WITNESS TO HISTORY

1929–1969

Charles E. Bohlen

WITH THE EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE OF

Robert H. Phelps

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Editor's Note

This book was written in an unusual way. Chip Bohlen does not type, and his handwriting, the product of St. Paul's and Harvard, is illegible. Thus he turned, as others have, to a tape recorder. He dictated some 600,000 to 700,000 words, following fairly closely the chronology of his career. Then began an eleven-month chore in which I asked questions—probing, needling, pleading—in an attempt to clarify thoughts, correct errors, fill in holes. The replies were taped, transcribed, and worked into the original manuscript, which was then re-edited and boiled down to perhaps 400,000 words. Over the next year and a half, we went through this process two more times, with me asking questions, Chip dictating answers into the recorder, and me re-editing the manuscript. The final product, this book of about 220,000 words, is truly Chip's—he did the research, he wrote the words, he checked the facts. As the catalytic agent and surgeon, I can express only admiration for his dogged performance and unfailing good humor under a waspish tongue and sharp knife.

ROBERT H. PHELPS

Foreword

This book is a collection of personal reminiscences and observations based on nearly forty years in the United States Foreign Service. It is a memoir of a diplomat lucky enough to have witnessed and participated in every major development in American-Soviet relations from 1929 to 1969.

This book is not, nor does it attempt to be, a history of American-Soviet relations, although every paragraph is wrapped in the history of those momentous years. While fate presented me with an unusual observation point, at the side of great leaders as they made decisions of incalculable consequences, every witness is limited. Other eyes see a different picture; other ears hear a different sound; other minds conceive a different situation. Thus I recognize that this book cannot truly be a balanced history.

This book is also not an analysis of the merits and demerits of American and Soviet policy, although I have not hesitated to point out mistakes that were made by myself, as well as others. My memoirs are not designed to be an apology for American policy or an attack on revisionist historians. I have tried only to relate, explain, and interpret events as I saw them.

The impressions I have sought to convey of the men I worked for in the American government—Presidents, Secretaries of State, and other high officials—are contemporary with their periods of service. I have sought whenever possible to avoid hindsight and ex post facto judgment of individuals. Therefore, my appraisals of the men who led the United States during this period should not be considered conclusive. They represent the opinion of one who had the privilege of working closely with them.

Because the material I had to work with was so vast, selection had to be somewhat brutal. Personal experiences were included only if they were germane to the general theme of American-Soviet relations. My ambassadorships to the Philippines and France were given relatively less space than the years there would seem to call for. It was not possible to mention all my associates. Therefore I would like to pay tribute here to the excellence and loyalty of my staff, both Foreign Service officers and clerical personnel, at the three Embassies I headed, in Moscow, Manila, and Paris, as well as my assistants during my tours of duty in the Department of State.

My appreciation and gratitude also go to three men who read an early draft of the manuscript and offered many useful comments and criticisms. They are George F. Kennan and the late Llewellyn E. Thompson, both former ambassadors to the Soviet Union, who served with distinction in the Foreign Service, and Larry Smith, a historian at Dartmouth College who is now administrative assistant to Senator Thomas J. McIntyre of New Hampshire.

My thanks also go to Evan Thomas, vice-president of W. W. Norton & Company, who encouraged me to write the book and helped me over many a hump.

Finally, I find it difficult to express my deep gratitude to Robert H. Phelps, news editor of the Washington Bureau of *The New York Times*, without whose invaluable assistance and constant help this book would never have been written.

CHARLES E. BOHLEN

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CHAPTER ONE

The Smell of Makhorka

As dusk was settling on the Russian plains, the train from Warsaw to Moscow pulled into the Soviet border village of Negoreloye, and we jumped down to the station platform. It was my first step on Soviet territory, marking the beginning of my Russian experience, which was to last on and off, mostly on, for more than thirty-four years. No one can read the future—not even a shaman with his Siberian magic—and on that bright, snowy day of March 7, 1934, I was too excited by our arrival to look much beyond the opening in a few days of the first American Embassy in the Soviet Union. Ahead, however, was a close-up view of some of the major historic events of the twentieth century—Stalin's great purges; the Nazi-Soviet pact; the World War II summit conferences at Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam; the Marshall Plan; the cold war; the Berlin blockade; the downing of the U-2 spy plane; the Cuban missile crisis. The Soviet Union became the central factor of my life in the Foreign Service.

