

# Whiting Williams and the Holodomor: A Biographical Essay

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## SUMMARY

The distinction of having the first photographs depicting scenes from Ukraine's Holodomor published in the Western press may belong to Whiting Williams. Several of his photos from an August 1933 visit to Ukraine appeared early in 1934 as illustrations to his articles in a British weekly, *Answers*. A longtime resident of Cleveland, Ohio in the US, the author was an established writer and speaker best known for his work in management consulting. He was particularly interested in improving labor management relations and traveled throughout the US, Europe and elsewhere, going undercover as a common laborer in coal mines and steel mills to learn about workers' primary concerns related to their jobs. In 1933, Williams returned to the Donetsk coal mining region in Ukraine, where he had spent time with the area's miners on the eve of the introduction of the USSR's first Five Year Plan in 1928.

Shocked by the greatly worsened human conditions he discovered that summer in 1933, he managed to take a few photographs which he put together with his personal observations for potential publication in the US. Much to his surprise, however, he could not find a publisher. Finally, the London-based *Answers* accepted his story along with eight photographs, which appeared in two consecutive issues in February and March, 1934.

## LIFE AND WORK UNTIL 1933

Charles Whiting Williams was born in 1878 in central Ohio into a prosperous family that valued entrepreneurship and participation in civic life. At Oberlin College, where Williams completed both his A.B. and M.A. degrees, he became involved in the Social Christianity movement, which promoted active engagement through philanthropy, education, and other service to society. He then spent nearly two decades in a variety of career settings before taking a position as personnel director of a steel company. To better understand the worker's perspective regarding labor management decisions, he committed himself to first becoming a genuine "participant observer."<sup>1</sup> Starting in 1919, he spent several weeks at a time disguised as an ordinary steel mill or coal mine laborer in the US, and later took on similar roles in the mines of England, France, and other countries, including in the Donetsk mining region of Ukraine in 1928. In Ukraine, he made every effort to speak one-on-one, if at least briefly, with a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> Wren, Daniel A., *White Collar Hobo : The Travels of Whiting Williams*.

workers, who were initially very skittish and evasive for fear of being overheard by informants and the Soviet secret police, the GPU. In fact, Williams himself was once taken in for intensive interrogation after he drew a crowd of inquisitive miners who wanted to know about conditions in the US.<sup>2</sup> In his conversations with the Donetsk miners, Williams repeatedly heard the same bitter complaint: that although the government promised vacations, cultural activities, and entertainment, the workers were not earning enough to stave off hunger or purchase basic necessities for themselves and their families.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the decade, Williams published books and numerous articles on the needs of workers, management skills development, and on improving labor-management relations based on conclusions from his experiences throughout the US and Europe. Before long, he achieved the status of sought-after consultant and frequent public speaker as well as a lecturer at prestigious US business schools.



#### UKRAINE: REALITY, REPORTING, RESISTANCE<sup>4</sup>

*“That the truth should be told.”*

During the depth of the world depression, Williams took another trip to Europe. After spending some time assessing new political and labor developments related to Hitler’s ascension to power, he returned to the Donetsk region for several days in August 1933 as part of a two-week visit to Ukraine. Williams was curious to see how the miners he had met in 1928 were faring at the end of Stalin’s first Five-Year

Plan. What he had seen in 1928, just prior to the implementation of Stalin’s first five-year plan, had been grim, but what he saw in 1933 was an unbelievable tragedy: he witnessed scenes of young and old alike lying dead or dying on the back streets of Kharkiv, Kyiv, in the Dnipro Hydroelectric dam vicinity, and Horlivka and Donetsk (then Stalino) in the Don basin. He heard countless stories of mass starvation in the villages. What Williams encountered during this visit left him overwhelmed with sorrow and anger. How, he wondered, could he unburden himself “of the huge and terrible load of human misery, suffering and death which that week packed into my soul”?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, “A Talk with the Workers of Soviet Russia and Fascist Italy,” 18.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, 151.

<sup>4</sup> Garland, *Portrait of Whiting Williams*.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, Whiting, untitled draft.

