

Perhaps never before in history — at least in the history that we know about — has there been so deep a cleavage as this.

— DEWITT CLINTON POOLE

MAYNARD BARNES: Our problem is to learn the idiom of dealing with Russia. We know the language already, don't we George?

GEORGE KENNAN: We do.<sup>1</sup>

## I

### The Breach: The Riga Axioms

BY OCTOBER 1917, the moment was ripe.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin left his hiding place in Finland and returned to Petrograd, formerly St. Petersburg, despite an order out for his arrest. On October 10, disguising himself with a wig, he made his way to a meeting of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party, which, responding to months of taunts and cajolery from him, at last voted 10 to 2 to prepare an armed insurrection against the Provisional Government. Hardly a formidable opponent, the Provisional Government had held power only since the overthrow of the Czar the preceding winter, and it had already lost most of its authority and will to rule. Early on the morning of October 25, the Bolshevik forces, meeting little resistance, seized strategic points in Petrograd. In the afternoon Lenin proclaimed the triumph of the workers' and peasants' revolution. Late in the evening, the Winter Palace, last stronghold of the Provisional Government, fell to the rebels. A new revolutionary state had been born.

Autocracy would give way to totalitarianism. What had been the empire of the Czars was to become the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics, a change that would, of course, transform the lives of the many nationalities that inhabited that vast territory. It would have, as well, great impact on international politics. But what kind of impact? And what role would the Soviet Union play in the interna-

tional system? "I will issue a few revolutionary proclamations to the peoples of the world and then shut up shop," announced Leon Trotsky, upon becoming the first People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs. Yet, in April 1922, the second People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Georgi Chicherin, showed up at the Genoa Conference wearing the top hat of bourgeois diplomacy and speaking not only fluent French, but also the traditional vocabulary of international politics.<sup>2</sup> Was the USSR a state in the service of an ideology, or an ideology in the service of a state?

That question — which turned on an assessment of the character of this political entity, its objectives and capabilities — emerged in the 1940s as the single most important problem facing those responsible for American foreign policy. It remained such through the 1970s. But for the first two decades after the Great October Revolution, the question was urgent only to a more limited circle of American officials.

When Joseph Grew was a junior secretary in the American embassy in St. Petersburg during 1907–8, he presented himself in full court regalia, including fore-and-aft hat and gold sword, and mixed with his Russian counterparts at the yacht, tennis, and polo clubs. The Bolshevik Revolution rudely shattered these pleasant customs. "Profoundly disgusting" was the way Grew described Western negotiations with the successor to the Czarist state at Genoa and Rapallo in 1922.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1920s, a new "Soviet Service" developed in the State Department; it was anti-Bolshevik and opposed to diplomatic recognition of the USSR. Cohesive, with a strongly articulated sense of identity, this group advocated a policy of sophisticated anticommunism in an axiomatic form. Its outlook was based on personal experience, assessment, study, and pessimism. As U.S. leaders attempted, after World War II, to analyze Soviet policy and select an appropriate American course, this group's position provided one end of the spectrum of the debate. Eventually its axioms triumphed. Or, rather, they triumphed again, for they had held sway during most of the interwar years, when they had little competition, and before the problem of the Soviet Union had moved to the fore.<sup>4</sup>

Initially, American officials saw the Bolshevik Revolution as a dou-

ble betrayal. The revolutionaries made peace with the Germans at Brest-Litovsk early in 1918 and withdrew from the war, hurting the Allied cause. The Bolsheviks had also destroyed the hopes for the budding Russian democracy by overturning the liberal regime, which in its few months of existence had at last removed the Czarist stigma from the coalition meant to make the world safe for democracy. There was even the possibility of a third betrayal — that Lenin was a German agent.

American policymakers refused to recognize the new regime, in part because they hoped that it would be short-lived. The idea was shared by "practically all of us," recalled DeWitt Clinton Poole, who worked on Russian affairs in the State Department after World War I, "that the cure for Bolshevism was prosperity and good order and that Bolshevism would disappear under those conditions." There was, in Poole's words, a "breach between the Bolsheviks and the rest of the world." In an important memorandum addressed to his superiors in the State Department, in August 1919, Poole marshaled the arguments against giving diplomatic recognition to this "unconstitutional" regime: "Their aim is world-wide revolution . . . Their doctrines aim at the destruction of all governments as now constituted." <sup>5</sup>

This outlook was widely accepted in the government and, instead of recognizing the Bolsheviks, the State Department set up a Division of Russian Affairs, with a mandate unusual for its time: to study and interpret the great mass of often contradictory information that made its way across the breach from this new Russia. It called upon the services of professors like Samuel Harper, of the University of Chicago, one of the first academic experts on Soviet Russia.

The U.S. maintained an observation post in the American mission in the Baltic port city of Riga, which was, through the interwar years, the capital of the independent republic of Latvia. Founded in 1201 by German merchants, tucked into a gulf at the very eastern end of the Baltic Sea, Riga still resembled a city of northern Germany, with narrow cobbled streets, gabled towers, and tiny squares. It was in this mission during the 1920s that much of the research on the Soviet Union was conducted, personnel trained, and fundamental attitudes formed and nurtured; and it was from the mission that there issued constant warnings against the international menace. For these reasons, I have associated place with ideas and linked Riga to the axio-

matic outlook of the Soviet Service in the State Department, although the ideas would receive further elaboration and gain new intensity in the latter half of the 1930s.<sup>6</sup>

The new Bolshevik regime, surviving civil war, famine, and intervention, had consolidated its power by the mid-1920s. In 1924 the Russian Division in the State Department was absorbed by the Eastern European Division, which continued to focus on the new state. Robert F. Kelley, who became the chief of the Division in 1926 and directed the creation of the Soviet Service, was the guiding force. A tall, taciturn former military attaché, educated at Harvard and the Sorbonne, Kelley spoke and read Russian flawlessly and was familiar with Russian literature. He felt that any analysis of the new regime should be based upon facts and study, not emotions, and he emphasized academic-style analysis. He oversaw the development of the Russian section at Riga, which eventually prided itself upon being, at least in economic matters, the equal of any of the leading academic research centers.

