AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY IN STALIN'S RUSSIA

Tim Tzouliadis

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The Forsaken

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For the innocent who lost their lives,

of every nationality

1

The Joads of Russia

There is much to say about Soviet Russia. It is a new world to explore, Americans know almost nothing about it. But the story filters through, and it rouses heroism. As long as the Red Flag waves over the Kremlin, there is hope in the world. There is something in the air of Soviet Russia that throbbed in the air of Pericles' Athens; the England of Shakespeare; the France of Danton; the America of Walt Whitman . . . This is the first man learning in agony and joy how to think. Where else is there hope in the world?

New Masses, November 1926

Their story begins with a photograph of a baseball team. The year is 1934, the picture is in black and white. Two rows of young men pose for the camera: one standing, the other crouching down with their arms around each other's shoulders. They are all somewhere in their late teens or early twenties, in the peak of health. They appear to be the best of friends. We know many, if not all, of their names: Arnold Preedin, Arthur Abolin, Eugene Peterson, Leo Feinstein, Victor Herman, Leo Herman, Benny Grondon . . . The names themselves are unremarkable, since none of them are celebrities nor the sons or grand-sons of the famous. They come from ordinary working families from across America—from Detroit, Boston, New York, San Francisco, and the Midwest. Waiting in the sunshine, they look much like any other baseball team except, perhaps, for the Russian lettering on their uniforms.[1]

At first glance they might appear to be one team, but in actual fact there are two. On this occasion we can tell from their uniforms that the Foreign Workers' Club of Moscow is playing against the Autoworkers' Club from the nearby city of Gorky. But perhaps such details are unimportant, since

many of the American baseball players in the photograph will soon be dead. They will not die in an accident, in a train, or in a plane crash. They will be the witnesses to, and the victims of, the most sustained campaign of state terror in modern history.

The few baseball players who survive will be inordinately lucky. But they will come so close to death and endure such terrible circumstances that they, too, at times, may wish they had lost their lives with the rest of their team. Only at that moment, as the camera shutter clicks in the warm summer air of Gorky Park, none of the American baseball players has any idea of their likely fate. Their smiles betray not the slightest inkling.

IT WAS THE least-heralded migration in American history. Unsurprising perhaps, since in a nation of immigrants, no one cares to remember the ones who left the dream behind—these forgotten exiles who stood with their families on the wooden decks of passenger liners, watching the Statue of Liberty fade into the distance as they left New York bound for Leningrad. A cross section of America, they came from all walks of life: professors, engineers, factory workers, teachers, artists, doctors, even farmers, all mixed together on the passenger ships. They left to join the Five-Year Plan of Soviet Russia, lured by the prospect of work at the height of the Great Depression. Qualified engineers on well-paid contracts jostled beside unemployed workers chasing jobs in Soviet factories, and starry-eyed fellow travelers whose luggage was bursting with the heavy tomes of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Within their ranks were American communists, trade unionists, and other assorted radicals of the John Reed school, but most were ordinary citizens not overly concerned by politics. What united them was the hope that drives all emigrants: the search for a better life for their children and themselves. And in the eagerness of their departure, no wise eyes strained to foresee the chronicle of violence that lay in store in Russia, as the bronze-and-steel propellers labored relentlessly across the gray-green ocean water toward Europe.

In the early 1930s, it must have felt as though America, caught in the clutches of the Great Depression, could not or would not keep her half of the social contract. There were more people out of work in the United States, both actually and proportionately, than in any other nation on earth. Thirteen million unemployed represented a quarter of the workforce in an age when, in most families, only the men held jobs. Now those millions stood on bread lines and queued up at soup kitchens waiting for their next meal. A ragged army of hoboes had taken to the highways and railroads of the continent in their search for work. Half the country was on the move, and not just the likes of Tom Joad driving to California in their Model A's. To these people, the Great Depression's newly dispossessed, the abject failure of capitalism was not such a radical proposition so much as the straightforward evidence of their senses. They saw it, and smelled it, whichever way they turned.

The New York Times published a story on the new city that had risen next to Wall Street as a symbolic rival to the financial center of the Western world: "*Campfires glowed last night in the Westside jungles. The jungle, bounded by Spring, West, Clarkson and Washington streets, looks, with its mounds of brick and its desolation like a shell-pocked village in France . . . Battered chimneys rise out of holes in the ground, where the unemployed have dug in for the winter. Shacks made of packing cases, old tin, dirty cement blocks, beams, tar paper, stand on some of the brick mounds, others are in the brick hollows.*"[2] These brand-new Hoovervilles, built of corrugated iron and salvaged brick, had risen suddenly in every major American city and struck many as a warning of a civilization dividing into alternate landscapes—as if competing visions of penury and plenty were being processed over one another, and the figures in the foreground were no longer sure to which their lives belonged or to which they now were heading. Almost overnight, pinstripes and spats had been replaced by worn-out denim and a sullen look, as the ranks of unemployed attempted to stay alive selling shoeshines or apples for a nickel apiece, competing with the countless others who had the same idea. On city sidewalks of America, the veterans of the Great War sold their decorations for valor won on the battlefields of France and Belgium. The going rate was one dollar and fifty cents.

In movie theaters, the newsreel pictures showed Franciscan friars doling out silver nickels to the homeless for a bed or a meal. Crowds of men stood smoking, their hats pulled down low over their eyes, waiting patiently to receive their solitary coin, tipping their hats as they walked past. It was an endless queue, and an anonymous haunted man who tries to cut in gets pushed back to the end of the line. The camera catches him in the act and preserves his despair forever, like a—the Sisyphus of old New York. In Uniontown, Pennsylvania, the destitute were living inside coke ovens shut down by the crisis. Men with their entire families were living there inside. Kids with nothing looked curiously into the inquiring cameras, some with unnaturally stern faces, others with the shy grins of children for whom this was all still just fun and who had no idea quite how desperate their fathers had become. In Harrisburg, a ragged army of unemployed stormed the state capitol demanding relief funds, while articles in the mainstream press carried portentous headlines warning of "the Prospect of Violent Revolution in the United States."[3]

Amid the enforced idleness, the bank failures, the sourness, and the blatant discontent, a bitter rage swept through the streets of American cities while the shock was still raw and the people angry enough to get out onto the streets. An international unemployment day was announced, and hundreds of thousands marched through New York, Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and the industrial heartlands. The general feeling of unease was impossible to resist; of disgust at the overwhelming power of money, which divided men from one another and added a layer of shame onto the hurt of what it already felt like to be absolutely poor. Reinforcing this nationwide shift toward radicalism—the sudden lurch of the entire political consensus to the left—was the growing awareness that all this unemployment and extreme hardship were ultimately unnecessary. The collective misery was simply the result of laissez-faire capitalism gone wild, the maniacal exuberance of Wall Street financiers who had stoked an express train until it careened off the tracks, leaving others to pick up the pieces of the wreck while the guilty fled the scene.[4]

Elected by a landslide, Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered his first inaugural address to a radio audience of sixty million listeners, roughly half the

country, eager to learn of a plan for a way out of the crisis:

The rulers of the exchange of mankind's goods have failed, through their own stubbornness and their own incompetence, have admitted their failure, and abdicated. Practices of the unscrupulous moneychangers stand indicted in the court of public opinion, rejected by the hearts and minds of men . . . A host of unemployed citizens face the grim problem of existence, and an equally great number toil with little return. Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment . . . The moneychangers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths. The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit.[5]

But many Americans no longer owned a radio to hear their president's calm words of reassurance. Such luxuries had long since been traded in for cash, along with the rest of their possessions. Thousands more had already left, choosing to chance their luck elsewhere and take a gamble on reports they read in newspapers of how Soviet Russia alone still had economic growth and jobs, and was planning a society that placed working-men at its very center, no longer merely the peripheral casualties of other men's greed. Searching for alternatives, for avenues of escape, they studied the glowing accounts of new factories being built in Russia, surrounded by trees and flowers, with cafeterias and libraries for their workers, nurseries for the children, and even swimming pools, for crying out loud! At that moment, American curiosity to learn about the Soviet experiment was all-consuming. An English translation of *New Russia's Primer: The Story of the Five-Year Plan* had become the unlikely publishing phenomenon of 1931, an American bestseller for seven months and one of the highest selling nonfiction titles of the past decade.[6] Its simple explanations, written originally for Russian schoolchildren, were read and reread by an American public searching for answers beyond the deadened reach of another decade of "rugged individualism." In the midst of Depression misery, who could

not be attracted to the book's shared vision of future happiness and social progress?

All this will be written about us a few decades hence. He will work less and yet accomplish more. During seven hours in the factory he will do what now requires eleven and a half hours . . . Instead of dark, gloomy shops with dim, yellow lamps there will be light, clean halls with great windows and beautiful tile doors. Not the lungs of men, but powerful ventilators will suck in and swallow the dirt, dust, and shavings of the factories . . . Socialism is no longer a myth, a phantasy of mind . . . We ourselves are building it . . . And this better life will not come as a miracle: we ourselves must create it. But to create it we need knowledge: we need strong hands, yes, but we need strong minds too . . . Here it is—your Five-Year Plan.[7]

And who could blame those Americans, motivated as much by economic necessity as their own idealism, who gratefully accepted Joseph Stalin's open invitation to work in the Soviet Union? Skilled workers could even have their passage paid to the land where all unemployment had been officially declared extinct. They saw themselves as the pioneers of a new frontier, moving slowly from west to east, lured not just by the idea of security in hard times but also by the simple temptations of adequacy: of three square meals a day, a decent job, a roof over their heads, a doctor for the children, and the knowledge that it all could not be taken away at the click of someone's fingers or the chatter of the stock ticker.[8]

They left it to the social philosophers to speculate on the value of secure and decently paid employment to an individual's notion of identity or self-worth; let alone "the pursuit of happiness," a phrase that provoked a certain mocking tone when spoken from beneath the corrugated roof of a brick shack. And if the president of the United States could talk to the nation of the flight of the moneychangers from the temple without being called a "Red," then presumably these American exiles could hold a similar view as they were drawn east to Russia like a beacon, a flickering flame in the white night of the Depression.

FOR THE FIRST TIME in her short history more people were leaving the United States than were arriving. And as the cutting edge of poverty sharpened their determination, the desire to join this forgotten exodus turned, as the saying goes, from a trickle to a flood. In the first eight months of 1931 alone, Amtorg—the Soviet trade agency based in New York—received more than *one hundred thousand* American applications for emigration to the USSR. Such was the overwhelming response to their newspaper advertisements publicizing just six thousand jobs for skilled workers in Russia.[9] At the Amtorg offices in Manhattan, crowds of workers jammed the corridors with their wives, children, and pets, pleading for a passage out to this "promised land." Ten thousand optimistic Americans were hired that year, part of the official "organized emigration," who received their good news with glee closer to lottery winners than economic migrants.

A business reporter was sent down to the unofficial Soviet embassy at 261 Fifth Avenue to look through one morning's applications. The occupations listed for those answering this "Soviet call for Yankee skill" included *"barbers, plumbers, painters, cooks, clerical workers, service-station operators, electricians, carpenters, aviators, engineers, salesmen, printers, chemists, shoemakers, librarians, teachers, auto-mechanics, dentists, and one funeral director."* The would-be emigrants hailed from virtually every state of the union, and their principal reasons for leaving that they wrote on their job applications, were: *"1. Unemployment, 2. Disgust with conditions here, 3. Interest in Soviet experiment."*[10]

Following in the slipstream of this official organized exodus were unknown numbers of uncounted Americans, the waifs and strays of the economic times, who chose to dispense with bureaucracy and travel to Russia as tourists, ready to hunt down jobs just as soon as they arrived. The Soviet travel agency, Intourist, was happy to sell them one-way tickets with their tourist visas, while the sales agents of the shipping companies were

telling all comers that Americans could find jobs in Russia whether they spoke the language or not. All they needed was enough money for their first week, which was as long as it took to find work.[11]

Already there were so many Americans writing to their government for information about work in Russia that as of May 1931, the Department of Commerce began replying to their letters with an official form response entitled "Employment for Americans in Soviet Russia." The Commerce Department's civil servants first told them what they already knew: "*At the present time a number of Soviet industrial organizations, operating through the Amtorg Trading Corporation in New York, are engaging American engineers and technicians in large numbers to work in Soviet Russia* . . ." Then followed a catalogue of sensible advice concerning Soviet contracts and housing, along with some cautious insights into family life: "*It is not considered wise for wives and children to accompany the individual, if it is possible for them to be left. The strangeness of language, conditions and habits affects American women unfavourably, and the absence of educational facilities is a serious loss for children of school age* . . ." Their government's advice was widely ignored—more often than not the American emigrants took their wives and children with them. Where were they going to leave them? The children, they reasoned, would find schools when they arrived.[12]

Other would-be emigrants addressed their letters directly to the State Department. Harry Dalhart, for example, wrote as the president of "the Soviet Emigration Society" of Wichita, Kansas. In his letter, Dalhart explained that his organization had 342 members "all under forty years of age. Ninety two are overseas world war veterans: all native born Americans." The Kansan society sought advice concerning their emigration to Russia "as a group." Others intended to leave as enterprising individuals with an eye for the main chance. One resident of Denham, Indiana, wrote to the State Department offering his "house, a lot, a truck, and a few household articles" he wished to trade with the government in exchange for his passage to Russia.[13]

On February 4, 1931, in the pages of *The New York Times*, "the greatest wave of immigration in modern history" was being forecast by Walter

Duranty, the celebrated Moscow-based reporter: *"The Soviet Union will witness in the next few years an immigration flood comparable to the influx into the United States in the decade before the World War . . . It is only the beginning as yet of this movement, and the first swallows of the coming migration are scarce—but it has begun and will have to be reckoned with in the future."* Although the American exodus was as yet only in the thousands, Walter Duranty was confidently predicting that the Soviets would be welcoming two million a year in the not-too-distant future, with Cunard and the other shipping companies "queuing up" for the passenger business. The American autoworkers who had recently established themselves in Russia would soon be advising their friends to follow: *"When the day comes that foreign workers here may write home and say, 'Things are pretty good here, why don't you come along? There are jobs for everybody and plenty to eat. Russia is not so bad a place in which to live and there are no lay-offs or short time and you get all that is coming to you' . . . Then immigration to the Soviet Union will begin to rival the flood that poured into America. At the present rate of progress that day is not far distant."*[14]

The article in the nation's most prestigious newspaper only hastened the deluge of American letters and visits to any Russian institution that might be willing to offer some assistance and advice. A San Franciscan mechanic wrote to a newspaper in Moscow, asking if he ought to change his name "before hand to a Russian name with that ovitch or -itsky ending." Others wondered if they needed relatives or friends in Russia to testify to their good character, supposing that the old rules of Ellis Island might somehow be reapplied by Russian immigration control. From Shenandoah, Virginia, a journalist reported that "a group of miners is being formed to go to Russia with their picks and drills and any other machinery that they have enough to buy." And this news prompted a host of inquiries from depressed mining regions across the United States. One group asked if it was true that the Soviets were going to send a ship to *"rescue all the miners from their American misery, and would the metalworkers or the textile-workers be next?"*[15]

At the docks of New York Harbor, groups of jobless men shared the shipping page of *The New York Herald Tribune,* which published the dates of freighters leaving for Leningrad and Odessa. Word was passed around that those who could not afford the price of a ticket could work their passage or stow away in one of the many crates of American machinery heading in the same direction. A dockside reporter described the zeal of a Milwaukee emigrant with the inspired idea that the *"mass transportation of 'broke' Americans to Russia would be best solved by a winter walk from Alaska to Siberia over the ice of the Bering Straits—'Just like Jules Verne described, just like Jules Verne!'"*[16]

Of course, the news of this sudden emigration from the world's wealthiest country was pounced upon by the Soviet press as evidence, not only of their own success, but that history was on their side. In an article entitled "Moscow the Magnet," the Russian journalist Boris Pilnyak recounted the story of a car journey through the Rocky Mountains in Arizona. One night some American miners had helped him repair his car and gathered around the campfire to listen to him talk of life in the USSR. Three years later, in Moscow, the doorbell rang and "a broad-shouldered man of about forty dressed in American working clothes entered. He smiled gaily and stretched his big hand over the threshold. 'You don't recognize me?' he boomed. 'Remember Arizona, that night by the gold mines? Your hand comrade . . . I'm in Moscow!' " [17] No one knew how many American workers arrived on a wing and a prayer like this Arizonan gold miner, having scraped enough money for a tourist visa or slept third class or stowaway class. Unaccounted for in any records of state, they rated only a passing mention in a Soviet press article, a social phenomenon embodied by the nameless curiosity of a forty-year-old miner with a broad smile, a firm handshake, and an overwhelming willingness to believe these grand accounts of Revolution.

If the Soviet emigration was not *the* most adventurous solution to the nation's Depression woes, it stretched the imagination to consider a bolder remedy. One group of American families sold their worldly goods to buy machinery for a collective farm they were moving to outside Moscow. Another party of sixteen emigrants from San Francisco pooled their cash to

buy tractors for the Portland Commune near Kiev. Between them they handed over their dollar savings, their tools, and a Lincoln automobile. Others donated their entire life savings to the state, supposing that they would no longer need money in the new Russia.[18]

On October 11, 1931, George Bernard Shaw returned from Russia to broadcast a persuasive lecture on American national radio. Using the power of mass communication, the world's self-styled "most successful playwright since Shakespeare" was only too delighted to share his thoughts on the Soviet experiment and demolish the myths that surrounded the world's first socialist state:

Naturally the contempt of the Russians for us is enormous. You fools, they are saying to us, why can you not do as we are doing? You cannot employ nor feed your people: well send them to us, and if they are worth their salt we will employ and feed them . . . They took command of the Soviets, and established the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics exactly as Washington and Jefferson and Hamilton and Franklin and Tom Paine had established the United States of America 141 years before . . . That Jefferson is Lenin, that Franklin is Litvinov, that Paine is Lunacharsky, that Hamilton is Stalin . . . Today there is a statue of Washington in Leningrad; and tomorrow there will no doubt be a statue of Lenin in New York. And now perhaps you would like to know what was my reaction to Russia when I visited it? . . . Well, my first impression was that Russia is full of Americans. My second was that every intelligent Russian has been in America and didn't like it because he had no freedom there. And now let me give you a few travelling tips in case you should join the American rush to visit Russia and see for yourself whether it is all real. If you are a skilled workman, especially in machine industry, and are of suitable age and good character . . . you will not have much difficulty; they will be only too glad to have you: proletarians of all lands are welcome if they can pull their weight in the Russian boat . . . There is hope everywhere in Russia because these evils are retreating there before the spread of Communism as steadily as they are advancing upon us before the last desperate struggle of our bankrupt Capitalism to stave off its inevitable doom. You will not go to Russia to smell out the evils you can see

without leaving your own doorstep. Some of you will go because in the great financial storm that has burst on us your own ship is sinking and the Russian ship is the only big one that is not rolling heavily and tapping out SOS on its wireless.[19]

The sensational lecture was printed in full in *The New York Times*, and judging by the publicity it generated, George Bernard Shaw must have convinced many more Americans to emigrate or, at the very least, quelled the fears of those still making up their minds. It was plain from his assurances that Shaw, like so many intellectuals of the era, placed implicit faith in the motives of Joseph Stalin and gladly lent him his seal of approval. While the American emigrants themselves, believing they must find social justice somewhere on God's earth and persuaded by that hope, were willing to travel halfway around the world to join what was universally described as "the greatest social experiment in the history of mankind."

Few paused to distinguish whether they were being pulled by an ideology or pushed by their need. Nor were these Americans merely a confederacy of political fanatics, hopeless idealists, or naïve adventurers. Theirs was a reaction to the actuality and future threat of poverty, and to understand them we must place ourselves momentarily in a similar position of unknowing: when the idea of the Soviet Revolution was still filled with hope, and only the most perspicacious could discern the truth that lay beneath that promise. It was an era when the political system of communism had yet to be fully tested, just as once upon a time democracy, too, had presented an equally radical affront to conservative opinion.

And so, as perhaps the least significant but most culturally enlightening consequence of this forgotten migration, there happened to be American baseball teams playing in Gorky Park in the very heart of Moscow; when its green acres were still known by its first Revolutionary name as the "Central Park of Culture and Rest." But maybe it was not so surprising after all. Immigrants have always brought their sports with them.

2

Baseball in Gorky Park

At one time America had been the remote star attracting all the unfortunate proletarians, serving as a lighthouse in their quest for liberty. The beacon, however, has become petrified . . . October lit a new star. The new fatherland of the proletariat has spread under this star over a sixth part of the globe, raising the scaffoldings of its construction work. From the Ruhr to Detroit, from red Wedding to Peking, the proletarians have risen and begin to march toward the star. This time they can be sure the new star will not betray them.

Boris Agapov, Za Industrializatsiu, November 7, 1931[1]

Every day in Moscow between twenty and one hundred fifty new American arrivals stepped down from their trains onto the platform of Belorussky Station. In early November 1931, *The Washington Post* reported the arrival of groups of miners from coal pits in Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, and Illinois, and the metal shafts of Michigan, Utah, and Montana. Steelworkers traveled from the shut-down mills in Pittsburgh and Gary to work alongside American carpenters, bricklayers, machinists, and railroad men.[2] And no one could predict who might turn up next. There might be forty more miners with their wives and children from Pennsylvania, or eighteen Swedish American lumber jacks from the Pacific Coast, or a couple of plumbers from Peru, Indiana, or a party of fourteen shoemakers from Los Angeles. As soon as the Americans left the train station, they made their way down to the Intourist offices on Theater Square to demand work—often to the astonishment of the Russian officials concerned. “Barbers! We’ve got plenty!”

One party of three hundred American miners on their way to Leninsk in Siberia managed to have their passports "misplaced" by a clerk, which created a storm of protest from their nervous wives. Half the group turned straight back home; the rest stayed. But for all the chaos of their arrival, two American reporters in Moscow, Ruth Kennell and Milly Bennett, understood their choices very well: *"Yet there are Americans who would rather have jobs in a land where poverty is general and hope is boundless—even standing in long lines to receive the food they pay for—than be idle in a land of plenty and despair."*[3]

By the winter of 1931, sufficient numbers had arrived for a weekly English-language newspaper to be established in Moscow, with the aim of reporting the "truth about what the Soviet government is trying to do." Staffed by young American journalists keen to salute the progress of the Five-Year Plan, *The Moscow News* was the ramshackle brainchild of its editor, Anna Louise Strong, a redoubtable progressive and personal friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. On her trips back to the United States, Strong was an occasional guest at the White House, where the ever-curious president would pepper her with questions about Soviet Russia. How, Roosevelt asked, could Stalin afford to *buy* all those factories?[4]

In Moscow the new arrivals gave cheerful interviews to their newspaper, along the lines of "I'd rather be here than in the soup line in New York." Some cracked wise about the social facilities they had heard were part of every factory worker's life—"Where's the golf course?"—while others were more serious. "It's hard to imagine conditions in the States if you haven't seen them," wrote a Chicago woman. "Public parks are crowded with sleeping unemployed lying on spread-out newspapers . . . A grocery store was broken into and robbed during the night."[5] Letters arrived at the *Moscow News*' offices on Strastnoi Boulevard from Americans searching for work. An ex-Follies dancer enclosed a photograph with her height and weight asking if she could be of any use to the Five-Year Plan. A Denver miner described how his wages in Colorado had been cut to thirty-five cents per ton, which, after the company deductions for rent and groceries, left the miners with precisely nothing: *"Give us a chance to come to the Soviet Union. We are willing to work hard; to endure hardships, if need be. Here*

we have hardships, hunger too and no hope. Over there, you are building for tomorrow. Let us come and help. We will be satisfied with bread and carrots."[6]

Very soon the sheer number of unemployed Americans turning up in Moscow was sufficient to create a headache for the Soviet authorities. In *The New York Times* of March 14, 1932, Walter Duranty described the number of new arrivals as still "relatively small—say 1000 a week at the outside. But it is on the increase."[7] The American reporters in Moscow were continually stumbling upon some poor lost soul worked down to his last dime, with nowhere to live, hoping to start life over in Russia, perhaps with a kid in tow, cap pulled down firmly over his eyes. Many had traveled completely of their own devices—they were neither qualified mechanics nor skilled workers on Amtorg contracts— and the Soviet government was completely unprepared for this sudden influx of tourists planning to stay and work, as in some latter-day Klondike rush to the land of zero unemployment. Soon an official edict was issued that in the future all tourists *must* carry a round-trip ticket and would no longer be given jobs, simply because there was not enough space to house them all. Moscow and all the major Russian cities were already horrendously overcrowded. The Russians had to fight for a few square meters of living space, huddled together in single rooms shared by two or three families. The discomforts, they were told, were temporary. When the new socialist cities were built, there would be space enough for everyone. In the meantime they would have to make do.[8]

Meanwhile, the newspaper offices on Strastnoi Boulevard served as a social center for the Americans, who organized Russian-language courses for the new arrivals, and English-language programs on Soviet radio, as well as educational excursions, boat trips, and of course a little music and dancing. On the evening of October 21, 1931, the *Moscow News* celebrated its first birthday with a party for three hundred guests crowded into the Foreign Workers' Club on Hertzen Street. Amid the usual speeches and high-flown rhetoric, the occasion was lent a touch of Bolshevik celebrity by a statement read out Nikolai Bukharin. The diminutive revolutionary, who had once been one of Lenin's closest friends, now welcomed the Americans

to the USSR: *“To build up a new world is the highest joy for man. We greet everyone who is unafraid of difficulties and assists the Soviet Union!”* And then, after midnight, a jazz band struck up and the guests danced away until the early hours. Did Bukharin stay for the American jazz? It was hard to resist the idea of Lenin’s ideologue—the author of *The ABC of Communism*—skipping his dainty feet to the rhythm of saxophone and drums.[9]

Two weeks later, on November 7, 1931, one million Russians marched through Red Square for the fourteenth anniversary of the Revolution celebrations. Lost in this tide of humanity, the sixty staffers of the *Moscow News* joined a party of American autoworkers who had recently found jobs at an assembly plant in Moscow. The children marched in front of their fathers, shouting “Long Live the American Pioneer Groups,” as they held up their banners in English, the Roman lettering strangely anomalous amid the long red streamers and bold Cyrillic propaganda slogans proclaiming the dawn of the Marxist-Leninist age.[10] Six months later, the Americans marched again for the May Day parade of 1932, those who did not yet understand Russian clustered around the ones who could translate, and cheering their approval in English. “Language did not matter. We were united by bonds closer than those of speech,” one of the marchers told a reporter. When the crowd passed into Red Square, the tall figure of the writer Maxim Gorky waved his hat and they cheered again. “Where is Stalin? Isn’t Stalin there?” asked a young American wearing a red tie in solidarity. “Sure there he is standing just on Gorky’s right—see in the brown coat and brown cap, he’s saluting now. And there’s Molotov and Kaganovitch beside them.” And then the crowd swept on past the cathedral of St. Basil, and out of Red Square, until they merged with the million others on the embankment of the Moskva River.[11]

THEY PLAYED BASEBALL almost as soon as they arrived. When the Moscow weather was fine enough, the young Americans formed their own teams and sprinted around the bases in Gorky Park on their free days and

evenings through the short Russian summers—as though they craved to keep at least one strand of the familiar in their creation of this brave new world. There were at least two American teams playing in Moscow that year. The Foreign Workers' Club competed against a team from the Stalin Auto Plant, the autoworkers taking a break from the assembly line to run the bases while curious Russians turned out to watch the sudden appearance of this strange new sport and their lively practice sessions in the park. In May 1932, the Foreign Workers' Club made an announcement in the pages of the *Moscow Daily News* (the newspaper was, by now, a daily title) that they were moving their whole summer program to the park: *"Baseball players who have suits, gloves, and other baseball paraphernalia are requested to bring same to the club, as these things have never been made here."*

All summer long, the young Americans sauntered down to the park every other evening to play baseball. And as their shadows lengthened in the evening light, the numbers of Russian spectators grew ever larger, all striving to get a little closer to the action. The sight of the Americans sliding into bases and the dust flying over their bodies must have only added to the excitement. "Niet out! Niet! Niet!" Some of the Russian spectators took to crowding around the bases, in spite of warnings that they might be hurt by bat or ball. Warnings that, we may assume, were met by friendly shrugs and smiles. "Nichevo"—"It doesn't matter"—and the game continued.

