THE BIG SHOW IN BOLOLAND

Compiled by Bertrand M. Patenaude
Center for Russian, East European & Eurasian Studies, Stanford University

When a devastating famine descended on Bolshevik Russia in 1921, the United States responded with a massive two-year relief campaign that battled starvation and disease and saved millions of lives. By summer 1922, American kitchens were feeding nearly 11 million Soviet citizens a day. At the time, the rescue operation was hailed as “the beau geste of the twentieth century.” Today, it is all but forgotten.

A new book, The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921, resurrects this epic tale in the form of a sprawling narrative history. It is, above all, an American adventure story, set in exotic Bololand, as the relief workers called Bolshevik Russia. These Americans were a colorful mix of former doughboys, cowboys, and college boys, most of them hungry for adventure in the wake of the Great War. The book draws extensively on their diaries, memoirs, and private letters located in the Hoover Institution Archives.

The man directing their operations from Washington was the humanitarian giant Herbert Hoover, chairman of the much-heralded American Relief Administration (ARA). Since the end of hostilities in the Great War, Hoover’s ARA had successfully executed a massive food relief campaign across Central and Eastern Europe. It was Hoover, as head of the ARA, who answered writer Maxim Gorky’s plea for assistance and negotiated an agreement to organize relief operations inside Soviet Russia. Hoover’s imposing presence here will surprise most American readers, who view him through the prism of the Great Depression.

Awaiting Death

Russia’s Great Famine of 1921 would claim millions of lives. The most credible estimates count five million victims of starvation and famine-related disease. The American relief workers entered a landscape of the dying and the unburied dead; by spring 1922 incidences of cannibalism and corpse-eating were recorded in growing numbers in the worst famine areas. Much of the horror and suffering is documented in the extensive photographic record of ARA operations located in the Hoover Archives. A dozen or so of these images are included in The Big Show, on the premise that one cannot begin to understand the enormity of the American achievement without appreciating the scale of the Russian catastrophe.

Such shocking scenes of misery are described without end in the relief workers’ letters home. Those stationed at the famine front quickly understood that they would have to harden themselves in order to get the job done. One of them was Bill Kelley, who wrote from the city of Ufa, at the edge of Siberia, on January 26, 1922: “I often think now of how people in New York told me how they envied me the opportunity of seeing so many interesting things. Yes, interesting, that’s the word. Yes, it’s very interesting to move among people who a glance tells you would be better off dead than alive.”

Fighting Famine and the Bolsheviks

The man Hoover chose to lead the expedition was Colonel William N. Haskell, a career soldier with a distinguished record of military service and with considerable postwar relief experience, notably as Allied High Commissioner to Armenia. His rescue operation in Russia was jeopardized by the hostility and hindrances of Bolshevik officials. Lenin’s government had invited the ARA into Russia out of desperation, and from the outset it chafed at the high profile and popularity of these “bourgeois” relief workers. The “Bolos”—in the parlance of the Americans—set out to win control over ARA operations or, at minimum, to gain credit for the relief in the eyes of the Russian people. Thus were Haskell’s men forced to fight a two-front war: against famine and against Soviet obstructionism.

Haskell later recalled that “many clever young Americans had to be sent out of Russia with nerves completely wrecked or on the verge of insanity due not only to the horrible suffering which they were forced to witness but to the interference and annoyance to which they were unnecessarily subjected by the very Soviet officials who should have been their helpers.”

The Mission Expands

Vernon Kellogg, a professor of entomology at Stanford and a longtime associate of Hoover in food operations in Europe and America, accompanied the first food train to the Volga valley, where he made his own famine investigation before returning to Washington. There he briefed Hoover, who was already considering seeking a $20 million congressional appropriation in order to expand the mission from a program of sustaining one million children to include the feeding of adults and many more children. The testimony of his trusted colleague encouraged Hoover to move forward. The essence of the message Kellogg brought back to Washington is captured in a diary entry from his September sojourn along the Volga in which he wonders: “Can we stop with feeding children alone while their natural protectors (mother and father) are allowed to die?”