Even the stabs at humor in Riga tended to be rather grim. "We used to practice our Russian and sharpen our wits," George Kennan once recalled, "by drafting *Pravda* editorials in which we announced the reinstatement of capitalism in Russia and claimed it was a tremendous triumph for socialist construction and maintained only the Soviet system was able to bring to the people of the world the advantages of capitalist initiatives without throwing them open to exploitation."<sup>7</sup>

Though insisting that emotions had no place in analyses, Kelley was known even in the Department for his pronounced antipathy toward the "Boles," as he called them.<sup>8</sup> "The fundamental obstacle" to recognition, Kelley believed, "is the world revolutionary aims and practices of the rulers of that country." Under him, throughout the 1920s, the Division regularly turned out papers against diplomatic recognition. "I trust you noted the two interviews from the White House re our Russian policy," Kelley wrote to Samuel Harper in March 1925. "They could hardly have been more to the point — yet certain *dark forces* persisted in misconstruing them . . . Our policy is not, or was not, a Hughes policy, but a Wilson-Colby-Harding-Hughes-Coolidge-Kellogg one." And two years later he confidently added, "There is no change in our policy toward the Soviet regime — none is under contemplation."<sup>9</sup>

Although Kelley's influence was apparent to all who worked under him, he had special influence on those he referred to as "my boys," the young State Department officers who went through a study program in Russian language, culture, and history that he initiated in 1928.<sup>10</sup> The emphasis was rightly on "Russian," for in many ways the program was an exercise in nineteenth-century nostalgia. He insisted that the two officers chosen for it each year emerge with a background similar to that "of a well-educated Russian of the old, prerevolutionary school." It was not only the education — in Berlin for George Kennan, in Paris for Charles Bohlen and the others — that shaped the outlook of these young officers; their first contacts with Russians were with White refugees. They became friends and identified with these anticommunist but "highly cultured Russian émigrés." They also trained in the Baltic republics which, with large émigré populations, were much more like Czarist Russia than anywhere in the Soviet Union; the ambience underscored for these Department men the existence of the "breach" Poole had described. "The Russian intelligentsia before the Revolution constituted one of the most remarkable collections of men that the world has seen," Bohlen wrote in his memoirs. The new Soviet specialists felt, in some small sense at least, that they themselves were émigrés from this Czarist past.<sup>11</sup>

This left the Americans with an attitude toward the Soviet Union compounded of fascination and distaste, which continued through the decades. In these early years Russia was already the consuming interest not only of their professional lives but of much of their personal lives as well. Nevertheless they generally opposed recognition as an unnecessary concession, even though nonrecognition kept them out in Riga or elsewhere, looking in. Echoing Robert Kelley, Kennan recalled in his memoirs: "Never — neither then nor at any later date — did I consider the Soviet Union a fit ally or associate, actual or potential, for this country."<sup>12</sup>

But with the Roosevelt Administration in 1933 came recognition. For one thing, pressure from market-hungry businessmen had been mounting. For another, both Roosevelt and, more reluctantly, Secretary of State Cordell Hull regarded nonrecognition as anomalous and of doubtful moral utility. The Soviet Union had not disappeared, nor could it be ignored as a factor in world politics. Roosevelt felt that recognition might be useful to the U.S. in dealing with problems in

Europe and, more particularly, in the Far East. The Russians, although they wanted expanded trade, also wanted relations with the United States to help balance the growing Japanese threat in Asia. As early as December 1931, Premier Molotov had characterized the Manchurian situation as the "most important problem of our foreign policy." Roosevelt bypassed State in the actual negotiations, first using William Bullitt, then taking charge himself. In an effort to deflect domestic criticism and "satisfy at least a majority of our people" — if not such implacable opponents as former Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby, who in 1920 had enunciated a powerful nonrecognition stand and now in 1933 denounced Russia as an "enemy state" — Roosevelt obtained from Soviet Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov a number of guarantees, of which the most important were a Russian promise not to meddle in domestic American politics and a vague "gentleman's agreement," tying a U.S. loan to a Soviet assumption of the debts of Kerensky's Provisional Government. These agreements, however, ended up causing more problems than they solved.<sup>13</sup>

Roosevelt selected Bullitt, who had become a foreign policy adviser during the 1932 campaign, as the first American ambassador to the Soviet Union.

Bullitt was a charming, but restless, ambitious, and erratic man, subject to great swings of emotion, from intense loyalty to profound hatred. He had been a member of the American delegation to the Versailles peace talks after World War I. In February and March 1919, he had journeyed to Russia for secret but officially approved talks with Lenin and other Bolsheviks; he had returned with what he regarded as sound terms for a political truce between the Bolsheviks and the victorious Allies. But Woodrow Wilson and David Lloyd George had repudiated him, and in May 1919 he submitted his resignation. He had been "one of the millions" who had trusted in Wilson, he wrote to the President, adding, "I am sorry you did not fight our fight to the finish." Convinced that he had been personally betrayed, Bullitt attacked Wilson and the Versailles settlement in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, then wandered back to Europe to mingle with its upper classes.

He had, for almost fifteen years, lived with the bitter memory. Now, with this new mission, he could prove himself right and Wilson wrong; he could absolve himself and make the great reputation that had been once denied him.

Arriving in Moscow in December 1933, Bullitt had the honor of being greeted in his hotel lobby by Marx — by Harpo Marx, who had arrived in the Russian capital at the same time. Both men were received warmly by the Bolsheviks. Harpo delighted a small audience one evening by "extracting" knives, spoons, and forks from Litvinov's clothes. Bullitt thought he would be able to delight the audience back home by extracting from Litvinov and the rest of the Bolshevik leadership some ill-defined concessions and prizes.<sup>14</sup>

The Americans had arrived at a very curious moment in the history of the Soviet Union. Late 1933 and 1934 provided a respite for the Soviet Union, a break between terrors. It was a pause between the two phases of Stalinization. The revolution mandated from above — industrialization and collectivization — had taken a terrible toll. Collectivization had not only created one of the worst famines in all of Russian history, but had also led to the deportation and deaths of millions of farming people — an "ethnic catastrophe" in Solzhenitsyn's phrase.

