

THE GREAT FAMINE

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When a devastating famine descended on Soviet Russia in 1921, it was the worst natural disaster in Europe since the Black Plague in the Middle Ages. Half a world away, Americans responded with a massive two-year relief campaign championed by Herbert Hoover, who was chairman of the American Relief Administration, known as the ARA. The ARA's nearly 300 American relief workers, known as "Hoover's boys," would be tested by a railroad system in disarray, a forbidding climate, and—being among the first group of outsiders to break through Russia's isolation following the Bolshevik Revolution—a ruthless government suspicious of their motives. By the summer of 1922, Americans were feeding nearly eleven million Soviet citizens a day in 19,000 kitchens. *The Great Famine* tells this riveting story of America's engagement with a distant and desperate people—an operation hailed for its efficiency, grit and generosity—within the larger story of the Russian Revolution and the roots of the US-Soviet rivalry that would dominate the second half of the twentieth century.

Known as "the Great Humanitarian" for his relief work during and after World War One, Herbert Hoover is said to have saved more lives than any person in history. Hoover was president during the Great Depression a decade later and, when Americans went hungry, their memory of all the others he had fed began to fade. However, Lenin's government never recognized America's humanitarian motives and saw the relief workers as exploiters and spies. The Cheka, Lenin's secret police, kept a watchful eye on the Americans and especially on the 120,000 Russians they hired to do the work. White Russians and aristocrats, the losers in Russia's brutal civil war, were hired because they were educated. The Bolsheviks feared the ARA was training them as counter-revolutionaries.

The Great Famine focuses on two relief workers, 29-year-old Will Shafroth and 47-year-old Walter Bell. Shafroth's district of Samara was known as "the Volga famine." One of the most affected areas, it was divided into 8 regions, each with at least one warehouse, and each village had a committee of local citizens who decided who got fed. Shafroth would supervise 16,000 Russians in 900 kitchens. Walter Bell's district grew to be the largest, spanning an area larger than France, from the Ural Mountains from Ufa in the west beyond Ekaterinburg in the east to the edge of Siberia.

Based on *The Big Show in Bololand* by Bertrand M. Patenaude, *The Great Famine* is told through film and photographs from American and Russian archives, interviews with survivors and with Russian and American historians, and the writings of the relief workers. Some scenes were filmed in the foothills of the Ural Mountains outside Ufa, Bashkortostan, where some of the worst of the famine occurred.

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CREDITS

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