Herbert Hoover, Master of Efficiency
Americans in 1921 placed a premium on efficiency, and Hoover was widely regarded as its embodiment. Indeed, efficiency was a hallmark of Hoover’s entire postwar humanitarian enterprise. To the ARA, the most effective relief worker was an engineer with an eye on the bottom line. The men who served under Hoover, if they did not always fit this description, shared this ethos, seeing themselves engaged in what they routinely called the “business of relief.” An unquestioning loyalty to “the Chief,” as the men under him called Hoover, was another ARA hallmark. In the face of obstructionist commissars and countless other worries that might tempt a young American relief worker to quit Russia, he would instead tell himself, “Do it for Hoover,” and press on.

Hoover was also, not incidentally, America’s most famous anti-Bolshevik. He proudly declared that his postwar relief operations had “stemmed the tide of Bolshevism” in Europe. This naturally put Lenin and his comrades on their guard and made Colonel Haskell’s diplomacy in Moscow more delicate, yet it also gave Hoover the singular authority to administer American food relief to a communist country. Few Americans were worried that the nation’s most accomplished anti-Bolshevik was playing into the hands of the Reds in the Kremlin. Hoover was immune to such suspicion in the same way that, half a century later, Richard Nixon’s unimpeachable anticommunist credentials uniquely qualified him to make a historic presidential visit to Red China. It was such considerations that Walter Lippmann took into account when he wrote of Hoover’s Russian undertaking in the New York World in May 1922: “probably no other living man could have done nearly so much.”

A Race Against the Clock

When word of the $20 million congressional appropriation reached Soviet Russia in late December 1921, the enthusiasm of the relief workers was mixed with trepidation, for the task before them seemed Herculean: move millions of bushels of corn and thousands of tons of seed by rail from the ports into the famine zone and do so in time for the spring planting. Suddenly, the appalling state of Russia’s railways loomed over the mission. When the ARA arrived in Russia, its railways were in a dreadful state, as had been expected, but concern had been tempered by the relatively modest size of the initial relief program. Now, in the face of a drastic increase in that program—of a kind, moreover, that hinged on a successful race against the seasonal clock—there was cause for grave apprehension. Would the system buckle under the strain?

European Russia was scarred with “locomotive graveyards,” rows of rusted and dilapidated locomotives that had gone unused for years, their tenders missing, piston rods removed, and boilers open, “resting there soundlessly, like sleeping monsters,” in the words of journalist Edwin Hullinger. The central drama of the relief story is how the ARA—against all odds and after a near-disastrous jam of corn trains west of the Volga—delivered its lifesaving corn and seed to the villages in the nick of time, breaking the back of the famine and securing the harvest of 1922.

Camels on the Volga

Once the corn trains arrived at their final destinations, their contents had to be conveyed from the railheads to the villages. Adverse weather and road conditions aside, there was a severe shortage of draft animals to power this final stage of the corn delivery. The number of horses, by reasonable estimates, had been reduced by as much as one-half since prewar days. Many of those still among the living were, like the human population, so weakened as to be unfit for sustained strenuous labor.

Their place was taken by great furry camels, exotic beasts of burden in the Russian heartland. All the testimony about their unruly individualism would appear to render oxymoronic the notion of a camel caravan, but in fact this was, and remains, the singular romantic image of the corn campaign, indeed of the entire American relief mission, appearing in numerous letters and reports from relief workers and preserved on film. Most impressive are camel-and-sleigh transport columns extending out of sight into the snowy expanse of the steppe.

The mobilization of the camels on such a scale was as extraordinary as the purpose for which they had been drafted. This is confirmed by a Russian inspector of the ARA who was present in a Tsaritsyn village when the locals received word that the Americans were waiting for them to come to a distribution point. Within an hour a wagon train was en route, powered mostly by camels. “In spite of the immensity of the steppe it was impossible to see the beginning or the end of this train. Even the oldest and most experienced teamsters admitted that they had never seen such a sight.”