But, in these first months of the new American embassy, the pressure on both the land and industry had been reduced. The great famine was easing, the new Five-Year Plan was more realistic, the economy was recovering, and conditions of life improving. Repression was less in evidence.<sup>15</sup>

These changes had effects on diplomacy. The Soviet leaders, Bullitt immediately reported, were "intelligent, sophisticated, vigorous" men, who could not be "persuaded to waste their time with the ordinary conventional diplomatist." Fortunately, they were "extremely eager" for contact with "anyone who had first-rate intelligence and dimension as a human being. They were, for example, delighted by young Kennan, who went in with me." Convinced that he had "the inside track," Bullitt imagined that he was picking up with Stalin where he had left off with Lenin. "I want you to understand that if you want to see me at any time, day or night," Stalin assured him, "you have only to let me know and I will see you at once." Bullitt informed Roosevelt that Stalin was like "a wiry Gypsy with roots and emotions beyond my experience." The ambassador marveled at the "magnificent forehead" of Molotov, who reminded him of a "first-rate French scientist, great poise, kindness and intelligence."<sup>16</sup>

The intellectual heritage of the Russian experts assumed less importance as the members of the embassy staff, operating under the

spell of Bullitt's charm, were caught up in the ambassador's enthusiasm and hopes. During this honeymoon, Moscow appeared colorful, cozy, even pleasurable. Discussion went on endlessly. Russian officials, including prominent Bolsheviks like Nikolai Bukharin and Karl Radek, came to dinner at Spaso House, the ambassador's residence, formerly the home of a rich vodka merchant; and they would stay to watch new films sent from Hollywood at Bullitt's behest. The ambassador also imported polo equipment, to teach the game to Red Army officers and thus win their friendship. The American air attaché, Thomas White, was allowed to keep his plane in Moscow, the only private aircraft in the entire country. Although Kennan asserts in his memoirs that his orientation was firmly fixed before he arrived, the evidence, including his own testimony, indicates that there was indeed a departure from the attitudes of the 1920s: "It was in truth a wonderful exciting time . . . an example of what Soviet-American relations *might*, in other circumstances, have been . . . Most of us look back on those days, I suppose, as the high point of life."<sup>17</sup>

Within a year, the honeymoon ended in bitter squabbles. Stabilization in the Far East removed the need that had been felt by both sides for a major understanding. In December 1934, Sergei Kirov, the Leningrad party leader, was assassinated, setting off a long train of accusations and arrests that culminated in the purges of the Great Terror.<sup>18</sup>

The small American diplomatic colony, however, blamed the deterioration on Russian violations of the Roosevelt-Litvinov agreements. Much time was spent on the essentially trivial matter of Soviet assumption of the Provisional Government's debts, but no conclusion was reached. Roosevelt, who was willing to take "a very liberal view" of any settlement, left most of the negotiating to Bullitt. The ambassador took an opposing stance, however, and became increasingly angry at the Soviet refusal to see the matter his way.\* "Any representative of the Soviet Union who suggests [direct credits] should, I think, have his face stamped on promptly," he advised.

\* Initially Bullitt did make a distinction between ethnic Russians and a Soviet minority, based upon a certain obvious prejudice. Some official Soviet nastiness, he complained to R. Walton Moore, resulted from "the influence of Mr. Umanski, the wretched little kike . . . The Foreign Office, as you know, has been purged recently of all its non-Jewish members, and it is perhaps only natural that we should find the members of that race more difficult to deal with than the Russians themselves. The Moscow Soviet, which is straight Russian, has been altogether friendly and cooperative." Bullitt was apparently unaware that Stalin shared his prejudice.

The debt question was shelved at the beginning of 1935. Most of the Americans, not recognizing any inconsistency in their own position, blamed the Russians for bad faith.<sup>19</sup>

Bullitt viewed it as a piercing personal insult, as well as a violation of the most important of the agreements, when the Communist Third International, otherwise known as the Comintern, invited a contingent from the American Communist Party to attend its Seventh Congress in Moscow. He failed to see that the convocation, held in Moscow in the summer of 1935, was belated penance for the hostility of the Sixth Congress in 1928, which had attacked social democrats as "social fascists," split the left in Europe, and thus helped open the way for Adolf Hitler's accession to power. This Seventh Congress was meant to change the party line with a call for broad antifascist popular fronts.<sup>20</sup>

Bullitt now swung to the other extreme. He raised with Washington the question of breaking diplomatic relations.<sup>21</sup> He wanted to attack Moscow from Moscow; he encouraged journalists to write anti-Bolshevik articles; he "deviled" the Russians. He no longer had any desire to stay in Russia.<sup>22</sup> He was in ill-health, and feared the psychological consequences of remaining in Moscow. The Polish ambassador had already suffered a nervous breakdown, and the British ambassador seemed close to one on the day he confided to Bullitt, "I feel like a prisoner pacing my garden between banks of snow, unable to escape." In March of 1936, Bullitt wrote plaintively, "Russia is a good country for pine trees, St. Bernard dogs, and polar bears, and I must say frankly I long to be at home again." In the middle of the year he left Moscow for good, and assumed the ambassadorship in Paris.<sup>23</sup>

The repudiation by Wilson and Lloyd George at Versailles now paled before the much greater rejection he felt the Russians had dealt him. It was as though promises made to him personally had been broken. He left, hurt, insulted, embittered. In October 1934, while the honeymoon was still on, in what was an optimistic report about Soviet developments, he had written: "No generalization on the Soviet Union can have more than momentary validity." But within a few months he himself had adopted generalizations to which he would cling for the rest of his life. Before departing Moscow in 1936, he summarized his views. Nothing remained of the Bullitt of 1919: "The problem of relations with the Government of

the Soviet Union is, therefore, a subordinate part of the problem presented by communism as a militant faith determined to produce world revolution and the 'liquidation' (that is to say, murder) of all non-believers." In the face of this danger, there was little the United States could do save "to encourage reconciliation between France and Germany." Bullitt, and apparently some of those he left behind in the embassy, believed that only Nazi Germany could stay the advance of Soviet Bolshevism into Europe. "With respect to the Soviet Union," he had written the year before his departure, "the countries of Europe are rapidly falling into the situation of the squabbling city states of Greece with respect to Macedonia. Athens and Sparta, France and Germany, Philip of Macedon — Stalin. I don't like the comparison but can not get it out of my mind."

