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## In China 'never again' is happening again



*A large screen displays in image of Chinese President Xi Jinping in November in Kashgar, a city in the Xinjiang autonomous region of China. (Bloomberg/Bloomberg)*

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

Because I write books about Soviet history, and because I often speak about them to U.S. or European audiences, I am frequently forced to confront the problem of Western indifference. Why, I am asked over and over, did British diplomats who knew about the man-made [Ukrainian famine](#) of 1932-1933 do nothing to stop it? The Catholic Church at that time was also aware that millions of Soviet citizens were dying because Joseph Stalin's state had confiscated their food. Why did it not galvanize Europeans to send grain?

Many are intrigued and horrified, as am I, by the story of Walter Duranty, then the New York Times Moscow correspondent, who covered up the story of the Ukrainian famine, though he knew it was happening. Many are impressed when they read about Gareth Jones, the Welsh freelance reporter who [told the truth about the famine](#) but was not believed. So fascinating is the contrast between them that a [new film](#) (“Mr. Jones”) has been made about them, more than 80 years after Jones’s death.

Usually, when asked why Jones was ignored, or why the Vatican and the British foreign office kept silent, I explain that 1933 was also the year of Adolf Hitler’s rise in Germany, so newspaper editors were distracted. Diplomats were already worried they would soon need Stalin as an ally. “Realists” such as [the French politician](#) Édouard Herriot — he made a trip to Ukraine in August 1933 and declared that he had found not hunger but “a garden in full bloom” — wanted their countries to trade with Russia. Besides, Ukraine, a distant Soviet republic, was a place that seemed alien and uninteresting to people in London, Paris and New York, most of whom probably felt they couldn’t do much about people suffering there anyway.

The audiences I speak to are sometimes unsatisfied with these answers. They want to talk about the perfidy of the Left or the New York Times, or they want to blame the U.S. president at the time, Franklin D. Roosevelt. But blame is easy. Far more difficult, both for them and for me, is to admit something more profound: That precisely the same indifference, and the same cynicism, exist today.

Yes, the West looked the other way during the 1930s, when people were starving. But the West is also looking the other way in 2019, refusing to see the concentration camps in China’s Xinjiang province. These camps have been designed to suppress the Uighurs, a Muslim ethnic minority whose status in China in some ways resembles that of Ukrainians in the old U.S.S.R. Like the Ukrainians who did not want to be Sovietized, the Uighurs do not want to be fully absorbed into the Chinese state. Like the Soviets, the Chinese have responded with repression. Previous Chinese leaders sought to flood Xinjiang with ethnic Chinese, the same tactic they used against Tibetans. More recently, the state has grown harsher, creating camps where at least 1 million Uighurs undergo forced indoctrination designed to eradicate their language and culture.

In truth, we know far more about these camps, and about the accompanying repression, than anyone in 1933 knew about the famine in Ukraine. They have been extensively described in the world’s media, including [the New York Times](#) and [The Post](#). Government bodies have studied them, too. Canada’s Parliament recently [produced an account](#) of the suppression of the Uighurs that is far more comprehensive than anything Jones ever wrote. The report is one of many to describe the massive surveillance program that China has imposed in Xinjiang, using not only old-fashioned informers and police checkpoints, but artificial intelligence, phone spyware and biometric data. Every tool that a future, larger totalitarian state may use to control citizens is currently being tested in Xinjiang.

Under “terrorist” legislation in Xinjiang, anyone can be arrested for anything — for expressing an allegiance to Uighur culture, for example, or for reading the Koran. Once inside the “re-education” camps, arrestees are forced to speak in Mandarin Chinese and made to recite praises of the Communist Party. Those who break the rules receive punishments no different from those

meted out to prisoners in the Soviet Gulag: “They put me in a small solitary confinement cell,” said one former prisoner cited in the Canadian report, “in a space of about two by two meters. I was not given any food or drink, my hands were handcuffed in the back, and I had to stand for 24 hours without sleep.”

As in the 1930s, there are explanations for the world’s lack of outrage. Newspaper editors are distracted by bigger, more immediate stories. Politicians and foreign policy “realists” would say there are more important issues we need to discuss with China: Business is business. Xinjiang is a distant place for people in Europe and North America; it seems alien and uninteresting. None of that changes the fact that in a distant corner of China, a totalitarian state — of the kind we all now denounce and condemn — has emerged in a new form. “Never again?” I don’t think so: It’s already happening.

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