In the summer of 1932, the Soviet Supreme Council of Physical Culture announced its decision to introduce baseball to the Soviet Union as a "national sport," part of a program to foster athletic competitions in which the citizens of the first socialist state might effortlessly excel. The Supreme Council admitted they had studied the feasibility of adopting American football as well as baseball in Russia but, upon careful consideration, football had been rejected as "too rough." Baseball, on the other hand, had a much gentler appeal. The American Foreign Workers' Club soon began coaching a team of young Russians at Moscow's Tomsky Stadium. A sports reporter from the *Moscow Daily News* was dispatched to cover their first game, and wrote that the Russians could "slam the ball all over the park" and throw just as well as the Americans but "catching the ball was their weakness." The Russian players were also let down by not fully

understanding the rules for stealing bases, evidently even a little indignant that such a plainly capitalistic aberration of "Americanski beisbol" should ever be allowed in the USSR.[12]

Still the enthusiasm of the Russian youth was obvious to all, and the Soviet sports apparatchiks took quick notice of baseball's immediate popularity. Soon, they declared, the game would be played on a "Union-wide scale," with the newly arrived Americans asked to volunteer as coaches. Orders would be placed to manufacture the necessary equipment, and the complicated rules would be translated into simple Russian for workers to learn. If there were still remote parts of the USSR where American workers had not yet emigrated, then "baseball will be taught by movies." And as the Soviet press dutifully praised the "grace and complexity" of America's national sport, official admiration was inevitably reflected in the state propaganda. At the Stalin Auto Plant in Moscow, the headline of the factory newspaper exhorted Russian workers to "Play the New Game of Baseball!"[13]

THE AMERICAN EMIGRANTS brought with them enough children for an Anglo-American school to be set up in Moscow, with 125 pupils on the register by November 1932, three quarters of them born in the United States. Over the next three years, the numbers of pupils rose still further, and very soon the Anglo-American school was forced to move into larger premises, at School Number 24 on Great Vuysovsky Street. Naturally the children were delighted by their new environment, enjoying a new woodwork shop, science labs, a music room, gymnasium, and dining hall in space they never had before. The model pupils spoke approvingly of the progressive methods of their American teachers, who talked to them "as friends" and "not like bosses back home."[14]

Inevitably the American students' lessons were very different from those they were accustomed to back home, since the children were taught a Soviet curriculum that stressed the reasons *why* their parents had fled the capitalist

crisis in the United States to join the forward march of Soviet Russia. It might, at first, seem startling that the classroom walls were decorated with brightly colored pictures of Marx, Lenin, and of course Comrade Stalin gazing down benevolently on the pupils as they chattered away in English and the Russian they had picked up with effortless speed. And the Russian textbooks used by the school made for some interesting reading at home: *"Is Henry Ford a capitalist? Yes Henry Ford is a capitalist. Was Lenin a great man? Yes Lenin was a great man . . . Is the Soviet Government a better form of Government than the American? The American form is better than other forms of Government but not better than the Soviet form."* [15]

Unsurprisingly many of the American engineers, in particular, complained that their children were turning out just a little too "Red." The indoctrination of their education was incessant, its effect magnified by the prevailing ideology of the Soviet state. An Associated Press reporter, Charlie Nutter, was somewhat disturbed when his young son, Jimmy, who had consistently refused to utter a single word, broke his silence one day by pointing a chubby finger at the picture on the front page of the newspaper. "Eta Stalin!" little Jimmy Nutter had gurgled in Russian with a smile, to the horror of his father, who immediately announced, "We're going home! I'm going to raise my kid to be an American!"[16]

For all the strangeness of their education, the pupils were still just normal American kids who happened to attend a school in Moscow. Their favorite books listed in the lending records of the school library were unexceptional: the three most popular were all by Jack London—*The Call of the Wild, The Son of the Wolf,* and *White Fang.* In fourth place was *David Copperfield,* followed by more London and Dickens before Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.* Only far down the list, in sixteenth place, was there anything remotely ideological in Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, just above John Reed's famous account of the Russian Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*,[17] at that time the bible of the American left.

Nevertheless, the Americans' school, just like their baseball teams, was a focus of intense Russian curiosity. A young cub reporter, Kamionski, visited

the school to write a story for *Moscow Pioneer.* In his article, Kamionski described both the children and their schoolteacher in suitably epic terms:

Every day new pupils come. They arrive with their fathers from the United States, from England, and from Canada. They cross the ocean, cross continents and enter the Great Vysovski Street . . . Here is Comrade Whiteman. He teaches physics, chemistry and mathematics. And the lads are very pleased. Thirty persons are in the class. The twenty-nine at the desks are white and the thirtieth on the platform is black. Comrade Whiteman is a Negro. Whiteman in English means a white man. The skin of Comrade Whiteman, however, is certainly not white. It is a greyish black color, a miserable negro skin. And the white family name was probably given in derision to an ancestor of Comrade Whiteman. Comrade Whiteman brought his mockery with him to the Soviet Union, where it is nobody's business what color his skin is. He should have entirely forgotten about it, if not for the foreign journalists.

From young Kamionski we learn that the American children addressed their teachers as "Comrade," that they studied collectively and wore the red ties of the Komsomol. More importantly, the cub reporter Kamionski also revealed how Soviet schoolchildren were taught to view the historical inevitability of their World Revolution: "*The man who goes up to the second floor not only crosses the Atlantic, he comes into a peculiar country, the America of the future.*"[18] Eventually all American first graders would patiently study their Marxism-Leninism. Until then there was School Number 24.

And in this startling vision of the "America of the future" we learn of the existence of a radical new method of discipline. On January 6, 1933, a group of delinquent American students, all aged between eleven and twelve, were brought for a trial before a court of their peers, charged with "petty thievery and attempts to disorganize the school." After two and a half hours of careful cross-examination, the culprits were discovered to be

suffering from “poor home conditions,” and one of them was motherless—all mitigating factors in their favor. Nevertheless, the American child-prosecutors of the court noted the existence of “a definite anti-social group” within their fold, and suspensions soon followed in this junior version of a show trial. It was a curious anticipation of what was to come.[19]

The blond president of the school’s “Anglo-American Pioneers” was a confident thirteen-year-old named Lucy Abolin, whose father had found a job as a metalworker in Moscow. Lucy Abolin was a serious but pretty girl who wore a red handkerchief tied around her neck and helped to organize the school plays that year: a production of *Tom Sawyer* in English and Gogol’s *Inspector-General* for the children who could already speak Russian. Undoubtedly Lucy loved her new school and the responsibilities she was given. “Even in America I was the leader of a dramatic circle,” she told a reporter from the *Moscow Daily News.* Some of the other American children found it hard to adjust, but not Lucy, who had arrived two years earlier with her parents and brothers from Boston: *“Sometimes they are shy, sometimes just individualistic and find it hard to take part in group activities. We make friends with them, though, and they soon get over it. They see for themselves the difference between the Pioneers and the other children and they usually want to join.”* And then this calm, self-possessed young girl, who already regarded “individualism” as something of a character flaw, cheerfully explained how *“the Pioneers are so much more disciplined and more organized. If a boy or girl keeps on giving trouble, we take their red ties away from them and that means a lot.”* Lucy Abolin was evidently happy and popular, and she no doubt basked in the limelight of her two elder brothers, Arthur and Carl Abolin, both regular starters on the Moscow Foreign Workers’ baseball team.[20]

OVER THREE SEASONS, baseball mania in the USSR had given rise to an emergent national league. In June 1934, the first intercity game was played between the Moscow Foreign Workers’ Club and the Gorky

Autoworkers team, who arrived at the Moscow train station weighed down with the brand-new bats they had finished making in their factory just three days earlier. On this occasion Walter Preedin caught the eye playing in left field and hitting the ball all over the park, while his brother, Arnold Preedin, struck out the Gorky batters with metronome-like efficiency. On their home field, the Moscow Foreign Workers' Club won the game easily, 16-5, packing off their rivals back to the assembly lines of Gorky. The American autoworkers grouched about the trouble they had finding a place to stay in crowded Moscow, and the fact that their game had not been properly advertised so the crowd was still only a couple of hundred. Their letters of complaint provoked a critical editorial in the *Moscow Daily News: "If baseball is to be rapidly popularised, as it deserves to be, such shortcomings must not be repeated, particularly as the Council of Physical Culture is considering the possibility of organizing this summer a six-city league and an All-Union tournament. Such a contest would be a tremendous encouragement to the American youth in the Soviet Union."*[21]

Two hundred fifty miles north of Leningrad, the Americans of Petrozavodsk had already organized four baseball teams in their city. Hundreds of American teenagers had emigrated with their Finnish American parents to this remote region beside the Russian-Finnish border. Amid the lakes of Karelia, baseball thrived despite the lack of a stadium or very much in the way of equipment. Here the baseball players had one bat between them in a very tired condition and had recently lost three precious balls into the river. The American baseball players had written home for new bats and balls, and one of their recruits, Alvar Valimaa, asked the *Moscow Daily News* if the newspaper could print the results of their local league each week with the batting averages of the ten best players. If baseball was all about statistics then in Soviet Russia it would surely thrive, as Hank Makawski hinted in a letter from Gorky: *"The fellows simply eat up baseball news from America, so you can be assured they are far more interested in baseball in the Soviet Union, where they themselves participate and are acquainted with the other teams."* [22]

In July 1934, one month after beating Gorky, the Moscow Foreign Workers' Club left on an eight-day tour of Karelia. In Petrozavodsk, their

first game was broadcast live over Soviet radio, with play-by-play coverage in English and Russian. This time the match was heavily publicized by newspaper and poster advertisements all over the city, and attracted a crowd of two thousand fans who turned out to support their local team. The Karelian captain was Albert "Red" Lonn, a young baseball fanatic from Detroit, who had emigrated to Russia with his most treasured possession: a baseball signed by his hero, Babe Ruth. In their two games, the Karelian Americans thrashed the Moscow Foreign Workers' Club, 12-7 and 12-2, with the big-city visitors excusing their poor performance with complaints of injuries and the loss of their two best players to harvest time at the American collective farm.[23]

Their arguments were settled one month later in August, when Albert Lonn's team traveled down to Moscow for a return match at the Stalin stadium, just across the street from Gorky Park. This time the American lumberjacks and ski builders from Karelia scored six runs in the eighth inning to win 14-9, in a thrilling game in which the sports reporter from the *Moscow Daily News* wrote that the crowd had started shouting, "We want baseball" (meaning they wanted a national league) and noted that "only hot dogs and pop were missing from a genuine American scene." In a letter published in their newspaper, the captain of the Moscow team, Arnold Preedin, publicly thanked these "genuine fourteen carat rabid fans" for turning out in support, and graciously acknowledged that Albert Lonn's team deserved to be crowned "the USSR champions of 1934." Then the handsome Arnold Preedin—who in his photographs was usually pictured grinning beneath his mop of light-brown curly hair—promised them "the sweetest trimming they ever got in their lives in 1935." It would be the year hot dogs first went on sale in the streets of Moscow, another idea brought over by an enterprising American emigrant.[24]

Meanwhile, in an effort to popularize their sport, the American baseball teams had already played exhibition games for the Red Army and during the halftime interval of the USSR-Turkey soccer match in front of a cheering crowd of twenty-five thousand Russian spectators. In the summer of 1934, even the Dynamo Sports Club of the Soviet secret police showed an interest in learning the fashionable new sport. In June, the Foreign

Workers' Club was invited to stage another exhibition game at Bolshevo, the model prison camp built for the rehabilitation of young criminal delinquents in parkland outside Moscow.[25]

Three years earlier, George Bernard Shaw had visited Bolshevo as part of his Soviet tour, and had been assured that this idyllic setting surrounded by trees and gardens was a typical example of a Soviet "corrective labor camp." The camp's buildings were finely constructed of wood and brick, and inside the dormitories were orderly lines of beds with clean white sheets and sparkling washrooms. Young delinquents, orphaned by revolution and civil war, worked quietly at their chosen trades of metalwork or carpentry or engineering, and the boys never studied for more than six hours a day. Others simply concentrated on their schoolwork in bright classrooms with a gymnasium and auditorium attached. It was a prototype of the Soviet criminal-justice system, a progressive showpiece for any Western intellectual, businessman, or trade unionist who cared to visit this camp with no guards, where the gates were open and doors unlocked.[26]

The Americans' train left Moscow for Bolshevo at 10:15 A.M. Beforehand they had been informed that "all ball players must turn out for this game," an instruction that sounded more like a warning than an invitation. No record survives of what took place that day on June 18, 1934, at Bolshevo, but their hosts must have been fairly impressed because the Dynamo Sports Club soon announced that they, too, would be preparing two baseball teams to play in the forthcoming Soviet league to compete against Arnold Preedin's Foreign Workers' Club and the other American teams.[27]

Dynamo had been founded a decade earlier by Felix Dzerzhinsky to provide rest and recreation to the Soviet secret police, known by its first Revolutionary acronym as "the Cheka"—"The Extraordinary Commission for the Combat of Counter-Revolution and Sabotage"—and later, through the course of the 1930s, by its ever-changing initials as the GPU, the OGPU, and the NKVD. A neutral observer might have confidently predicted that any game between the OGPU and these brash young Americans would have been intensely competitive, with national pride at stake and tempers frayed over close calls, stolen bases, and complex rules

lost in translation on the baseball field. But the OGPU's interest in baseball would prove to be short-lived. Only their connection with the baseball players would last.

3

"Life Has Become More Joyful!"

The abolition of the Ogpu, secret police organization, and absorption of its functions into the newly created Commissariat for Internal Affairs [NKVD], was celebrated here today as a demonstration that the Soviet Union had turned the corner and at last could safely cast off methods by which the regime heretofore had stamped out enemies.

Harold Denny, The New York Times, July 12, 1934[1]

The two Foreign Workers' Club teams—the Hammer and Sickles and the Red Stars—continued their practice sessions in Gorky Park or at the Stalin stadium during the spring training of April 1935. The only problem they faced was the mischief of the Russian children who sneaked onto the grounds to watch them play. In one tied game, a foul ball was hit over the fence into left field, where a gang of little faces was watching intently. Straightaway the kids grabbed the ball and ran out of the stadium and into their backyard to start a game of "Americanski beisbol" of their own. It was left to the captain, Arnold Preedin, to chase after them and persuade this Moscow Little League to return their precious ball and let the Americans finish their game.[2]

By then the American baseball players had already gained their most celebrated team member. At the height of his fame, Paul Robeson arrived in Moscow to discuss acting roles with the Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein, and to give concerts in Moscow factories where he was cheered by the American emigrants who worked there.[3] To the world's press, the thirty-five-year-old American actor and singer announced his passionate enthusiasm for all he had seen: *"In Russia I felt for the first time like a full human being—no color prejudice like in Mississippi, no color prejudice like in Washington."* Later Robeson revealed that his young son would start

school in Moscow "so that the boy need not contend with discrimination because of color." Paul Robeson, Jr., was duly enrolled at the elite Moscow academy whose pupils included Stalin's daughter and Molotov's son.[4]

On New Year's Eve 1934, Paul Robeson had stepped into the party at the Foreign Workers' Club on Hertzen Street, perhaps out of curiosity or simply because he was searching for somewhere to celebrate the New Year. In their club, the young Americans mobbed him as a hero of the progressive cause, and performed their initiation ceremony of throwing the six-foot-six-inch former All-American football star three times into the air. At the invitation of the baseball players in the crowd, Paul Robeson happily agreed to turn out for the Foreign Workers' Club when he returned to Russia in the New Year. "I'll be a catcher," he laughed and crouched down low to show them he still had the moves from his days on the Rutgers team that had beaten Princeton. And on a promise made around midnight, the Foreign Workers' Club baseball team gained an honorary new member, as Robeson and the young Americans raised their glasses and drank toasts: "To the New Year, the third of our Five-Year Plan."[5]

"I was not prepared for the happiness I see on every face in Moscow," Robeson told a reporter from the New York *Daily Worker*, "I was aware that there was no starvation here, but I was not prepared for the bounding life; the feeling of safety and abundance and freedom that I find here, wherever I turn. I was not prepared for the endless friendliness, which surrounded me from the moment I crossed the border." When asked for a comment on the recent executions of "counter-revolutionary terrorists" announced in the Soviet press, Paul Robeson was frankly unconcerned: *"From what I have already seen of the workings of the Soviet Government, I can only say that anybody who lifts his hand against it ought to be shot! It is the government's duty to put down any opposition to this really free society with a firm hand . . . It is obvious that there is no terror here, that all the masses of every race are contented and support their government."*[6]

ONE OF THE new American baseball players to arrive in Moscow in the summer of 1935 was a nineteen-year-old from Buffalo, New York, with high cheekbones and brown eyes. Thomas Sgovio traveled with his mother and fifteen-year-old sister, Grace, to join his father, Joseph Sgovio, who had left America two years earlier. Sharing his father's gregarious nature, Thomas made friends easily within the American community in Moscow, as he pursued his youthful ambition to become a fine artist. Perhaps one day he might see his work hanging in the Tretyakov Gallery, just across the river from the Kremlin, but in the meantime he waited patiently to be accepted into art school for the following year, and took evening classes in charcoal drawing to help build up his portfolio.[7]

His father had found a job working as a pipe-fitter in a Moscow factory, and gave lectures to Soviet factory clubs on the evils of American unemployment his family had been so lucky to leave behind.[8] Joseph Sgovio had been an active American Communist Party member in Buffalo, and was comfortable delivering radical speeches. In Russia, the main difficulty these "political emigrants" faced was overcoming the skepticism of their audiences. No matter how bleak the American radicals painted the picture of their hardships back home, the Russian workers would take one look at their fine clothes and boots and not believe them. This political problem was directly addressed by Ben Thomas in a letter to the Soviet journal *Internatsionalny Mayak*, in which he admitted that Russian workers still believed that the Soviet press "*exaggerate conditions of workers in America. They often judge of the conditions according to the clothes of the American workmen who come here. I tried to explain to the workmen that the persons arriving . . . have still retained their clothes doing their best to present an 'outward appearance' because in America a man with worn clothes is viewed with suspicion and turned out.*"[9]

What set the American emigrants apart was always their clothing, which was closely examined by Russian workers, who touched their jackets and suits with expressions of approval and offered escalating sums of rubles to buy them, quite literally, off their backs. This Russian mania for American dress would last throughout the history of the Soviet Union, but it was particularly pressing in the thirties, when both fashions and new materials

were nonexistent.[10] The best-dressed people on the streets of Russia's cities were always foreigners, while the mass of ordinary citizens looked on enviously. And the Americans, in turn, could not help but notice that the Russian faces, if not quite starving, were at the very least a little hollow.[11]

Joseph Sgovio's speeches provided his family with an extra food ration in the special stores, where they waited in line next to the German and Italian communists who had fled fascism for the sanctuary of the USSR.[12] For some it came as a surprise that the system of Soviet food distribution was so heavily politicized. One American autoworker in Moscow reported six different types of stores selling items of varying quality to every class group.[13] While others who had been in the Soviet Union much longer were no longer shocked on seeing as many as seventeen different categories of wage and food rations. The mockery of the early American arrivals —*"Workers of the World Unite, and then divide yourself into seventeen categories!"*—was entirely lost on the Bolsheviks.[14]

The most luxurious stores were exclusively reserved for the Bolshevik elites, and if a young American such as Thomas Sgovio did not know any better, he might have suspected that a new class of privileged had quickly arisen from the ashes of the old. A sharp-eyed witness might occasionally catch a glimpse of a commissar, or GPU officer, stepping out of a store reserved for one of his own kind, turning the corner of a Moscow street, and clutching a precious food package wrapped in brown paper. But the Americans could hardly criticize when they themselves formed one rung on this escalating hierarchy of privilege. All those who arrived on official Amtorg contracts, as well as the political emigrants, gained access to the special stores where scarce provisions could be bought in exchange for foreign currency. It was a gastronomic world above and beyond the subsistence tedium of black bread and soup reserved for ordinary Russian workers. Fortunately for the consciences of the Americans, Stalin himself had pronounced that strict equality—once the highest ideal of the Revolution—was now *"a piece of petty bourgeois stupidity, worthy of a primitive sect of ascetics, but not of socialists' society organized on Marxian lines."*[15]

SOON AFTER HIS arrival in Moscow, Thomas Sgovio joined the Anglo-American Chorus, one of the cultural activities organized by the Foreign Workers' Club. The chorus gave concerts with forty-five male and female voices singing a program of "Negro protest-songs and American cowboy tunes," conducted by Gertrude Rady, formerly of Broadway.[16] Very quickly these American singers were in great demand, invited to the Theater of People's Art in Moscow, where they performed "Dis Cotton Want a Picking" to great applause from the discerning Russian audience.[17] Their concert was filmed, and soon afterward Thomas Sgovio joined his friends in a Moscow cinema to watch their performance projected up on the silver screen at twenty-four frames per second. At that moment, they all must have felt as though they had really arrived.[18]

If only for a short while, the popularity of the Americans in Moscow was unrivaled. Everyone was keen to make friends with these optimistic, fun-loving, and well-dressed new arrivals, including the sons and daughters of the Bolshevik elite. Thomas had recently made friends with Marvin Volat, a young American emigrant who hailed from Buffalo, New York, and was studying the violin at the Moscow Conservatory. It was Marvin who invited Thomas to meet his new Russian girlfriend, a nineteen-year-old language student named Sara Berman. Riding the tram over to Sara's apartment, on Lubyanka Square, Marvin chattered excitedly, "Just think! Her father is the chief of all the concentration camps in Russia! He knows Stalin real well."[19]

As their crowded tram clanked slowly to their stop, Thomas Sgovio could hardly have considered the inadvertent warning that lay hidden in Marvin's words. What earthly significance could the Glavnoye Upravleniye Lagerei—"the Labor Camps Directorate," whose initials formed the acronym "Gulag"—have to a nineteen-year-old American art student? At the time, if either Matvei Berman or the Gulag meant anything at all, it was only as the faint reflection of the state propaganda which characterized the

“camps” as the unfortunate necessity of the post-Revolutionary era, required for the “political re-education” of the remnants of the old Tsarist regime. Even Walter Duranty had agreed on the essentially benign nature of these “concentration labor camps.” Their purpose, Duranty had written in an article published on the front page of *The New York Times*, was to *“remove subversive individuals from their familiar milieu to a remote spot where their potentially harmful activities will be nullified—the Bolsheviki add kindly—‘where such misguided persons will be given a chance to regain by honest toil their lost citizenship*

in the Socialist Fatherland.’” Duranty’s best comparison was with the early American settlers of Virginia: *“Each concentration camp forms a sort of ‘commune’ where everyone lives comparatively free, not imprisoned, but compelled to work for the good of the community. They are fed and housed gratis and receive pay for their work . . . They are certainly not convicts in the American sense of the word.”*[20]

Of course it was a strange coincidence that out of all the millions of young women in Russia, Thomas Sgovio’s friend Marvin Volat had chosen to romance the daughter of Matvei Berman, the Gulag chief recently awarded the Order of Lenin for the “glorious” construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal.[21] But then it was equally surprising that two American teenagers should be riding a tram through 1930s Moscow toward the floodlit monolithic GPU headquarters on Lubyanka Square, whose blazing lights emitted a peculiar dark energy through the night. They had no idea, even then, that there were few Muscovites who would not make the necessary detour, of a few city streets left or right, to bypass Lubyanka Square.[22]

To make a little extra money on the side, Thomas was freelancing as a commercial artist at *Sovietland*—an English-language magazine published by the Soviet news agency TASS and intended as a cultural export for an English-speaking readership.[23] With no apparent sense of irony, the magazine’s glossy pages were filled with articles such as “Abundance!” which described how Moscow’s department stores were now overflowing with supplies of food, not to mention gramophones, vacuum cleaners, electric stoves, and a cascade of consumer goods. New cafés were opening

in Moscow where "payment was made by the honor system," although in a period of universal shortages, exactly where such cafés were found no one was completely sure. But the magazine articles were pored over by readers in America who formed strong attachments from such slender means. The manufacture of certainty, it seemed, was the most successful export of the Five-Year Plan.[24]

At the offices of *Sovietland*, Thomas Sgovio was introduced to Lucy Flaxman, who worked full-time on the magazine. Lucy was a pretty and rather lighthearted twenty-six-year-old from Boston, who had arrived in Russia a decade earlier with her family. Naturally she knew a wider circle of people in Moscow, and could help Thomas with his faltering Russian. Thomas' first American girlfriend had returned home, so when Lucy Flaxman invited him to the prestigious "House of Writers" to dance the latest American crazes that were sweeping Moscow, he was only too happy to join her.[25]

Greater quantities of food were beginning to appear in the stores; if never in the quantities suggested by the *Sovietland* articles, then at least there was something to buy after years of acute hunger and terrible shortages. When people started talking of a new café that had recently opened up on Pushkin Square with music and dancing, it seemed as though the promised socialist "good times" were finally on their way. The Communist Party had long declared itself to be "dizzy with success," and the official slogan of 1935 was Stalin's own announcement that "Life has become better, comrades; Life has become more joyful!"[26] It was seen everywhere across the USSR, the favorite catchphrase of a propaganda campaign announcing the arrival of socialism, the first step on the road to a fully communist society. "Life has become more joyful!" was the front-page headline in the Soviet press on New Year's Eve, hung in banners over "People's Parks" across the land, and celebrated in Red Army song. For a moment, then, it seemed as though enjoyment itself, for its own sake, had received an official Kremlin blessing: carnival balls, new sports, new foods, dancing, and jazz were all officially allowed, even encouraged.[27]

And so, as if obeying a stamped edict from on high, Thomas danced with Lucy Flaxman and their friends at the House of Writers, at the Metropol

Hotel, and the Foreign Workers’ Club. The young Americans danced, played baseball, sang in choirs, acted in the Clifford Odets play *Waiting for Lefty,* fell in love with one another, and thanked their lucky stars that they had made the right decision to come to Soviet Russia. All of them were full of hope for the future, bursting with the can-do optimism of the young.[28]

4

“Fordizatsia”

Carbon is transformed into diamond
Russia into a New America
A new one, not the old America.

Alexander Blok, July 1919[1]

Far from congregating in Moscow, the American emigrants had scattered all over the Soviet Union. Wherever there was work to be done, there seemed to be a lean and eager American happy to make the journey, willing to travel across the length and breadth of the USSR, from remote eastern cities such as Nizhni Tagil tucked away in the Ural Mountains, all the way south to the oil fields of Azerbaijan. By the early 1930s, there were English-language schools established for the children of American workers in Moscow, Leningrad, Stalingrad, Kharkov, and Nizhni Novgorod.[2]

Reports reached the *Moscow Daily News* of baseball teams organized in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, and in the Ukraine, where the Americans working at the Kharkov tractor factory announced their desire to join the Soviet national league just as soon as their “bush leaguers” got a little better. The Kharkov Americans had been getting along so far with just one bat and two balls. The bat was all right, but the balls were “in bad condition after three seasons of mauling” and needed restitching after every game. They wrote that Russian workers were also joining in their sport; and some Americans who had never had the chance to play baseball back home were learning for the very first time in the USSR.[3]

Did it strike them as strange that many of the Americans traveled to Russia only to find themselves working in brand-new Soviet factories built by the old capitalist titans of American industry? In the city of Nizhni Novgorod, 420 kilometers east of Moscow, the Ford Motor Company had constructed a giant auto plant on the empty Russian steppe. Despite a ferocious record of strikebreaking in Detroit, Henry Ford had been only too delighted to sell the Soviets the necessary industrial blueprints and machinery, together with seventy-five thousand "knocked-down" Ford Model A's from the River Rouge plant. It was a deal sweetened by the guarantee of five years of technical assistance and the promise of American labor and know-how. The Soviet contract was worth a staggering forty million dollars, and lest we forget, these were 1930s millions, paid for in gold at the height of the Depression. No other firm in the United States, or even the world, conducted as much business with Joseph Stalin as the Ford Motor Company between 1929 and 1936. For above all men, Henry Ford —"the Sage of Dearborn"—understood very well that the power and allure of the automobile transcended ideology. The whole of mankind was in love with speed and, in that respect at least, the Bolsheviks were no different.[4]

In fact the cult of "American mechanization" in Russia was as old as the Revolution. Lenin himself had been a passionate advocate of Ford's methods of mass production, and Ford's autobiography, *My Life and Work*, had long been a Soviet bestseller, going through four printings by 1925 alone. In remote Siberian villages, peasants who had not yet heard of Stalin knew all about Henry Ford; even his quip "You can have any color you like as long as it's black" hinted at a very mordant Russian sense of humor. The Soviet press had long heralded the advent of "Fordism" as the slogan for their industrialization campaign.[5] But it was the motorcar in particular, and Ford's role in its perfection, that set the standard for the modern age. The construction of a "Soviet Detroit," therefore, was deemed essential to the Bolshevik cause. Henry Ford's unpalatable hatred of trade unions, not to mention his vast capitalistic fortune, would have to be politely ignored as the Soviet ideologues embraced Ford as a secular saint holding the keys to a mechanical heaven.[6]

In Detroit, the River Rouge plant was universally recognized as "the wonder of the industrial world." The Rouge alone employed more than one hundred thousand men, in factories constantly fed by snaking wagons of coal and iron ore bearing the Ford logo on their side. Henry Ford owned the railroad, the river barges, the coal and iron ore mines, the glass and tire factories, even six million acres of Brazilian jungle bought for a rubber plantation named "Fordlandia." All of which converged at the Rouge, the industrial epicenter that employed five thousand workers just to keep the factories spotlessly clean, scrubbing floors, emptying trash every two hours, cleaning windows, and endlessly repainting surfaces in the Ford colors of white and machine blue. There was no talking, no smoking, no more than fifteen minutes allowed for lunch breaks, and instant firings for the slightest infraction of the rules.[7] Industry at the Rouge was all-powerful, unceasing, and relentless: as one shift ended another began in the twenty-four-hour production schedule, the Ford workers pouring out of the factories, most wearing flat caps and carrying lunch pails, a few grinning for the whirling cameras of the "Ford Sociological Department," which were recording them for the Ford Motor Company archives. For among his many eccentricities, Henry Ford was most consumed by his company's much-vaunted history.

The Ford publicists boasted that the iron ore delivered at the River Rouge docks on Monday morning was transformed into a finished motorcar to be sold in a Ford customer dealership by Thursday night.[8] The simplicity, speed, and scale of the industrial operation was a miraculous achievement. It was also a uniquely American success, the pinnacle of mass production and the very starting point of modernity. In Dearborn, Michigan, was the distilled essence of the industrialized world, which every company around the world was so jealously striving to copy. By 1931, Henry Ford posed proudly for a photograph with his son Edsel, in front of the very first and his twenty-millionth car sold. No wonder Stalin gazed on so enviously, and sent his Russian emissaries to Detroit begging to learn how it was done.[9]

For his part, "the Sage of Dearborn" could hardly suppress his delight at the prospect of being paid forty million dollars for the old Model A plant he had only been planning to scrap. From his point of view, it was simply too

great a business opportunity to refuse, although Henry Ford was perfectly aware of the grim reputation of the Soviet state. The Ford Motor Company had been trying to break into the Russian market since before the Revolution. In the summer of 1926, Henry Ford had sent a party of five employees to investigate conditions in Soviet Russia and to explore the idea of building a factory there. The group was led by the American engineer Bredo Berghoff, who quickly discovered the existing Soviet industry languishing in a state of chaos. Their factories were burdened with endless workers' committees, reluctant management, widespread smoking, trash on the floors, crude oil in gas tanks, machine parts manufactured to random thickness—an endless litany of industrial despair. It was soon obvious that while a vast market in automobiles lay waiting in Russia, the construction of a privately owned factory at Ford's expense would be tantamount to economic suicide, liable at any moment to government seizure by the Bolsheviks.