King Corn

When the corn reached the villages, there were scenes of prayerful ecstasy, but just as often the recipients were too weak to display emotion. A recurrent image used by Russians in expressing their gratitude to their American benefactors was of being rescued “from the edge of the grave.” The ringing of the Easter bells that accompanied the arrival of the corn reinforced the symbolism of deliverance from death.

The distribution of corn in the village of Vasil’evka, in Samara province, was documented by the ARA photographer and motion picture man Floyd Traynham, whose film of relief worker George McClinton and his supplicants is featured in an ARA “two-reeler” film made in 1922. In the film we see each adult receive the standard ration of 30 funts—about 27 pounds—of corn.

“The Greatest Inspiration”

Corn was served as grits—kasha in Russian—in ARA kitchens that had been operating in Soviet Russia since the autumn of 1921. These kitchens were of all sizes, from a dining hall seating several hundred located in Moscow’s former Hermitage Restaurant to the lowliest peasant hut in the deep recesses of the Russian interior.

The larger village kitchens were often established in the school-
houses. Since many schools had by then ceased functioning, this arrangement not only kept the teachers and students from starving but meant that the children could stay for their lessons after the noon meal.

ARA meals consisted of white bread, rice, lard, corn grits, milk, sugar, and cocoa. The menu was adjusted during the week for variety and according to availability. The children ate in silence. ARA historian (and later Hoover Institution director) Harold Fisher, himself a witness to such scenes, testified that “the sight of these ragged rows of thin bodies, desperately concentrated, was undoubtedly the greatest inspiration that the relief workers had.”

**Foy and His Flivver**

The success of the ARA mission depended on teamwork, as well as American innovation and individualism. John Foy, a relief worker in Tsaritsyn, became renowned for his extraordinary expeditions into the famine zone in his Ford “flivver.” Foy motored into isolated regions where only the camel roamed, single-handedly engaging highwaymen and time and again drawing on his remarkable resourcefulness to bring his trademark flivver back to life.

In the summer of 1922, Foy prepared to drive southeast across the Kalmyk steppe, in the direction of the Caspian Sea, a distance of more than 600 miles. Previous motorists had declared travel by car across this “sea of land” impossible because of the quicksand-like salt marshes and also because of the bandits who preyed on camel trains. But there were reports of starvation in the region, and Foy was determined to investigate. He outfitted his flivver for the desert, fashioning a large torpedo-shaped body whose entire rear half served as a gas tank (with a capacity of 70 gallons). In theory this enabled the vehicle to travel 800 miles without refueling. Foy made the round-trip journey in six days. A colleague wrote, quite in earnest, that “a volume could be written” about Foy’s Russian adventures.

**A Funeral in Moscow**

Probably the greatest single threat to the ARA men in Russia was typhus, which was epidemic in the winter and spring of 1922. The fear of infection was a constant source of anxiety, and it is remarkable that of the 300 Americans in the mission only 10 relief workers contracted typhus or relapsing fever while in Russia. The only fatality among them was Harold Blandy of New York City, who died in Ufa on May 17, 1922.

Blandy’s body was transported to Moscow, where he was given the equivalent of a state funeral by the Soviet government. The casket was draped with a large American flag and a blanket of blue forget-me-nots and wreaths. The formal ceremony was followed by a grand procession, seven miles in length and two hours in duration, through the sun-drenched streets of Moscow to the train station. Participants included the ARA’s local American and Russian personnel as well as a good number of curious Muscovites. The casket, escorted by ushers in white formal attire, was borne on an open white hearse led by eight impressive horses. “Moscow must have been searched to find them,” wrote a foreign journalist. The ARA was forbidden to fly Old Glory in Russia, and its appearance adds a further disorienting note to the surviving images of the occasion.