Williams was stunned not only that he had been so uninformed of what to expect, but now that word was getting out, there was no international campaign to assist the starving, as was organized during the 1921 famine. Williams kept a diary of his impressions from this trip, and as soon as he returned home began writing about what he felt was essential for the American public to know. In September he submitted an article with an unspecified number of photos to the *Saturday Evening Post*, a well-regarded weekly with a substantial readership, which had recently published a piece he had written on another worker-related topic. He closed his letter accompanying the submission by stating that the article would “doubtless keep me out of Russia as long as the present regime stands. But that, nevertheless, seems to me less important than that the truth should be told.”<sup>6</sup> Within a few days, the article was turned down because the editors didn’t want to “overdo it” on “unfavorable” articles about Russia.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, *Colliers*, another popular weekly that had published several articles by Williams, turned down his manuscript on conditions in Ukraine with a vague excuse.<sup>8</sup>

Williams was finding that his accounts were often met with disbelief – particularly of the estimates of millions dead. Some who cast doubt were recent tourists to the USSR who had been taken to carefully selected sites and were not permitted to explore on their own. Others were committed supporters of the Soviet regime. Still others considered their business relationships with the Soviet Union of paramount importance. Others were simply skeptical. It was also a time of heightened debate on whether the US government should establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Some prominent newspaper editors such as William Allen White and Henry Justin Allen supported recognition, while at the same time maintaining that the horrific loss of millions of lives to famine in the Soviet Union was a cost partly balanced by the surge in employment opportunities in Soviet industry.<sup>9</sup> As his acquaintance photographer James Abbe (also represented in this Directory) wrote by way of introducing him to a potential publisher, Williams “discovered to his astonishment that American public sentiment had swung over to the Bolos and so far no paper has had the courage to buy [his article.]”<sup>10</sup> Williams was dismissed as sensationalist because so few corroborating accounts had made it into public circulation in the US at that time. Walter Duranty, the *New York Times*’ influential correspondent in Moscow, was echoing the Soviet government-controlled press while people lay dying on the streets: “the best crop in 50 years!”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, Whiting, “Letter to Thos. B. Costain.”

<sup>7</sup> Costain, Thos. A., “Letter to Whiting Williams.”

<sup>8</sup> Morris, Frank D., “Letter to Whiting Williams.”

<sup>9</sup> Saul, Norman E., *Friends or Foes? The United States & Russia, 1921-1941*, 286.

<sup>10</sup> Abbe, James, “Letter to H. Hessel Tiltman.” ‘Bolo’ was a derogatory slang term for Bolshevik, or member of the Communist party.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, Whiting, “High-Spot”; Williams, Whiting, “The Workers’ View of Europe,” 20.

With a good word put in by James Abbe, Williams found a British publisher that agreed to publish his manuscript and eight photographs, with stylistic revisions, as a two-part series in the London-based weekly *Answers* in early 1934.<sup>12</sup> In the meantime, he described the suffering he witnessed in Ukraine in his self-published newsletter,<sup>13</sup> and worked the topic briefly into articles comparing European and US approaches to solving the economic problems of the day, for example, in *Nation's Business*<sup>14</sup> and the *Cleveland*,<sup>15</sup> and into his speeches to business and civic groups.

#### PHOTOGRAPHY IN UKRAINE

*“ She’s always also suggesting this and that photo”*

Strictly an amateur “snapshot” photographer, Williams managed to take a few photos on both his 1928 and 1933 trips to Ukraine that he brought back to the US. Many of the photos were deemed permissible by the Soviet government informants-as-interpreters who chaperoned Williams throughout most of both visits. In an entry in his 1933 diary, Williams wrote that his chaperone “drives me crazy by asking eternally if I don’t think this, that, and t-other fine and beautiful and unique... She’s always also suggesting this and that photo – till I wish I could ask – ‘Are you telling me?’”<sup>16</sup> In 1928, Williams returned home with numerous photos of himself seated alongside miners he met in Horlivka and of workers on the job at a nearby steel plant.<sup>17</sup> In 1933, he took a posed shot of workers drafted from the city to help with the harvest at a collective farm on the tourist circuit<sup>18</sup> and of a smartly dressed traffic officer against the backdrop of the Derzhprom, the futuristically designed new government complex in Kharkiv.<sup>19</sup>