Perhaps the most interesting section of Bredo Berghoff's report was the considerations of personal safety in Russia, which the engineer was very anxious to reveal to Henry Ford. The new Soviet leader was mentioned only in passing, in a cursory nod toward the well-known prejudices of his boss: *"The government of the USSR is today, just as it was before Lenin's death, controlled by one man, Comrade Stalin . . . an Asiatic whose iron control of Russia and the USSR befits his Name which means Steel. Stalin's real name is Joseph Vissarionovich Djugashvili, although he is said not to be of Jewish blood."* What Berghoff subsequently made plain was the range of repressive methods employed by the contemporary Soviet state. In particular, he warned of the reputation of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the feared head of the Soviet secret police, who was *"considered responsible for the death of thousands upon thousands of people accused of not being in sympathy with Communist principles."* As Berghoff underscored the dangers, he added a request of his own that reflected this fear:

It is respectfully and urgently suggested that this copy of the Report on Soviet Russia and the USSR be kept at all times in a safe place and under lock when not under the holder's personal attention . . . The Soviet

Government possesses an excellent system of espionage throughout the world . . . Any careless handling of the information contained herein might easily result in 1. No member of the present delegation being allowed to reenter Soviet Russia . . . 2. If allowed to enter the country prison terms and even violence might await any member who might thereafter be falsely accused of counter-revolutionary sympathies, as such has been practiced on other foreigners in the past.

In conclusion, Berghoff requested that the report be burned immediately after it was read. Instead, it lay buried in the Ford Archives in Dearborn, an unheeded warning of the violence that might await any American who ventured to Russia upon the business dealings of Henry Ford.[10]

BREDO BERGHOFF'S PRESENTIMENTS of danger would prove to be well founded. But whereas Charles Sorensen, Ford's production chief, was only too happy to drop the whole idea of the Russian venture completely, Henry Ford was never quite so easily deterred. With reports of Stalin extending courtship to the French auto giants Citroën and Peugeot, the prospect of losing the Russian market to an international business rival appeared more than Ford could bear.[11] The reluctant Sorensen was instructed by his boss to negotiate with Stalin's emissaries in Dearborn. If there could not be a wholly owned Ford factory in Soviet Russia, then perhaps a compromise might be reached? And so Charlie Sorensen attempted to explain the strange vocabulary of capitalist ownership to the Bolsheviks, like a Roman senator pressing table manners on the hungry Goths.[12]

The startled American press quickly pounced upon the leaked news of these negotiations. In an article titled "Talk of Ford Favor Thrills Moscow," Walter Duranty attempted to explain the developments to the puzzled readers of *The New York Times: "Ford means America and all that America has accomplished to make her a model and an ideal for this vast and backward country . . . Cheap mass production is a Soviet goal, more precious from the practical standpoint than world revolution—Ford in Soviet eyes is the arch-mogul of that achievement.*

‘Fordizatsia’—‘Fordisation’—has become one of the ‘words of power’ with which Soviet orators spellbind auditors.” [13] In Dearborn, real progress was made with the arrival of Valery Mezhlauk, a highly intelligent Soviet industrial commissar who struck up a warm and unlikely friendship with Charlie Sorensen. The agreement between the Ford Motor Company and the Soviet Supreme Council of National Economy was signed on May 31, 1929, the forty-million-dollar deal completed in a mere seven pages of paperwork.[14] Henry Ford himself added his looping signature to the last page of the contract, and then happily posed to have his picture taken outside, standing between Valery Mezhlauk and Saul Bron, the Amtorg chief, as the photographers’ bulbs flashed amid a general purr of mutual satisfaction.[15]

Two months after the agreement was signed, Charlie Sorensen was welcomed in the USSR as an industrial prince from the old New World. For his visit, Sorensen was provided with his own private railroad car, along with a personal chef, steward, and valet to cater to his every whim on his journey across Russia. A private yacht was chartered to sail him down the Volga to view the site outside Nizhni Novgorod chosen to become “the Soviet Detroit.”

At a truck factory in Moscow, Sorensen’s arrival struck him as having made a “good excuse for a holiday.” All semblance of work stopped, and to his surprise, Sorensen heard shouts of “Hello Charlie!” and “Charlie, how are you?” from former Ford employees greeting their old boss with an easy familiarity they would never have dared back home. Sorensen recognized some familiar faces from the Rouge, and noted that the Russians employed these Americans as “experts,” whereas back home they had been regular assembly-line Joes. At one point during his three days of negotiation in the Kremlin with Soviet industrial commissars, Sorensen was surprised to be greeted by another small, unnervingly familiar figure gliding past their table. “Allo Sharley,” Joseph Stalin had murmured.[16]

Back in Detroit, bearing a parting gift of a silver jewelry box that had once belonged to Catherine the Great, Charlie Sorensen told Henry Ford that he would like to return to Russia to review the work they had set in motion. Ford’s reaction, Sorenson later remembered, had been adamantly

opposed: *“Charlie don’t you do it! They need a man like you. If you went over there, you would never come out again. Don’t take that chance!”* If Ford’s production chief could not be risked twice, no one seemed overly concerned for the safety of the company’s present and former employees who would travel to Russia to assemble the Soviet Model A’s.[17]

THE YEAR THE contract was signed, Ford’s chauffeur pulled up outside the modest Detroit home of Sam Herman, an autoworker and naturalized American born in the Ukraine. Over afternoon tea, Ford easily convinced this spellbound employee that he should act as an interpreter for the Soviet deal. Sam Herman’s youngest son, Victor, had sat in the room too overawed to interrupt their conversation. A teenage boy soon to become one of the American baseball players on the Gorky team, at the time Victor Herman was still just an athletic Detroit kid with pale blue eyes and a knack for getting into fights in their working-class neighborhood. On Ironwood Street, the local toughs had thrown stones at the windows of the Herman family house because they were Jews, and Victor had learned to box to defend himself. When his father announced that the family would travel to Russia on a three-year contract to build cars, Victor had been only too delighted at the prospect of an adventure. He trailed along as his father helped persuade three hundred Detroit families to emigrate to the new “American village” being built two miles outside the Ford factory in Nizhni Novgorod.[18]

Officially Victor Herman’s father was now an employee of the Soviet trust “Autostroi,” although while he worked with the Russians at the River Rouge plant in Dearborn, he was issued with a Ford badge, No. H-9824, on July 9, 1931, for which he had to sign an official waiver for any claims for damage or loss to his person. The Ford badge allowed Sam Herman entrance onto the premises of the Ford Motor Company, and it stated in his contract that he would have to pay a five-dollar fine if the badge was lost.[19] Perhaps assured by this implicit moral covenant with Henry Ford, the

Herman family emigrated on the passenger ship *Leviathan*, which sailed out of New York Harbor on September 26, 1931.[20] Several hundred American autoworkers and their families arrived in Nizhni Novgorod during the course of that year to join the crowds of that ancient Russian city with its blue onion-domed churches and muddy streets.

On a curve of the Volga River, at the junction of its tributary the Oka, where once there had been nothing but wheat fields and forests of dark fir trees, in less than two years a giant auto factory had risen from the Russian steppe.[21] An American construction company working under Ford supervision had begun the work in August 1930, and the factory was finished by November 1931. Given that half of the labor force was made up of Russian women equipped only with wheelbarrows and long-handled shovels, its completion was almost a miracle. Five thousand horse-drawn wagons had been used to move the building materials and heavy machinery, since there was a desperate shortage of trucks. Even the efficiency of these horses, the American construction engineers complained, was "catastrophically reduced by the low supply norms of oats."[22] During the winter in that part of central Russia, the temperatures almost always fell below minus twenty degrees, and the ice on the Oka River froze at least four feet thick.[23]

In such conditions, despite all the obstacles, eventually a "workers' city" was built beside the car factory, with rows of three-story apartment houses specifically designed by their Bolshevik architects *without* individual kitchens, since in the new Soviet era all cooking would take place in communal factory kitchens, signaling the "death blow" to domestic bourgeois drudgery. [24] The architects had adorned their workers' city with all the conveniences of the model state: a cafeteria, a nursery, public baths, a "palace of culture," and, of course, a crematorium.[25] It was, in every sense, a political showpiece of Joseph Stalin, to be heralded in Soviet propaganda as "Detroit without Ford," whose "masters are the working class, not capitalist kings."[26]

The American workers simply christened their new home "the Russian Fordville" or "Nizhni New York," a faintly familiar copy of the River

Rouge plant dropped down into the Russian wilderness.[27] And when the Americans arrived to work at their brand-new auto factory, they could see from the distance the giant sign that read FORD.[28]

5

"The Lindbergh of Russia"

We respect American efficiency in everything—in industry, in technique, in literature, in life. We never forget the United States of America is a capitalist country. But among the Americans are many sound persons physically and mentally, sound in their approach to work, to action.

Joseph Stalin, June 1932 [1]

For a while, at least, Stalin loved to buy American. Considerations of practicality were all but subsumed by the desire for symbolic achievement, with each new scheme designed to surpass the scale of the American original, and rechristened "the Soviet Detroit" or "the Soviet Gary" or "the Soviet Muscle Shoals." On Henry Ford's recommendation, the Detroit architect Albert Kahn designed the auto factory at Nizhni Novgorod and now opened an office in Moscow staffed with twenty-five architects, all working nonstop to put up 521 new Soviet factories in quick succession.[2] In the early thirties, Stalin's Russia was being rapidly industrialized according to an American design. It was a strange coalescence of interests that would soon be consigned by both parties into the dark interstices of history.

One thousand kilometers south of Nizhni Novgorod, along the course of the Volga River, several hundred Americans had found jobs working at the mammoth tractor factory built by Albert Kahn at Stalingrad. If living conditions were initially somewhat primitive, their deprivations were offset by feelings of solidarity, job security, and higher pay. Robert Robinson was one of the lucky ones offered a contract that almost doubled his existing wage. Working for Ford's in Detroit, he had earned $140 a month, whereas

in the Soviet Union he was offered $250 a month, rent-free living quarters, a maid, thirty days' paid vacation a year, a car, free passage to and from Russia, and the promise that $150 of each month's paycheck would be deposited in an American bank. It was too good an opportunity to miss, especially since Robinson knew he might be laid off any day from his job at the Rouge.[3]

When Robinson arrived at the address advertised in the Detroit newspapers, there was already a crowd of people hoping for the same chance.[4] Vast swaths of workers were being laid off in those Depression years, when wages at Ford's were almost halved from seven to four dollars a day, while the "speed-up" was in full effect and becoming unendurable. By October 1932, the Ford workforce had been cut to just fifteen thousand men, and within months the entire River Rouge operation would be shut down completely. [5] The mass redundancies in Detroit were greeted with evident delight in front-page headlines in the Soviet press: "Soviet Union Will Ask Fired Ford Men to Work Here."[6] Robert Robinson was just twenty-three years old when he left Detroit, and he considered himself fortunate.

So it was bitterly ironic that as a black American who emigrated to work in Russia, Robinson encountered racism only from his white American co-workers. Arriving in Stalingrad, Robinson refused to take their casual threats seriously until, just two weeks into his contract, he was stopped by two Americans named Lewis and Brown, who first racially abused him and then threatened: "You have twenty-four hours to leave this place or you'll be sorry." On the banks of the Volga, a fight broke out in which Robert Robinson gave back as good as he got.[7]

Back home in the United States, such retaliatory violence might easily have led to Robinson's being hunted down the next day. In Stalingrad, however, a Russian witness reported the ugly confrontation, and when Robinson turned up for work at the factory the next day, the Russian workers treated him as a hero. Four days later a well-organized demonstration took place outside the factory gates, with speeches condemning racism and calling for the punishment of Lewis and Brown.

The Soviet newspaper *Trud* published the text of their resolutions: *"We will not allow the ways of bourgeois America in the U.S.S.R. The Negro worker is our brother like the American worker. We castigate any who dares to destroy in the Soviet land the equality we have established for all proletarians of all nations."*[8]

The Alabaman Herbert Lewis was locked up in a Stalingrad prison awaiting trial. His arrest, observed the visiting American reporter William Henry Chamberlin, seemed only to strengthen the "racial chauvinism" of the three hundred other Americans working at the tractor factory. Chamberlin described a conversation he had with a "middle-aged mechanic, of the type, who probably earned fifty or sixty dollars a week before the Depression, regularly voted the Republican ticket and belonged to the Methodist church." This nameless mechanic had organized an American committee to free Lewis. "You know, brother," he said, "it's been most humiliating for us, as Americans, to hear a lot of furriners get up and jabber about how our government was no good and how we couldn't make laws to suit ourselves. And what they're trying to do with this trial is to force on us something no white American will stand for: social equality with the colored race."

The mechanic then showed Chamberlin a letter written on a sheet of paper, which Lewis had signed. The apology expressed his regret to "the ladies of the American colony, to the workers of Russia, and to the workers of the whole world," part of the plea bargain struck to avoid a Soviet prison sentence. When Chamberlin asked about a line in the note that had been heavily crossed out, the Republican mechanic explained, "That was a direct apology to the nigger. We crossed that out."[9]

Taking into account the fact that the defendants had been "inoculated with racial enmity by the capitalistic system of the exploitation of the lower races," the Stalingrad district court sentenced Lewis and Brown to expulsion from the Soviet Union as a substitute for "the term of ten years for deprivation of liberty."10 The court case turned Robert Robinson into a minor celebrity in Russia and America also, where his story was quickly picked up by the press. For Lovett Fort-Whiteman, the teacher at the Anglo-American school in Moscow and co-founder of the American Negro Labor

Congress, Robinson’s case must have seemed the fulfillment of the great ideal of color-blind justice. In the country Fort-Whiteman had left behind, black Americans were the last to be hired and the first to be fired, denied membership by the majority of white trade unions, thoroughly segregated, and regularly the victims of racially motivated violence. In 1933, twenty-four black Americans were lynched in the United States, a practice that would continue with stubborn regularity for the next three decades.

Small wonder, then, that American emigrants such as Fort-Whiteman wanted so passionately to believe that a place in the world existed where man’s essential brotherhood blinded him to differences of color. In the USSR, he thought he had found it. How then could Lovett Fort-Whiteman ever have foreseen that by being deported back to the United States for their assault, Lewis and Brown would have their lives saved, while he, by staying on, would have his own condemned?

HERBERT LEWIS SPENT a month in jail, and nine days on trial, before returning to America. In an interview he gave to the *Chicago Tribune*, the Alabaman mechanic painted a grim picture of the living conditions for the 450 Americans (including 80 women and children) who he claimed were being “held captive by Reds” in Stalingrad. Lewis stated that all of them were anxious to leave but were being refused exit visas and, meanwhile, were falling sick to “typhoid, typhus, dysentery and scurvy.” Two Americans had already died and many others were seriously ill. Their communications with the outside world were heavily censored, and they had barely one hundred dollars between all of them. The American money, which was supposed to have been paid into their Detroit bank accounts, had never materialized, and they quickly discovered that their ruble salaries were virtually worthless. *“They were not there because they were Reds,”* Lewis told the *Tribune*, *“they were there for the jobs, the salaries from $306 to $500 monthly.”* [11]

Robert Robinson was never physically attacked again in Stalingrad. In the summer of 1933, he returned home to New York to visit his mother in Harlem. In the trough of the Depression, the poverty and misery on the streets of Harlem were unrelenting, and Robinson discovered also that as a result of the publicity from his court case, he had been blacklisted by Ford's from all work in Detroit. Unable to find a job, Robinson returned to work at a ball-bearing factory in Moscow.[12] The following year, at a factory meeting on December 10, 1934, he was unexpectedly nominated to the Moscow Soviet. Once again the Soviet newspapers fêted him as an example of how a black American, unwanted and persecuted back home, could be raised to the status of a big-city politician owing to the progressive nature of the Soviet state. Unanimously "elected" with rising Communist Party apparatchiks such as Nikolai Bulganin and Nikita Khrushchev, Robinson's unlikely rise was featured in *Time* magazine of Christmas Eve 1934. The magazine ran a photograph of the shy and studious-looking Robinson above the caption "The Coal Black Protégé of Joseph Stalin." According to *Time*'s editorial: "*Possession of a US passport is the sine qua non for Negroes whom the Soviet Government is training as Communist dynamite. Reason: they must be able to get home as bona fide US citizens to do any good when the hoped-for explosion of US Revolution comes.*"[13]

In reality, Robert Robinson was a little panicked by his unexpected election. Fearing that he was already in well over his head, and not wishing to increase his indebtedness still further lest he never be able to return home, he refused Comrade Bulganin's offer of a central Moscow flat, a dacha, and a car in exchange for playing a more active role in the propaganda campaign. And, in the end, his American passport would prove no guarantee of his return.[14]

MEANWHILE THE CITY of Nizhni Novgorod had been renamed in honor of the Bolshevik writer Maxim Gorky, and its auto factory officially opened for full-scale production on January 1, 1932, with the usual fanfare of

ceremonies and rhetoric: *“When we place the USSR at the wheel of an automobile, and a peasant on a tractor, let the venerable capitalists boasting of their ‘civilization’ try to reach us!”* The first Ford Model A’s began rolling off the assembly line beneath giant portraits of a disturbingly youthful-looking Joseph Stalin, his watchful gaze seemingly filled with satisfaction at the appropriation of one of the most famous brands of American industry. In the early days, the blue oval Ford badge was still stamped on the Soviet Model A’s, positioned next to the hammer and sickle and a five-pointed red star on the front grille. The new cars were proudly driven out of the factory decorated with banners in Russian demanding: FULFILL THE FIVE-YEAR PLAN! GIVE US SOVIET FORDS![15]

Within weeks the entire assembly line had been shut down amid reports of wildcat strikes due to food shortages, and the Red Army having to be called in to “restore order.”[16] After production restarted in May, it became clear that for all the imported expertise of their 750 American workers, the Soviet management had not yet grasped even the most basic principles of mass production. One American visitor watching the assembly line at Gorky noted a touring car, a closed car, a seven-passenger car, and a truck emerging one after the other. Henry Ford would simply have fired everyone in sight.[17] Another Ford engineer just despaired: *“The Russians are a group of children playing with their first mechanical toys, they are smashing them, running them improperly, and generally making a mess of things.”*[18]

Even the official Soviet production figure of just forty cars per day proved deeply suspect, since most of the cars emerged missing a fairly crucial element, spark plugs and steering wheels in particular. A thousand of these semi-cannibalized machines awaited delivery that first summer, before the Russian winter destroyed them. But at least the Five-Year Plan was a little closer to being fulfilled. The Plan called for cars; it did not stipulate whether they arrived with their steering wheels attached.

Inside the factory, the native Detroiter Walter Reuther watched a Russian worker use his sleeve to wipe off a die because there was no cloth available. *“Nichevo”* was the response as the acid burned through his coat. With the constant threat of Sheared and falling machinery operated by inexpert

hands, the Soviet Ford factory was an extremely dangerous place to work.19 Young Russian women had to be persuaded to use tongs, not their hands, to remove material from the press. When an American worker tried to warn one woman, she only smiled and, with the air of professional impatience to a timid novice, replied, "Nichevo."[20] Fortunately a quick-thinking Ford engineer, Frank Bennett, was on hand when the wet paint on the Model A's caught fire. If the paint drums stored next to the overheated ovens had caught light, the whole factory would have gone up in flames. But the drums were rolled out of the way just in time.

In Moscow, the "Stalin" auto factory had been built to assemble the seventy-five thousand knocked-down Fords shipped over from Detroit. The factory floors were still being laid when Frank Bennett arrived on an inspection tour. He noticed that the Russians did not use regular asphalt, which was immune to temperature fluctuations and was the accepted practice back home in Detroit. Instead they preferred a "low-grade concoction," reinforced with broken bricks from old buildings. Walking through the factory, the American engineer kicked a piece of brick and realized that it had come from a church.[21] As part of the atheist campaign, Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior had recently been dynamited to make way for Stalin's Palace of the Soviets. The demolition was filmed by Soviet newsreel as evidence of the final triumph of the Bolsheviks, with Stalin's functionary Lazar Kaganovich pictured standing on top of the ruins proclaiming, "Mother Russia is cast down."[22]

In retrospect, the destruction of Christianity in Russia was a necessary precursor for all that followed. In the dictatorship of the proletariat, any element of civil society that might provide a countervailing voice to the authority of Joseph Stalin was being systematically destroyed, or turned into an acquiescent imitation of self-parody. The rubble from the Russian churches was salvaged to be used for factory floors, and the church bells removed to a giant smelting works outside Moscow. Here, in a mountain of ancient gold and silver, lay the silence that had descended upon Russia like the first fall of winter snow.[23]

SHORTLY AFTER HIS family's arrival in the USSR, Sam Herman was sent to Moscow from Nizhni Novgorod as an official American representative of the Soviet Ninth Trade Union Congress. Scare stories of "Nizhny Defeat" were unwarranted, Sam Herman told the Soviet press, "Mistakes have been made, it's true, but the plant has resumed operation." With some justification he blamed setbacks on a shortage of essential tools "such as Yankee screw drivers" and "the inexperience of workers who never handled complex machinery before." The Ninth Congress, Sam Herman pointed out, was *"the swellest Union convention ever witnessed, what impresses me about the Congress is the freedom with which workers criticize conditions in their plants. Could you imagine foreign workers scarcely employed a year at their trades elected to an AF of L. convention and actually stating opinions from the floor? In America this would be a pure fantasy. Yet here we are—a group of foreign delegates— three Americans and six Germans having the same rights as the rest."* [24]

On April 26, 1932, *Pravda* published the story of Joe Grondon under the headline "The Man Who Abandoned Detroit." Sam Herman's fellow union representative had been building Model A's in Russia for the past four months, after fifteen years spent working at the Rouge. Joe Grondon made a passionate speech at the Ninth Congress describing how he had walked through a park in Dearborn before he left and had seen an American policeman haul seven bodies of homeless workers out of the river:

I knew them—I had recently seen them alive. They had been working at our plant . . . I am a foreman of high qualification, and made good money at Ford's. But I asked myself: how about tomorrow? What will happen to me tomorrow? Shall I take walks in the park? Or will policemen carry my body out of the park? What guarantee have I that this will not occur? What security? There were 165,000 workmen in 1928 at the Ford plant where I was working. In 1931 there were only 35,000. Every one of these 35,000 spends all day in a state of feverish anxiety lest he be dismissed tomorrow.

In Detroit, Joe Grondon told his Russian audience that “theft and murder were flourishing.” He had been mugged walking home from the plant, while unemployed autoworkers were living in an abandoned Detroit fish factory in the dirt and soot, and fed once a day on soup. *“I decided to spend the rest of my days in the USSR,”* said Grondon, who was fifty years old when he left the United States. *“I read in the bourgeois papers that the Bolsheviks are the enemies of culture and civilization. I came to the USSR and got employed as a foreman at the Nizhni Novgorod automobile plant . . . I see the enthusiasm of the workmen, I see their passionate desire to master new machinery . . . What an attitude they maintain towards me! How attentively they listen to every word I say!”* [25]

It was always the political idealists like Joe Grondon and Sam Herman who had the hardest time adjusting to what they discovered in Russia, as they carried with them the seemingly irresistible hope that their situation would improve later that year, or the next, or the year after that, until it was all too late. Eighteen months after the union congress, Sam Herman’s name appeared once again in the Soviet press with another update on news from Nizhni Novgorod, the city now known as Gorky:

The foreigner required real spunk to stick through the early stages—but we stuck. Things have definitely turned to a brighter side now. Life in the village is more comfortable; and the factory is working better each month . . . Shall I ever go back to the States again? . . . No I don’t think so. I don’t think any of us care to. Isn’t there plenty to do right here? Our aim is to develop the Soviet automotive industry to the level of Detroit within the shortest time. Isn’t that work enough for a specialist’s lifetime? [26]

A convoy of the first thirty Ford cars and trucks built in the Gorky factory was ordered to be driven to Moscow for a propaganda display, a request that would have been easy enough to fulfill had there been sufficient

workers who knew how to drive. But most of the Americans were too broke to afford a car back home, and very few Russians had learned to drive. So it fell to the Detroit teenager Victor Herman to get behind the wheel of a truck. On the journey to Moscow, Victor was amazed to watch the Soviet militia turn out Russian villagers to tread down the snow in front of their convoy, making his route a little easier. In Moscow the atmosphere for the parade was strangely intense. There was hardly any cheering; the Russians appeared so genuinely moved by what they saw. Victor watched men and women openly weep at the sight of the brand-new Ford trucks and cars "made in the USSR." On the street his observation was broken only by the voice of an educated Russian woman who tugged at his sleeve and whispered to him in English, "Tell me why you do this. Why you help them, the Soviets?"[27] But it was only later, too late, that he understood the bewilderment resting in her question.

Afterward, at the official reception in the Kremlin, Stalin himself made a rare appearance before the Gorky autoworkers. He was much shorter than Victor Herman had expected, with a pockmarked face and yellow eyes quite unlike those in his idealized portrait. In a brief speech, Stalin urged them all "to try harder, produce more, give it all you've got," and was met by a familiar thunderous ovation. An awestruck American engineer named McCarthy leaned over and proudly told Victor that what they had just witnessed was "an honor to them all." Looking around the Kremlin banqueting hall, Victor Herman noticed that all the waiters had the clear outlines of revolvers bulging out of their jackets.[28]

After Stalin's speech, Victor Herman met a Red Army officer in his mid-forties with gray hair and an apparent sense of humor who introduced himself as "Tukhachevsky." By this stage Victor's Russian was fluent enough to ask the man if he was the son of the famous Civil War hero, to which the officer had only laughed and replied that he *was* Marshal Tukhachevsky. The Russian then questioned Victor on which airplanes he could fly, since he assumed that all Americans who could drive must be able to fly planes, too. When Victor insisted that this was not actually the case, Tukhachevsky laughed again and asked if perhaps the young American might like to learn. Naturally, the excited Detroit teenager handed

him his address at the American village in Gorky, and Marshal Tukhachevsky promised that all would be arranged. And much to Victor's surprise, his new benefactor kept his word.[29]

It turned out that Victor Herman was not only a gifted athlete but also a natural aviator, quickly graduating from flying planes to parachuting at an elite Moscow aviation academy. In September 1934, the nineteen-year-old Herman set the world freefall record, jumping from a plane at 24,000 feet and waiting 142 seconds before opening his parachute. From the ground, thirty thousand spectators watched him fall through the air holding the ripcord with his right hand and calmly eating an apple with his left. Victor later explained that he had been surprised to find the apple in his pocket—his pilot must have put it there for luck—and since apples were scarce at the time he thought he might as well eat it. His record, and the cool nerve he displayed in achieving it, turned him into another minor American celebrity of the Soviet emigration. The newspapers crowned Victor Herman "the Lindbergh of Russia," while his story crossed the Atlantic into the pages of the *Detroit Evening Times* under the headline "Detroit Boy Wins Fame as 'Lindy of Russia.'"[30]

It was only later that the trouble started. The paperwork had to be filled out to gain credit for the jump from the world aviation authorities, and in the box marked "nationality" Victor Herman had written "USA." Officials suddenly appeared from all sides, representing the Communist Party, the Red Army, and the secret police. Questions were asked and arguments raged: "How could an American be allowed to jump from a Soviet plane, flown by a Soviet pilot, onto Soviet soil?" Fortunately a quick-thinking official thought of a cheap solution to their problem. A new set of forms was filled out, and Victor Herman was politely asked to please write "USSR" in the correct box. Full of a sense of his own invincibility, the naïve blue-eyed Detroit teenager picked up a pen, paused for a moment, and then wrote "USA." And with those three letters young Victor Herman sealed his fate.[31]

6

“The Captured Americans”

The slogan “The Five Year Plan in Four Years” was advanced, and the magic
symbols “5-in-4” and “2 + 2 = 5” were posted and shouted throughout the land. The formula 2 + 2 = 5 instantly riveted my attention. It seemed to me at once bold and preposterous—the daring and the paradox and the tragic absurdity of the Soviet scene . . . 2 + 2 = 5: in electric lights on Moscow housefronts, in foot-high letters on billboards, spelled planned error, hyperbole, perverse optimism . . . a slogan born in premature success tobogganing toward horror.