I had planned it that way, selecting the Soviet Union as my specialty and spending five years, from the time I entered the Foreign Service in 1929, preparing for a career dealing with Russian-American relations. I selected my specialty only after deciding to become a diplomat, and I cannot remember when or why I decided on such a career. Diplomacy certainly was not a popular career in the late 1920s, when isolationism prevailed in the United States. At that time of booming prosperity, most of my friends at Harvard, where I graduated in 1927 with a bachelor of arts degree, planned to go into the stock market, banking, or the law, with the overriding purpose of acquiring a fortune. Such a future did not appeal to me; I had no interest in business, no inclination toward any of the professions.

I did, however, possess a somewhat more cosmopolitan upbringing than most of my contemporaries, and this background may have predisposed me toward diplomacy. The second of three children, I was born in the family's summer home in Clayton, New York, on one of the Thousand Islands, on August 30, 1904. Both my father, Charles, a gentleman of leisure who had inherited a little money, and my mother, Celestine Eustis, who had been from her birth in New Orleans pro-French, enjoyed traveling in Europe, and usually took me and my brother and sister with them. My first trip there was made when I was eight years old; we spent the winter of 1912–13 in Vevey, Switzerland, where I was tutored by a Monsieur Robert, practiced my French, slid down snowy hills on my sled, and got fat on Swiss chocolate.

In succeeding years, I visited most of the Western European countries. My mother, who was by far more influential than my father with me, always made sure that France was on our itinerary. Her love for France stemmed from her French ancestry and from her four years in the American Embassy in Paris. Her father, a United States senator from Louisiana, had been named the first American ambassador to France by President Cleveland in 1893. Up to that time, all our representatives had held no rank higher than Minister. During his ambassadorship, my mother acted as hostess for the Embassy because my grandmother was dead. Her love for France sometimes bordered on the ludicrous, as her children well knew. Once, on a train from Cherbourg to Paris in the early 1920s, she pointed to a group of cows in a field and said, to our indignation, "You must admit that they are prettier than cows in America."

Thus I became oriented toward foreign countries at an early age. Even in college, this leaning did not result in any decision to become a diplomat, and on graduation, undecided about what I wanted to do, I jumped at the chance to work as an apprentice seaman on a tramp steamer which was making a six-month trip around the world. Nothing happened on the trip to end my uncertainty. On my return, I discussed on and off for the next few months various career possibilities with my family and friends. Someone suggested the Foreign Service and mentioned that my cousin, Mrs. William C. Eustis, who lived in Washington, knew people in the State Department. Mrs. Eustis arranged for me to see William R. Castle, the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs. It was this conversation at the end of the summer of 1928 that finally fixed me in my decision to become a diplomat.

An attractive, urbane gentleman, Castle spoke to me with frankness and understanding about the problems of the Foreign Service. He pointed out that with the passage of the Rogers Act of 1924, which established the career Foreign Service, the State Department could at last offer a respectable future to a young man with a genuine interest in foreign affairs. I was particularly concerned about pay. I was under the erroneous impression—popular even to this day—that without a private income no one could make a go of a career in diplomacy. Castle explained that the 1924 law provided for pay and allowances which, while not lavish, were sufficient for a decent living. There was every indication, he said, that conditions would continue to improve. He swept away my doubts, and I decided to try for the Foreign Service.

It was necessary then, as now, to pass an examination, written and oral. It was considered wise to attend a tutoring school in Georgetown run by an estimable gentleman from Virginia named Crawford with a fondness for bourbon whiskey and the Democratic party. He was a man of some erudition who usually had the will power to refrain from drinking during the two months of his course. In the presidential election of 1928, however, Herbert Hoover, a Republican, carried Virginia. The day after the election, Crawford came to class drunk, delivered an impassioned lecture on the "black shame of the Dominion of Virginia," then disappeared for a week.

With the help of Crawford's tutoring, I had no trouble with the written part of the test. In those days, the written examination was much easier than it is now. The questions I had to answer called for simple factual knowledge—such as matching a list of important military battles with dates. A revision of the exam, made soon thereafter by Professor Joseph Green of Princeton, was aimed at testing the ability of an applicant to reason and to write rather than to recall facts, and required essay-type answers.

