

## Learning How to See Soviet Russia From Estonia



*George F. Kennan*  
(George F. Kennan Papers. Public Policy Papers. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. Princeton University Library.)



*Charles E. Bohlen*  
(Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

In her 1962 memoirs *Around the Globe in 20 Years*, Irena Wiley – the Polish-born wife of John C. Wiley (U.S. Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Estonia from 1938 to 1940) and a gifted linguist who was fluent in English, French, Russian, Italian, German, and Spanish in addition to her native Polish – wrote: “I was annoyed no end at my inability to learn Estonian.” In the 1920s and 1930s, the State Department's Foreign Service School did not include foreign

language training as it does today. If the State Department thought someone should learn a foreign language, they would send them to a university to study it. Otherwise, diplomats were expected to make do with the world language that they already knew – usually French, German, or Spanish – or learn on the job. Born in Bordeaux in 1893 where his father served as U.S. Consul, Minister Wiley spoke French like a native in addition to having mastered both German and Spanish thanks to his earlier assignments in Germany, Austria, Spain, and Latin America.

### **The Language of Diplomacy**

Although they never managed to learn Estonian, the Wileys always tried to do the right thing. Mrs. Wiley recounts how: “In Estonia John found a new solution to the language problem. To his consternation, he learned from the Chief of Protocol that he was expected to address the Estonian Army after presenting his credentials to the President. But John rose to the occasion. He wrote a nice little speech, had it translated into perfect Estonian, and then practiced the phonetics with our Seventh Day Adventist cook.” Although based in Riga, the Wileys set up a second residence in Tallinn on Freedom Square with an Estonian staff. The Wileys appear to have developed a particular fondness for Estonia as they spent much of their Baltic assignment in Tallinn.

But returning to Mrs. Wiley's story of November 24, 1938: “The great moment came: John, in white tie and tails, emerged from the ceremony, descended the front steps of the presidential palace, stopped, removed his top hat in a gracious salute to the troops massed in the square. He delivered his speech in flawless Estonian with his head uncovered. He had pasted his speech inside his top hat and was able to read it without difficulty. The Estonians were delighted that John had taken the trouble to master Estonian so rapidly and marveled at his talent for languages.”

### **Studying Russian Rather than Estonian**

Back in the 1920s and 1930s, U.S. diplomats would come to Estonia in order to complete their language training. But they came here to learn Russian rather than Estonian. The reason for this was simple: the U.S. only established diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia in 1933. While the U.S. Legation in nearby Riga served as the main training ground for U.S. diplomats who would later be assigned to the new U.S. Embassy in Moscow when it opened in March 1934, the U.S. Legation in Tallinn – as well as the rest of Estonia – also played a role in the future development of U.S. diplomacy and its diplomats. It was in places like Tallinn, Narva-Jõesuu, and Petseri that several of the first diplomats referred to as the State Department's “Russia hands” learned to

respect and admire Russian culture while growing increasingly wary of the Soviet Union.

In Mrs. Wiley's wonderful description of late 1930s Estonia, she concludes with the words: "It is understandable that Tallinn was the favorite post of the Foreign Service bachelors. But, regardless of one's marital status, life in Tallinn was easy, gay, and carefree." Mrs. Wiley would know because when her husband served as the first Counselor at the new U.S. Embassy in Moscow (1934-1936), she met several Foreign Service officers who shared with her their fond memories of Tallinn. At least two of the new U.S. Embassy's Third Secretaries – George F. Kennan (b. 1904) and Charles E. Bohlen (b. 1904) – had spent part of their early careers in Estonia.