Eugene Lyons, American reporter in Moscow[1]

Those Americans who found it hard to settle in Russia soon began to discover quite how difficult it was to leave. In Moscow, one Californian machinist with two children was curtly informed by the authorities that he was considered a Soviet citizen. His family was allowed an exit visa only after more than a year of protests and pressure from the American reporters who threatened to bypass Soviet censorship by mailing their dispatches to London and then have them cabled on to the States. Very quickly, the Californian’s passport was returned, and he was allowed to leave with his family. More usually, the Americans who arrived in Russia had their passports confiscated, and those whose initial fervor had quickly dimmed soon discovered they were on their own. In 1933, the United States still had no diplomatic presence in the Soviet Union, and after a while the American reporters simply shrugged their shoulders and offered not much more than sympathy. Privately they had already coined a name for these people: they became known as “captured Americans.”[2]

The American press corps in Russia—Walter Duranty, William Henry Chamberlin, Ralph Barnes, Linton Wells, and Eugene Lyons, among others —were strangely reluctant to cover the story of the missing American

passports, although it was a widely known practice at the time. In Gorky, the "foreigners' bureau" at the auto factory was notorious for attempting to persuade their American workers to take up Soviet citizenship, offering the lure of better food and housing, coupled with the threat of having to leave Russia at short notice. One group who had arrived in December 1931 were simply instructed to hand over their passports for registration which, they were told, would be returned to them when they left. The American autoworkers were then given registration forms to fill out, and abruptly informed that they had all become Soviet citizens. According to one witness, there was an ardent American communist who worked in the bureau named Sophie Talmy, who "was responsible for causing many American citizens to apply unwittingly for and acquire Soviet citizenship."[3]

After Herbert Lewis' expulsion from Stalingrad, both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* carried a report from Peter Sutherland, a forty-four-year-old engineer from San Diego, on the "enslavement" of Americans in the USSR by the confiscation of their passports, which Sutherland claimed were then used to slip communist agitators into the United States "in the guise of returning American citizens." Several men Sutherland had known personally in Russia had simply vanished. Meanwhile, an American military intelligence report sent from the Berlin embassy to Washington, D.C., cited evidence "confirmed by an authoritative source" that *"American passports are stolen at every opportunity, as they can be sold to the Soviet government at a good price. Passports thus obtained by confiscation or theft are used for fraudulent entry of communists into the United States. The photograph is removed and a photograph of the communist user is substituted, who enters the United States under the name of the former owner. Counterfeit passports have also been used for the same purpose to some extent, but the genuine passport, altered as described, is greatly preferred."*[4]

Only a hopeless idealist—or the most blundering detective—could have failed to deduce that once an American passport was stolen and reused, the true holder of that passport would become a rather inconvenient witness to an inelegant identity fraud. But the Berlin intelligence report was kept classified; and no one thought to warn the Joads still on their way to Russia.

Nor were the American reporters in Moscow ever likely to risk exposing the story, since their professional existence in Russia depended on the approval of the Soviet authorities, who censored their stories for the slightest transgression of the Bolshevik party line. The reporters understood very well that if they wrote anything remotely critical, they would be instantly harassed, have their visas revoked, and shortly afterward be declared “hostile” to the Soviet Union and expelled. Over time, most of the foreign press in Moscow became gradually browbeaten into repeating the themes their Soviet censors wished the American public to read. Consequently news from the USSR acquired an Alice in Wonderland quality, as prescribed by the Soviet censor-in-chief, Konstantin Oumansky, a young, multilingual, gold-toothed apparatchik.[5] And for their part, realizing that it was pointless to write anything that would be censored anyway, the American reporters began to lose all measure of their critical faculties, lapsing into a stupefying form of self-censorship. If the story of the “captured Americans” trapped in the USSR failed to register in the public consciousness back home, it was therefore hardly surprising. Especially when one considers how easily Konstantin Oumansky orchestrated the concealment of a far greater crime being committed at the time.

IN MARCH 1933, in response to the widespread rumors of a terrible famine in the Ukraine, Walter Duranty wrote an article for *The New York Times* entitled “Russians Hungry But Not Starving.” Very carefully Duranty explained that reports of “mass famine casualties” in the Ukraine “were somewhat hasty.” Duranty himself was anxious to reveal the truth:

I have made exhaustive inquiries about this alleged famine situation. I have inquired in Soviet commissariats and in foreign embassies with their network of consuls, and I have tabulated information from Britons working as specialists and from my personal connections, Russian and foreign. All

of this seems to me to be more trustworthy information than I could get by a brief trip through any one area . . . And here are the facts: there is no actual starvation or deaths from starvation but there is widespread mortality from diseases due to malnutrition.[6]

Anyone who crossed paths with the travelers returning from Soviet famine areas understood very well the consequences of Stalin's collectivization campaign. Jack Calder, the tall, pipe-smoking American engineer who had built the tractor factory at Stalingrad, would sit at the bar of the Metropol Hotel in Moscow telling anyone who would listen the story of his recent trip through Soviet Central Asia. In Turkestan, Calder was chauffeured across a desert during a snowstorm. Through the car window, he noticed that the side of the road was lined with a continuous pile of logs, covered by the drifting snow. The logs had not been stacked correctly; often his chauffeur had to stop the car and move them over to the side of the road. When Calder asked where all the wood had come from in a desert region, the chauffeur had burst out laughing: *"Those aren't logs. This road leads out of the Soviet Union to countries where you can have food by merely going into a restaurant. Thousands of peasants . . . try to get out of Russia. Most of them are too weak to make it."*[7]

In Moscow, Jack Calder was celebrated as the American engineer "Carter" in the Soviet play *Tempo*, and, according to his contract in the Russian state archives, was earning a tax-free salary of ten thousand dollars per year, with all the perks of his position. But neither celebrity nor riches was sufficient compensation for the sights he had witnessed in Turkestan. Haunted by the dead, Calder packed his bags and returned home.[8]

Although other American engineers brought back similar eyewitness accounts of the terrible famine in the Ukraine—one described how Soviet border guards were opening fire on "thousands" of Ukrainian peasants attempting to cross the frozen Dniester River at night—by their own admission, the American reporters were more anxious to cover the forthcoming trial of a group of British engineers accused of espionage. Late one night in a Moscow hotel room, a Faustian bargain was struck between Oumansky and the American press corps as to how they would cover the state-induced famine. Years later, Eugene Lyons, the United Press

correspondent, confessed his own complicity in the deal: *"We admitted enough to soothe our consciences, but in roundabout phrases . . . The filthy business having been disposed of, someone ordered vodka and zakuski, Oumansky joined the celebration, and the party did not break up until the morning hours."*[9]

By September 1933, when the famine was over, the American press corps was finally granted permission to travel into southern Russia and the Ukraine. Walter Duranty was given a two-week head start, presumably as a form of payback for being the most vociferous champion of the nonexistence of the starving millions. In a *New York Times* report titled "Abundance Found In North Caucasus," Duranty wrote, *"The use of the word 'Famine' in connection with the North Caucasus is a sheer absurdity. There a bumper crop is being harvested as fast as tractors, horses, oxen, men, women, and children can work . . . There are plump babies in the nurseries or gardens of the collectives . . . Village markets are flowing with eggs, fruit, poultry, vegetables, milk and butter at prices lower than in Moscow."* [10]

But Walter Duranty's private remarks were very different from his published story. To British diplomats in Moscow he admitted *"that Ukraine has been bled white . . . It was quite possible that as many as ten million people may have died directly or indirectly from lack of food in the Soviet Union during the past year."*[11] Perhaps, as an Englishman, he felt more at ease, and inclined to be honest, in the British embassy overlooking the Moskva River.

The celebrated Walter Duranty was fêted by the American literary establishment. Awarded the 1932 Pulitzer Prize for his outstanding reporting from Soviet Russia and rumored to be one of the highest-paid foreign correspondents in the world, Duranty lived a life of unrivaled comfort in Moscow. With the success of his journalism, his household expanded to include a fact-hunting American assistant; an elderly Russian cook; a young Russian house-maid; Grisha, his chauffeur; and Katya, his beautiful assistant, who for a while "ran the whole show" and bore him a son.[12] Together they lived in large apartment with four or five rooms—an unheard-of living space in the desperately overcrowded city—with their

own bathroom and a kitchen outfitted with an electric refrigerator brought over from America, another luxury "almost unique" in Moscow. His many guests noticed also, on prominent display in the bookcase of his living room, a signed photograph of Joseph Stalin.[13]

At home, Walter Duranty would drink cocktails and make witty asides to his constant flow of visitors, while dictating effortless copy on the Five-Year Plan for his American readership. And in the evening, the whole party moved on to the Metropol Hotel, where the fun really began.[14] All the rich Americans in Moscow would gravitate to the Metropol, with its long, shining mahogany bar and jazz band blaring out syncopated rhythms, Soviet style.[15] Couples danced, working their way around a circular fountain kept stocked with fish in the middle of the dance floor. Diners were encouraged to select their supper, at which point a net would be deftly flourished by the waiter, the fish caught and cooked and brought to their table. It was all part of the theater, along with the Russian girls who walked through the dining room selling multicolored balloons at five rubles apiece. Their customers would tie on a paper streamer, set it alight, and watch the balloon float upward—if it reached the ceiling intact, there would be another burst of raucous applause. Who said you couldn't have fun in Moscow? The crowd at the Metropol was always "a riot," amid the jazz and dancing and the waiters babbling away in the languages of the rich visitors passing through town. And then there was always the frisson of intrigue provided by the GPU and the Bolshevik apparatchiks, who were the only locals who could afford the prices. In public the Americans learned to follow the Russian example, and never mentioned the initials GPU or NKVD out loud. Instead they joked about the "Four-Letter Boys" or the "YMCA" or "Phi Beta Kappa" or "the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Bolshevism" or any other whip-smart euphemism that might confuse the listening waiters, secretaries, and assorted informers of every stripe who surrounded them in the Metropol bar.[16]

The wealthy Americans—the industrial engineers, businessmen, reporters, and tourists—quickly discovered that tipping, too, while officially abolished, was still very much in favor among the waiters themselves and ensured a stampede of service as soon as they sat down.[17] Their party at the

Metropol became a weekly event to which everyone turned out, and the dancing would carry on until six in the morning, with the lonely Americans looking forward to the company of the sleek Russian girls who hung around the bar. All the Metropol Hotel girls were "swell dancers" and just happened to speak English, French, and German.[18] They were always beautifully turned out with immaculate hair and makeup, and fashionable dresses impossible to come by at the time. Of course, it was widely known that these girls were handpicked by the GPU for their looks and ability to speak foreign languages. Almost without exception, they came from the former Russian aristocracy, the luckless generation of Anna Karenina's granddaughters made victims of the Revolution. As "class enemies," the Metropol girls would disappear with heartrending regularity, only to be replaced by more of their kind. The rule among the Americans was "not to get too attached," and to help things along, they drank up the Metropol whiskey, cognac, and beer on sale at the better class of Chicago speakeasy prices. Vodka was, of course, cheaper, and, for the more or less permanent resident, the drink of choice since the effect was quicker. The Russian vodka quickly drowned out the memory of the ever-changing faces of the Metropol beauties, and allowed "everyone to have a swell time anyway," as the photographer Jimmy Abbe put it.[19]

In the midst of the intrigue, Walter Duranty never missed the party. Duranty had lost half his leg in a train wreck and could not dance, but he sat instead at his favorite table always "romancing some dame."[20] While the wits at the Metropol bar dreamed up plans for a population exchange between America and Russia. The Russians would bring to the United States their literature, art, and music, and within a decade destroy American industry. The Americans would arrive in Russia and, in that decade, build up a fully functioning economy. Then they could both go home again. It would take the Russians another ten years to wreck their economy, and the Americans the same time to rebuild theirs, thus providing jobs and culture for all. Zara Witkin, a Californian engineer, even had the beginning of a show tune:

USSR has some hope, but no soap
USA has no hope, but some soap
USA is losing its soap
USSR is losing its hope.[21]

Occasionally a genuine American jazz band materialized in Moscow, and then, according to one witness, *"the tide turned, and the boys put on some real American cloggin', the house broke out in a roar, and I heard a woman back*

of me saying 'Marvellous, truly marvellous.'"[22] For a moment then, with the blaring jazz and thunderous applause, the stamping feet and swinging arms, the pretty young women in expensive dresses and the handsome men in black tie—if only for a moment—it must have felt as though the Depression had never really arrived and the Roaring Twenties roared on, in one of Jay Gatsby's parties switched to snowy Moscow just for the thrill. And the rich American engineers and reporters who gathered at the Metropol Hotel bar to spend their dollars and savor the attention of Russian girls so much more attractive than their company deserved only had to put up with the occasional inconvenience, the occasional episode in the night to add to a vicious hangover and a very large check. From the early 1930s, the rich Americans who shared their apartment buildings with the Soviet elite were already starting to be woken in the night by a pounding on their door from the GPU and a command barked in Russian, "Open! Open!" They would answer bleary-eyed in dressing gowns at five A.M., only to discover that their wild-eyed night visitors had come to the wrong apartment: *"What do you mean coming around here at this hour waking people up? I am an American."*[23]

It was an experience that was becoming increasingly common with each passing month, and those Americans who judged themselves to be immune from the threat were wrong. A few would be caught in the exit as they rushed for the doors. Their time was drawing ever closer, looming toward them with every passing week of the Metropol party, from out of the fog of the vodka, the girls, and the blaring jazz.

IT WAS Walter Duranty, more than any other individual, who persuaded Franklin Roosevelt of the wisdom of granting diplomatic recognition to the Soviet government. Even before the inauguration, Duranty spent long hours briefing the president-elect on "the Soviet experiment," elaborating on a theme he had first outlined in *The New York Times* of how *"the word 'Bolshevik' has lost much of its former mystery and terror over here* . . . *Such a concept of bolshevism as applied to the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics today is a trifle old-fashioned, to say the least."* [24] In the midst of a Soviet famine that was killing millions with calculated ruthlessness, the United States chose to make friendly overtures to Joseph Stalin. And President Roosevelt, while doubtless aware of the rumors of the famine, was either blind or inured to the scale of the horror, thanks in no small measure to Duranty.

In November 1933, the Soviet foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov, crossed the Atlantic in the royal suite of the passenger liner *Berengaria,* ready to negotiate the terms for the American recognition. As the *Berengaria* steamed into New York Harbor, Litvinov asked the captain to steer the ship closer to the Statue of Liberty. Standing beside him at the rail was Walter Duranty, who wrote in *The New York Times* that the Soviet foreign minister admired the Statue of Liberty "no less than the New York skyline."[25] The *Times* reporter then assured the American public that the continued accounts of the Ukrainian famine were nothing but *"an eleventh-hour attempt to avert American recognition by picturing the Soviet Union as a land of ruin and despair."* [26] The tubby Soviet foreign minister, meanwhile, ensured himself a warm welcome at the White House by arriving with a complete collection of Soviet stamps issued since 1917, his personal gift for the philatelist president.[27]

After sixteen years as a pariah nation, the Soviet state once derided by the former secretary of state Bainbridge Colby as "illegal, irresponsible and without doubt impermanent" was now on the brink of legitimacy.[28] It was

the American business community, in particular, who urged the president to help their firms export their way out of the Depression. For his part, Maxim Litvinov played the role of piper, forecasting more than one billion dollars of future trade orders, to mesmerize the two thousand American corporations already selling a shopping list of industrial equipment into the Soviet market. A cartoon published in national newspapers summed up their case: "Starving in the Midst of Plenty" showed a very gaunt and hungry-looking Uncle Sam sitting next to the fat turkey of Russian trade.[29]

Stepping off the *Berengaria*—having traveled on the same crossing as Maxim Litvinov, albeit in steerage class—was William Gedritis, an American teenager from Chicago. Gedritis was followed shortly afterward by his friend and co-worker in Russia, the fugitive American trade unionist Fred Beal, who was escaping the Soviet Union under a false identity. Sent by the Communist Party to work with the American emigrants at the Kharkov tractor plant, Beal had seen firsthand the foreigners of Kharkov under siege from Ukrainians desperate for food. The Americans, in particular, were known to be generous, and the locals knocked on their doors to beg for scraps, or fought one another for the privilege of raking through the Americans' garbage. The foreigners' food stores were protected by armed guards, but the starving populace still attempted to break into them at night. In the autumn of 1932, seeking a respite from the grinding desperation of city life, Fred Beal had taken an unsupervised trip out into the Ukrainian countryside. Walking through fields he stumbled upon fresh graves marked with crosses, and unburied bodies decomposing into the earth. As he continued walking, he noticed the starving Ukrainian peasants running away from him, evidently mistaking him for the GPU.

Around six months later, in the spring of 1933, Beal had made a second trip, this time to a Ukrainian collective farm, near the village of Chekhuyev, and walked several miles east. Here the atmosphere was thick with the cloying smell of death, hunger, and despair. By the side of the road, the Massachusetts-born trade unionist came across a dead horse still harnessed to its wagon, and a dead man holding its reins in his hands. Walking into an empty village, Beal looked into a peasant hut and saw a dead man still sitting by a stove: "His back was against the wall, he was rigid and staring straight at us with his faraway dead eyes." On one village door someone

had written: GOD BLESS THOSE WHO ENTER HERE, MAY THEY NEVER SUFFER AS WE HAVE. Inside the house, two men and a child lay dead beside the family icon. On his return to America, for all his radical contacts, Fred Beal could find only one newspaper willing to print his account of the famine that had claimed an estimated five million lives. The socialist *Jewish Daily Forward* of New York published his testimony in Yiddish.[30]

DURING THE BUILDUP to the U.S.-Soviet recognition agreement, as the State Department officials busied themselves in Washington, they became aware of the pressing need to protect the American citizens who had already left to work in the USSR. Loy Henderson—soon to become the first secretary at the Moscow embassy—later recalled how reports had been gathered as early as 1932 of the sudden and mysterious disappearance of American nationals in Russia. According to Henderson, some of the missing Americans had served sentences in Siberia and been allowed to leave; but others remained unaccounted for, even as Litvinov was in discussions with Roosevelt at the White House.[31]

The day before their agreement was signed, Franklin Roosevelt exchanged a series of official letters with the Soviet foreign minister. With a cigarette burning in its ebony holder, tilted up at a jaunty angle, and an ever-present smile flickering around the corners of his mouth, America's great optimist began:

My Dear Mr Litvinov, As I have told you in our recent conversations, it is my expectation that after the establishment of normal relations between our two countries many Americans will wish to reside temporarily or permanently within the territory of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and I am deeply concerned that they should enjoy in all respects the same freedom of conscience and religious liberty which they enjoy at home. As

you well know, the Government of the United States, since the foundation of the Republic, has always striven to protect its nationals, at home and abroad . . .

The letter continued, listing the presidential expectation of the rights of American citizens living in Russia:

We will expect that the nationals of the United States will have the right to collect from their co-religionists and to receive from abroad voluntary offerings for religious purposes; that they will be entitled without restriction to impart religious instruction to their children, either singly or in groups, or to have such instruction imparted by persons whom they may employ for such purpose; that they will be given and protected in the right to bury their dead according to their religious customs in suitable and convenient places established for that purpose . . . Let me add that American diplomatic and consular officers in the Soviet Union will be zealous in guarding the rights of American nationals, particularly the right to a fair, public and speedy trial and the right to be represented by counsel of their choice. We shall expect that the nearest American diplomatic or consular officer shall be notified immediately of any arrest or detention of an American national.

Perhaps Maxim Litvinov smiled when he read these words, and naturally he agreed wholeheartedly to every one of Roosevelt's demands, knowing as he did that the Soviet judicial process tended to conclude in only the swiftest extraction of confessions. The GPU, they said in Russia, "could force the stones to talk."[32]

At the official ceremony held at the White House on November 17, 1933, the United States recognized the existence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. And in the subsequent press conference, President Roosevelt

publicly reiterated to the two hundred gathered news reporters the guarantees he had gained for the protection of the American citizens living in the USSR. Even at the time, George Kennan, a young Russian speaker at the State Department who would soon arrive in Moscow, noted that the provisions of the agreement were inadequate. Among its many oversights, an American consul was not specifically entitled to visit with an American prisoner alone without the presence of the Soviet secret police. But in spite of his warnings urging more stringent safeguards, such flaws had been left unchanged in the final draft.[33] The president had sought to convey the impression of vigilance when, in reality, the safeguards would prove unenforceable—and in the end they were unenforced.

AFTERWARD, AT THE celebratory banquet at the Waldorf Astoria, when Walter Duranty's name was announced, in the words of *The New Yorker* correspondent, "the only really prolonged pandemonium was evoked . . . One got the impression that America, in a spasm of discernment, was recognizing both Russia and Walter Duranty."[34] In this crowd there was only passionate agreement with Duranty's confidence in the new era of diplomatic friendship and cooperation between the United States and Soviet Russia. The American guests stood and cheered the so-called King of Reporters, who told them that the methods of terror no longer existed in the modern USSR.[35]

Of course, every one of the American reporters in Moscow knew otherwise. Eugene Lyons had visited a Moscow theater where the Russian comedian Vladimir Khenkin was performing his famous monologue. *"One night,"* Khenkin said, *"I heard a vigorous knock at the door. So I took my little suitcase and went to open the door . . ."* The Russian audience roared with laughter in a sudden release of nervous energy and mutual recognition of their fear. They understood very well that the "former" people were disappearing, and realized immediately that the "little suitcase" was the symbol of their departure. People had already begun packing these little suitcases in expectation, filling them with a change of clothes, something to stay warm, something to eat perhaps on the long journey to God knows where.[36] In retrospect, the clues were all around them even then, if only they had the eyes to see and the sense to understand their significance.

Adorning the walls of Soviet buildings in the early 1930s was one particularly uncanny propaganda poster. The image showed a large open eye watching over a work camp, above the slogan GPU—THE UNBLINKING EYE OF THE PROLETARIAN DICTATORSHIP.[37]

After several years in Russia, Eugene Lyons had become attuned to the low-frequency hum of the GPU, the soft burr of executions announced daily on Soviet radio and in the newspapers. His was a slow-dawning comprehension of an approaching catastrophe. In the morning, Lyons would count out the death sentences handed out to the so-called enemies of Progress—the reactionary amalgam of wreckers, saboteurs, aristocrats, priests, businessmen, former White Army officers—the list was endless.[38] At night, stumbling back from their parties more often than not the worse for wear, the American reporters had begun to notice strange new vehicles driving through the empty streets of Moscow that looked like moving vans from back home, except they had ventilation holes cut into their roofs. Late one night on his way home, Lyons had rung the bell of his courtyard gate and woken the concierge, who was dozing. “I thought it was the wagon again,” the sleepy-eyed man complained. “Almost every night they come for somebody.”[39]

Meanwhile, Eugene Lyons’ colleague Walter Duranty returned from America with a shining new Buick. In December 1933, his young Russian chauffeur, Grisha, drove his master’s limousine around Moscow at maniacal speed, and Duranty had a special GPU horn fitted, which he took great delight in pressing as the terrified Muscovites leaped out of his way in panic. The horn on the Buick, Duranty later claimed, had been fitted through “fortuitous circumstance,” but his fellow American reporters suspected otherwise. Linton Wells took a ride in the Buick late one night on a drunken spree, when his pal Duranty decided it would be a good idea to pay a call on some Russian friends. According to Wells, they pulled up outside an apartment building well past midnight, and the chauffeur began honking the Buick’s horn to announce their arrival. Getting no response, Duranty and Wells stepped out of the car and rang the doorbell. Eventually a very frightened woman opened the door. “We thought . . .” the woman whispered and then fell into silence. Inside the apartment Linton Wells

could faintly discern in the dim light *"a dozen men, women and children huddled together, almost paralysed with fear. On every hand were indications that frantic efforts had been made to conceal everything and anything which might be regarded by the dread secret police as unworthy of being in a true proletarian's possession."*[40]

7

“The Arrival of Spring”

After 8 months of work I decided to go back to United States . . . They told me they are not going to give my papers, because they need me as a specialist in the factory . . . They scared me with threats to put me in jail. They kept asking me why I wanted to go to the States, as there is starvation. I told them that I would rather be in jail in America than an employee in the Soviet Union. This made them angry . . . They told me they would rather kill a person like me than let him out of the country.

John Match, in a handwritten letter to the State Department, May 6, 1935[1]

Even before the U.S. embassy had officially opened in Moscow, the first American diplomats were set upon by their fellow countrymen desperate to return home. The first secretary at the embassy, Loy Henderson, wrote that “these unfortunate people were importuning us in our hotel rooms.”[2] Those American emigrants sought help to gather the paperwork they needed to leave the USSR, help for their friends who had been arrested, and proof of their status as American citizens to keep them safe from harm. And while 1934 was still very much a “honeymoon” period for the American diplomats in Russia, a time when they could move freely in Moscow as their governments warmed to each other, even in that first year of diplomatic representation there were Americans disappearing.

As soon as he arrived in Moscow, the mild-mannered Loy Henderson realized that the officials at the Soviet Foreign Ministry were terrified of their own secret police and powerless to intervene. A sixteen-year-old American girl called at the U.S. embassy to plead for help to return herself, her mother, and two younger sisters back home to the United States.

According to Henderson, this nameless girl was "refused permission to visit the U.S. embassy again" by the Soviet authorities. The young girl and her sisters remained on Loy Henderson's conscience as he wrote his memoirs several decades later. But she was not, by any means, an exceptional case.[3]

Working in the Consular Division of the embassy, the thirty-one-year-old diplomat Elbridge Durbrow came into daily contact with Americans seeking new passports. Forty-seven years later he recalled their existence almost in passing, during an interview given in his retirement. According to Durbrow, their original American passports had simply vanished:

A lot of them literally threw it in the Baltic Sea. Others claimed they didn't throw it away, it was taken when they got to Leningrad, when they printed in their visa or something, and never saw it again. Whether they were telling the truth, all of them, or not—but the stories jibed too well, at different periods of time, from people I don't think had met each other in the Soviet Union. They were dispersed all over. I had two assistants then, and we'd interrogate these guys for hours on end . . . So we'd hear their story, check on where they'd lived in the United States, see if they knew something about Pittsburgh or Chicago or Washington, to check on their story. They'd all come over accompanied by their families. Some yes, some no, a lot of them were family and "Daddy threw the passport away."[4]

Elbridge Durbrow called them "captive Americans"—too slight a variation on the reporters' expression "captured Americans" to make a difference. Later Durbrow stated that he had helped five hundred to return home, in the days before their exit visas were stopped completely by the Soviets.[5]

It might seem strange that Durbrow was quite so tentative over what had happened, when the Soviet confiscation of American passports was so well known at the time. On April 5, 1934, a satirical article entitled "The Story of Two Passports Which Developed into No Passport at All" was published in the German-language newspaper *Rigasche Rundschau*. After noting that two hundred Americans had arrived at the U.S. embassy on the first day it

opened, the German journalist proceeded to tell the story of an American engineer named William Smith—"or any other name"—who had accepted a working contract in the USSR. Soon Smith is accused of espionage by the GPU and, to clear his name, is required to demonstrate his loyalty by taking up Soviet citizenship: "He is told that he can be a Soviet citizen and remain an American. He will have two passports—a Soviet and an American passport." William Smith's American passport is then confiscated and

the Soviets inform his Embassy that he is now a Soviet citizen and point out that the Soviet passport is of a more recent date. The American ambassador says he is powerless to intervene. What is now to happen to poor Smith—that is the question that only the Gods can answer . . . Each one of the two hundred Americans had passports, then they had two passports, and now, finally they have no passports at all. In respect to the simple workers and labourers the Soviets have quite simply stolen their passports. That was much easier, it made less work and it accomplished the same purpose . . . Many tragedies in Russia have commenced with this matter of passports.

The American embassy officials in Moscow not only read the startlingly accurate article, they had it translated and sent back to Washington.[6]

The difficulties of the ordinary American emigrants in Russia were worsened by the fact that so many were flat broke and could not afford the price of a ticket home. Those not officially recruited by Amtorg were being paid the same rate as Russian workers, between 80 and 110 rubles per month, 40 of which was spent on a place to sleep in a crowded room and the rest at the factory kitchen.[7] Shipping firms such as the Hamburg Line, sensing perhaps the vulnerability of a captive market, were now charging $178 for passage back to New York, a full $60 more than the same journey in the opposite direction. For those Americans who had arrived on tourist visas and managed to find jobs working on an assembly line in Moscow or Gorky, it was an impossibly high price to pay.[8]

On May 11, 1934, the first U.S. ambassador to Russia, William Christian Bullitt, wrote to the State Department asking for a welfare committee to

help destitute Americans return home: *“Most of the Americans in distressed circumstances still retain some sort of employment in the Soviet Union and despite the hardships they are encountering, are reluctant to return to the US for fear of being entirely destitute should they fail immediately to find employment . . . It is expected that many destitute Americans will appear in the future.”* The State Department passed the financial responsibility to the American Red Cross, which replied to Bullitt’s appeal with scant sympathy: *“The program of the Red Cross does not include relief for Americans abroad who find themselves in economic difficulties.”* [9]

Meanwhile the State Department continued to receive numerous reports that Soviet authorities were issuing residence permits for shorter and shorter periods, forcing costly renewals unless the emigrants accepted Soviet citizenship, always given with the reassurance that their American citizenship would remain unaffected.[10] Although aware of the coercion involved, and the variety of methods used to part the American emigrants from their passports, the State Department did little to help them, even in the glow of those early months when there was still an opportunity for negotiation. The American embassy officials struggled to have their questions answered by the labyrinthine Soviet bureaucracy, and the “captive Americans” remained in stateless limbo as the weeks and months ticked away. There were only a few thousand of them in Russia. Overwhelmingly they were just ordinary people with little influence or access to the high circles of state. The Soviet apparatchiks guessed, quite correctly, that they would soon be forgotten.