**Walter Bell: “Idol of the Bashkirs”**

“If ever there was an epic of relief work it is the story of Colonel Bell of Ufa,” wrote Walter Duranty of the New York Times. The epic quality of Bell’s enterprise was in part a reflection of the outsize dimensions of his relief operation: Territorially Ufa grew to become the biggest ARA district in Russia (larger than all of France), and it ranked first in the number of beneficiaries, reaching 1.6 million in the summer of 1922. It also extended the farthest east, into Asiatic Russia, which lent it the aura of the frontier. “We all have to go about dressed like Bret Harte, with a six gun on the hip,” Bell wrote to a friend at ARA headquarters in New York. “France in 1918 was a summer resort, compared with our present assignment.”

Ufa, with its significant Bashkir population, was one of three ARA districts inhabited largely by Muslims. The strong Islamic presence made local relations with Moscow especially delicate, which complicated the task of the relief workers. Bell wrote, “The diplomatic entanglements involved make the Peace Conference seem like a well conducted private school.” Fortunately for the ARA, Colonel Bell proved to be not only a master of efficiency but a master diplomat in his dealings with even the roughest backwoods commissars. Part of the secret to his success was his ability to hold his liquor: It was said that he could drink any Bolo chief under the table.

**Medical Relief and Food Packages**

Food might save hundreds of thousands of children from starvation, but an equal number might be carried off by hunger-related diseases. To meet this danger, the ARA mounted a large-scale medical relief effort, one of two large supplementary programs it carried out in Russia. Russia’s cities had seen epidemic outbreaks of typhus, relapsing fever, cholera, smallpox, and typhoid during its civil war, but these had largely subsided by 1920. The famine portended a second, much deadlier wave of pestilence. Cholera posed the most immediate threat, but there was far greater concern about an inevitable and looming epidemic of typhus, which was in fact to become the chief object of the ARA’s medical program. Disease prevention featured an aggressive inoculation drive beginning in the winter of 1922. The vaccine employed was designed to immunize against cholera, typhoid, paratyphoid, and dysentery.

The other large supplementary activity was delivering food packages. Here the ARA adapted its traditional practice to Russian circumstances by creating a food remittance program, which worked as follows: Relatives, friends, and other benefactors could put money down for a package at the ARA’s New York headquarters or one of its European offices. A statement of payment would then be sent by ARA courier to Moscow headquarters, which would in turn contact the appropriate provincial ARA office, where the responsible
While motives are possible—and more so when that organization is from a Communistic Soviet government official be expected to think that all human conduct is guided as an A-B-C principle that all human conduct is guided by the relief effort and, where possible, to take the credit for the Soviet government.

The point was to minimize Bolshevik embarrassment caused by the relief effort and, where possible, to take the credit for the Soviet government.

In response, in late winter 1922, Colonel Haskell decided to bypass the Soviet government and launch an ARA advertising campaign. He held a competition among Moscow artists for the best poster design (see the two winning entries, above and on page 226). These posters were lithographed by the hundreds of thousands and posted onto both doors of every freight car leaving the ports. Aside from providing free publicity, these cars were to be given preference along the railway lines. A train of these cars thus outfitted must have attracted attention, but it was not a spectacle many had the chance to witness. Most of the posters were torn down very soon after leaving port. Haskell blamed the Soviet authorities, accusing them of removing the offensive ornaments at the first railroad junction. When the ARA learned of this practice, it distributed posters to all junction points along the line.

Of course, after the ARA withdrew from Soviet Russia in the summer of 1923, its reputation and its legacy were vulnerable to every kind of Soviet slander. By the 1930s the party line instructed that the purpose of Hoover’s ARA in Russia had been espionage under the cover of philanthropy. For the most part, though, the ARA mission was purposely ignored by the Soviet authorities and thus slowly forgotten by the Soviet people. This and the eclipse of Herbert Hoover’s humanitarian achievements go a long way toward explaining why the tale of the ARA’s Russian adventure has slipped into obscurity.