With Bullitt's departure, the career officers in the embassy dug in. Bullitt's opinions were fully in accord with, and indeed partly shaped by their own, and they were prepared for their little Cold War with the Soviet authorities. Several months after Bullitt's departure, Arthur Bliss Lane, the American minister in Riga, noted that there was no change, "even a particle [in] the policy which was pursued by the former Ambassador since the disillusionment of 1935." The hard line was supported almost wholeheartedly in the embassy. If one had taken a snapshot of the career staff sometime during those first couple of years of relations, it would have shown many of the men who were to become the State Department experts on Soviet and communist affairs in the middle and late 1940s, the era of the origins of the Cold War and the rise of the national security state.<sup>24</sup>

Loy Henderson, one of the founders of the Soviet Service and a major figure in the history of the Foreign Service, was already emerging as the leader of this loosely defined but highly influential group; he was a man of strong opinions, considerable ability, steadfast loyalties, and an integrity that impressed those who worked with him throughout the State Department. As Lane commented: "Mr. Henderson, through his tact, ability, and firmness, has made an enviable reputation for himself." Born in the Ozarks, Henderson always thought of himself as coming from "the old pioneering culture which had to go" but nonetheless resented the "urban blight" that "helped to destroy the code of ethics and ideals." A stiff right arm, the result of boyhood roughhousing, kept him out of the Army during World

War I, so he joined the Red Cross, worked in repatriating Russian prisoners, and then — fearing that the Bolsheviks might capitalize on misery — helped deliver relief assistance to Lithuania in 1919. During the next few years, he was a witness to abortive leftist uprisings in Germany. Almost from the beginning, then, he had concluded that Bolshevik Russia was a threat to world peace and stability. Joining the Foreign Service, he started working on Soviet affairs in 1925 and was assigned to the Riga observation post. He became a fascinated but unsympathetic and, in the Kelley tradition, unemotional student of Soviet affairs. In Moscow he became the senior political officer, and, in effect, embassy administrator as well.<sup>25</sup>

If Henderson was the dominant member of the group, George Kennan was its chief ideologue. The Foreign Service was for him almost a family, a home, and this was important to a man who always tended to feel like an outsider. This feeling had already developed by the time he was a Princeton undergraduate in the early 1920s; indeed, upon reading the description, by fellow Princetonian F. Scott Fitzgerald, in *The Great Gatsby* of a Midwesterner's reaction to the fashionable East, Kennan was moved to tears. He was taken by the notion that he would follow the course of a relative with whom he shared a birthday, another George Kennan — cousin of his grandfather, traveler and diplomat in late Czarist times — and become a major figure in the history of Russia and the West. So he would. Throughout his diplomatic career, the younger George Kennan attached himself as a kind of court intellectual and explicator to men of power. He was known as "Bullitt's bright boy." In 1935, when Kennan was recuperating from an illness in Vienna, Bullitt wrote back to Washington: "He is the best officer I have had here and I could release *two* officers when he returns. But I want to be sure he can stand Moscow. The climate is not easy. It is now May 10 and we have had snow five times this week. I want to have Kennan but not kill him." Troubled by ulcers, with an expression that seemed somewhat ascetic, Kennan struck others as arrogant, high-strung, ambitious, and very bright. A fitness report from Riga in 1933 listed these qualities: "excellent mind, supple and penetrating, and well balanced, save perhaps for a tendency . . . to entertain intellectual concepts rather emotionally, and to be a trifle more enthusiastically idealistic or more hopelessly cynical, than would be the case if he were a little more mature." Kennan liked to think of him-

self as a realist, with a keen eye for power and the less obvious traits of a man's character; but as one historian has written, "In George Frost Kennan, the Presbyterian elder wrestled with the Bismarckian geopolitician." The struggle within him was joined as well by a romantic who fancied a "mysterious affinity" with Russia and imagined himself friend and heir to the cultured turn-of-the-century intelligentsia, whose way of life had been destroyed by the Bolsheviks.

He cared much about style, in both personal manner and his prose; he had a fondness for the upper classes around the world. Much later in life, he described himself as "a conservative person, a natural-born antiquarian, a firm believer in the need for continuity across the generations in form and ceremony." Like Henderson, he felt that he had not only left and lost his American roots, but that America had left him. And like the White Russians with whom he mixed so happily and nostalgically in Berlin and Riga, he too was an émigré, though his was an exile of the spirit.<sup>26</sup>

Two others in this imaginary snapshot stand out. Charles Bohlen was, in background and approach, the perfect exemplar of the diplomat, a graceful, charming master of technique, less emotional and less committed than his peers, "most capable" but with an "apparently carefree attitude" (in the words of one American in Moscow). His father had been a gentleman of leisure, and he had traveled a good deal in Europe with his mother, receiving part of his education there. His friends at Harvard, from which he was graduated in 1927, became bankers, lawyers, and stockbrokers; Bohlen joined the Foreign Service. Two years after Kennan, he entered the Russian specialization program. Kennan attributes to him "a leading place in the formative influences" on his own understanding of Soviet communism. Yet at first, because he was slightly less in thrall to the Riga heritage, his views were not so well defined; he was more willing to follow the lead of others, neither tied to one position nor feeling the need to take a position, more adaptable to changing lines.<sup>27</sup>

Elbridge Durbrow, a short, energetic, voluble Yale graduate who had served in Rumania and Poland, was skeptical from the beginning. He did not have the same academic training as those from Riga, and was always outspoken, blunt, and categorical in his views. In his first year and a half, as vice consul in Moscow, he listened to perhaps 200 workers from the U.S., either Russian-born or native American, who had been lured to the Soviet Union during the

Depression by the false promise of high-paying jobs. "I learned a lot about the damned place, talking to those guys who were workers and wanted to go back to the U.S.," he recalled. "The Revolution didn't have a good reputation . . . When you once went there and lived and looked out the window and saw what the hell it was like, it confirmed your worst fears."