Kennan and Bohlen's first boss at Embassy Moscow, Second Secretary Loy W. Henderson (b. 1892) was also a regular visitor to Estonia when he covered the Baltic States for three years (1927-1930) from his base in Riga. It was there that Henderson (a German speaker) met and then married his Latvian wife, Elise Marie Heinrichson. But Henderson's ties to Estonia go back even earlier. While working with the American Red Cross during Estonia's War of Independence, Henderson earned Estonia's Freedom Cross (1920) and Estonian Red Cross Medal (1923) for his services to the Estonian state defeating the typhus epidemic in Narva. Later in his career, Henderson would go on to serve as U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Iran, and India.

Under Henderson's able mentorship, both Kennan and Bohlen men would also be destined for greater things. George F. Kennan would later become U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union (but for just six months in 1952 as he was soon declared *persona non grata* by Stalin) and then to Yugoslavia. Charles E. Bohlen would replace Kennan as the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union (1953-1957) before going on to serve as U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines and then to France. But more importantly, these two men – along with their State Department colleagues Dean Acheson, Averell Harriman, Robert Lovett, and John McCloy, Jr. – would play a key role in shaping post-war U.S. foreign policy by pushing the United States to assume an assertive global role rather than retreating back towards isolationism. In their book *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (1997), Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas describe how these friends were not only the primary architects of the U.S. policy of Soviet Containment but also of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan.

### **First Encounters with the Soviet Union**

As it happens, both Kennan and Bohlen's first close encounter with the Soviet Union took place in Estonia. While Kennan (a German speaker) was sent to the University of Berlin to study Russian, Bohlen (a French speaker whose grandfather had served as U.S. Ambassador to

France) went to the Ecole Nationale des Langues Orientales in Paris. Since these two young diplomats had selected Russia as their area of specialization, they were also required to get practical experience in the field. As Kennan describes the situation in the Pulitzer-prize winning first volume of his *Memoirs* (1967), “Since we had no relations with the Soviet Union, the 'field' consisted of the three Baltic cities of Tallinn, Riga, and Kovno, the capitals, respectively, of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, in each of which the United States government had consular and diplomatic representatives.”

Kennan remembered his arrival in Estonia in July 1928 as follows: “The first assignment of my regular preliminary Russian training was as vice consul in Tallinn. Tallinn was then, and I hope still is, a lovely old Hanseatic town – a northern replica of the German Lubeck – surrounded incongruously but not unattractively, by purely Russian suburbs. It lies on a bay of the Gulf of Finland, some sixty miles across the gulf from Helsinki. Two hundred and fifty miles away, at the head of the gulf, stands Leningrad.” In his memoirs *Witness to History* (1973), Bohlen was similarly impressed: “I passed two summers in Estonia [in 1932 and 1933]. They were delightful, but, more importantly, they enabled me to become relatively fluent in Russian, since, from the time I set foot in Estonia at the end of June until I left in the middle of September, I spoke hardly a word of English.”

### **Russian Immersion in Narva-Jõesuu**

While first Kennan (who would transfer to the U.S. Legation in nearby Riga in January 1929 where he would work under Henderson) and then Bohlen would only spend a brief time in Estonia, these crucial six-month periods would end up having a life-long impact on each of them. As Bohlen explains, “I was sent to Estonia, which was independent then, to live in a Russian pension, where I immersed myself in the sound and feel of Russian. The pension was in Narva-Jõesuu, a former Russian resort with a magnificent beach, about four hours from Tallinn. Under the name of Hungerburg, it had been the chief summer resort for St. Petersburg. Life in the Serebryakovy sisters' pension undoubtedly followed the centuries-old style of the leisure class of Czarist Russia. In the morning there were language lessons. Lunch was very late, around four o'clock. Then we took a nap, followed by a walk, often to gather mushrooms in the forest. After a late supper, the samovar would be set on a table outdoors. Then we would converse for two or three hours like characters in the stories of Chekhov, discussing philosophy and morals, reciting poetry, talking politics, and sipping tea.”