However, Williams also succeeded in photographing a handful of forbidden subjects. For example, during his 1928 visit, he captured long lines outside the Horlivka unemployment office<sup>20</sup> and village women being solicited to buy government bonds to subsidize the purchase of American machinery.<sup>21</sup> On the back of a photo of a train locomotive, Williams wrote: “Anyone taking a photo of Russian engines is likely to be looked upon as a spy of the ‘Ring of Capitalist Enemy Nations around us’.”<sup>22</sup> This caption, however, did not make it into the 1928

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<sup>12</sup> Williams, Whiting, “My Journey Through Famine-Stricken Russia”; Williams, Whiting, “Why Russia Is Hungry.”

<sup>13</sup> Williams, Whiting, “High-Spot.”

<sup>14</sup> Williams, Whiting, “The Workers’ View of Europe.”

<sup>15</sup> Williams, Whiting, “Don’t Forget the Individual.”

<sup>16</sup> Williams, Whiting, “Diary,” 5: 14.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, Whiting, *Photographs*.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, Whiting, “Why Russia Is Hungry,” 3.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, Whiting, “My Journey Through Famine-Stricken Russia,” 17.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, Whiting, *Photographs*.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, Whiting, “What If the Soviet’s Machine Gods Fall Down?,” 322.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, Whiting, *Photographs*.

article published with the photo.<sup>23</sup> In 1933, he managed to document long lines to buy food, a child lying dead along a city curbside, and homeless children being carted out of Kharkiv.<sup>24</sup>

Several photos from his first visit to the Donetsk mining region appeared in articles published in the *Nation's Business* (1928)<sup>25</sup> and *American Machinist* (1930).<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the only pre-WWII publication known to include his 1933 photos was the two-part series *Answers*, described above. His correspondence with publishers all mention an unspecified number of photographs from 1933, but it may never be confirmed whether those that appeared in *Answers* comprise the extent of his 1933 photos. Original prints of seven of the eight photos in *Answers* (not counting the two portrait photos of Williams himself) are held in the Photograph and Print Collection of the Western Reserve Historical Society (WRHS) in Cleveland, Ohio. Additional undated photos from Williams' visits to Ukraine, the Donetsk region in particular, are also included in the WRHS Collection and primarily depict men and women in their industrial work environments. Most of these are likely from 1928, based on their similarity to photos used in pre-1933 publications; further work is needed to positively date the remaining.

*"officers in Packards, and poor devils starving"*

In his writings, Williams frequently points out the stark and "amazing" contradictions that characterized Soviet life in 1933: "parks and filth – flowers and obscene effluvia [,] palaces of labor, shovels, officers in Packards, and poor devils starving."<sup>27</sup> And many of Williams' photographs similarly belie his verbal accounts: We see the smiles of city women who had been drafted to help bring in the harvest as they pose at a model collective farm; a young shoeshine boy beams at Williams as he polishes a traffic officer's boots. But of course, the women must smile for the visiting tourists, although many, as Williams was told, will take months to recover from the physically demanding work they are unaccustomed to. We also see photographs that portray shocking although not necessarily self-evident content. Without an explanation, we'd have no idea why a cartful of children is seen on a city street, or why a child is lying along a busy curb with people gathered around. As Susie Linfield points out, "We as viewers must look outside the frame to understand the complex realities out of which these photographs grew."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Williams, Whiting, "Russia and Italy Pin Their Hopes on America's Ways of Work," 26.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, Whiting, "Why Russia Is Hungry," 3; Williams, Whiting, "My Journey Through Famine-Stricken Russia," 17, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, Whiting, "Russia and Italy Pin Their Hopes on America's Ways of Work."

<sup>26</sup> Williams, Whiting, "What If the Soviet's Machine Gods Fall Down?"

<sup>27</sup> Williams, Whiting, "Diary," 5: 8.

<sup>28</sup> Linfield, Susie, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, 51.