The American mission was in the new style; continuing the Riga tradition and having little consular work, it allowed its members to engage in study and analysis. The discussions and debates went on daily, endlessly, in the embassy. "There were differences between us," Loy Henderson remembered. "While we all agreed what was the situation in the Soviet Union, the differences were about the extent to which we should allow the situation to affect relations between the U.S. and the USSR." The environment encouraged a common view among the officers; their "education," after the pleasant confusion of the honeymoon, led them back to a simplification, to a restatement of the Riga axioms. Alexander Kirk, Charles Thayer, Edward Page, and others who served there in the 1930s for the most part shared the same ideas. One of the few exceptions was the chief military attaché, Colonel Philip Faymonville. He lived apart, and the opinion in which he was held by the others is suggested by the brief description in Bohlen's memoirs: "pink-faced."<sup>28</sup>

Certain factors reinforced the cohesiveness of the group and its outlook. The living conditions made the embassy staff feel isolated, even embattled; they perceived themselves under siege, as if in rehearsal for the Cold War. Informal socializing with Russians ended, and the American diplomats could not join a sports club. Food was bad, the Russians were truculent, and life was not easy. Harassments of all sorts increased. Observation and spying became so obvious that at one point Kennan recommended against having an ambassador in Moscow at all.<sup>29</sup> It was like living in a land where "you were officially billeted as a sort of representative of the devil, evil and dangerous, and to be shunned," he wrote in a 1938 memoir. "Personal friendship, like some powerful curse, would spell ruin for those to whom it attached itself."

The effects of the purges, with their great trials and sudden disappearances, on the image of the Soviet Union held by the American diplomats cannot be exaggerated. The assassination of Kirov inaugurated a second phase of Stalinism — the orgy of terror, now directed

against the apparatus of state and party. The unprecedented and spectacular show trials — conducted not only in the major cities but in almost every *oblast* — delivered their requisite output, an endless series of perfectly outlandish confessions, which “proved” that Trotskyites and foreign agents honeycombed Soviet society with their conspiracies. Millions suffered directly in this holocaust. In the simple words of Roy Medvedev, “Between 1936 and 1938 Stalin broke all records for political terror.” Dread became a basic ingredient of Soviet life. By 1939 the purges had helped to establish firmly a highly centralized, bureaucratic, terror-driven totalitarian state, and the entire nation had become the servant of the state and of its ruler.

How could one react to this spectacle, save with shock and horror? The terror accentuated all the fears of the American diplomats; in its total impact, it erased whatever doubts the men in the Soviet Service may have had about the character of the regime. It was as though they were watching some barbaric blood sacrifice. “No one seems to know who will be the next to disappear,” Henderson wrote Robert Kelley in April 1937. “Since, during the last ten years, it has been almost impossible for anyone to survive in the Soviet Union unless he broke a law now and then, and since nearly every person at some time or another in an unguarded moment has made statements critical of certain policies or Soviet leaders, there is practically no one who does not have a guilty conscience.” Henderson discounted one explanation of the purges; he did not think that Stalin was anti-Semitic, though he did think it likely that Stalin would be “impatient and distrustful of persons with the mentality possessed by so many Eastern European Jews.” But he admitted that those in the embassy could not explain the “weird developments” taking place. “It would almost appear as though Stalin is trying to discredit some predecessor who has been ruling the country unwisely for the last 15 years.” Still, on balance, Henderson believed at the time that there might be some truth in the charges. “Undoubtedly by this process many thoroughly rotten branches are being lopped off the Soviet tree. One is beginning to wonder, however, how much hacking and pruning will be necessary before good solid wood is to be found.”

Well into 1938, the debates continued in the Moscow embassy: Why did the purges start? What was their aim? Was Stalin mad? Did he have some other plan in mind? How much truth was there in the charges? Kennan, assigned back to the State Department in

Washington, occupied himself during much of the hot summer with the hundreds of pages of testimony from the Radek trial, studying everything he could find on opposition activities since the death of Lenin, using note cards and chronologies in an effort to reconstruct something that “made more sense than the monstrous accusations and absurd confessions which were put forward for the edification of the outside world.”<sup>30</sup>

The American specialists found their place on the periphery of these events disorienting, even shattering; they lost whatever channels and contacts they once had had into Soviet society. By 1937 the purges had made their isolation virtually complete. Former friends would purposely turn away at the opera. By then it was already well known that the favored method of execution was a bullet in the back of the head. The mysterious “Baron” Boris Steiger, the only trusted informal link to the Kremlin and the conduit for delivering Edgeworth pipe tobacco from the American embassy to Stalin, told Charles Thayer, “It is very dangerous weather, very treacherous. At times like these one must be very careful to protect the back of one’s head.” Soon after, Steiger was tapped on the shoulder while dining with some Americans at the Hotel Metropole; his execution was announced a short time later. “No arrest in recent years, not even that of the highest Soviet officials, has made such an impression upon the Diplomatic Corps,” Henderson reported. Steiger was the only Soviet official who had ever talked with a foreign diplomat “as though he were an intelligent human being,” Henderson added. “The others continuously told him things which only a person with a childish intellect could believe.”

The Americans learned that, one after another, many of the highest officials — civilian, military, even secret police — were arrested, tried, executed, or had simply disappeared. One of the most searing experiences was the trial whose defendants included the Bolshevik theoretician Bukharin, with whom some of the Americans had found communication possible, even entertaining. Bohlen listened as Bukharin dueled with the prosecutor, Andrei Vyshinsky, in some language he could not understand. When he finally heard the sentences in this trial — “to be shot . . . to be shot . . . to be shot . . .” — he felt dizzy, as though his head were coming off, and for a month after he could not easily sleep.