The Narva-Jõesuu beach seems to have made a similar impression on Bohlen as it would later have on the Wileys. As Bohlen explains, “One engaging feature of life in Narva-Jõesuu was the beach. It was divided into two sections by lines in the sand. On the left the females bathed in

the nude; on the right the males bathed in suits. I spent many an hour on the beach, but I could never get over the novelty of being greeted by a bevy of naked Estonian beauties. The Estonian people are a singularly handsome race of Scandinavian origin – tall, blond, and well built in comparison to Russians.”

### **Russian vs. Soviet**

Ironically, Estonia in the 1920s and 1930s had managed to preserve those traditional elements of Russian culture which were being lost in the Soviet Union. From his hosts in Narva-Jõesuu, Bohlen learned to love Russian rather than Soviet culture. According to Bohlen, “The Serebryakovy sisters came from Leningrad, which they always referred to by its pre-war name of St. Petersburg. Both were strongly anti-Bolshevik and lived in the hope that someday the nightmare would pass away and they would return to old Russia, complete with Czar and aristocracy. One of the sisters was well educated and had been a teacher in the Smolny Institute, a school for the daughters of the Russian nobility which the Bolsheviks had seized and used as a headquarters before the October Revolution. It was she who inspired my interest in Russian literature – the classics of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov, and others.”

Bohlen kept this interest in Russian culture alive throughout his life. When writing his memoirs, he had this to say about Russian: “It is a beautiful language, excellent for music and poetry because of the many vowels. I never had any particular problem in learning Russian, and I still get pleasure out of reading and speaking it.” First in Narva-Jõesuu and then later in Tallinn, Bohlen learned about a Russia which might have been had there been no October Revolution: “When the summer was over, I went to Tallinn and lived for about a month with the family of a man who had been a big timber merchant in Russia before the war and who still carried on the business from Tallinn. The family was immensely Russian, full of the curiosity which characterized the pre-Revolution Russian intelligentsia, and obsessed with deep and unworkable philosophical concepts.”

### **In Pursuit of Enlightenment**

Kennan's recollections of studying Russian in Estonia are very similar to Bohlen's. But instead of studying with Russian émigrés, Kennan studied with another former citizen of the Russian Empire: “My teacher was an impoverished Ukrainian. He knew nothing about teaching languages, but he had the virtue of speaking, aside from his native Ukrainian, no word of anything but the language he was purporting to teach.” Kennan also noted how Russians and Russian traditions continued to thrive in independent Estonia. As he explains, his teacher brought him “as teaching aids, the first grade-readers used in the schools in the Russian-

speaking province [of Petserimaa]. I admired and cherished these slender volumes, with their beautiful unreformed Cyrillic script, their little vignettes and passages from Russian folklore and the classics, their naïve drawings of barnyards and animals and peasant children sledding. I learned by heart some of the poems and jingles they included.” Kennan also fell in love with Chekhov's writings and decided that one day he would write the story of Chekhov's life.

Like Bohlen, Kennan learned to admire the Russian language in Estonia: “I conceived then and there a love for this great Russian language – rich, pithy, musical, sometimes tender, sometimes earthy and brutal, sometimes classically severe – that was not only never to leave me but was to constitute in some curious way an unfailing source of strength and reassurance in the drearier and more trying reaches of later life. Russian seemed to me, from the start, a natural language, in which words sounded the way they ought to sound, and might be expected to sound, as though one had once known it in some dead past and as though the learning of it was some sort of rediscovery. I turned to it with such real enjoyment and excitement that by the end of the year I could get around a bit in it.”

Estonia was also where Kennan learned about an alternate Russia that might have been. He spent the Christmas of 1928 in Petseri as a “seeker of retreat in the Pskovo-Pecherski Monastery, near the Soviet border: a bit of old Russia, seventeenth-century Russia in fact, unspoiled in a way that would have been hard to duplicate anywhere in Russia proper. No one there spoke anything but Russian.” It was here that he experienced his first Russian breakthrough: “When I left, I felt that I was really getting on.”