INSTEAD THE AMERICAN diplomats occupied themselves coping with the shock of their entrance into Soviet life. The chargé d’affaires, John Wiley, wrote to the State Department asking for Moscow to be placed on a list of “unhealthful posts.” His seven-page letter listed the infectious diseases prevalent in Moscow that year: typhoid, malaria, smallpox, scarlet fever, diphtheria, dysentery, and sixty-two reported cases of anthrax. “A

number of doctors," Wiley added, "including some who are believed to have accepted foreign currency for outside services, have disappeared within the past two months. The most competent dentist in Moscow disappeared two weeks ago when he was in the process of giving treatment to some members of the embassy. Members of the embassy who called on him in accordance with appointments found his doors secured with the seal of the OGPU."[11]

Denied access to black market rubles by the high-minded prescription of Ambassador Bullitt, the young American diplomats and their wives busied themselves with the continual harassment of finding enough affordable food. At the foreigners' food stores, the prices, starting at a dollar per egg and rising up to ten dollars for the whole chicken, were "like eating gold."[12] And when Irena Wiley discovered that their embassy food supplies had been delayed at the border, she had to rush out and buy a very expensive and very thin Russian cow to be killed and butchered for a reception that day. At the dinner table, her husband quipped, "You had better show our guests the horns, so that they'll know it isn't a horse."[13]

Of course, none of these hardships made the slightest difference to the handsome, blue-eyed ambassador William Christian Bullitt, whose private income derived from a trust fund of his wealthy Philadelphian family. Still only in his early forties, Bullitt arrived in Moscow very much in sympathy with the Bolshevik experiment, regarding Stalin's economic planning as not so very different from the ideas Roosevelt was attempting in Washington, if just a few shades of red darker than the New Deal palette. As the American ambassador settled into his official residence at Spaso House, the fine open rooms of the pre-Revolutionary mansion seemed to suit him and his little terrier, Pie-pie, very well. With great delight Bullitt wrote to his brother Orville that Pie-pie was "lording it" over all Moscow, since all the other pets in the city had disappeared after the chronic food shortages of the year or two before. Spaso House was described as one of the glories of the Tsarist era in the American press. The forty-room mansion, wrote one reporter, had belonged to Russia's former sugar king, Tverkov, and "had a tragic history. It was completed just before the war and the owner lived in it only a short time before the revolution broke out. In the civil war he was

shot just at the steps where Ambassador Bullitt's car will draw up when he alights at his new home."[14]

Unfazed by superstitious omens of bad luck, one of Ambassador Bullitt's very first actions was to place a bouquet of red roses on the grave of his friend John Reed at the Kremlin Wall. The ambassador's marriage to John Reed's widow, Louise Bryant, had ended in bitter divorce just four years earlier, but this had not altered his affection for Reed. William Bullitt had attempted to buy a whole wreath for the grave of the American revolutionary, but this proved impossible in Moscow at the time. Even a dozen red roses tied together with wood shavings required the purchase of entire rose bushes, which, at the artificially high exchange rate, ended up costing the ambassador the princely sum of forty-eight dollars.[15]

But this political gesture did not pass unnoticed. Almost immediately, William Bullitt was invited to dinner at the mansion of the Soviet defense commissar, where he was introduced to Joseph Stalin. "*His eyes are curious,*" Bullitt wrote in a letter to Roosevelt,

giving the impression of a dark brown filmed with dark blue. They are small, intensely shrewd and continuously smiling. The impression of shrewd humor is increased by the fact that the "crow's feet" which run out from them do not branch up and down in the usual manner, but all curve upward in long crescents. His hand is rather small with short fingers, wiry rather than strong. His moustache covers his mouth so that it is difficult to see just what it is like, but when he laughs his lips curl in a curiously canine manner . . . I felt I was talking to a wiry Gipsy with roots and emotions beyond my experience.

At Voroshilov's mansion, Bullitt and Stalin became acquainted over the customarily lavish Soviet banquet, the food and wine judged by Bullitt to be of a quality that "no one in America would dare serve nowadays." After ten vodka toasts, Maxim Litvinov slyly noticed that Bullitt had started only to sip from his glass and quickly informed him that "it was an insult not to drink to the bottom and that I must do so." Another fifty toasts followed,

which Bullitt survived thanking "God for the possession of a head impervious to any quantity of alcohol." He wrote that Joseph Stalin drank toasts to the "American Army, the Navy, President and whole USA," while Bullitt reciprocated with "the memory of Lenin and continued success of the Soviet Union." Then an excited Stalin marched little Georgy Piatakov over to the piano and instructed him to play, standing behind the deputy commissar for heavy industry, squeezing his neck, as Piatakov "launched into a number of wild Russian dances" with a manic furiosity at the keyboard, spurred on by Stalin's hands around his neck.

The music may have accounted for Stalin's evident good humor that night, as well as his open admiration for Roosevelt, and his assurances to Bullitt that he could see him "any time, day or night, you have only to let me know and I will see you at once." As they left the mansion in the early hours, Stalin stopped the ambassador to ask, "Is there anything at all in the Soviet Union that you want? Anything?" The quick-thinking Philadelphian immediately requested seventeen acres of the Lenin Hills overlooking the Moskva River as the site for the construction of the first American embassy in the USSR in the style of Monticello. "You shall have it," Stalin answered and, brushing aside Bullitt's outstretched hand, took his head between his hands and kissed him. To the president, William Bullitt wrote, "I swallowed my astonishment, and, when he turned up his face for a return kiss, I delivered it."[16]

Ambassador Bullitt never lost his vision of a Monticello in Moscow, which, he once quipped, would have a quotation from Thomas Jefferson over the entrance: GOD FORBID THAT WE SHOULD LIVE FOR TWENTY YEARS WITHOUT A REVOLUTION.[17] He even obtained the necessary $1.2 million appropriation, which caused controversy in Congress but was justified on the grounds of the expected "Red trade offers."[18] But Stalin never had any intention of giving up such valuable land in the center of Moscow, so the money was never used and Bullitt's kiss was returned in vain. Had he only thought of it, the American ambassador might have asked instead for the release of the "captive Americans" seeking exit visas from the USSR—a gift far easier to extract from the drunken Soviet dictator than seventeen acres of prime Moscow

real estate. But he did not, and if there were a few more opportunities to make such a request, they would all be squandered with the profligate expectation that such mistakes could later be corrected.

The new ambassador did, however, gain permission to import the first privately owned airplane into Soviet Russia, along with carte blanche to fly "wherever he wanted." He also dispensed with the services of a chauffeur and took to driving his own sports roadster around the streets of Moscow. According to his secretary, Charlie Thayer, the handsome ambassador became very popular *"among the great mass because of his wonderful personality in crowds, his democratic leanings and his dashing ways . . . Often on the streets the urchins who know the car shout at him as he goes by 'Your*

health Comrade Bullitt' which pleases him immensely." [19] Even the news that Ambassador Bullitt had crashed his plane in a field outside Leningrad only added to his charisma. The plane had landed upside down and was chased after by Soviet officials expecting to prise out the body of a dead ambassador from the wreckage. Brushing himself down, William Bullitt climbed out of the airship completely unscathed "and received them as if we were quite in the habit of landing upside down."[20]

In the autumn, Ambassador Bullitt escorted his ten-year-old daughter, Anne, to the Moscow Children's Theater. Visiting Moscow from her boarding school in Europe, Anne Bullitt was a pretty little girl, with her mother Louise Bryant's dark hair and her father's calm gaze of self-possession. Together they met the theater's founder and director, Natalya Satz, and enjoyed a performance of *The Negress and the Monkey,* a moral tale of an African woman searching for her beloved pet monkey kidnapped by a party of capitalist big-game hunters. The play, Natalya Satz explained, promoted "active sympathy for oppressed folks of far-off lands who, though their skins may be different, are human beings, experiencing the joys and sorrows of human beings." Anne Bullitt then happily posed for a publicity photograph for Miss Satz and her new theater, while her father expressed his approval to the press: "Every time I visit the Children's Theater I am more impressed by the profound understanding that Miss Satz possesses not only of the art of the theatre but also of the nature of children."[21]

In a letter, President Roosevelt had suggested to Bullitt that "it seems to me highly desirable that an effort should be made to provide the embassy and consular staffs with a certain amount of American recreation."[22] Pursuing the president's idea, the ambassador wrote to A. G. Spalding and Bros. of New York, requesting the delivery of sports equipment to Moscow: a dozen baseballs, six bats, one catcher's mask, two catcher's mitts, sixteen gloves, one body protector, one set of bases, home plates, and shoes and uniforms for four teams.[23] The handsome Bullitt easily charmed Betty Glan, the director of Gorky Park, into providing the American embassy with its very own baseball diamond in the park's green acres.[24] And so, with the president's blessing, baseball in the Soviet Union took a further fragile hold, as the diplomats, just like the American emigrants before them, attempted to play their national sport and feel a little less sick for the home they had left behind.

The newness was scuffed off the Spalding baseball gear at the first embassy ball game, held on the Fourth of July, 1934. Unsurprisingly, the team of diplomats soundly thrashed the newspaper reporters, whose taste for late nights seen through empty vodka glasses was reflected in their athletic performance. The reporters lost 21-3, with Bullitt himself driving home the first run. "The Ambassador," reported Harold Denny in *The New York Times*, "had a perfect batting average with five hits in five times at bat, and he actually made a double play unassisted. It was that kind of a game." That night at Spaso House, the ambassador hosted a Fourth of July party for a few hundred American guests, with a Soviet jazz orchestra hired to belt out a welcoming rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Unfortunately the Russian musicians had borrowed their score from a phonograph disk on which several variations of the American national anthem were recorded. Bewildered by this unfamiliar degree of choice, they had naturally preferred the jazz version as the most authentically American. With hundreds of guests standing to attention, the Soviet orchestra blared out "The Star-Spangled Banner" with "saxophones crooning and an occasional bewildering 'Hey nonny nonny and hotcha cha.'"[25]

The diplomatic baseball played in the Moscow summer evenings was captured on film by the visiting American documentary filmmaker Julian

Bryan. Miraculously his rushes from Gorky Park survived, and the black-and-white images brought to life a game watched by crowds of small boys as the athletic figure of William Bullitt jogs up to the pitcher's mound smiling and wearing a big white hat and gray flannel trousers. The ambassador pitches fairly fast, winding up and firing the ball down to a catcher standing with the proper protection behind home plate, while languid American women sip champagne and look on from deck chairs at the side of the field. This was the embassy crowd at play, quite literally a different league from the hard-edged competition of the American emigrants. Later on, the ambassador steps up to bat and strikes out as the spluttering film jump-cuts into another sequence, in which Bullitt attempts to teach some Russian boys and girls to hit and catch. They swipe and miss, learning that it is very easy to miss but so satisfying when the bat connects and the ball flies away into the air. It is a warm summer day; people are sipping their cocktails as the baseball equipment is stacked up for a photograph, the bats in a pyramid, the protector and the face mask at the front. Young men and women grin at the camera as a baseball is presented to a girl with smiles and handshakes.[26]

Since all forms of photography in the Soviet Union were subject to draconian censorship and interminable delay, Julian Bryan's film left the country in the diplomatic bag to be edited and screened in American cinemas as part of *The March of Time* newsreel. On August 29, 1934, President Roosevelt wrote a congratulatory letter to Bullitt: "*It is grand about . . . the baseball. By the way, as an expert I want to compliment you again on your excellent Russian in that picture. All you need to do now is to swallow some lubricant just before starting to speak. It will give you the necessary speed-up!*" [27]

Of course, there were a few mocking articles in the American press. John Lardner, in his column "From the Press Box," wrote,

Our Ambassador is a first baseman. Nobody knows how good a first baseman he is. But he doesn't have to be good to fool the Russians. If the Hon. William C. Bullitt scores a few putouts . . . the Russian ball writers

will be calling him another Hal Chase and comrades all over the Soviet Union will bring their children up to be first basemen . . . In no time at all the natives would be falling over themselves in their eagerness to form a club of their own, the Kremlin Wildcats, or the Moscow Maroons, or possibly, when the game takes hold in all sections of the country, the Nevsky Prospect Red Sox.[28]

What the mockers never knew was that the clubs already existed, although the American emigrants' fledgling baseball league and the diplomatic games belonged to two separate worlds. The Moscow Foreign Workers' Club was formed from American electricians, steam fitters, linotype operators, machinists, and truck drivers, who played baseball to a level comparable with the average "industrial league" in the States, with a few of their players even described as having "semi-professional and professional experience." [29] It was possible that an occasional young American such as Arnold Preedin or Thomas Sgovio might have dropped in to play a game with the diplomatic corps. But it was equally true that the sons of radical metalworkers and machinists were unlikely to mix easily with their State Department peers, who were predominantly wealthy and Ivy League educated. Other than their nationality, they had little else in common. It was simply a case of money and class, and the separation both bring: twin social forms that applied just as distinctly in Moscow as any city back home.

AS IF TO highlight this very difference, the following year William Bullitt hosted an embassy ball themed on the "Arrival of Spring," its size and sheer extravagance so typical of his character. For one night in April 1935, the ballroom of Spaso House was decorated in a color scheme of green, white, and gold—with green trees, white tulips, white goats with gilded horns, and white roosters in gold and glass cages. Since Moscow was still blanketed in snow, Charlie Thayer had telegraphed south to Odessa for birch trees to be

flown up and placed under sun lamps, ready to burst into leaf. Lambs were ordered from a collective farm, but the Americans received sheep instead which had to be shampooed to rid them of their overpowering smell, only to be replaced by kid goats anyway. The director of Moscow Zoo agreed to loan the crazed Americans a bear cub, and took to calling up his co-conspirator, Irena Wiley, whenever a new animal was born: “Do you need a giraffe, a wolf, a baby llama?” Nothing was beyond the imagination of these Americans, if the zoo director took his cue from Mrs. Wiley’s idea to have the ballroom floor glassed over and the space filled with water and brightly colored tropical fish. It would make a sensational aquarium on which the ambassador’s guests could dance their hot American jazz.

Either practicality or an understandable uncertainty over Soviet glass manufacture spared the tropical fish, but not the rest of the zoo’s menagerie. As Ambassador Bullitt greeted his guests from the top of the stairs of Spaso House, the gilded bear cubs, kid goats, and cockerels encircled the floodlit ballroom. Around them a consignment of blooming white tulips, flown in from abroad, was made to sway in the breeze by means of a concealed electric fan. While imported champagne and delicacies were laid on to satisfy the tastes of the invited guests, whose social hierarchy ranked from Max Litvinov, the tubby Soviet foreign minister bursting out of his white tie and tails, all the way down to Mikhail Bulgakov, the penurious writer whose wife had nervously worried about what they might wear to the grand American ball. In the event, the guests’ costumes were hardly noticed amid the slides of flowers projected onto the ballroom walls and the vast nets glinting with gold powder that had been stretched across the ceiling from four marble pillars, creating a vast aviary for hundreds of chattering greenfinches on loan from Moscow Zoo.

Naturally the animals caused a sensation. The Soviet general Aleksandr Yegorov picked up a bear cub in his arms, only to have the bear redecorate his uniform. Yegorov left, cursing, but returned an hour later, newly resplendent, and stayed until dawn. Amid the laughter, another Red Army general, Semyon Budenny, folded his arms across his chest and started to dance Cossack style, his long waxed mustache glinting under the lights, while Ivy Litvinov, the wife of the foreign minister, clutched one of the kid goats to her chest, and Karl Radek, the editor of *Izvestiya*, attempted to pour

champagne into the bear cub's milk bottle. Amid the lights and general commotion, no one noticed that in the aviary above them the greenfinches were dying. When the jazz orchestra burst into "The Star-Spangled Banner," the birds had flown into a "heart-breaking" panic, crashing into the golden nets and getting tangled in their mesh. The fortunate few who managed to escape were trapped in the house for days.[30]

Quietly observing this celebration of American bravura, Mikhail Bulgakov would borrow a host of details for his novel *The Master and Margarita*, whose scene from "Satan's Ball" was bewitchingly similar to the real-life American affair down to the "green tailed parrots and white tulips" and an "unbearably loud jazz band." Even one of Bullitt's guests, Baron Boris Steiger, the unofficial liaison officer between the diplomatic community and the NKVD, became recast by Bulgakov as "Baron Meigel, employee of the Spectacles Commission in charge of acquainting foreigners with places of interest in the capital." Mikhail Bulgakov would write his masterpiece during the height of the Terror over the next three years. But the novel's principal theme of the devil's reappearance in modern-day Moscow meant that it could never be published in Russia while Stalin was still alive. The analogy was far too blatant.[31]

Like its fictional counterpart, the American ball continued through the night and was interrupted only at daybreak, when the gold-painted cockerels began to crow inside Spaso House. The animal noises were drowned out by the jazz band, which kept on playing relentlessly since none of the gathered guests showed the slightest desire to leave, dancing as if half-aware they would never have this chance again. It was nine o'clock in the morning before the last party lovers were shepherded away into their waiting limousines.

Rumors of Bullitt's extravaganza quickly traveled around the world. One gossip column in the American press called it "the swellest party Moscow has seen since the Revolution." The piece was spotted by the eagle-eyed Roosevelt, who had it clipped and sent in the diplomatic mail to his ambassador.[32]

LESS THAN A year after Ambassador Bullitt hosted the ball, the Terror had begun. He wrote to his friend R. Walton Moore, the assistant secretary of state:

The stories which are reaching us from Leningrad sound unbelievable . . . The British Vice Consul there reports that 150,000 persons have been exiled from the city and 500,000 from the Leningrad Oblast. In Moscow the OGPU is now carrying out arrests every night. I know, personally, of three recent cases. In each case, at 2 A.M., the secret police appeared, entered the apartment, took all papers, sealed whatever room contained books, and removed the head of a family. Since the disappearances, wives and children have been unable to get any information as to whether fathers or husbands are alive or dead.[33]

During his brief tenure in Moscow, Bullitt's Russian friends had already begun to disappear. Natalya Satz, the director of the Moscow Children's Theater, had been arrested, as had Betty Glan, the director of Gorky Park. Satz was imprisoned as a "wife of a traitor to the motherland." In her "corrective labor" camp, the Children's Theater director fell ill with typhus and became so exhausted that, according to a fellow prisoner, she "resembled a puny little girl, though her head was gray."[34] Their disappearances rid William Bullitt of all trace of his romantic preconceptions of the Revolution. In his final dispatch to the State Department, dated April 20, 1936, the ambassador issued a frank warning:

The problem of relations with the Government of the Soviet Union is . . . 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. There is no doubt whatsoever that all orthodox communist parties in all countries, including the United States, believe in mass murder . . . The final argument of the believing communist

is invariably that all battle, murder, and sudden death, all the spies, exiles and firing squads are justified.[35]

At the State Department offices in Washington, Bullitt's sudden hostility might well have seemed exaggerated. Unless witnessed personally, the scale of what was taking place in Russia was difficult to comprehend. In June 1936, on his way to the American diplomats' rented dacha outside Moscow, Elbridge Durbrow watched a train of fifty cars "loaded down with prisoners, men, women and children together, coming out of Moscow."[36] No one knew who these people were or their destination, but the prison trains had been seen in operation for several years now by American witnesses from all over Russia. Some, such as the young American writer Ellery Walter, sensed their significance straightaway and took the trouble to report them: "I counted 13 trains, each with 2000 men and women and children bound for Siberia."[37] Others, such as the American engineer Bredo Berghoff, had chanced upon a prison train while searching for his trunk along a railroad yard. Through the narrow, steel-barred windows, Berghoff could see young men whose eyes stared back at him from the darkness.[38]

Packed with several thousand human beings, each train was destined to travel hundreds, and often thousands, of stifling kilometers to its hidden end point. The system of repression was kept secret, but it had grown so vast that there were continual gaps in the fabric of its concealment. The American witnesses had seen the suffering of those trapped within the carriages, and in an exchange of looks, their fearful eyes carried their own message.

William Bullitt was far from alone in realizing the truth of what was taking place around him. One of the American reporters, William Henry Chamberlin, left at the same time in the early summer of 1936. *"I went to Russia,"* Chamberlin later wrote, *"believing that the Soviet system might represent the most hopeful answer to the problems raised by the World War and the subsequent economic crisis. I left convinced that the absolutist Soviet state . . . is a power of darkness and of evil with few parallels in*

history . . . Murder is a habit, even more with states than with individuals."[39] Perhaps it was not accurate to say that the Terror had begun then. In truth it had been in existence for many years. But Bullitt's departure did coincide with a vast expansion and *acceleration* of the process, as if what once had been mere habit had now been transformed into an overwhelming compulsion and an inexorable desire.

SEVERAL MONTHS AFTER Bullitt's departure from Moscow, in October 1936, a small party of young American diplomats sat listening to a radio broadcast of the World Series. Late into the night, they gathered in the study of their absent ambassador to eat hot dogs and follow the sixth game of an all-New York contest between the Yankees and the Giants at the Polo Grounds on West 155th Street. The radio commentary over the airwaves to Moscow was uncannily clear that night: the diplomats could hear the ball as it was struck, the roar of the crowd from the bleachers, and the fizzing words of the announcer as he called out the names of Lou Gehrig and Joe DiMaggio, the Yankee Clipper, from six thousand miles away in New York. Every now and then, through the crackle and the pop, came a moment of crystal clarity—a New Yorker shouting, "Robber, robber! Kill the umpire! Fan him out!" or a salesman crying, "Peanuts, popcorn, chewing gum and candy."[40]

It was unlikely that any of the "captive Americans" living in Russia had a radio capable of picking up the World Series. In any event, by October 1936, listening to a foreign-language radio station in Moscow would have given cause for suspicion among their neighbors in the communal apartments in which they lived. All trace of baseball's fragile existence in the USSR was disappearing from the stage. A few practice games had been played earlier that summer, but there was an edginess about it all, as if the American players began to sense the danger of sticking their heads above the parapet of ideological conformity. "Where are the old baseball enthusiasts and why have they not been coming around to practice

sessions?" a *Moscow Daily News* reporter asked in an article written that year. "Nothing has been heard in Moscow from cities such as Petrozavodsk, Gorky and Leningrad this season."

The first baseball game of the Moscow season was played in July 1936, when the Red Stars beat the Hammer and Sickle team 4-3 in a game at the Lokomotiv Stadium. The Moscow team captain, Arnold Preedin, hit the only home run in the sixth inning, and Thomas Sgovio hit a triple in the seventh to lend strength to the batting lineup of the Foreign Workers' team.[41] But just one month later, in August 1936, the first of the great show trials opened in Moscow. At the trial of the "Trotskyite-Zinovyevite Terrorist Center," the prosecutor, Andrey Vyshinsky, jumped to his feet in a furious rage at the defendants, angrily demanding that "these rabid dogs must be shot to the last one."[42] And suddenly baseball in Soviet Russia seemed so evidently strange, so anomalous, so utterly divorced from the terrible events taking place all around them that it became a danger to its participants.

Even Gorky Park, for all its popularity and millions of visitors, had fallen uncannily silent. The atmosphere had puzzled the visiting American literary critic Edmund Wilson, who walked among these strangely silent crowds. When Wilson mentioned the silence, there was a long pause before his female Russian companion whispered an explanation in French: *"C'est que tout le monde a très peur."*[43]

Amid this general, ever-increasing fear, baseball stopped being discussed or reported in the press, and very soon was no longer played. The Soviet Union's newest national sport simply vanished from the stage, the taint of its association with capitalism judged too overpowering for the harshness of a paranoid ideology. And the American baseball players also began to disappear one by one, their photographs fading into sepia—as if they had never been real human beings at all, just phantoms of a passing age. Baseball in Gorky Park had lasted just a few brief summers, which had come and gone so quickly. And very soon all trace of its existence was removed from life in Soviet Russia, and all that would remain were a few still photographs in black and white, and some long-forgotten newsreel buried in a dusty archive of the Library of Congress.

THERE WERE STILL a few English-language programs broadcast on Soviet radio for the American emigrants, but their propaganda was growing ever more hectoring: *"It must be remembered also that the radio hour is not only an opportunity for enjoyment and recreation, but can also be a powerful weapon in the greatest of all battles, the struggle for a classless socialist society."* [44] At the radio center in Moscow, a few American contributors gamely discussed in English, "How shall we spend our holidays this summer? Shall we go to a Rest Home or Sanatorium? Or travel on our own? Shall we go to the North to the Arctic or to the South, the Caucasus or the Black Sea?"[45] But their stilted conversations had developed an element of staged unreality, like the vast Stars and Stripes hauled up in front of the American embassy on Mokhovaya Street facing the Kremlin, with its implicit promise of guardianship over the lives of the American emigrants.[46]

The previous year, the American embassy had requested, through the pages of the *Moscow Daily News*, that all Americans in the USSR should come into the building to register their passports. A list, they said, was being compiled so that the diplomats might know their whereabouts and *"in order that protection might be extended in the event that such an occasion should arise."*[47]

In retrospect, it seems that the American diplomats, at least, were well aware of what was about to happen. By the summer of 1936, sufficient numbers of their friends and acquaintances had already disappeared. Loy Henderson, for one, observed the growing uneasiness among the Russian members of the staff within the building. In August, he found one employee "hunched over her typewriter sobbing."[48] It was not even three years since the U.S.-Soviet recognition agreement had been signed, when *Time* magazine wrote that "President Roosevelt cast the cloak of his popularity over Dictator Stalin."[49] In exchange for a long list of unfulfilled promises and the lure of a trade bonanza that never arrived, a moral legitimacy had been granted to Joseph Stalin that he would continue to flaunt through the very worst of the Terror. And through it all the Stars and Stripes would float in the breeze opposite the Kremlin, although Ambassador Bullitt had long

since departed in disgust, and the diplomatic staff he left behind in Moscow had been “pared to the bone.”[50]

The Bolsheviks had once described the American radicals as *“poputshiki”*— “fellow travelers”—whose path coincided with theirs for a certain distance until the time came when they would have to part.[51] And although, in theory, there was still an institution to protect the welfare of the American emigrants, in practice the Stars and Stripes on Mokhovaya Street, rather than being a source of their salvation, became instead the cause of their death.

8

The Terror, the Terror

Little apple, little apple, where are you rolling to?
Are you rolling to the Cheka?
Then you will never come back . . .

Anonymous[1]

On December 1, 1934, in an empty corridor of a Leningrad office

building, a waiting assassin stepped out and shot the party boss Sergei Kirov at point-blank range. Although Kirov had been Stalin's personal friend, subsequent evidence pointed toward the premeditated assassination of a political rival. The day after the assassination, Stalin boarded a train to Leningrad, and "retaliatory" violence quickly followed in his wake. Kirov's principal bodyguard was summoned to appear before Stalin, but arrived dead at an NKVD hospital, having been thrown from a moving truck. Stalin himself, meanwhile, interrogated the assassin, Leonid Nikolaev, asking why he had killed Kirov. According to one witness, *"Nikolaev answered that he killed Comrade Kirov on the instruction of a person employed by the Cheka, and at this pointed to the men from the Cheka sitting in the room . . . 'They forced me to do it.' The NKVD agent then knocked Nikolaev to the floor with a blow to the head, and he was removed."* [2] The assassin Nikolaev was tried and executed, and the NKVD officers in Leningrad were arrested and sent to the camps, where they would later be shot. In a subsequent show trial, the NKVD chief, Henrikh Yagoda, was charged with organizing Kirov's murder as part of a "Trotskyite conspiracy."[3] But in truth, the Kirov assassination was only ever a pretext for what was to come.

The night of Kirov's murder, a reception was held at the American embassy, attended by the usual gathering of the Soviet elite. Irena Wiley was talking to Karl Radek, the editor of *Izvestiya*, when a Russian

interrupted their conversation to whisper in Radek's ear. On hearing the news, Irena watched the color drain from Radek's face as he leaned against the wall in shock. Immediately Radek made his excuses and left, and within minutes every Russian at the party had disappeared without a word of goodbye. That night John and Irena Wiley were visited by their friend the diplomatic liaison officer Baron Boris Steiger. "Take it very seriously," said Steiger, explaining the reason for the mass departure. Afterward Steiger revealed that every day "seven thousand" people were being arrested and "exiled" to the Arctic Circle or Central Asia.[4]

Two days later, on the afternoon of December 3, Elbridge Durbrow invited the Soviet vice president of Intourist, George Andreytchine, into his apartment above the embassy to talk with Loy Henderson and John Wiley. Andreytchine appeared extremely distressed as he attempted to explain that the death of Kirov was an act of terror that *"could trigger acts of repression on the part of the Soviet regime that would make even the collectivization campaign of 1930 look mild."* As an insider, George Andreytchine had the clearest understanding of the mechanics of Stalin's power.[5] His prediction proved correct, and he himself was one of those about to be arrested. From this point onward, the disappearances within Soviet society became ever more noticeable and, by their very abruptness, so much harder to conceal. At an American embassy bridge party, Irena Wiley's partner, the Soviet diplomatic chief of protocol Florinski, was called to the telephone. He returned to their table smiling with the news that he would have to leave for just a few minutes but would return shortly, and would they please wait for him?[6] Florinski never returned to finish his hand.

The only elliptical explanation for the disappearances was in a film playing in Moscow cinemas during the winter of 1936. The Hollywood feature *The Invisible Man*, based on the novel by H. G. Wells, had been dubbed into Russian and was advertised in the Soviet press: *"One stormy night an unknown, uncanny man, his eyes completely hidden by enormous black glasses, enters a rural English inn. The stranger removes his hat, then his glasses—and his head disappears completely then his hands and feet, until nothing but terrifying emptiness remains where he has been standing . . ."*[7]

THE SOVIET UNION no longer teetered on the brink. The revolutionary state had already fallen into the abyss, pushed by the ministrations of the force whose name could not be mentioned. Above all else, the NKVD commanded fear, since their power over every citizen was beyond all justification. The time to leave Russia had long passed. Now the only hope for protection lay in obscurity, to hide far from people and abandon any position of responsibility or town of any size. The most astute unaccountably walked away from careers as industrial managers to become bricklayers, or abandoned their surgical duties to tend horses on a collective farm. Those who had read the signs in time slipped away to reappear, if they were lucky, among the community of Russian exiles in Paris or Nice. It was a time, in the words of the poet Alexander Blok, to be "quieter than water, lower than grass." But by 1937, the Soviet borders were sealed tight. All opportunities for flight were exhausted, and what once was impending had now arrived.