The Americans felt that those Bolsheviks whom they might in



some ways have respected and talked to — the intellectuals, those that were civilized and cosmopolitan — had all been wiped out. Stalin, in contrast, seemed irrational, fanatical, with a lust for power that knew no bounds, with a ruthlessness that was total and an incapacity for trust that was complete. In his memoirs, Kennan seems to backdate his conclusion, but nevertheless to assess accurately the ultimate impact of the trials: “a sort of liberal education in the horrors of Stalinism.” Stalin was not merely a dictator, he was a tyrant. Those who did survive in positions of leadership seemed so mediocre and intimidated, so compromised, that their consciences and minds must have been heavily mortgaged to the General Secretary of the Party. In the most fundamental way, there seemed something totally corrupt about Stalin and his entourage. Ever after, the American specialists could not, no matter what the circumstances, think of Stalin and his associates without recalling the blood on their hands.<sup>31</sup>

Leninism had posed the first of the crucial questions about the Soviet Union — what was the relationship between its ideology and its behavior in the international system? Now Stalinism underlined in a stark fashion the second of the two questions — what was the connection between domestic totalitarianism and Soviet foreign policy? As with the first, there was no easy answer. Certainly, the American diplomats were correct in their judgment about the corruption of the Stalinist system. Indeed, if anything, they were restrained, for they were able to see only the surface of the terror, for it has taken many years since for Westerners to begin to learn the full extent of Stalin’s tyranny. Still, those diplomats concluded that the connection between the character of the state and its foreign policy was necessary and complete, that a totalitarian system at home meant a totalitarian foreign policy. If their answer was too categoric, even mistaken, one can understand — seeing what they did of collectivization, of the purges, of the daily life of terror and hypocrisy — why they came to it.

The group’s sense of unity was made even stronger by what it felt to be attacks coming from another source as well — Washington, D.C. These “attacks” heightened its feeling of isolation, and confirmed its perception that the New Deal was an enemy. The first blow came in the figure of Joseph Davies, Bullitt’s much-resented successor as ambassador. Conventional Cold War history, like the Riga School itself, has portrayed Davies as naïve, muddle-headed,

and dishonest — a dangerous, meddling fool. That view is inaccurate.<sup>32</sup> Davies, a Wisconsin lawyer who had made a fortune representing Standard Oil and had married a General Foods heiress, had remained a staunch progressive. As a reward for serving as one of Woodrow Wilson’s campaign managers in 1912, he had been offered the Moscow ambassadorship after Wilson’s victory, but opted instead for the chairmanship of the Federal Trade Commission. During World War I, he became devoted to the future presidential prospects of Assistant Navy Secretary Franklin D. Roosevelt. Eventually one of the largest contributors to Roosevelt’s presidential campaign chests, he was chosen to replace Bullitt in Moscow. Preceded by rumors that he would be accompanied by “5 servants, 25 ice boxes and a thirst for entertaining,” he arrived in the Russian capital early in 1937. He opened himself to a certain kind of ridicule — he spent much time on his yacht anchored at Leningrad, and because of a bad stomach he ate frozen foods shipped from abroad. On other matters the ridicule was misspent. He was not completely hoodwinked by the purge trials. His dispatches show the same confusion as did those of the career officers. He found the trials “horrible” and a “shock to our mentality,” and declared that “the terror here is a horrifying fact.” The Soviet Union, he said, was “a tyranny, without any protection whatever to the Proletariat of ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’”

But Davies’ political role clashed with the traditional career mission of Foreign Service officers. He was not sent to Moscow to study and analyze and report facts but, in the context of Roosevelt’s growing concern with the European crisis, “to win the confidence of Stalin.” His messages were composed not only for an audience in Washington but also for one in Moscow; he was sure the Russians would get wind one way or another of what he was saying. But before Davies got to Moscow, the officers, angered by what they took to be Roosevelt’s slighting of the new traditions of the Soviet Service by the dispatch of this “unserious” ambassador, were already making fun of him, raising complaints and planning revolts — to such an extent that Loy Henderson felt the need to send around a sharp memorandum, prior to Davies’ arrival, ordering the staff to treat the new ambassador with respect.<sup>33</sup> Although the open complaining was reduced, the basic animosity did not abate. Only Loy Henderson, though convinced that Moscow was not a place for ambassadors

“with a political turn of mind,” succeeded in establishing a more cordial relationship.\*

The others, especially Bullitt’s former protégé, George Kennan, resented Davies’ close relationship with British and American journalists and his tendency to review developments with them rather than with the staff. Moreover, Davies rejected their outlook: he thought the fundamental tenets of the “revolutionary state” were wrong. He believed that communism by its nature had to fail, that Stalinist Russia had retreated into state socialism, that it was not necessary to fuss about the Comintern because its influence was small in America, and that communism was not a threat to the United States. He also thought Soviet Russia could prove an important factor in the power equation on the European continent. The embassy staff endured all this only with reluctance; they were greatly relieved when he was assigned to Brussels in 1938. Davies thereafter remained for the Soviet specialists the archetype of the fuzzy-minded American liberal who refused to see the truth as they saw it.<sup>34</sup>

The diplomats were also shocked and upset when, in 1937, the State Department’s European Division absorbed the Eastern European Division, which had nurtured them and shaped the tradition in which they worked. “We have been liquidated,” Robert Kelley wrote. They perceived the amalgamation as a threat to their own expertise, and were dismayed at what seemed to be Kelley’s enforced transfer to a post in Turkey. The group suspected a “plot” by left-wing New Dealers, perhaps even Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins.<sup>35</sup>

Yet it seems that the Riga group had misconstrued the “plot.” The sudden action — it had been effected largely over one weekend — was a coup of sorts, part of a struggle between Assistant Secretary of State Sumner Welles on one side, and, on the other, Hull and R. Walton Moore, also an Assistant Secretary of State.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the Mexican Division had been eliminated a short time before and the dismantling of the Eastern European Division was part of the same effort to make the Department more efficient.

