soviet official named Zhukov, Patenaude says he “became head of a factory for making playing cards, so it was said” (p. 477). A particular gathering included “eight—or was it nine? – Americans” (p. 481). Patenaude ends his account of one colorful American, a jovial bluffer named Fink, with a sly invitation to the reader to be a fellow sleuth. Fink was sent home just in time for the World Series, and “perhaps he wrote up the games for one of the New York papers. You could look it up” (p. 484).

In this context, the mystery of the disappearance of Phil Sheild fits right in and adds another layer of excitement to the book. Sheild “walked out of ARA headquarters in Simbirsk on Sunday evening, October 15, 1922, and disappeared forever ‘as though the earth had swallowed him up’” (p. 258). Bits of evidence gradually turned up, culminating in spring 1923 with the discovery of a corpse that might have been Sheild’s. “As things stood, the American public was under the assumption that Phil Sheild was the victim of a theft-related murder” (p. 261). This wording leads the reader to speculate that the real explanation may have lain elsewhere.

Horrible thoughts arise as the page is turned to reveal the title of the next chapter: “Tales of Cannibalism.” After discussing gruesome scenes and rumors of cannibals lassoing passers-by from second-story windows in Orenburg, Patenaude concedes, “They did not lasso victims in Simbirsk, so this possibility was never considered in the case of Phil Sheild” (p. 270). Then he moves on to seemingly unrelated topics—wild parties, debauchery, seduction—which suddenly turn out to be relevant to the Sheild mystery. It emerged that the straitlaced Virginian had had an affair with a married woman, and his colleagues were convinced that guilt feelings had driven him to suicide. If you want more details on this “drama-within-a-drama in the Russian theater of action” (p. 323), you’ll have to look it up in chapter 20. Needless to say, the ARA chiefs in New York, attempting to spare the feelings of Sheild’s widowed mother and the American public, officially embraced the not-unfounded “theft-related murder” theory (p. 317). Explanations involving sordid affairs of the heart did not fit their self-portrait as “masters of efficiency.”

So much for the American self-presentation. For their part, Soviet leaders were ambivalent: they hoped to inculcate the “work ethic, efficiency and awesome energy

of the Americans” in their people in order to modernize their socialist country (p. 701). “For Lenin the ARA was a godsend—a living, breathing example of a system that worked” (p. 703). Sometimes Soviet leaders matched their level of energy, though perhaps using different methods. For example, “Iron Feliks” Dzerzhinskii was “efficiency personified” when as commissar of communication he made the trains run on time to deliver American corn. Indeed, the constant goading by the Americans that forced this to happen, asserts Patenaude, was the “key to the revival of Russia’s railroads in 1922” (p. 699). This embrace of “*amerikanizm*” would soon end, as the Soviet Union turned to an autarkic campaign of socialist industrialization. When the United States fell into depression in 1929, just as the Soviet Union was portraying itself as the beacon of industrial virility, Herbert Hoover and the ARA seemed forgotten (p. 733). One of the few lasting memorials to the ARA is something “safely beyond the reach of even the mightiest totalitarian dictator” (p. 744): a small planet, number 849, which a Crimean astronomer had named “Ara.”

III. Cultural Encounters

The contrast between American “pep” (p. 587) and Russian passivity is a major theme of Patenaude’s section on the cultural encounter between Americans and Russians. The contrast between the Russians, whose Orthodox Christianity emphasized redemptive suffering, with the Protestant ethic of the ARA men was stark. As Patenaude puts it, “the collision of these two radically different mentalities predicted many of the comedies and tragedies of the relief story and for a time made of famine Russia the kind of great lab that might have occupied Weber’s dreams” (p. 563). “Nichevoism” and “sichasism” [sic] are one example of the contrast. The word “nichevo,” meaning “nothing” or “it doesn’t matter,” seems to sum up Russian fatalism. “Seichas” means “now” but was used as an interminable delaying tactic (pp. 568-569). The ARA workers took to insisting on an “*amerikanskii sichas*” when they truly wanted something done immediately (p. 568).

However, this single paradigm does not exhaust the rich detail on cultural encounters in the book. For one thing, the ARA workers grappled with a seeming contradiction: how could these Russians, whom they saw patiently waiting in line for their handouts or for death, have been responsible for the revolutionary violence of 1917? In the chapter “From the Bell Tower,” Patenaude undertakes a long discussion of Russian and American interpretations of the origins of Russian passivity, includ-

ing analyses of the roles of Russian Orthodoxy and of the peasant way of life.