Who in Soviet Russia dared speak out? Hardly a soul when the consequence was not a dissident's imprisonment but immediate execution. Besides which, no medium for protest existed outside the state's control. Among Russia's intellectuals the clear-sighted had long recognized the murderous capacity of the Revolution. The father of modern psychology, Ivan Pavlov, was eighty-five years old on December 21, 1934. His experiments in behaviorism had earned him the Nobel Prize, and his international scientific reputation made him virtually untouchable. Following the mass arrests in Leningrad, Pavlov had written an angry letter to the USSR Council of People's Commissars: "*You believe in vain in the all-world revolution . . . You disperse not revolution, but fascism with great success throughout the world . . . Fascism did not exist before your revolution . . . You are terror and violence . . . We are living now in the atmosphere of terror and violence . . . Am I alone in thinking and feeling this way? Have pity on the Motherland and us.*" When Ivan Pavlov died

two years later, the NKVD had collected five volumes of informers' denunciations against the figurehead of Soviet science.[8]

Russia's only other living Nobel winner, Ivan Bunin, had collected the 1933 prize for literature in Stockholm as a stateless exile. Like Pavlov, Bunin had been aware of the violence of the Revolution from the very beginning. In March 1918, he asked a telephone operator to put him through to a literary magazine and instead was accidentally connected to a conversation within the Kremlin: "I have fifteen officers and Lieutenant Kaledin. What should I do with them?" The voice on the end of the line did not hesitate: "Shoot them right away."[9] Later Bunin received an order requiring the registration of "all bourgeois," which prompted the question in his diary: "How is one to understand this?" His suspicions that their registration was the prelude to execution proved entirely correct. Fortunately Bunin managed to flee Russia into exile and saved his life. In his private diary he wrote: *"The 'Great Russian Revolution' is a thousand times more bestial, filthy and stupid than the vile original which it claims to copy because it exceeds—step by step, item for item, and in a horribly shameless and explicit way—the bloody melodrama that had played itself out in France . . ."* [10] The events of 1937 would transform his words into understatement.

In March 1937, Joseph Stalin made a speech to the Central Committee that was published across the Soviet Union, and signaled a further escalation of the Terror:

The sabotage and diversionist work has reached to a greater or lesser extent, all or practically all our organizations . . . Soviet power has conquered only one sixth of the world and five sixths of the world are in the hands of capitalist states . . . As long as our capitalist encirclement remains, we will always have saboteurs, diversionists, and spies . . . The real saboteur must from time to time show evidence of success in his work, for that is the only way in which he can keep his job as a saboteur . . . We shall have to extirpate those persons, grind them down without stopping, without

flagging, for they are the enemies of the working class, they are traitors to our homeland![11]

It was as if an angel of death had descended upon Russia, and the sound of its beating wings grew louder and louder as the months wore on. Only, this nocturnal visitor wore the uniform of the NKVD and, far from being one single entity, had arrived as an army of one third of a million. There was a saying in Moscow at the time: "Thieves, prostitutes and the NKVD work mainly at night." The Russians learned very quickly that the peak calling hours for Stalin's secret police were between one and five in the morning, when the "ravens," the prison vans, began scouring the streets for "enemies of the people," taking with them their families, their friends, and even simple acquaintances seized for "prophylactic purposes." Each arrest sparked a new series of detentions in a chain reaction that rapidly developed a momentum of its own. So many people were being arrested that the black vans were painted with signs advertising "Bread" or "Meat" or even "Drink Soviet Champagne!" in a shallow effort not to alarm the frightened public.[12]

As the Terror picked up speed, to crack a joke, to show ironic hesitancy over state propaganda, or even to collect foreign stamps was enough to be judged an "enemy." Mass indoctrination was broadcast from blaring loudspeakers put up on street corners. A simple mistake of a factory manager, the miscalculation of an engineer, a broadcaster's choice of light-hearted music on the anniversary of Lenin's death—all became evidence of an organized conspiracy of saboteurs operating in their midst. The Soviet public was encouraged to search for hidden fascist symbols and coded messages, and quickly found them disguised in seemingly innocent book illustrations or newspaper photographs. Denunciation boxes appeared in factories and on street corners, and were soon crammed to bursting with claims made against fellow citizens, the denouncers vainly believing that by accusing others they might somehow save themselves. In such a society, pure malice was given free rein. The secretary of Stalin's henchman Lazar Kaganovich, for example, while typing out an arrest list, quietly added the

name of her neighbor. When her neighbor was arrested, she moved into the apartment she had coveted.[13]

"Conciliators"—those citizens who advocated leniency toward the "enemies of the people"—were themselves arrested. "Failure to denounce" had become a crime, and there were provocateurs who made false statements just to report those who failed in their duty to the state. A fourteen-year-old boy who had informed on his peasant father for hoarding grain—and was then murdered by outraged neighbors—was turned into a Soviet national hero. "Pavlik Morozov" statues were commissioned for parks and squares across the Soviet Union, so many in fact, that the statue's sculptor was killed in an accident caused by the state's production demands. No one stopped to consider the irony, and who could believe the rumors that the fourteen-year-old informer had, in fact, been murdered by the NKVD, who executed thirty-seven of his village neighbors, including Morozov's grandfather, grandmother, uncle, and cousin?[14]

Not only were Soviet schoolchildren expected to denounce the "enemies of the people," they were also specifically instructed to inform on their parents, their teachers, and their friends. Young Pioneers, who accepted the new morality, eagerly embraced "socialist competitions," with awards for those who could inform upon the greatest number of "enemies." One homeless child of the 1930s, a waif named Voinov, remembered his teacher walking into their classroom one morning with a smile across her face. "Vasiliev is the pride of our school," the teacher began. "He sets an example that should be followed. He's only a boy, but he has proved that he is a responsible citizen of our country . . . With vigilance worthy of a real Bolshevik, Vasiliev has revealed and unmasked an enemy of the people. Of course, this is the duty of every Soviet citizen—you're right. But Vasiliev did more. He has acted like a hero. He conquered family prejudices and denounced his own father!" Vasiliev sat in the classroom wearing a new suit, his reward for having reported seeing his father reading the banned works of Trotsky.[15]

Wise parents stopped talking when their children came home from school. When both parents were arrested, their children were sent to NKVD orphanages, where they learned the consequences of being the sons and

daughters of “enemies of the people.” A future Soviet dissident, Yelena Bonner, remembered how her nine-year-old brother innocently accepted the guilt of their father, arrested in 1937. “Look what those enemies of the people are like,” he told his sister. “Some of them even pretend to be fathers.” Yelena Bonner’s father was shot, and her mother sent to the camps.[16]

Desperate to avoid the same fate, millions of Soviet citizens voted for death sentences in public demonstrations across the Soviet Union. The first generation of Bolsheviks responsible for the Revolution was almost entirely annihilated by Stalin. Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, who had led the storming of the Winter Palace in 1917, was one of those given “the supreme measure of punishment.” Their executions removed the eyewitnesses of the origins of the Revolution, leaving a blank canvas upon which Stalin and his historians could paint any interpretation they desired. The recent past was erased and replaced with an alternate vision in which the primacy of Stalin emerged unchecked, shoulder to shoulder with Lenin throughout, directing the events of 1917. Any other interpretation—or even memory of the Revolution—became a secular heresy to be stamped out with ruthless and unyielding brutality. Thus, of the 1,966 people’s deputies of the Seventeenth Party Congress of 1934, 1,108 were arrested on charges of “anti-Revolutionary crimes.” The so-called Congress of Victors had greeted Comrade Kirov’s speech with a little too much enthusiasm, thereby hastening both Kirov’s death and their own. And the execution of the Bolshevik cadres was merely the public face of a vast hidden realm of terror.[17]

During the summer of 1937, Stalin’s chief henchmen, Lazar Kaganovich, Vyacheslav Molotov, and Nikita Khrushchev, among others, were sent out to the provinces to oversee “the purge of the party and state apparatus.” Old slogans in the factories were replaced by stark warnings—“We shall destroy the enemies of the people, Comrades!”—and as the Soviet press and radio broadcast incessant reports of conspiracies against Stalin’s life, the NKVD adopted efficiency targets to speed their plan for arrests, confessions, and executions.[18]

In their eagerness to overfulfill their plan, the internal NKVD sections bickered with one another for promotion and reward. One department complained that another had preselected married men with children for interrogation who, as every agent knew, were the quickest to confess. The NKVD was expanding ever outward, recruiting and controlling an ever-larger network of informers, while the secret departments watched from within, and like a Russian doll, those departments had special sections to watch the watchers. These were the "special tasks" operatives, entrusted with hunting down the Russian agents and diplomats who had refused to come home from abroad. Assassination squads traveled across Europe and America to silence the defectors.[19]

IN MOSCOW a dwarflike apparatchik named Nikolai Yezhov had been promoted from the provinces and had risen rapidly to succeed the fallen commissar Henrikh Yagoda. Standing barely five feet tall, even when wearing the peaked cap of the NKVD, Yezhov scarcely came up to Stalin's shoulder, and Stalin was himself a small man. Besides his stature, it was Yezhov's eyes that caught people's attention, "grey-green, fastening themselves upon his collocutor like gimlets, clever as the eyes of a cobra."[20] The gimlet-eyed Yezhov would visit Stalin at his Kremlin office or at "Dacha Number One," outside Moscow. In Stalin's official register of visitors, it was recorded that Yezhov spent several hours each day conferring with the Great Leader.[21]

Together they worked on the lists of those about to be destroyed. In the Lubyanka, Yezhov would create the lists of names, which Stalin would read and sign, and afterward watch a movie for relaxation. At one Central Committee meeting, Stalin presented lists for Molotov, Kaganovich, and Georgy Malenkov to cosign that sentenced 230,000 people to their executions. During 1937 and 1938, Yezhov faithfully brought Stalin 383 lists for his examination.[22] Unlike Hitler, the Soviet dictator never had any qualms about adding his personal signature to genocide, scanning thousands

of names into the night, occasionally marking off a famous writer, such as Boris Pasternak, as "not to be touched." Such dispensations were, of course, extremely rare. On one of the lists Yezhov claimed to be checking, Stalin wrote: "No need to check. Arrest them."[23]

Telegrams were sent by Yezhov from Moscow to regional districts across the USSR. The messages conveyed succinct instructions: *"You are charged with the task of exterminating ten thousand enemies of the people. Report results by signal."* And the replies from the local NKVD chiefs would be swiftly telegraphed back to the Center: *"The following enemies have been shot . . ."* [24] In their haste, the NKVD provincial chiefs often attempted to outperform one another, and as they struggled to overfulfill their execution norms, the wave of judicially sanctioned murders escalated still further. Unprecedented in its scale, the same measures were simultaneously applied in every city, town, and village of the Soviet Union. There was no recourse to an appeal.

One NKVD deputy commander, Iakubovich, attempted to increase the number of arrest warrants he could sign in one minute, timing himself as he furiously initialed sheaves of papers with a red pencil.[25] When the western Siberian NKVD were informed they had achieved second place in the killing spree, the mood, according to one operative, Tepliakov, "reached ecstasy."[26] On July 23, 1938, an NKVD chief named Gorbach wired Moscow from the city of Omsk asking for an increased quota of thousands more executions, since his men had already fulfilled their plan. The request was approved by Stalin personally, who promoted Gorbach to a larger district, where he overfulfilled the quota once again. Meanwhile, Yezhov sent out threatening telegrams of encouragement to the others: *"Beat destroy without sorting out . . . A certain number of innocent people will be annihilated too . . . Act more boldly, I have already told you repeatedly."* [27]

On August 4, 1937, Popashenko, the NKVD chief of the Kuibyshev region, issued a detailed set of instructions to one of his underlings, a Captain Korobitsin, on how to proceed with the executions:

1. Adapt immediately an area in a building of the NKVD, preferably in the cellar, suitable as a special cell for carrying out death sentences . . . 3. The death sentences are to be carried out at night. Before the sentences are executed the exact identity of the prisoner is to be established by checking carefully his questionnaire with the troika verdict. 4. After the executions the bodies are to be laid in a pit dug beforehand, then carefully buried and the pit is to be camouflaged. 5. Documents on the execution of the death sentences consist of a written form which is to be completed and signed for each prisoner in one copy only and sent in a separate package to the UNKVD [local administration of the secret police] for the attention of the 8th UGB Department [Registrations] UNKVD. 6. It is your personal responsibility to ensure that there is complete secrecy concerning time, place and method of execution. 7. Immediately on receipt of this order you are to present a list of NKVD staff permitted to participate in executions. Red Army soldiers or militsionery are not to be employed. All persons involved in the work of transporting the bodies and excavating or filling in the pits have to sign a document certifying they are sworn to secrecy.[28]

Similar instructions were ordered in other districts, supporting the conclusion that this was the universal method. In Novosibirsk, in July 1937, the NKVD chief, Mironov, charged his local operational chiefs with the task of *"finding a place where the sentences will be executed and a place where you can bury the corpses. If this is in a wood, the turf should be cut off beforehand so that for full secrecy's sake the place can be covered with this turf afterward."* [29] And with exacting premeditation, the turf was cut and the graves were dug, ready to conceal their victims. By the autumn of 1937, the pressure to achieve arrests was so great that the NKVD interrogators began picking out names from the telephone directory.[30]

THE VICTIMS WERE killed with a shot to the back of the head. From a

mass grave at Vinnytsia in the Ukraine, 9,432 bodies were taken for examination, of whom two thirds had required a second shot to end their lives. Seventy-eight people were shot three times, and two victims were shot four times.[31] Others had their skulls staved in by the force of a blunt object. The victims were buried in a pear orchard, which the NKVD surrounded with a high fence for secrecy. Nevertheless, curious locals had peered through holes in the fence or climbed trees to look into the orchard, where they had seen the bodies stacked up awaiting burial. Most of the victims were male, but the bodies of a number of women were found in the graves also, some of whom were buried naked.[32]

In the mass graves of Kuropaty, near Minsk in Byelorussia, it was reported that sand thrown over each layer of victims was seen to be moving some time afterward.[33] Here the graves extended across acres of woodland, the victims executed on the edge of the pits. At Kuropaty the executions continued for four and a half years, as pit after pit was dug and filled with bodies. Just as in the Ukraine, around the execution grounds, the NKVD had built a fence ten feet high. This time the local villagers heard the pleas of the victims echoing across the night air. Even in the final stages of the Terror, when the Nazis were bombing Minsk in July 1941, the executions continued, and by the outbreak of World War II, a quarter of a million people lay buried in one of eight killing fields located around Minsk.[34]

The victims' families were not informed of the executions. Instead they were told their relatives had been given ten-year sentences in the camps "without the right of correspondence." Outside prisons across the Soviet Union, long queues formed of women and children seeking word of their disappeared loved ones. Under the Soviet criminal code, political prisoners not yet convicted were allowed to receive fifty rubles while in prison. Waiting in line for news of her husband, the German communist Margarete Buber noticed a little girl about ten years old join the queue behind them. In her hand the girl was clutching several ruble notes. "Who are you paying in for, dear?" a voice from the queue asked gently. "Mummy and Daddy," the ten-year-old girl replied.[35]

As an organization, the NKVD was expanding so rapidly the agents making the arrests were often little more than teenagers themselves. When confronted by any unforeseen obstacle, they had to telephone back to base for instructions. Edmund Stevens, an American reporter living in a Moscow building that had already been visited several times, remembered one night when the NKVD arrived just after two o'clock. The teenage agents wore the caps of cornflower blue with red piping marked with the badge of the hammer and sickle, the faces of their victims reflecting back at them from the shining visors. Years later, Stevens could still not rid himself of the screams of hysteria as a young mother was torn away from her two-month-old baby and she and her husband were dragged down into the van waiting for them on the street below.[36]

In Moscow at the height of the Terror, it was if the whole city was waiting to be arrested. Another American reporter, Louis Fischer, watched a Soviet official sitting on a balcony with his little suitcase packed ready, killing time before the night, when the visitors would arrive. Fischer watched the official for three weeks that summer before the NKVD finally took him. More than half of the 160 apartments of his eight-story building had already been subjected to the nocturnal arrests. The rest were waiting, and the apprehension itself became part of the repression. At night, feigning sleep, the Soviet citizens listened for the sound of the brakes on the wheels of the van and the crunch of boots as the NKVD agents leaped down onto the pavement and began pounding up the stairs.[37]

In Leningrad another sleepless witness, Lyobov Shaporina, the fifty-eight-year-old wife of a composer, noticed how people would repeat the news of the disappearance of an acquaintance as calmly as saying "He went to the theater." Shaporina wrote in her diary that the atmosphere was "like walking through a cemetery pitted with freshly dug graves. Who will fall in next, will it be you?" At three o'clock in the morning of October 22, 1937, she had woken suddenly. Outside, the night air was still and there were no trams or cars to break the silence when she heard a burst of gunfire. The noise was repeated ten minutes later, and then at intervals through the night until five o'clock in the morning, when the city of Leningrad gradually awoke to its normal routine. Walking to her window, Shaporina concluded

the shooting had come from the fortress of St. Peter and Paul, used as a jail by the NKVD. And then calmly she realized that she had spent the night listening to executions.[38]

During the "Yezhov days" people shrank away from one another in fear, unsure if a casual acquaintance was an informer or, worse yet, an "enemy" who might implicate them by association. With denunciations reaching saturation point, friends stopped recognizing one another on the street, fearing the consequence of unnecessary social contact. And thus, ironically, Soviet Russia became transformed into a nation of fearful individualists, their eyes flicking across and then swiftly away, as each citizen reminded himself not to speak unless it was strictly necessary, to remain silent at all times, except when silence itself gave cause for suspicion. Then they would applaud with all the energy a threatened life could muster, until their hands shook white, and still they dared not stop. At a party rally or a factory meeting, if an ovation for a speech made by Comrade Stalin lasted twenty minutes, or thirty minutes, then so what? Everyone sensed they could not be the first to stop when "the angels" were watching. The first to break the applause would be arrested. So the crowds kept pounding their hands together, shouting out their praise for Comrade Stalin, sensing rightly that their lives depended on it. And so it continued, day after day, and night after night.[39]

IN THE AUTUMN OF 1937, writers and journalists were disappearing so quickly their names were no longer painted on the doors of publishing companies or newspapers such as *Izvestiya*. The response of the frightened writers was to shout their chorus of approval still louder, putting forward sincere proposals to rename the Volga River after Stalin, or the city of Moscow, or even the moon. Of the seven hundred writers who had attended the First Congress of Soviet Writers three years earlier, only fifty survived the Terror. Their past work was there for all to scrutinize, their fate a lesson

to others: *"If you think don't speak! If you speak don't write! If you write don't publish! If you publish recant immediately!"*[40]

In such an atmosphere, famous cultural figures were shot without fanfare. The writer Isaac Babel was arrested at his dacha. His subsequent trial lasted twenty minutes, and he was shot the next morning. The internationally renowned theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold was arrested and executed in similar circumstances. Weeks after his arrest, his wife, Zinaida, was discovered in her apartment murdered. The poet Osip Mandelstam suffered an ignominious death in a transit camp in Far East Russia. Once he had joked: "Russia is the only place where poetry is really important. They'll kill people for it here." After Stalin closed his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk*, Dmitry Shostakovich took to sleeping in the corridor outside his apartment so that his arrest would not disturb his family. Shostakovich was ordered to appear before his NKVD inquisitor Zanchevsky in the spring of 1937, accused of involvement in a plot to assassinate Stalin. The shocked composer denied the charges but was given the weekend to think it over: *"I can give you until Monday. By that day you will without fail remember everything. You must recall every detail of the discussion regarding the plot."* Returning to the Lubyanka on Monday morning, Shostakovich was told, "Zanchevksy is not coming in today." On this occasion it was the inquisitor, not his victim, who was taken.[41]

Since "enemies of the people" were being discovered everywhere else, then why not within the NKVD itself? There was an old saying from the 1920s: *"A Chekist who has shot fifty prisoners, he deserves to be shot as the fifty-first."* And thus the Terror began to consume both its "enemies" and the minds of those who had imagined them, fueled by Stalin's ever-present desire to rid himself of the witnesses of his crimes. Several NKVD officers committed suicide in anticipation. It was reported that a knock on the door of an NKVD residential building in central Moscow triggered a multitude of gunshots within adjacent apartments. Others threw themselves from the top-floor windows in a rash of suicides, their bodies hurtling to the ground in full view of passersby. Rumors of the news spread rapidly over Moscow, panicking the population still further.[42]

In a totalitarian and paranoid state, nothing was beyond the reach of politics. Professor Kalmonson of Moscow Zoo was arrested for “wrecking” activities, after the zoo’s monkeys died of tuberculosis. In jail, the professor was thankful to have only been arrested as a “wrecker” and not a “spy,” which carried a greater certainty of death. In December 1937, fifty-three members of a deaf-mutes association were arrested in Leningrad, and thirty-three were sentenced to death for conducting “conspiracies” in their private language. Philatelists and Esperantists were arrested for their past dealings with foreigners. Anyone who had been outside the borders of the USSR in any capacity whatsoever became an immediate suspect. With the prisons filled beyond capacity, two- or three-man NKVD committees—the dread *dvoiki* or *troiki*—began handing out death sentences after ten-minute trials. Willingly the NKVD pursued their nightly task as a bleakly efficient killing machine, immune to reason or restraint, which in the morning left behind only the red seals on the apartment doors of their victims as evidence of their presence, like the aftermath of a plague.[43]

FEARFUL IN THE midst of the mass arrests, waiting anxiously for salvation, were the foreigners of the Soviet Union. Most bewildered of all were the Americans, coming as they did from a nation with no history of state terror. No longer the welcomed guests of the Revolution who arrived to help “build socialism,” the foreigners were now regarded as potential spies plotting its destruction. Officially, from Stalin himself, they had received the mark of Cain:

It has been proved as definitely as twice two are four, that the bourgeois states send to each other spies, wreckers, diversionists and sometimes also assassins . . . The question arises why should bourgeois states be milder and more neighbourly towards the Soviet Socialist state . . . Would it not be more true, from the point of view of Marxism, to assume that to the rear of the Soviet Union the bourgeois states should send twice and three times as many wreckers, spies, diversionists and murderers? [44]

After such well-publicized pronouncements, all foreigners became a special target, with Moscow's embassies recast as hostile outposts to be watched over with all the suspicion that a notoriously paranoid organization could devote. Orders were given that these "potential intelligence bases" of "enemy states" be placed under continuous observation. Every foreigner entering and leaving the embassy buildings who did not possess cast-iron diplomatic or journalistic credentials became subject to investigation.[45]

Aping their bosses in Moscow, the regional NKVD were, if anything, even fiercer in their witch hunts against the foreigners. The Krasnoyarsk NKVD chief, Sobolev, proclaimed enthusiastically, *"All these Poles, Koreans, Latvians, Germans etc should be beaten, these are all mercenary nations, subject to termination . . . All nations should be caught, forced to their knees, and exterminated like mad dogs."* The term "mad dog" had become an essential element of Soviet lexicography, the choice of language reflecting a dehumanizing process that facilitated the destruction of their victims. Among the Polish community residing in the Soviet Union, 144,000 people were arrested, and of these 111,000 were executed. It beggared belief, but such was the power of the NKVD.[46]

All communication with foreigners became dangerous, and ordinary Russian citizens shrank away from them in fear. Propaganda posters depicted a Nazi spy choosing which mask to wear, the choice of labels communicating the hierarchy of suspicion: "Foreign specialist," "Tourist," "Writer," and "Victim of Fascism." Viewing such posters, the American emigrants must have realized they were suddenly very vulnerable as they waited, transfixed by the events taking place around them. For most, the Terror was impossible to understand; it was easier to believe in the guilt of the arrested than to contemplate the notion that the Soviet state was now intent upon their destruction. Some Americans found solace in the recently published "Stalin Constitution," which guaranteed that *"the citizens of the USSR are ensured inviolability of the person. No one may be subject to arrest except by decision of a court or with the sanction of a state*

prosecutor." But fate made a mockery of their hope, as the authors of Stalin's so-called Bill of Rights were themselves arrested.[47]

The direst warning had stared them directly in the face. The year before, Nikolai Yezhov's appointment as the people's commissar for the NKVD had been announced with a banner headline in the *Moscow Daily News*. On the front page, his photograph had gazed out at the American readers. Picking up the newspaper that day, did they really believe Yezhov's "grey-green gimlet eyes" would miss them?

9

Spetzrabota

Or be that fairy tale you've dreamed up,
So sickeningly familiar to everyone—
In which I glimpse the top of a pale blue cap
And the house attendant white with fear . . .

Anna Akhmatova, "To Death"[1]

With every passing week, Stalin's portrait had multiplied. His gaze was there whichever way the Americans turned, a constant reminder of their powerlessness. Uncannily in an atheistic state, Stalin's image had acquired a sacramental quality, demanding the very greatest reverence from his subjects. Nothing could be placed over it, the slightest fun could not be made of it, nor could it be even accidentally tarnished—not that any sane person would ever dream of committing such an offense. Most disturbing of all were the portraits of Stalin held aloft in crowds, emerging in successive waves of marching acolytes, watched over by the same face looking down in approval from surrounding buildings. At the Tushino air fête, a crowd of half a million spectators gathered under a slow procession of hot-air balloons carrying monumental fifty-by-thirty-foot photographs of Stalin and the Politburo, moving gently across the summer sky. "*Long Live the Brain, the Heart, the Strength of the Party and the Soviet peoples, our Beloved Leader and Teacher, Comrade Stalin!*"[2]

It was Stalin who personally instructed the NKVD to torture their prisoners to extract confessions, writing "Beat, beat!" next to his victims' names. When Khrushchev visited Yezhov in his Central Committee office during the Terror, he noticed bloodstains on the front and cuffs of Yezhov's shirt. Catching his gaze, Yezhov replied, "One might be proud of such spots, for it was the blood of the enemies of the Revolution." By now, Stalin had nicknamed his favorite commissar "Ezhevichka" ("the little bramble")

and entrusted him with order No. 00447, to "put an end, once and for all" to anti-Soviet elements within society.[3]

At the height of the Terror, Stalin promised: *"We shall annihilate every one of these enemies, even if he is an Old Bolshevik. We shall annihilate him and his relatives, his family. Anyone who in deed or in thought, yes, in thought, attacks the unity of the socialist state will be mercilessly crushed by us. We shall exterminate all enemies to the very last man, and also their families and relatives!"*[4] Naturally there were those who privately speculated on the mental health of Stalin, this small man, rather thin and quite frail, whose jacket hung off him and whose face was pockmarked by smallpox scars and had grown deathly pale from his nocturnal schedule. They questioned whether Stalin had not descended into a psychopathic paranoia concealed by a functioning intelligence. A childhood friend, Ioseb Iremashvili, later wrote that *"undeserved terrible beatings made the boy as hard and heartless as his father himself. Since all men who had authority over others either through power or age reminded him of his father there had arisen a feeling of revenge against all men who stood above him. From his youth the realization of his thoughts of revenge became the goal toward which everything was aimed."*[5]

There were many who believed Stalin was insane, such was the scale and senselessness of his wrath. The Dearborn negotiator Valery Mezhlauk wrote to his brother, who was organizing a Soviet exhibition in Paris, that Stalin was ill from "acute" paranoia. What other explanation could there be? To infer that Stalin was deliberately scything through every class of Soviet society to maintain an absolute and critical hold on power seemed either fantastical or diabolical in its cruelty. Such a conclusion went beyond the deductive logic of even a highly intelligent Bolshevik Party member such as Mezhlauk. To have reached this political conclusion would have required the realization of his own impending death, and that of his brother's also.[6]

Even by speculating on Stalin's mental health, Mezhlauk was guilty of "thought crime," a very real transgression in a state that demanded both the appearance and actuality of capitulation. The Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz later described the rationale of their guardians: *"The enemy, in a potential form, will always be there; the only friend will be the man who accepts the*

doctrine 100 per cent. If he accepts only 99 per cent, he will necessarily have to be considered a foe, for from that remaining 1 per cent a new church can rise."[7] In the mind of Stalin, the killings had become a necessity for the entrenchment of power. And the "captured Americans"—although only a negligible fraction of a percentage of the population of the USSR—were as subject to the mechanics of Soviet power as any of those around them, perhaps even more so, since every American emigrant carried with them the threat of revelation to the outside world.

ARTHUR TALENT ARRIVED in Moscow in the 1920s as a seven-year-old child with his family from Boston. The shy boy was a gifted violinist who won a place at the prestigious Moscow Conservatory to study music. As a young man, Talent offered a room in his family's apartment to John Goode, the brother-in-law of Paul Robeson, and received as a gift a brand-new suit from America. In the political atmosphere of the day, even such a simple exchange could condemn both parties. On January 28, 1938, Arthur Talent was arrested by the NKVD, and the young violinist vanished.

In the late 1990s, transcripts of his interrogation were released by the Russian security services. The yellowed sheets of paper in Arthur Talent's NKVD file recorded his steadfast denial of the accusations thrown at him in the Lubyanka. His interrogation ended abruptly, only to be resumed thirty-eight days later, when Talent began a full "confession" to an NKVD agent named Salov. The methods used to change Talent's mind were commonplace, the transcript failing to convey the mechanical cadences of an exhausted victim who prefers death over that which he has just endured: "You are arrested and accused of espionage activities in the USSR in favour of a foreign state. Do you plead guilty?" "Yes! I plead guilty of being involved in espionage in favour of Latvia. After thirty-eight days of denial, I have decided to tell the inquest the whole truth."