There had been considerable unhappiness with the insularity of the Eastern European Division. Arthur Bliss Lane, for instance,

\* Indeed, when Davies died two decades later, Henderson was one of his pallbearers.

whose anticommunist credentials were impeccable, had been complaining for some time that those who worked in it, “as a result of overspecialization on Russian affairs, have come to think in terms of Russia as a separate entity, rather than in terms of Russia’s relationship to Europe and the rest of the world.” The Division could not comprehend, he declared, “that the Eastern European area (with the possible exception of Russia) is in itself perhaps the least important of all the areas in the world with which the United States has to deal.” \* “I entirely agree with you as to the narrowness of the system which seems to have grown up in the Eastern European area,” James Dunn, a senior official of the European Division and a strong anticommunist himself, wrote to Lane. Conservative men continued to direct the Department’s policy toward Russia, and Kennan in fact was brought home to assist in the enterprise.<sup>37</sup>

Such changes, however, were more organizational than ideological. Circumstances and experience had confirmed predispositions and reinvigorated what had been the dominant American diplomatic response to the Bolshevik Revolution. By the end of the 1930s, the image of the revolutionary state and the ideas associated with it had become firmly fixed in the minds of the Soviet specialists and in those of people, like Bullitt, who had “learned” with them. “I am inclined to believe that all of us who have been in close contact with the thing itself gradually come to a common point of view,” Henderson observed in 1940. “There are a few exceptions among the chaps who are emotional and likely to become prejudiced.” So codified had these beliefs become that we can now lay them out as axioms — though we must be careful not to confuse axioms with blinding dogma.<sup>38</sup>

Doctrine and ideology and a spirit of innate aggressiveness shaped Soviet policy, the specialists believed. Thus, the USSR was committed to world revolution and unlimited expansion. In consequence, the United States, not just the countries around the Russian rim, was under siege and had to be continually vigilant. The “breach” of 1919 was still very real, to be bridged only by a major transformation.<sup>39</sup>

\* We shall have occasion to return to this statement when we consider the controversy between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II.

Curiously, however, for all their fanatical devotion to ideology, the Soviet leaders were cool thinkers, much cooler than their Western counterparts. "They are realists, if ever there are any realists in this world," wrote Ambassador Laurence Steinhardt, Davies' successor, in 1940. The Soviet leaders always set their goals with supreme clarity. To an extent greater than that of most countries, Henderson wrote in 1936, Russian policy "has before it a series of definite objectives." Soviet officials are judged by "the progress" they can make "in the direction of those objectives." The Russians were always surefooted, and were masters of strategy and tactics.

The historian must here observe that the axiomatic notion that the Soviets worked by a foreign affairs plan, derived from ideology and with definite objectives, not only gave them more credit than they deserved, but also proved to be a central weakness in the assessments of Soviet policy after the war. For it led U.S. officials to exaggerate the policy coherence of the Kremlin — the role of ideology and conscious intentions. At the same time they understated the role played by accident, confusion, and uncertainty in Russian policy and also mistook mere reaction for planned action. A similar pattern, no doubt, would exist on the other side; what Americans would regard as their efforts to muddle through, in response to this or that problem, would be seen by the Soviets as part of a larger calculated policy. Indeed, one might even go further and hypothesize that there is a general tendency in international relations to exaggerate the policy coherence of an adversary.

In the eyes of American officials in the 1930s, the Soviet Union was also dangerous and untrustworthy because it was a completely immoral state, placing no value on human life. The effect of Stalin's terror was a powerful one. In 1938, Kennan recalled how he would gaze out from his window on Red Square and the "snow-covered towers . . . with the big Asiatic carrion-crows wheeling overhead against a leaden sky, as though they sense that they were over one of the bloodiest spots in the world." The image of the carrion birds was appropriate in another way, for the Russians were the scavengers of war and international crisis. "War will mean such horrible suffering that it will end in general revolution," Bullitt wrote in 1936. "The only winners will be Stalin and Company."<sup>40</sup>

Underlying all these assumptions was a view of the collective "personality" of the Soviet leaders. Aggressiveness and insecurity

coexisted in their minds in such a way that they were geared for permanent warfare. It should be considered "axiomatic," Henderson wrote in 1938, that the Soviet leaders regard the presence of foreign diplomats "as an evil which world conditions force them to endure." Such attitudes on the part of the Russians made impossible almost any kind of constructive relations with them.

The American officials believed that the Soviet outlook reflected a merger of Bolshevik doctrine and practice with Russian national character. In a lecture delivered in 1938, important because it shows the origin of his postwar "Mr. X" article and the Freudian concepts that influenced it, Kennan chose to skip over the "hackneyed question of how far Bolshevism has changed Russia" to take up instead the question of "how far Russia has changed Bolshevism." The natural environment, especially the Asiatic frontier (generating fear, concern for "face," and a "vague feeling of universalism"); the Black Sea civilization; the Byzantine Church (with its adherence to dogma and its intolerance and intrigues); the backwardness of the country as compared to the West — all these had given rise to a state "with a very definite personality." Kennan continued: "After all, nations, like individuals, are largely the products of their environment; and many of their characteristics, their fears and their neuroses, as well as their abilities, are conditioned by the impressions of what we may call their early childhood." He saw powerful continuities, both in internal and foreign affairs, of life under the Czars and under Stalin.<sup>41</sup>

Confronted by such a potential adversary, the United States needed to adopt a stance of wariness and constant vigilance. Great patience and a counterassertiveness, an explicit "toughness," were required to cope with the Russian "personality." Steinhardt wrote to Henderson in October 1940: "Approaches by Britain or the United States must be interpreted here as signs of weakness and the best policy to pursue is one of aloofness, indicating strength . . . As you know from your own experiences, the moment these people here get it into their heads that we are 'appeasing them, making up to them or need them,' they immediately stop being cooperative . . . My experience has been that they respond only to force and if force cannot be applied, then to straight oriental bartering or trading methods . . . That, in my opinion, is the only language they understand and the only language productive of results."<sup>42</sup> The conclusion, therefore,

was that diplomacy with the Soviet Union was not merely a questionable venture, but downright dangerous.

By the end of the 1930s, the Soviet specialists and those associated with them held a fully developed image of the Soviet Union as a world revolutionary state. It was an elaboration of the outlook associated with Riga, emerging from the original Wilsonian nonrecognition of the Bolshevik Revolution, but intensified by their experience since recognition, especially by the only partly glimpsed horrors of Stalinism. The diplomats had a language for describing Soviet Russia and its role in international relations, and they had an idiom as well, as Steinhardt had declared, for speaking to the Russians.

The Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact, initialed in Moscow on August 23, 1939, was not the shock to the Soviet specialists that it was to the Popular Front left. As early as May 1937, Henderson had predicted "extremely interesting developments in Soviet-German relations during the next two years." He did not think that the Soviet Union would "formally drop its international revolutionary ideas and adopt a frankly dictatorial form of government" to appease the Nazis, but it might subordinate the German communists to the exigencies of an "understanding" if Hitler would show greater friendship toward Russia and gradually stop "his campaign against international Jewry." Henderson explained: "Please don't gather the impression from the last condition mentioned that I feel that the Soviet Union is being dominated by the Jews. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the Soviet Union realizes that, by and large, the international Jewry is an important supporter of it in international affairs, and I further believe that it would prefer, at the present time at least, to continue to have bad relations with Germany than to allow the internationally-minded Jews of the world to feel that it has left them in the lurch."<sup>43</sup>

The events that followed the 1939 pact — the Soviet role in the partition of Poland, the winter war in Finland, the annexation of the Balkan states and Bessarabia — all of these steps involving deportations and further extension of the terror — confirmed the Riga viewpoint, and gave its advocates the confidence to speak even more categorically. The war with Finland, in general, mobilized anti-Soviet sentiment in the United States and chilled Russo-American relations. The abhorrence that had fed DeWitt Clinton Poole's strictures two decades before returned, and with greater force.<sup>44</sup>

Even at the highest levels the Riga image regained acceptance. In the middle of 1940 Loy Henderson challenged his superiors: "Is the

Government of the United States to apply certain standards of judgment and conduct to aggression by Germany and Japan, and not to Soviet aggression?" The answer came now: Germany and Russia were two of a kind; they were totalitarian dictatorships. Cordell Hull, on the eve of the German invasion of Russia, summarized the knowledge gleaned in the 1930s: "Basing ourselves upon our own experiences and upon observations of the experiences of other governments," U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union called for making "no approaches to the Soviet Government," treating any Soviet approaches with reserve, and rendering "no sacrifices in principle in order to improve relations."<sup>45</sup>

These axioms seemed to explain satisfactorily Russia's role in world politics and to delineate an appropriate course for the United States to follow. They dominated interpretations of events until the German invasion of Russia in the night of June 21-22, 1941.<sup>46</sup> With that, the Riga axioms suffered a startling loss of relevance. A new phase began in Soviet-American relations, which led to an experience radically different from that of the Soviet Service during the interwar years. A fresh image, based upon other assumptions, came to the fore. In addition, procedures were established for handling political problems that bypassed the State Department.<sup>47</sup>

Those who had been on the front lines of the small interwar cold war now found themselves sidetracked. Their interpretations and explanations no longer fitted the situation. The men who had formulated them feared that Roosevelt was a deluded dreamer, that he was following the mistaken and dangerous path of Joseph Davies. But it did not matter what they thought; they had become an ineffective opposition. Henderson fought as hard as he could against the new Roosevelt policy and the practices that would implement it. He did not want to see the United States "scrap these principles [of] normal international intercourse," but he knew that policy was not being devised "by such persons like myself, but by the highest authorities of our Government." He wrote to Samuel Harper in March 1942, "These are interesting times here in Washington, but you may be sure of one thing — it is not the most agreeable situation in which to carry on." Finally, overruled too many times, he decided to carry on no longer. Having asked to be relieved of his duties as head of the Russian section of the European Division in 1943, he was exiled to the post of chief of mission in Iraq.

Charles Bohlen succeeded him in Washington, and, initially at

least, continued to argue the Riga view. However, Bohlen was co-opted into Roosevelt's immediate foreign policy circle and became liaison man between the State Department and the White House. As such, his attachment to the Riga axioms relaxed, and he found himself accepting with cautious optimism Roosevelt's assumptions. In February 1945, George Kennan wrote Bohlen a personal letter in which he called for a spheres-of-influence division of Europe, but really for the formation of an anti-Soviet bloc. Kennan criticized Soviet influence in Eastern and Central Europe as "so dangerous to everything which we need to see preserved in Europe."

"I don't believe for one minute that there has been any time in this war when we could seriously have done very differently than we did," Bohlen wrote back. "Isn't it a question of realities and not bits of paper? Either our pals intend to limit themselves or they don't. I submit, as the British say, that the answer is not yet clear. But what is clear is that the Soyuz [Soviet Union] is here to stay, as one of the major factors in the world. Quarreling with them would be so easy, but we can always come to that."<sup>48</sup>

Kennan had laid out his own opposition almost four years earlier in a letter to Loy Henderson, two days after the German attack on Russia. In every border country in Europe "Russia is generally more feared than Germany." To welcome Russia "as an associate in defense of democracy" would be to identify the United States with Soviet oppression of Eastern Europe and with the domestic policy of a regime "which is widely feared and detested throughout this part of the world." Kennan was not alarmed, in the early days of the war, by the exercise of German power on the European continent. "It cannot be said that German policy is motivated by any sadistic desire to see other people suffer under German rule," he wrote in April 1941. "On the contrary, Germans are most anxious that their new subjects should be happy in their care; they are willing to make what seems to them important compromises to achieve this result, and they are unable to understand why these measures should not be successful."<sup>49</sup> Kennan was, in fact, primarily occupied with non-Russian subjects during the war, first in Germany (where he was interned for a time after America joined the war), then in Lisbon and London until the summer of 1944.

Elbridge Durbrow did eventually become head of a reconstituted Eastern European Division, and warnings continued to flow from the

State Department, as they had in the time of Kelley, regarding Russia's revolutionary goals, its lust for power and territory, its duplicity, and the dangers of appeasement. The alarms were not heard.

United States policy toward the Soviet Union was now out of the hands of the State Department. In an environment sharply transformed from that of the interwar years, the Riga School was being made obsolete by the bold new span Roosevelt was constructing to bridge the breach between America and Russia in the postwar era.<sup>50</sup>