The oral exam, which followed a few weeks after the written test, was not stiff, either. One question I answered incorrectly asked what percentage of the population of the United States lived on farms. The questions were put to me by a panel of representatives of the State Department, the Civil Service Commission, and the Department of Commerce. For me, the anticipation of this appearance was nerve-racking. I took a drink of bootleg gin in my apartment before going to the exam to give me courage. Apparently, someone on the board smelled the alcohol on my breath and argued, when my application was considered, that anyone who violated the nation's Prohibition

laws should be barred from the Foreign Service. Luckily, Castle was on the board and was able to persuade the other members to pass me.

Having successfully completed the exams, I was accepted into the Foreign Service on March 26, 1929. The first step in my training was a four-month stint at the Foreign Service School, which, like the rest of the State Department, was housed next door to the White House in a building of unsurpassed ugliness but of exceptional comfort. Now known as the Executive Office Building, it is an annex of the White House. At the Foreign Service School, the courses were primarily pragmatic, dealing with procedures such as handling visa applications and making out invoices. There was little discussion of foreign policy in general. The prevailing isolationist philosophy of the country was reflected in classes on how a diplomat should report political events overseas. He should report objectively and succinctly but under no circumstances take sides.

After Foreign Service School, the next step in my apprenticeship was to acquire some of the basic skills of the diplomatic art. The department believed that the best way to learn was under the watchful eye of an experienced officer. I was assigned for a few months to the staff of J. Theodore Marriner, the chief of the Division of European Affairs. Marriner, tall and courtly and possessed of great patience, taught me the rudiments of answering correspondence from American citizens. His constant admonition was to keep controversial issues quiet. There was a run of letters at that time from hard-shelled Protestants who feared that the United States was going to send a diplomatic mission to the Pope. Under Marriner's guidance, I drafted innocuous replies assuring those who had written warnings about the Pope that the State Department would consider their views.

Marriner was typical of the old-line diplomats who filled key positions in the department. Steeped in isolationism, they were interested in doing a good job for their country. (Marriner was killed in 1937 by a disappointed visa-seeker in Beirut, where he was consul general.) But the old-timers thought that America's responsibilities were not very great. The world seemed secure to them and the United States safe from attack as long as it kept its nose out of other nations' business. The two dominant world powers—Britain and France—were considered friendly, even though America had traditionally opposed colonialism, because they shared the same basic Western Christian democratic view of society. The other big countries—Germany, Italy, the Soviet Union, Japan, and China—posed no apparent threat at that

time. There was no need for the United States to assume a big power's responsibility.

As a result, the work load at State was light and there were few crises to worry about. Virtually the only contact with Congress was the annual review of the budget, which totaled only $14 million in 1929, with half of that returned to the Treasury in the form of passport and visa fees and charges for other services. Regular public hearings, closed-door briefings, and the constant interchange of views which are now a regular part of the relations between State and Congress were unknown in 1929.

As a bachelor in a city with many single girls, I enjoyed those charming days. As far as I remember, neither I nor any of the other young Foreign Service officers dissented from the prevailing head-in-the-sand policies of the United States government. I never dreamed that within a few years the United States would be involved in every area of the globe and that the tranquil life of the Foreign Service officer would be a relic of the 1920s.

My first doubts were not whether the department was relevant to the world but whether it was made up of eccentrics and misfits, as some Americans believed then and still do. That summer, a Foreign Service officer whom I had known, but not well, was arrested on a streetcar in Washington for indecent exposure. Then a consul general in Australia was thrown off a boat in Sydney harbor for molesting two boys. Finally, a consul general in Prague suffered a mental breakdown and shut himself in his hotel room, where he lived on beer and raw beef. When he got word that the consul was coming to take him into custody, he jumped in a taxicab and headed for Carlsbad, scattering hunks of beef on the way, presumably to divert his pursuers.

I soon learned that those were isolated incidents, by no means typical of the Foreign Service. The department was so small (there were only 614 people working for State in Washington in 1929 compared with 6,396 in 1972) that I soon got to know, like, and respect most of them, although I never even saw the first two Secretaries of State I worked under, Frank B. Kellogg and Henry L. Stimson. The small size of the Foreign Service produced an intimacy that helped a great deal in personnel matters. The boards of promotion or review, as well as personnel officers, came to know and were able to give much more time to the consideration of the personal qualities of each officer and his problems. I suppose it is nostalgia, but it seems to me that a smaller, more compact, more intimately integrated Foreign Service would be