Arthur Talent confessed that Paul Robeson's wife, Eslanda, had brought him the American suit during a previous visit to Moscow, at the request of

her brother, John Goode, who was staying at his apartment, which had become a "centre for foreign espionage." Talent confirmed that John Goode was an "agent of a foreign state," and the suit was proof of payment for his espionage. Pressed for more information and the names of his accomplices, Arthur Talent proceeded to denounce his friends involved in his "crimes," including Jim Abolin and his two sons, who played on the Moscow Foreign Workers' baseball team. A slip of paper inserted at the end of the file then revealed that Arthur Talent was then taken from his prison cell and driven to the countryside outside Moscow. At the execution grounds at Butovo on June 7, 1938, he was shot. He was twenty-one years old.[8]

On May 10, 1936, Paul Robeson had given an interview to Ben Davis, Jr., of the *Sunday Worker* describing a visit he had made to the apartment of his brother-in-law John Goode: *"While in the Soviet Union I made it a point to visit some of the workers' homes . . . and I saw for myself. They all live in healthful surroundings, apartments, with nurseries containing the most modern equipment for their children. Besides they were still building. I certainly wish the workers in this country—and especially the Negroes in Harlem and the South—had such places to stay in. I visited the home of my brother-in-law, his apartment had plenty of light, fresh air and space. Believe me he is*

very happy." John Goode was a mechanic and bus driver living in Moscow whose existence Robeson was careful to publicize.[9] What the American singer never mentioned in any interview was how he had helped to engineer Goode's escape from Russia at the end of his concert tour. His brother-in-law fled with just one suitcase to add credence to their story that he was taking just a short vacation outside the USSR. And by means of this subterfuge, John Goode's life was saved from the NKVD decree of February 19, 1938, ordering his arrest.[10] But if any of the young American baseball players of Moscow were hoping for similar intercession by Robeson on their behalf, they were to wait in vain. There is no record of any statement made by the honorary catcher of the Moscow Foreign Workers' baseball team in support of his young American friends. Nor did Robeson make any attempt to denounce the Terror, which he knew was

taking place within the Soviet Union. The most famous bass voice in world music had fallen unaccountably silent.

In February 1937, as the Stalin constitution was being ratified, Paul Robeson returned to Russia for a concert tour with the Moscow State Philharmonic. At a performance at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, the audience suddenly stood and began to cheer furiously. Joseph Stalin was standing in a box on the right, smiling and applauding. Later Robeson described his feelings: *"I remember the tears began to quietly flow and I too smiled and waved. Here was clearly a man who seemed to embrace all. So kindly—I can never forget that warm feeling of kindliness and also a feeling of sureness. Here was one who was wise and good—the world and especially the socialist world was fortunate indeed to have his daily guidance. I lifted high my son Pauli to wave to this world leader, and his leader."* [11]

That summer, Eslanda Robeson visited the American Communist Party leader Eugene Dennis at the Hotel Lux in Moscow. When she asked Dennis if they should keep Paul Robeson, Jr., at school in Moscow, his advice was straightforward: "If you do so, I urge that you make it publicly well-known, and be sure the practical arrangements are such that you can take him home whenever you wish." Eugene Dennis was speaking from experience; he had been forced to leave his son behind in Moscow when he first left the USSR. Tim Dennis was eight years old and could not speak English at all—although both his parents were American—and when the couple left Moscow again, he was raised in a Soviet state orphanage. [12] Heeding Dennis' advice, the Robesons took their son with them on a summer vacation with the family of Oliver Golden, a black American cotton specialist who had arrived in the Soviet Union in 1931 with his wife, Bertha, and settled in Tashkent. Oliver Golden spoke Russian with a Mississippi accent, and joked about returning home "when elephants roost in the trees."

During their vacation at an elite rest home on the Black Sea, the ten-year-old Paul Robeson, Jr., explained to his father how the parents of his Moscow school friends were being arrested. The children of the Bolshevik elite had learned to walk outside into the playground if they wanted to talk

about their parents, for fear of their conversations being recorded. Paul Robeson, Jr., then recounted how he had stood with his friend Misha watching the return of the Soviet hero-explorers from their North Pole expedition. As they stood watching the propaganda parade, Misha explained that the light ash falling from the sky *"came from the crematoria in the cellars of prisoners where the firing squads were working overtime."*[13]

In the face of such revelations, it was unsurprising that the Robesons' Black Sea holiday was marred by arguments. Oliver Golden's daughter remembered how her father and Paul Robeson had been locked in "heated political discussions."[14] Given that both were dedicated communists, it was uncertain who was defending the status quo, but it transpired also that Robeson had been unable to find any of the Russian friends he had made on his earlier visits. Returning to Moscow in August 1937, Robeson asked to meet Ignaty Kazakov, a doctor and Shakespeare scholar who had made friends with his young son. Although warned that Kazakov had already disappeared, Robeson insisted, and quite unexpectedly the Russian doctor telephoned to invite him to lunch at the Metropol Hotel. Arriving with two "translators" as his escort, Kazakov sat down for a two-hour lunch as if nothing was wrong. Only at the end of the meal, when the doctor announced that he must return to his medical institute, did he manage to whisper "Thank you" into Robeson's ear.

Six months later, Ignaty Kazakov's name appeared as one of the defendants at a Moscow show trial, accused of having used his medical clinic for political assassinations. His guilty verdict and swift execution prompted an argument between Paul Robeson and his young son, who had since been moved to the Soviet diplomatic school in London. With a child's instinct for justice, Paul Robeson, Jr., understood very well that the charges had been fabricated, and he accused his father of inaction: "We all knew he was innocent, and you never said a word." In his memoirs, Paul Robeson, Jr., wrote that a few days later his father had explained how *"sometimes great injustices may be inflicted on the minority when the majority is in the pursuit of a great and just cause."*[15]

After their vacation, Oliver Golden returned to the "House of the Foreign Specialists" in Tashkent, only to discover his neighbor's apartment door was sealed with red wax. Concerned friends told Golden that while he was away the NKVD had arrived in the night to arrest him. As a dutiful communist, the American cotton specialist immediately took himself down to the NKVD headquarters. "You came for me," he said boldly. "Arrest me if you think I'm an enemy of the people." Then something remarkable happened. The NKVD officer in charge advised him to calm down: "Comrade Golden, don't get so upset. We've already fulfilled the plans of arrests for your area. Go home and work in peace." And by this stroke of good fortune, Oliver Golden lived another three years. According to his granddaughter, he died of heart and kidney failure in the land of his dreams.[16]

LOVETT FORT-WHITEMAN disappeared soon after applying for permission to return home to the United States. His exit visa was refused, and the former teacher at the Anglo-American school, born in Dallas and educated at the Tuskegee Institute, was denounced as a "counterrevolutionary" by a lawyer from the Communist Party of the United States. Three weeks later Fort-Whiteman was arrested and sent to a "corrective labor camp" in Kazakhstan. In Moscow, Robert Robinson heard more news from a Russian friend who had returned from the same camp. According to this witness, Fort-Whiteman had been severely beaten because he had failed to meet his work quota. In the camp, he had died of starvation, a broken man whose teeth had been knocked out.[17] It was difficult to comprehend how such a robust figure, so physically strong and an avid boxer, could have died so quickly. But the truth of the sighting was confirmed when Fort-Whiteman's NKVD file was discovered in the late 1990s. The NKVD recorded the date of his death as January 13, 1939, at the age of forty-four. The fingerprints taken from his corpse were still attached to the back of his file.[18]

Sympathy for the Soviet cause was no guarantee of safety; instead it attracted suspicion. The Reverend Julius Hecker, for example, was a Methodist academic from Columbia University who published several books defending communism before moving to Russia with his American wife and three young daughters to teach philosophy at Moscow University. According to the American embassy, in earlier summers, when Moscow was crowded with tourists, Julius Hecker had made "speeches almost daily to the visitors on the subject of religious tolerance in the Soviet Union."[19] His daughter Marcella Hecker remembered the day the NKVD came to take her father away. "He was asleep in a little room which I occupy now," she said. "Although my mother opened the door very, very quietly, Father must have had some terrible dream, because he woke up at once with a jerk, and immediately understood everything. They bore him away and we never saw him again." Julius Hecker's wife remained convinced that her husband's arrest was just a terrible mistake, and she waited long years for his return.[20] She never learned that just two and half months after his arrest, on April 28, 1938, Professor Julius Hecker confessed to being an American spy who had written his books merely to draw attention away from his espionage. Two hours after making this false confession, he was shot.[21]

There were those—the majority—who waited in the night like Julius Hecker. Only a very few sought sanctuary with friends, hidden away in attics like Soviet Anne Franks. But in the communal apartments of overcrowded cities, it was almost impossible to hide. Some fugitives moved cities and kept on running, hoping to buy false papers and new identities, and keep one step ahead of the overburdened NKVD. There were always more than enough "enemies" to arrest who remained in their apartments, paralyzed by fear. But it was difficult to flee if you were a foreigner, let alone an American, whose particular Russian accent automatically attracted attention, and thus suspicion. And those who left the cities to live in remote villages, or who arrived at a new construction site in search of work, only came under the scrutiny of fresh pairs of NKVD eyes eagerly scanning residence lists in search of names.[22]

In 1937, Victor Herman, "the Lindbergh of Russia," was expelled from his elite parachute academy outside Moscow, stung by the taunts of the

school's political commissar: "You are an enemy, Herman! Your kind does not belong here! All enemies are being weeded out!"[23] Now in his early twenties, when Victor took the train back to the Ford auto factory in Gorky, he discovered the once-lively American village had become deserted. Recognizing two Americans in the cafeteria, he was shocked to realize they were too fearful to say hello. When he questioned his father, Sam Herman instinctively looked over his shoulder before whispering, *"Leave here with your sister . . . Take Miriam and return to Moscow. You are to go straight to the American consulate there. You will tell them you wish to go home immediately. I want you to promise me, Vickie, you will not leave that building until they send you and your sister home."* Later his father told him that of the hundreds of Americans who had come to work at the auto factory in Gorky, only twenty were left.[24]

The American workers had been disappearing from the auto factory for some time. Joe Grondon, the former Ford employee and trade unionist made briefly famous by *Pravda* as "The Man Who Abandoned Detroit," had been arrested at home in the American village some two years earlier. From State Department records we know that his son, Benjamin Grondon, reported his father's disappearance to the American embassy on May 6, 1935.[25] What happened to Benjamin Grondon, who had played as an outfielder on the Gorky baseball team, we do not know. But during the intervening period, virtually every Russian engineer who had any connection with Detroit was arrested. An anonymous American engineer who visited the Gorky car plant during the Terror discovered that the production cost of each Soviet automobile was around "twenty thousand dollars." The latest engineers were all "high school graduates," with virtually no one aged over thirty left working in the factory.[26]

On October 7, 1937, *Pravda* ran an article accusing the Gorky automobile plant of "shameful" work. The machinery installed by "wreckers" had become worn out due to "carelessness and insufficient care"; while expensive technology bought from abroad had not been used at all for "fear that if improperly installed the machinery might not function." If it was obvious that the Soviet Detroit was nowhere near as productive as Henry Ford's, then clearly "wreckers" must be to blame. Valery Mezhlauk

and Saul Bron— the two Russians photographed on either side of Henry Ford after signing the Amtorg contract in Dearborn—were both arrested and summarily executed. Sergei Dyakanov, the director of the Gorky plant whose photograph Henry Ford had once generously signed "from the American Ford to the Soviet Ford," was arrested and shot in the Lubyanka on the day of his trial. In Dyakanov's NKVD file, his interrogator, Lieutenant Shevilyov, noted that he had carried out the sentence personally.[27]

In such circumstances, any promise Victor Herman made to his father in the American village was impossible to keep. Those who tried to escape Gorky could not get far. The NKVD were everywhere, constantly checking identity papers, and someone like Victor never really stood a chance. He was arrested on July 20, 1938, bundled into the back of a Ford Model A. Like the others, the bewildered Victor Herman attempted to protest his innocence: *"I am an American! You will pay for this! This is kidnapping! You cannot do this to an American!"* But the NKVD lieutenant remained impassive, watching his victim with detached bemusement before nodding toward some pedestrians staring at them from the street: *"Look, Lindbergh of Russia, the people are applauding."* [28] In Russia, the Americans were carried away in the very cars they had left Detroit to build. For Henry Ford's contract, signed in Dearborn, had supplied the NKVD with their entire fleet, missing only the uniformed drivers and the blue stars on the windscreens.[29]

THROUGH THE COURSE of 1937 and 1938, Americans such as Victor Herman began to disappear, one after another. Many of the arrested were shot not long afterward, often with their fathers, who had brought them to the USSR. After their denunciation, the baseball players from Boston, Arthur Abolin and his younger brother, Carl, were both arrested and executed with their father, James Abolin, in 1938. Their mother died later, in a concentration camp. Only their younger sister, Lucy Abolin—the

precocious drama student of the Anglo-American school—was left untouched.[30] Other records emerged that revealed how certain victims were forced to testify against their family members in so-called "confrontation interrogations." In March 1938, a twenty-five-year-old New Yorker named Victor Tyskewicz-Voskov confessed that his mother had been recruited into "espionage in favor of Germany." Under extreme duress, Tyskewicz-Voskov denounced his mother to his interrogator as a "Trotskyist, inclined antagonistically against the Soviet power." The NKVD officers then placed his forty-three-year-old mother in the same interrogation room while her son repeated his denunciation in front of her. His mother bravely confessed her own guilt while steadfastly refusing to implicate her son. They were both executed on June 7, 1938.[31]

In the killing fields of Butovo, twenty-seven kilometers south of Moscow, the depressions in the ground later revealed themselves in aerial photography. The mass graves ran for up to half a kilometer at a time. Nor was there anything particularly unique about Butovo. Within the Soviet Union such "zones" were differentiated only by their location. Orders sent from Moscow were applied uniformly throughout the USSR, from the Polish border across one sixth of the surface of the earth to the Pacific Ocean. If the NKVD were instructed that 250,000 people should fill one of the eight mass graves in Byelorussia, then a similar ratio was applied to every other Soviet republic, and every regional district of Russia, too, including the Moscow region itself. At Butovo, exactly the same procedure was followed by the NKVD brigades as elsewhere.[32]

In the 1990s, a Russian society for the rehabilitation of Stalin's victims located within the files of KGB pensioners a "Comrade S.," the first *komendant* of an NKVD execution squad who was willing to be interviewed for the historical record. Comrade S. happily discussed his *spetzrabota*— the so-called special work—which he had performed with his team of a dozen executioners during the *Yezhovchina*, the days of Yezhov. Comrade S. remembered how his unit had waited in a stone house on the edge of the killing fields while their prisoners' files were checked. How they led their victims to the edge of the pit and held the standard-issue Nagan pistol to the back of their heads. How they pulled the trigger and

watched the bodies crumple and fall into the hole in the earth. And then how they repeated the process over and again until, like every other Soviet worker, they had met their quota for the night's work. At the end of their shift, Comrade S. and the dozen members of his squad would retire to their stone headquarters exhausted, to drink the liters of vodka specially allocated for the job at hand. Obviously their masters understood the traumatic effect the *spetzrabota* had on the minds of the executioners. The vodka salved their consciences as the dawn rose over Moscow, and a new day began for the city's fear-filled inhabitants.[33]

In the mornings at Butovo, the executioners heard the sound of the bulldozers covering over the mass graves, and the fresh graves being hollowed ready for the next night's work. In their stone house they washed their hands and faces, removing the inevitable back-spray of blood, and doused themselves in cheap eau de cologne, once again provided by their masters, who seemed to have thought of everything and who understood that the smell of death clings to those who administer it. Although they were allocated leather aprons and gloves and hats to protect their uniforms from the spattered gore of blood and skull and brain, the men found it was impossible to stay clean.[34]

Judging from the undisturbed recollections of Comrade S., the NKVD guards remained convinced they were not murderers but righteous executioners sanctioned by their state. With prolonged ideological training, their moral sense became disguised and distorted by euphemism. The brigade was enforcing the "supreme penalty for social defence," or administering the "nine-gram ration." Words such as *liquidation* or *repression* inadequately concealed the simple act of murder. While numbed by the repetitiveness of their "special work," the executioners became as passionless as slaughtermen, too busy for introspection. Their *spetzrabota* did not end for many years; it kept arriving until it was hardly special any longer, just monotonous in its routine.[35] There was, however, one unexpected consequence to their lives. Their work made them wealthy. Each NKVD executioner was paid special ruble bonuses for killing people in "the zones," so much in fact that their increased salaries excited the envy of their NKVD colleagues not selected for this work. And the ruble bonuses

mounted up as, night after night, the pits were filled and new ones were dug again the next morning.[36]

In the fields of Butovo, apple trees were planted over the dead. In Depository No. 7, at the Lubyanka, the NKVD entered their names into four hundred bound volumes. Each name was marked with a red pencil and the note "sentence carried out." From these books, researchers later calculated that 85 percent of the dead were noncommunists, ordinary people who mostly came from the Russian peasantry. Given the scale of the genocide, the fate of the Americans was scarcely a matter of significance. The statistical evidence had no regard for the captain of the Moscow Foreign Workers' baseball team, Arnold Preedin, or his brother, Walter Preedin, from Boston, Massachusetts, who lay buried in an apple orchard twenty-seven kilometers south of Moscow.[37]

VIRTUALLY EVERY DAY in Moscow, Thomas Sgovio heard the news of the arrest of friends such as Arnold Preedin and his family. At the Foreign Workers' Club on Hertzen Street, the Americans shrank away from one another in fear before deserting the building completely. Soon the premises were shut down, along with virtually every other institution associated with the world beyond the borders of the USSR, including the Anglo-American school, whose teachers were now accused of running a "spy center." After his father, Joseph, was arrested, Thomas Sgovio quite naturally panicked. Not knowing where else to turn, he approached the only place he thought might possibly help a twenty-one-year-old from Buffalo, New York, thousands of miles from home. Like many others before him, Thomas Sgovio walked into the sanctuary of the American embassy on Mokhovaya Street.[38]

At the time, virtually every embassy in Moscow was besieged by desperate men and women attempting to flee the USSR. As well as Americans, there were thousands of other foreigners—Italians, French, Spanish, Greeks, Austrians, Germans—all in a similar position of realizing

too late what a terrible mistake they had made in emigrating to Soviet Russia. And while it was obvious that the Russian public had no protection whatsoever from the ferocity of the NKVD, collectively the foreigners still clung to the hope that their governments might save them.

The staff at the American embassy were inundated with requests for help, but this still did not explain their slow, and strangely ambivalent, response. In fear for their lives, American emigrants were turned away by their diplomats, often on the flimsiest of grounds. Those who had lost their passports to the coercive schemes of the NKVD were told that they would have to be subject to lengthy periods of investigation, when it was obvious there was no time to lose. Those whose passports had lapsed were refused new ones often on the grounds that they lacked the necessary photographs or the two-dollar fee at a time when possession of foreign currency was a criminal offense in the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, lurking outside the embassy gates, the NKVD agents were waiting for the emigrants to emerge. Many American citizens were arrested in this way, on the pavement just yards from the embassy. Alexander Gelver, a twenty-four-year-old from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, was one of those picked up outside. He was executed on New Year's Day 1938.[39]

Thomas Sgovio's friend Marvin Volat was also arrested leaving the American embassy, on March 11, 1938. The violinist was accused of "counter-revolutionary activity" and espionage for foreign powers. His interrogation lasted two long months, but eventually Marvin confessed to having taken clandestine photographs at Moscow's military airport. He was convicted and sentenced to hard labor in the camps. On the final page of his NKVD file, an official hastily recorded that Volat died in February 1939. None of his former Soviet friends could help him. His girlfriend, Sara Berman, was herself arrested, as a "CH-S," a family member of "an enemy of the people." Her father, Matvei Berman, the former Gulag chief, had already been executed on Stalin's orders.[40]

Ten days after his friend Marvin's arrest, on March 21, 1938, Thomas Sgovio walked into the American embassy. The midday emptiness of the waiting room surprised him. On his first visit, the room had been crowded with people waiting patiently to be seen. This time Thomas was told once

again that the officials were reviewing his case and that he should return in a week or so. No one warned him that his appeals and repeated visits were only placing his life in greater danger. Instead, ever hopeful and respectful of their advice, Thomas Sgovio left the American embassy at 1:15 P.M., and was immediately arrested by the NKVD on Sverdlov Square. That afternoon it was his turn to be pushed into the back of a black Soviet Ford Model A and begin the short journey that ended in the Lubyanka. He was twenty-one years old and had been in the Soviet Union just two and a half years.[41]

INSIDE THE EMBASSY OFFICES, the American diplomats had known about these disappearances at least as early as April 4, 1934, when Henry Maiwin, had visited to register his American passport and subsequently vanished. In a memo dispatched to Washington, D.C., a diplomat wrote that *"persons living in Mr. Maiwin's apartment house advised an inquirer that Mr. Maiwin had been arrested by the OGPU and shot."*[42] A year later, on February 16, 1935, the chargé d'affaires, John Wiley, had reported the Soviet surveillance of U.S. passport and registration applicants, before stating dryly: *"If American citizens can disappear in the Soviet union without leaving a trace, the ability of the Embassy to extend protection to such citizens becomes distinctly impaired."*[43]

It is not certain what lay behind the diplomats' reaction. Perhaps they viewed these American exiles with disdain, as men and women who had turned their backs on their country and were now suffering the consequences. Perhaps the State Department was unwilling to countenance the return to the United States of those they saw as economic misfits and political radicals of varying leftist stripe, whom they could scarcely have regretted to see leave. While serving in the American consulate in Berlin in February 1931, George Kennan had written a memo on "the status of American communists" living in the USSR: *"The question naturally arises as to whether they should be allowed to retain their American passports*

and citizenship . . . It is evident that American citizens become to a certain extent naturalized as soon as they step on Soviet soil." Kennan had then advocated the use of delay as the best procedure to follow: *"If anyone is to take the initiative in getting this matter cleared up, it would apparently have to be Consular officers in the field, who could either submit reports on expatriation or hold up the renewal of passports in cases of this sort . . . Outside of new legislation, at any rate, this is the only possible means I can see of bringing about the legal expatriation of those whose moral expatriation has long since been a fact."*[44]

Whether or not his advice was put into practice at the American embassy in Moscow at the height of the Terror we do not know. But it was certainly true that the American diplomatic staff found themselves having to explain to the visitors who had lost their American passports and their citizenship that the process was irreversible. The Soviets had simply claimed them as their own, and there was very little countervailing desire to question their judgment.[45] In Moscow, the American diplomats understood very well that low-level negotiation with the Soviet Foreign Ministry was entirely useless, given the fact that the entire Commissariat was petrified of the NKVD and were themselves frequent victims of the Terror. Clearly more forceful intervention was required at the very highest levels of government. Had the diplomats been willing, action might still have been taken, and the lives of the American emigrants might well have been saved.

But what was abundantly clear was that if this was about to happen, the "captured Americans" needed a heroically protective figure to intervene on their behalf—someone with the courage of Oskar Schindler or Raoul Wallenberg—someone willing to lend sanctuary, to hand out passports, to speak to the president, and to kick up a very loud and very public fuss in a time of peril. Someone, in short, who might hold a protective hand over them when their lives were so evidently endangered.

What they got, instead, was Ambassador Joseph Davies.

10

“A Dispassionate Observer”

To grief, even at night, the road is bright.

Innokenty Annensky[1]

Joseph Davies was a liberal lawyer who had married an heiress and thereby ascended into the rarefied world of America’s multimillionaires. As legal counsel to the General Foods empire, Davies had been invited to a dinner party of mainly anti-Roosevelt businessmen, hosted by the company’s owner, Marjorie Merriweather Post. Their romance began when Davies launched into a passionate attack on the “Liberty League” guests present at the table, whose conversation was spent running down Roosevelt as a man who had betrayed his class. The New Deal, retorted an indignant Davies, had not only rescued millions of unemployed American families from hunger but also saved the nation from the threat of imminent revolution: “Where would your millions be then?” The speech overwhelmed his glamorous hostess, who swiftly got up from her chair and, paying no attention whatsoever to her startled guests, walked over to Davies and kissed him: “That’s what I’ve been wanting to say to this crowd!”[2]

Marjorie Merriweather Post was well known to the American press as “the Lady Bountiful of Hell’s Kitchen,” for gifting seven hundred free meals every day to the destitute women and children of New York. Her press critics sniped that this was merely good public relations for a fortune that had survived the Crash unscathed, her generosity being well within her means, especially given that the food business was notoriously Depression-proof. Each time one of 130 million Americans consumed an array of General Foods products—Instant Postum, Post Toasties, Sanka Coffee, Grape-Nuts, Log Cabin Syrup, Swans Down Cake Mix, Jell-O, Minute Tapioca, Calumet Baking Powder, Baker’s Chocolate, Maxwell House

Coffee, or any of the Birds Eye frozen foods—Marjorie became a few cents richer.[3]

The profits of her brand-laden business financed one of the most lavish lifestyles in America. Luxury mansions on manicured estates scattered from Palm Beach to the Adirondacks were periodically filled with vast parties featuring "elephants from Ringling Brothers-Barnum and Bailey Circus, and cooch dancers." The twenties had been a sparkling decade to be very rich, and it took a while for the hosts and their guests to realize that their gilded era of conspicuous consumption was gone. From the German shipyards of Kiel, a 357-foot yacht, *Sea Cloud,* was commissioned and launched in 1931 as one of the final unwitting tributes to a decade of excess.[4] As the Depression's woes became fully apparent, Marjorie and her second husband spent long expanses of the year aboard the world's largest privately owned yacht, with its immaculately uniformed crew of seventy in attendance. It was, all conceded, so much easier to enjoy life on the high seas than back home, where the backwash of poverty left a guilty aftertaste, no matter how many mothers and children were being fed in Hell's Kitchen.[5]

A year after their fateful dinner party, Joseph Davies married Marjorie Merriweather Post, both bride and groom having divorced their respective spouses—in Davies' case, his wife of thirty-three years. Details of their wedding—Marjorie's third—were supposed to be secret but, of course, were leaked to a press eager for tales of high living in those Depression years. The wedding was reported to have cost one hundred thousand dollars, nearly five thousand of which was spent on chrysanthemums, dyed blush pink to match the bride's dress, and an enormous three-hundred-pound wedding cake, which, one reporter calculated, worked out at seven dollars per slice. If the cost was scandalous, the indignation of the press soon trailed off in the wake of the *Sea Cloud* as the couple honeymooned on a cruise through the Bahamas, and Joseph Davies contemplated his elevation to a lifestyle immune from the misfortunes of the Depression. For a man rumored to have lost much of his own personal fortune in the Crash, it must have come as some relief.[6]

While the gossip columnists who wondered what exactly the groom had brought to their union, aside from his evident love and persuasive oratory, had underestimated the consolations of the world of politics. For Joseph Davies had remained a personal friend of Franklin Roosevelt's from their days working together in the Wilson administration. When Davies' own political career stalled in a failed Wisconsin Senate campaign, he clung to the coattails of an altogether more successful politician. And since both Davies and his new wife were very generous contributors to Roosevelt's 1936 reelection campaign, there was an outstanding favor to be returned. So when the president was casting around for a sympathetic progressive to appoint as the second American ambassador to the Soviet Union, naturally he turned to his good friend Joe. It was a very suitable wedding gift, said the press, for the woman who had everything. And the title "ambassadress" lent official recognition of an elevated status far above the mere ordinariness of uncommon wealth.

It did not seem to matter that Joseph Davies had no previous diplomatic experience, nor that he spoke not one word of Russian. All Roosevelt required was a friend whom he could trust "to be his eyes and ears on the ground." Leaving for Moscow, the new ambassador was by no means overawed. He told the press that his mission was to "counter prejudice and misinformation," and that his mind was ready for "dispassionate observation." In retrospect, it was difficult to imagine a worse choice to send to Soviet Russia at any time, least of all at the very height of the Terror.

IN JANUARY 1937, the Davies entourage arrived in Moscow on a special train, waited on by a small army of footmen, secretaries, chauffeurs, a chef, a hairdresser, and a masseuse—making up sixteen servants in all, with an attendant mountain of luggage. Stepping off the train dressed for the Russian winter in a thick fur hat, immaculately tailored coat, and gold-topped cane, Joseph Davies glanced around for the first secretary of the embassy, Loy Henderson, who recognized the ambassador's "flashing,

probing eyes," and noted his fine clothes. Marjorie Davies, the secretary observed, was almost fifty years old but looked "exceptionally young" and "not travel worn in the least."[7]

The scene at the railway station was chaotic. The Moscow police had cordoned off the entire square, and the station was crowded with Soviet apparatchiks, American diplomatic staff, and a kaleidoscope of dignitaries from foreign embassies who had turned out to greet the new American ambassador. Fighting for space in the crowd were photographers from the Soviet and American press, popping flashbulbs, while their newsreel colleagues worked under lights—with the whole circus shepherded by the NKVD. The Russian cameramen paid special attention to the gold-braided American flag attached to the left-side fender of the ambassador's waiting limousine.