Upon exiting Ukraine in late August, 1933 Williams presented an unremittingly bleak verbal portrait to the American consul in Poland. Both workers and peasants, he reported, appeared “completely helpless and without hope. Their only interest is in a plea, not a struggle, for existence... They are crushed.”<sup>29</sup> The Consul’s report concluded with Williams’ remark that “the Soviet organization at Moscow is the most unscrupulous and the cruellest [sic] organization for the exploitation of the laboring man, whether industrial worker or farm peasant, that the world has ever seen.”<sup>30</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although his Ukraine-specific article and photographs had limited circulation, Williams continued to discuss, defend, and identify accounts that corroborated what he saw in 1933 in Ukraine. It was entirely plausible, in his opinion, that the conditions of 1933 could continue in 1934, depending on the Kremlin’s policies. Following the publication of his articles in *Answers*, he was in contact with the Ukrainian Bureau, an information and advocacy service in London, which put him in contact with similar organizations in the US.<sup>31</sup> In 1934, the United Ukrainian Organizations of the United States was sufficiently impressed by Williams’ account in *Answers* that it reprinted the entire text of both articles in a pamphlet dedicated to spreading the word about the famine.<sup>32</sup> However, no photographs were included. In fact, no evidence has been found to date that any of his famine-related photographs were republished later that decade. He corresponded with individuals in Great Britain who were attempting, unsuccessfully, to organize relief for the famine victims. He was aware of a diaspora Russian organization in the US trying to aid the hungry in Russia, and also directed inquiries to them.<sup>33</sup>

As a seasoned professional investigator, Williams was determined to provide a factual, first-hand account from the worker’s perspective of what a typical physical laborer in 1933 Ukraine was really experiencing – on the job and in his social and civic environment. The accounts he succeeded in publishing, however, were soon overshadowed by other events. Decades later, documentary research as well as the testimony of survivors and other witnesses have corroborated his observations.

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<sup>29</sup> U.S. Consul General, Warsaw, “Strictly Confidential Report to Department of State,” 4–5.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Consul General, Warsaw, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Gibson, Louise, “Letter to Whiting Williams.”

<sup>32</sup> *Famine in Ukraine*, 15–27.

<sup>33</sup> Like most people of his time, Williams understood Ukraine to be a district or province of Russia. Although he visited only Ukraine in 1933 and was told the situation was most severe there, he, like others, tended to extrapolate the experience of Ukraine to all of Russia.

For the rest of his life, Whiting Williams would continue to write and speak with his trademark down-to-earth humanism and humor on labor, the economy, and business-government relations, passing away at the age of 97 in 1975. His biographer Daniel A. Wren justifiably focuses on Williams' pioneering contributions in the field of labor-management relations. Regrettably, however, he barely mentions Williams' experiences in Ukraine and ignores his efforts to publicize the conditions of famine and misery he had witnessed. In fact, Wren's brief summary includes significant factual errors regarding the Famine and world response.<sup>34</sup>

It is extremely fortunate, therefore, that before his death, Whiting Williams and his family donated his collected photographs and writings to the Western Reserve Historical Society's Research library in his hometown of Cleveland, where the archive has been carefully cataloged and preserved for public use.<sup>35</sup> The records held there, including his correspondence, diary, and unpublished manuscripts, further substantiate his published accounts. Moreover, they offer a window on the political and social attitudes of the day that prevented his reporting on conditions in 1933 Soviet Ukraine from getting the front-page, sympathetic response he anticipated. The WRHS library staff has been most helpful in making accessible Williams' unique contributions, both to our understanding of the conditions of the working classes in Ukraine during the Holodomor and how opinion and policy makers in the West responded.

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<sup>34</sup> Wren, Daniel A., *White Collar Hobo : The Travels of Whiting Williams*, 106. E.g., In a total misinterpretation of Williams and disregard of well known historical fact, Wren writes: "The Americans, despite their own problems, were sending relief to Russia, just as they had done in the post-Russia revolution famine of 1921." There was no US government aid sent to the USSR during the 1932-33 famine; only very small scale private efforts were undertaken with limited success. Furthermore, Williams pointed out this fact in his own writings.

<sup>35</sup> "Finding Aid for the Whiting Williams Papers."

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