For another thing, the Soviet population was not monolithic. Soviet officials, for example, occupied a special and unenviable niche. Until recently they had been used to carry out brutal requisitioning of food from peasants. Now they were supposed to lead the peasants in welcoming American work methods but also to continue to propagandize socialism. On top of this, they naturally competed with the Americans for authority. Their competition was manifested in various areas, such as the use of automobiles, which to the ARA men signified manliness, efficiency, and prestige, while to the Soviet officials they evoked privilege, technology, and association with America (p. 465). Another area of competition was the ability to hold liquor, especially when it came to the kerosene-vodka cocktails that were poured into both automobile engines and human throats (pp. 430ff).

The multi-ethnic character of Soviet Russia also complicated the picture. Many police officials, for example, happened to be of Latvian background. These Letts had a reputation as “hard and unforgiving” (p. 348). The ARA men also formed impressions of the Tatars and Volga Germans—whom they found businesslike and hardworking (e.g. pp. 330ff)—and they shared Russian stereotypes of Jews, “the only class of native Russians with much real ‘push’” (p. 570). Patenaude gives a quick synopsis of the status of the non-Russian nationalities in the country (pp. 330ff).

The ARA attracted other atypical Soviet citizens as well, including odd characters such as Iliodor the “Mad Monk of Russia” (pp. 665-666). The ARA men also made the acquaintance of Russian artistic figures such as ballerinas; they invited these hungry young ladies to dinner and taught them to foxtrot, with the implied expectation that the ballerinas would give them something in return afterwards (pp. 295, 299). Many of the Russians who worked as ARA employees were also marginal, being of bourgeois or noble background and thus stigmatized by the Soviet regime as “former people.” When working for the ARA, “these former people had become people once again, and [when the ARA departed they] faced a return to their former status” (p. 727). One ARA worker describes the arrest of a Russian employee as “an invisible hand ... [that had] drawn her back into the dark” (p. 400). In his view, this employee had briefly enjoyed the “light” of American presence and optimism, and perhaps a taste of her pre-revolutionary lifestyle.

For their part, the American ARA workers tended to

be young, single, college-educated men who had previously served in the military or in relief work elsewhere in Europe. They were cocky, adventurous, and pleased with their godlike status in Russia. Needless to say, after the mission was over in mid-1923, these “returnees from the Red Planet” (p. 732) found it difficult to adjust to ordinary American life. They continued to write memoirs and to hold reunions for many years, crafting a trove of stories about their experience.

Indeed, any group of Americans who choose to spend time in Russia, both in the 1920s and in this generation, is self-selected and engages in its own myth-making. The ARA men’s memoirs resemble the war stories shared by any cohort of American sojourners in that land, whether academic researchers or business expatriates: stories of obdurate bureaucrats, of wild parties, of liaisons, of black marketeers, of eccentric characters on both American and Russian sides. Patenaude’s book is based on just such lore. However, the men who went to the “Red Planet” in 1921 were not U.S. academics and businessmen, and the stakes were much higher than obtaining tenure or clinching a deal. The lives of millions of people were at stake.

In this context, Patenaude’s style may seem flippant. However, he is merely adopting the tone of his sources, for whom an attitude of gallows humor may have been a psychological defense. In addition, this work is not the first to take a light-handed approach to tragic subjects. Readers of a certain age, for example, will remember the television sitcom *M*A*S*H*, which was set amidst the carnage of the Korean War. Patenaude’s book strikingly resembles *M*A*S*H* in its picaresque plot line, its romantic subplots, and its odd characters. Unlike *M*A*S*H*, though, his book is informative as well as entertaining. Even if the TV producers are not ready to turn this book into a sitcom, some documentary film-makers are planning a film for PBS. The show would be well worth watching.

Note

[1]. The figure of 20 million comes from Benjamin Weissmann, *Herbert Hoover and Famine Relief to Soviet Russia, 1921-1923* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1974), p. 5. Patenaude discusses various mortality estimates on pp. 197-198.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Nellie H. Ohr. Review of Patenaude, Bertrand M., *The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7750>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.