### **Seeing Estonia**

Working at the small, quiet U.S. Legation in Tallinn in the late 1920s, Kennan also got a chance to explore Estonia during his time off. In Kennan's words, “I took, in company with the dog, a series of weekend expeditions: to Helsinki, to Narva; to the old university town of Tartu (Dorpat); to Pernau, on the southern coast; to the Russian-speaking province at the southeastern extremity of the country [Petserimaa]; to remote islands off the coast, with their simple communities of Swedish farmer-fishermen. I enjoyed this travel intensely, gathered impressions, recorded and treasured them with avidity.” Even after he moved on to Riga, Kennan would be drawn back to Estonia – for example, he spent Easter 1929 in Tartu, passing through Valga along the way.

While the time that they both spent in Estonia seems to have been close to perfect, neither Kennan nor Bohlen ever forgot why they were here: to prepare for eventual assignments in the Soviet Union. These assignments would come soon enough: Kennan traveled to Moscow in

December 1933 with Ambassador William C. Bullitt to help establish the new U.S. Embassy. Bohlen arrived in Moscow along with the rest of the Embassy staff in March 1934. Once in Moscow, the two men would cement their life-long friendship. But it was in Estonia that they both began to understand Soviet Russia and developed those vital first impressions that would stay with them all their lives. As Bohlen recalled, "Once when a friend from America visited me for a week or so, we decided to go up to the Soviet frontier. We walked along a dusty road until we came to the Estonian frontier post. Standing there, we looked into Russia. It was my first glimpse of that country. We could see the Soviet sentries and a guards' tower, but we never got close enough to talk to any Russian."

### **The Shape of the War to Come**

As the storm clouds of the Second World War began to gather, Mrs. Wiley describes her own trip to the very same border region east of present day Ivangorod with her husband: the Estonian "Foreign Minister escorted us to the nearby Estonian-Soviet frontier. It was a sinister and threatening sight. The Red Army had cleared about a quarter of a mile of no man's land. There were masses of barbed wire and frequently a high Soviet observation post. In the heavy pine forest one could observe many patches of yellow, where trees had been cut down to make room for gun emplacements. The trees had been stuck back in the earth as camouflage, but when they died and changed color they had casually been left standing. Instead of camouflage, they served to reveal and to remind the Estonians that the big neighbor was malevolently watching them."

The Wileys' visit to the Estonian-Soviet border took place in the summer of 1939. That fall on October 18, 1939, the Soviet Union forced Estonia to accept Soviet troops based on its soil. On June 16, 1940, the Soviets stopped pretending. The front-page of the *New York Times* the next day read: "2 Soviet Invasions: Red Army Marches into Latvia and Estonia as They Bow to Claims." Although it was a calculated risk, Minister Wiley decided to stay and continue his official reporting on the deteriorating situation in both Latvia and Estonia for over a month, visiting his friend General Johan Laidoner one last time before his arrest and witnessing the creation of the puppet states of the Estonian SSR and Latvian SSR on July 21. Minister Wiley's cables were read with great interest by his friend and colleague from Embassy Moscow days – Loy Henderson, who was now Assistant Chief of the State Department's European Affairs Division.

Backed by Henderson's lobbying efforts in Washington, Minister Wiley's eloquent cables describing the real situation in the Baltic region helped produce one major result: on July 23, 1940, Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles declared that the U.S. would never recognize the

illegal and forcible incorporation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania into the Soviet Union. Two days later, the Wileys left the Baltics forever, having done everything that they could do. For his exemplary work in Estonia and Latvia under trying conditions, John C. Wiley would soon be appointed U.S. Ambassador to Colombia and then later to Portugal, Iran, and Panama. But like Kennan, Bohlen, Henderson, and many of the other U.S. diplomats who worked or studied in Estonia in the 1920s and 1930s, the Wileys would never forget the small country that had managed to enchant them and help shape the way they looked at the world.