From behind the wheel of the enormous twelve-cylinder Packard shipped over from America, the ambassador's chauffeur, Charlie Ciliberti, watched them photographing the Stars and Stripes from every angle. He also noticed how the couple's designated Soviet fixer, Philip Bender, barked orders in Russian to the station porters, who leaped to his every command with puzzling speed. In New York, Ciliberti concluded, someone like Bender "would probably have had his ears slapped down" for taking such a tone. But in Moscow, the home of the workingman, the situation appeared very different.[8] Here Philip Bender fairly exuded authority and parted crowds by showing a card in his hand to the Moscow militia, who sprang into action. Loy Henderson often felt that it was Bender rather than the American ambassador whom the Moscow police were attempting to help.[9]

Emerging from the press frenzy, Ambassador Davies and his wife were driven slowly away from the station. The ambassador had brought with him a home movie camera, which one of the passengers used to film through the window of the Packard as it cruised along the snow-laden streets of Moscow. Caught on film were the ordinary citizens of the city wrapped up in black overcoats as they ran out in front of the limousine, chasing after trams hooked up to electric cables running overhead.[10] For a crowded metropolis, Moscow was unusually quiet. The streets were teeming with people but strangely empty of cars, and the majority of traffic consisted of

overcrowded trams or horses and carts, with just the occasional truck or car, whose engine noise was muffled by the snow packed down on the roads. The atmosphere was like living in a silent movie, of mute monochromatic figures silhouetted against the snow.[11]

Their chauffeur drove the American couple the short distance to their new home at Spaso House. The grand mansion with its black railings and garden covered in snow had an outwardly unwelcoming appearance, but inside the ambassadorial residence had been extensively remodeled with furnishings and furniture imported from the United States. An interior decorator, Harry Benson, had been dispatched several months earlier to raise the mansion to the level accustomed to by Marjorie Davies, and in a frantic burst of activity, the tired building was transformed with all the urgent taste a multimillion-dollar fortune can command. A crystal chandelier, said to be insured for ten thousand dollars—which took two men several days to shine—was suspended within the central dome of the ballroom, forty feet high.[12] On a tour of the finished project, Elizabeth Hampel, the wife of a military attaché from St. Louis, marveled at "oil paintings in bathrooms and gold rimmed glasses and cut crystal bottles and too much of everything that was too expensive."[13]

In the basement, a Belgian electrical engineer had installed the twenty-five deep freezers required for two box cars of American frozen food shipped ahead to Russia. Steaks, fowl, wild game, and exotic fruit and vegetables were all now on the daily menu, with four hundred quarts of frozen cream specially imported to soothe the ambassador's troublesome stomach. News of the couple's "desert-island" food supply was soon leaked to the press, irritating the Soviet censors with its presumption that there was no decent food to be had in Moscow, and adding to the rolling Davies news story. The publicity only worsened when, within days of their arrival, the freezers shorted out the Spaso House generator, causing a catastrophic melt. The idea of American appetites overwhelming the Soviet electricity supply became an irresistible target for mockery.[14]

On the couple's first afternoon in Moscow, Charlie Ciliberti had driven the Packard to Red Square, and the ambassador and Mrs. Davies got out to stretch their legs around the Kremlin. From the railway station they were

followed, and when the ambassador stepped out of the car, two men walked behind him at a distance. From that moment onward, if the ambassador ever came close to anyone who looked as though he might engage him in conversation, the lurking NKVD escort cut in very quickly. They would remain at his heels throughout his stay in Russia. Officially assigned for the ambassador's personal protection, the Soviet secret police would equally ensure that no one else came near. It would not, however, prevent them from trying.[15]

JUST TWO DAYS after his arrival, Joseph Davies attended the second of the great Moscow show trials, the major international news story of the day. Whereas the majority of Stalin's victims were stealthily eradicated, the most famous Bolsheviks were periodically tried in a Soviet court of law. Pleased by his timely arrival, the new ambassador assiduously attended the six-day trial, with George Kennan whispering a simultaneous translation beside him in court. They sat together at the very front of the Hall of Columns, once a ballroom of the Tsarist aristocracy, whose high ceilings and faded blue walls lent an atmosphere of decaying splendor to the proceedings. The courtroom was filled with four hundred spectators, with the defendants placed in an adjacent box guarded by four soldiers standing at attention, their rifles resting on the floor. Recording the scene were the microphones of the radio broadcasters, and the lights and cameras of the photographers from the world's press.[16]

The American ambassador's highly visible attendance in court was heavily publicized in the Soviet media, his presence lending a veneer of legitimacy to the proceedings, which Stalin so clearly craved.[17] The German diplomatic corps had notably stayed away en masse, and according to his secretary, the German ambassador, Schulenburg, was full of "indignation and bewilderment" at Joseph Davies' prominent place in the courtroom. It was, he said, as if Davies viewed the show trials "as innocently as the dances held in the nobleman's ballroom in the Tsarist

era."[18] Quite unaware that he had managed to concede the moral high ground to the diplomatic representatives of Nazi Germany, at lunch Ambassador Davies asked George Kennan to run off for some sandwiches, while he turned to chat with the boys from the American press. The publicity-hungry ambassador courted the newspapers at all times, and perhaps realized that he could stand to use a little help with some background material.[19]

The show trials had a long and very checkered history in the Soviet Union. A decade earlier, when the trials were still in the process of being properly managed, there were obvious kinks in the mechanism, missteps in the elaborate choreography between prosecutor and defendant. These were the cases when the victim, expected only to confess, remained silent before shouting, "Comrades, how could I not sign?" and then tore off his shirt to reveal a tortured back "streaked with deep, purple bruises and swollen welts."[20] In past trials, brother had testified against brother, and a teenage son against his father, all anxious to profess their greater loyalty to the Soviet state: *"I denounce my father as a whole-hearted traitor and an enemy of the working class. I demand for him the severest penalty. I reject him and the name he bears. Hereafter, I shall no longer call myself Kolodoob."* [21] The teenager's confession was published in the morning edition of *Pravda,* and wise readers understood very well its beckoning subtext of implicit threat.

In previous prosecutorial fiascos, defendants had supposedly met with people already dead, in places, such as the Hotel Bristol in Copenhagen, that turned out to have been demolished some twenty years earlier. The French president Raymond Poincaré, one of the accused Russian spies' alleged controllers, had very derisively responded that "there must be rather gullible people in Moscow, if some actually believe or believed those fairy tales." And the obvious question was "Why have a prosecutor at all?" The ashen-faced defendants were always so free with their confessions, talking their lives away in fantastical conspiracies led by Raymond Poincaré or Winston Churchill or Lawrence of Arabia or whichever other unlikely foreigner was cast as the mastermind of the Revolution's evident ills.[22]

Even in the current trial, mistakes had crept into the most carefully planned testimony. The newcomer Joseph Davies looked on as the piano-playing former Soviet industrial commissar, Georgy Piatakov, was accused of having met Leon Trotsky at an airfield in Oslo. The trembling Piatakov resembled, according to one witness, "not Piatakov but his shadow, a skeleton with his teeth knocked out."[23] Such was the fate of the Bolshevik once described by Lenin as "unquestionably a man of outstanding will and outstanding ability." Piatakov had been tortured for thirty-three days, before he was broken and ready to appear before the show trial. According to Yezhov's report to Stalin, during his interrogation Piatakov volunteered to act as a prosecutor, asking that "they allow him personally to shoot all those sentenced to be shot in the upcoming trial, including his former wife." But Stalin had refused the request, commenting only that it would turn the trial into "a comedy." [24]

For the next six days, Ambassador Davies listened to the confessions of the defendants. During one intermission, he turned to an English journalist, Alfred Cholerton of *The Daily Telegraph*, to ask his opinion of the trial. Cholerton answered that the Soviet Union seemed to move only through convulsions, and that this, being the latest, was the most violent of all. When Davies insisted, "No, no, I am quite serious, I would like your opinion of this trial," the incredulous Cholerton replied, "Mr. Ambassador, I believe everything but the facts."[25] Another reporter, from the Austrian newspaper *Neue Freie Presse,* wrote a more straightforward summary of the atmosphere in court: *"No analogy from modern European history is aroused in western brains when hearing of this deathly tragedy of marionettes. It is necessary to go far back, to the Middle Ages, if one wants to find a similar fervent longing for execution, a similar tired 'only quickly, only quickly the end.' "* [26]

But still it seemed Joseph Davies could not grasp the essential idea that the entire legal proceedings were staged, an elaborate deceit played out after torture. This obvious notion seemed too fantastic, despite the prompt retort from the Norwegian government stating that the airfield cited in the supposed Trotsky-Piatakov meeting had been closed at the time to all civilian traffic. *"To have assumed that this proceeding was invented and*

staged as a project of dramatic political fiction," wrote Davies back to Washington, *"would be to presuppose the creative genius of a Shakespeare and the genius of a Belasco in stage production."* The clever Cholerton might have done better to quote Macbeth to the ambassador, so ever appropriate for Stalin's Russia: "By the clock 'tis day, / and yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp."[27]

In the early hours of a January morning, two hundred thousand factory workers from Moscow's night shift gathered in Red Square in a "spontaneous demonstration" to demand death sentences for the accused. The crowd was addressed by the forty-year-old Nikita Khrushchev: *"The enemy of mankind, the mad dog, the murderer Trotsky is a faithful ally of the fascists—the instigators of a World War . . . The Trotskyite reptiles have been crushed. But this must not lull our vigilance . . . Long live the leader of the world proletariat, the perpetrator of the cause of Lenin—Comrade Stalin!"* In minus twenty-seven degrees centigrade, the crowd roared back their approval, each person careful to display a frenzied enthusiasm to his neighbor.[28] The death sentences demanded by the prosecutor, Vyshinsky, were handed down to all but four of the defendants. The *Izvestiya* editor Karl Radek was given a notional ten-year sentence, only to be murdered in jail. Perhaps it was vengeance for Radek's veiled irony during the trial: "For nothing at all, just for the sake of Trotsky's beautiful eyes—the country was to return to capitalism."[29]

Joseph Davies, meanwhile, had cabled President Roosevelt with his observation that "the confessions bore the hallmarks of credibility." In his diplomatic report, Davies described how Stalin had uprooted "a clear conspiracy against the government." And as if to underline his point, the ambassador bought up English translations of the trial—quickly published by TASS in Moscow—to send to his friends back home. Almost without exception, his staff in Moscow were skeptical. George Kennan wrote to the State Department that there was "in actuality . . . no real evidence—nothing, in fact, except vague and general contentions to show that these men ever constituted anything resembling an organization."[30]

Shocked at the apparent naïveté of their new boss, the American diplomats met secretly in Loy Henderson's rooms to consider a mass

resignation in protest.[31] Had they actually done so, perhaps subsequent events might have taken a different course, but at the critical moment the officials lost their nerve and stayed silent, reasoning that Joseph Davies would be in Moscow for only another year or possibly two, and they would wait it out. Then the steady Loy Henderson warned the younger officers that while serving under Joseph Davies, "they should not indicate by word, gesture, or even facial expression a lack of respect of him."[32]

In the meantime, life was very stressful for the American diplomats, with the demands of Joseph Davies' arrival and the stream of desperate Americans begging at the embassy for passports or harassing them on the streets for their help. At least the ban on black market currency dealings had been rescinded. Now even the lowest-ranking diplomats could buy rubles at fifty to the dollar on the black bourse in Paris, which financed a handsome lifestyle in Moscow. A group of the younger American staff officers rented a dacha in the countryside outside Moscow, staffed with Russian servants, and treated themselves to "great spoonfuls" of caviar for breakfast. There were weekend retreats of blissful calm in the midst of the Terror, in which they relaxed from the stresses of Moscow city life. In the winter of 1937, Elbridge Durbrow and Charlie Thayer brought some American records over to a public skating rink, which they managed to have played over the loudspeakers, and everyone danced along to the beat. Later they took their expensive American skis out for a run across the countryside, chased after by excited Russian children yelling, "Capitalists! Capitalists! Capitalists!"[33]

OBLIVIOUS TO THE mutinous intrigues of his staff, Joseph Davies cultivated the friendship of Kremlin insiders. On February 17, 1937, he entertained at lunch Boris Steiger, the Soviet diplomatic liaison officer. After a long talk over foreign affairs, Davies drew Steiger aside and asked him confidentially how he was "faring personally" in the midst of the purges. The Russian merely shrugged his shoulders and pointed with his

index finger to the back of his neck. Was this witty élan or the calm resignation of someone who knew the end was nigh? The ever-charming Steiger endeavored to become a Davies family favorite, accompanying them to the royal box for the opera. After one performance, Steiger invited Davies' daughter Ekay and her friends to dinner and dancing at the Metropol Hotel. Shortly after midnight, while seated at their table, he was tapped on the shoulder by two men in civilian dress. Steiger excused himself and left, saying he would be back shortly. He was never seen again.[34]

A more superstitious man might have steered well clear of the American ambassador that year. A month after Steiger's disappearance, Davies invited a party of sixty Red Army high commanders to dinner at the American embassy, laying on the very best meal his French chefs could offer, with "all the capitalistic trimmings" and old-fashioned American cocktails that seemed to go down very well with the Soviet military elite. Marshal Tukhachevsky was placed next to Ekay Davies, who had learned some Russian while studying law at Moscow University. The Red Army marshal and the ambassador's daughter had a long discussion about communism and women's rights in the USSR. Toasts followed, with Ambassador Davies proposing the health of the Red Army.[35]

Within nine weeks of the dinner, most of Davies' guests, including Marshal Tukhachevsky, had been shot. Their arrest, closed trial, and executions made headline news all over the world, with political repercussions in Washington, London, Berlin, and Tokyo. Naturally the ambassador's opinion was called for, and once again Davies attempted to substantiate the charges made against his former guests: "The best judgement seems to believe that in all probability there was a definite conspiracy in the making looking to a coup d'état by the army." One month later, Davies continued his theme in a letter to the secretary of state: *"It is scarcely credible that their brother officers . . . should have acquiesced in their execution unless they were convinced that these men had been guilty."* [36]

The Red Army officers who signed Tukhachevsky's death sentence were themselves executed, one by one, over the course of the year. The rationale

for their deaths was that the survivors might become resentful, a state of mind that Stalin referred to as an “unhealthy mood.” General Pavel Dybenko, one of the commanders who conscientiously signed the death warrants, was himself accused of being an American spy. Pavel Dybenko had once been described by John Reed in *Ten Days That Shook the World* as “a great bearded sailor, with the clear eyes of youth, [who] prowled restless about, absently toying with an enormous blue-steel revolver which never left his hand . . . giving rapid orders right and left.” Now the former Revolutionary hero was reduced to writing desperate pleas to Stalin from captivity: “I don’t know the American Language, Comrade Stalin. I beg you to look into it thoroughly.” His pleas fell on deaf ears, and Dybenko was shot along with the others. Nor were their families spared. Tukhachevsky’s wife and brother were executed, while his daughter and four sisters were sent to the camps.[37]

Barely three months after his arrival in Moscow, Joseph Davies sailed back to the United States to brief Roosevelt on the Soviet criminal procedure he had watched so carefully during the Moscow show trial. What the new ambassador never discussed, or even mentioned at the time, was the plight of the American exiles or their evident desperation to leave the USSR. This was not through ignorance, since Davies was well aware of both their existence and continued requests for help. But the ambassador and his new wife always appeared to have more pressing business to attend to.

THROUGHOUT THEIR STAY in Moscow, the American couple was consumed by an acquisitive desire for Russian art, jewelry, and pre-Revolutionary treasures on sale at the Soviet commission shops. Joseph Davies clearly understood the provenance of these items, as he revealed in a letter to his daughter Eleanor: “These resemble our antique shops and are run by the state and sell all manner of things brought in by the owners, from pictures to bedroom sets, and from jewels to china.” Even on his industrial tours of the USSR, Joseph Davies found time to buy paintings from these

commission stores, closely watched over by an NKVD officer who, if an item was oversold or misrepresented, demanded a quick refund on behalf of the grateful ambassador. During the summer of 1937, Davies admitted his compulsion in another letter to his daughter Ekay: “*Marjorie was much pleased with your selections at the Commission shops. As usual, we cannot resist them and have been having somewhat of an orgy again in picking up these interesting souvenirs. I definitely made up my mind not to make any more purchases of pictures, but apparently I can withstand anything but temptation and I fell for four or five more very lovely ones.*” [38]

Other diplomats behaved with more restraint, their consciences overcoming the bargain-hunting instinct. On one visit, Irena Wiley had encountered a distinguished-looking elderly Russian dressed in threadbare clothes. His feet were wrapped in newspaper as he offered a silver cup for sale, evidently a family heirloom. At the counter, the old man was offered such a low price that despite his evident poverty, he declined. Outside, Irena Wiley offered to buy the cup from him at a price she thought was fair, and he accepted. When she took her purchase home and polished it up, she discovered it was an eighteenth-century silver goblet with a Moscow hallmark, worth a hundred times what she had paid for it. And then she realized that every item in the Soviet commission stores was bought on the suffering inflicted upon the Russian people. The thrill of the bargain hunt was immediately replaced by guilt, and she, for one, never went back.[39]

But Joseph and Marjorie Davies’ desire for such treasures never wavered. Their keenest interest was usually in the possessions of the former Russian aristocracy, sold at discount by their executioners: “Marjorie dearest: Here is the letter from Paris descriptive of the Orlov Tea Service and the items which we procured, for your files . . . I have talked over with Bender all of the matters you had in mind. I think I shall send him to Leningrad personally within the next few days and he will look into the matter of the Vladimir plates, the Greuse head, the tea set, and the other items.”[40] In gratitude for his ability to facilitate their acquisitions, Philip Bender soon acquired the trappings of the Davies family retinue. His fine American clothes only added to his authority.[41]

There were no exact figures, but it was clear that a significant portion of Marjorie Davies' fortune was used to fund the couple's spending spree. At the time, the German diplomat Hans von Herwarth wondered if the Americans were buying "not individual objects but whole museums," and later he would be proved correct. In the meantime, the most immediate effect was that the American couple managed to drive up the black market ruble rate in Moscow. Too busy augmenting their collections to question their behavior, the couple kept a catalogue of their purchases that told its own story. Second on the list of Joseph Davies' Russian icons was "an interesting example of sixteenth or seventeenth century art" taken from the Chudov Monastery during the destruction of the atheist campaign. The icon was simply titled *Descent into Hell*.[42]

THROUGHOUT MARCH 1937, Charlie Ciliberti was approached almost every day on the street by desperate Americans either too scared or too well informed to venture into the embassy but still attempting intervention at a higher level of authority than the nay-saying officialdom of George Kennan. The chauffeur passed on the information he learned to the ambassador during their car journeys around Moscow, but it seemed that Joseph Davies was strangely unmoved by the plight of his fellow citizens, even though his public profile—and hence his ability to intervene—could scarcely have been any higher. In mid-March 1937, Joseph and Marjorie Davies were photographed holding hands and laughing for the front cover of *Time* magazine, over a quote hinting at the magnificence of their lifestyles: *"The exaggerations give both Mrs. Davies and me a big laugh!"*[43]

At the very moment when his presence was most urgently required in Moscow, the laughing ambassador arrived back in New York City on April 6, 1937, pursued by a press forever hungry for news from the closed world of Soviet Russia. With the Terror entering its bloodiest phase, Joseph Davies briefed the American media on his recent observations: *"A*

wonderful and stimulating experiment is taking place in the Soviet Union. It is an enormous laboratory in which one of the greatest experiments in the realm of state administration is being accomplished. The Soviet Union is doing wonderful things. The leaders of the Government are an extremely capable, serious, hardworking and powerful group of men and women.” His comments were widely reported in the Soviet newspapers and left even their most vigilant censors with nothing to add.[44]

In New York, Davies made no mention of the reports of the disappearances of Americans in Russia, or the trainloads of prisoners seen by his embassy officers pulling out of Moscow, or even the frantic telephone calls received after the callers’ friends had been arrested.[45] Most tellingly, he kept absolutely silent regarding the sounds that had kept his wife awake in their bedroom in Spaso House. Only years later, after their divorce, did Marjorie Merriweather Post reveal how she had listened to the NKVD vans pulling up outside the apartment houses that surrounded the Spaso House gardens. In the middle of the night, she had lain awake listening to the screams of families and children as the victims were taken away by the secret police. It had continued night after night. Like many other historical witnesses of the Terror, Marjorie Davies was also regularly awoken by the intermittent sound of gunfire. Once, when the noise of the guns interrupted her sleep, she turned to Joseph Davies to tell him, “I know perfectly well they are executing a lot of those people.” To which the American ambassador had replied soothingly, “Oh no, I think it’s blasting in the new part of the subway.”[46]

None of this was mentioned at the press conference in New York. Instead, Joseph Davies traveled on to Washington, D.C., to brief the president on the show trials and his tour of the Soviet industrial showpieces. From Ambassador Davies, Roosevelt discovered that the Soviets were introducing capitalist foundations into their economy: returning to a system of personal incentives, piece rates, and new technology. At the White House, Davies also exhibited the wonderful collection of Russian art he had accumulated during his short stay in Moscow. Wheeled around the pictures hanging in the East Room, President Roosevelt remarked that he “particularly liked the vividness and beauty of the snow scenes.”[47]

11

“SendViewsofNewYork”

Apostle Peter, if I go away
forsaken, what will I do in hell?
My love will melt the ice of hell,
and my tears will flood hell’s fire.

Nikolay Gumilyov, “Heaven”[1]

Joseph Davies returned to Moscow via London, where the ambassador and his wife had been invited to the coronation of George VI. At the Coronation Ball, the ambassador noted that Marjorie “created a sensation,” with her jewels and white satin gown outshining even the maharajas and European aristocracy gathered at Buckingham Palace. Outside, the crowd had started to cheer Marjorie when she waved to a child, accidentally mistaking her for the princess of a monarchy as yet undeclared.[2] In London, Davies’ thoughts on the Moscow show trials gave the skeptical Winston Churchill a “completely new concept of the situation.” This English understatement was taken at face value by the delighted ambassador, who embarked on a leisurely tour of European capitals before eventually returning to his post in Moscow on June 24, 1937.[3]

His diplomatic staff had spent the intervening weeks investigating Soviet attempts to bug the embassy and the ambassador’s residence. Below stairs in Spaso House, the Russian servants ate at separate tables from the Americans, officially because the two groups could not understand each other, but there was also a certain strangeness among the Russians, who often spoke better English than they let on and seemed to live in fear of an employee named Sam Lieberman.[4] Strange wiring had recently been discovered in Spaso House, artfully concealed yet comically betrayed by a pile of fresh cigarette butts found next to a hiding place in the attic. A trap was set to catch the chain-smoking spy with trip threads running across the

attic attached to an alarm. But each morning the young American diplomats discovered the threads cut and the power to the alarm switched off, until eventually their cat-and-mouse game ended when they stayed up all night to catch Sam Lieberman red-handed, emerging from the attic. Lieberman admitted everything quite brazenly but received only a reprimand.[5] The day after his return to Moscow, Ambassador Davies declared all their efforts a complete waste of time. There was "nothing to hide" from the Kremlin.[6]

Instead, Davies treated the prevalence of microphones hidden all over the embassy and Spaso Houses as a source of his own amusement. At the British embassy, the ambassador had met a Welsh military attaché, and for fun they conspired privately to speak the language of Davies' grandparents over the telephone. Not long after their conversation began, all the phone circuits were cut, and a short while later rumors began circulating the diplomatic community that America and Great Britain were engaging in war plans. Conversations had been heard in an "American Indian language" that no one in Moscow could translate.[7]

WHILE DRIVING THE ambassador around Moscow, wherever his chauffeur Charlie Ciliberti parked the shining Packard, a crowd of Russians would immediately stop and gather around. Ciliberti understood people's natural curiosity but winced at the fingerprints smeared over the car's immaculate body and windows. Children especially felt compelled to touch the beautiful American machine, whose wing mirrors were constantly being twisted by mischief makers trying to catch sight of their own reflection. Tired of having to shine the expanse of bodywork at almost every stop, when one of the mirrors and a door handle went missing, Ciliberti sought the counsel of his Russian chauffeur friends. They advised him to adopt the practice of the Soviet elite, whose luxury cars were protected by an electric current, which gave curious hands a nasty shock. Using a battery, coil, and plumb, Ciliberti engineered a similar system for the Packard, and very soon

when he was parked on Moscow’s city streets no one dared come too close.[8]

Only the American emigrants were drawn almost irresistibly to the beautiful electrified limousine—just as they had been drawn into the embassy on Mokhovya Street. The gold-braided Stars and Stripes flown from the fender of the Packard, and the car’s familiar New York license plate, carried a similar promise of salvation.[9] In June 1937, a harassed Ciliberti was parked on Stoleshnikov Pereulok, waiting for the ambassador to emerge from his latest shopping trip. Their NKVD escort was somewhere in the vicinity but not especially close that day, and Ciliberti happened to meet another American on the street, and the two stood idly chatting as the Moscow crowds milled around them. Quite unexpectedly, in the midst of their conversation, Ciliberti noticed a blond girl standing close by, watching them intently and smiling as if she understood every word they were saying. Glancing around, Ciliberti asked the girl in Russian if she spoke English. “I was born in Cleveland,” she replied dead pan.

Unaware of the extent of the emigration, and having no sense of the number of young Americans, just like this blond eavesdropper, who were trapped in the Soviet Union, Charlie Ciliberti and his friend stood on the street quite amazed. When they asked, the girl told them that she had been brought to Russia by her parents six years earlier, when she was fifteen. But just as she started her story, Ambassador Davies reappeared quite suddenly, and Ciliberti had to jump back into the Packard to drive him on to his next destination.

The American chauffeur was thirty-one years old when he arrived in Moscow by way of New Jersey. A handsome man personally chosen by Marjorie Davies—whose appreciation for beauty appeared to extend to her employees— Ciliberti revealed his intelligence when he voluntarily chose to study Russian during his evenings off, and quickly acquired a conversational ability that neither the ambassador nor his wife ever came close to matching. Perhaps in a 1930s novel, the bright working-class chauffeur from Jersey City might have defied authority and leaped to the rescue of this young girl from Cleveland, driving her back into the safety of the American embassy. And Ciliberti did meet the girl again, either by

accident or because the Packard was so easy to spot, on the same street a week later. But this was reality, not fiction.

At their second meeting, Ciliberti learned only that she was a twenty-one-year-old American citizen, and he did nothing more than advise her to present herself at the embassy chancery. Recalling the episode in a memoir published nine years later, Ciliberti revealed an unapologetic indifference toward the fate of the girl whose name he did not recall:

Whether or not she tried to get out I do not know. If she did she probably was picked up, since the Chancery was watched as closely as the Embassy and anyone who visited there was suspect. If she really was an American, the American authorities would do all they could for her. She had told me she could get the money for her passage. If she did get picked up, it was either because she went into the Chancery, or because she talked to me when the GPU was with me. I know one of the GPU heard her speaking English to me and I didn't like the look in his eye. He was a new boy. We had lost two of our old GPU guard.[10]

Later Ciliberti wrote that he did not want to go "out on a limb" in case the girl was a "phony." Not wishing to risk his job, he chose to do nothing at all for the Cleveland girl, who must have known the risk she was talking by meeting him twice on the street but would have calculated that it was less dangerous than walking into the embassy.[11] Given his status and close relationship with the ambassador and his wife, Ciliberti had sufficient authority to protect her life if he chose. But either he was unwilling or, persuaded by his uncertainty, Charlie Ciliberti elected to remain safe and warm in the fur-lined American coat bought for him by Marjorie Davies. He never saw the girl again.

Rather than risk the antagonism of the NKVD escort, Ciliberti chose instead to win their friendship. At first he tried bribing them with cartons of Camel cigarettes, or by slowing down when their tailing car stalled, to allow them time to catch up with the Packard. Later he worked out a system of warning blasts on the horn to give the NKVD enough time to warm up their unreliable Soviet Ford engine before departure. In return, Ciliberti

received a nightly ride back to his hotel from the NKVD, after he had dropped off the ambassador at Spaso House.[12] Soon Ciliberti was supplying the NKVD agents with gifts from America—they asked for contraceptives in particular—and as a consequence of this favor swapping, he remained untouched when virtually every other Davies family servant was arrested on the streets of Moscow during the course of the year.[13] Agar Lindstrom, Marjorie's hulking Swedish masseur, was picked up in broad daylight soon after leaving the Italian embassy, where he had gone to give a massage to the Italian ambassador's wife. The brawny Swede refused to go quietly, and a mighty struggle ensued, until the secret police were persuaded to drive Lindstrom back into the American embassy.[14] Perhaps it was because Ciliberti was never arrested that he had so little sympathy for the "captured Americans." "They made their bed, let them sleep on it" was his attitude, which ultimately was much the same as that of Ambassador Davies, who shrugged his shoulders and politely sighed that there was nothing to be done.[15]

SHORTLY AFTER THEIR return to Moscow, Joseph Davies and his wife embarked on a summer cruise around the Baltic. Before he ordered the *Sea Cloud* to be sailed to Leningrad, Davies had first consulted with Maxim Litvinov to check whether such a defiant expression of American capitalism might offend the Soviets. His question had only made the jovial foreign minister laugh. "Why of course not, Davies. We respect and trust you even though you differ from us in political ideology." The ambassador's next question revealed the full extent of his naïveté of the first principles of this totalitarian state: "Now then, Litvinov, I want to ask you a still more delicate question. Do you think that it might possibly be blown up in the harbor by one of your Bolsheviks?" Once again, Maxim Litvinov struggled to hide his amusement: "Davies, it will be safer in the harbor of Leningrad than in the harbor of New York . . . Our police force are more efficient."[16]

In his journal Joseph Davies wrote that he had smiled at Litvinov, who smiled back, “for he knew that I had seen their visits in the night to take heads of family into custody never to be seen again.” But in public Davies gave not the slightest hint of his knowledge or disapproval at the time. That summer the *Sea Cloud* motored out of Leningrad harbor on a Baltic cruise, escorted through the minefield by a naval vessel of the secret police. The ambassador then very politely invited his NKVD guardians aboard to watch Hollywood movies in the ship’s cinema. After a long discussion and “much amazement,” the men in the pale blue caps accepted his invitation.[17]

Charlie Ciliberti, meanwhile, was left behind in Leningrad with Philip Bender. Picking up a telegram at the Hotel Europa, Ciliberti accidentally walked through the wrong door into a room where twenty men and women were studiously bent over desks writing screeds on pads of paper. Among them he recognized the Russian woman who had been their guide in Leningrad. When Cilberti asked Bender what it was he had just seen, Bender only smiled. “What do you think?” he said. “She is probably writing up everything we said today,” Ciliberti answered. And Philip Bender, who had spent his youth working as an organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World in San Francisco, and had long exhausted his life’s given supply of irony, merely replied, “Charlie, you catch on quickly.”[18]

It was the normal course of events in Soviet Russia. The longer an American stayed, the more likely this painted world was to reveal itself. Although there were obvious exceptions to the rule—most notably the ambassador, now happily watching movies aboard the *Sea Cloud* with his friends from the NKVD. The summer weather was so blissful and the sea air so bracing that Joseph Davies declared the *Sea Cloud* would become “his floating embassy” in Russia. Presumably by doing so, he would avoid any more unwelcome confrontations on the street.[19]

WHILE DAVIES CRUISED the Baltic on his yacht, letters continued to “pour in” at the American embassy in Moscow, and the State Department in

Washington, from anxious relatives across the United States searching for their missing loved ones in Russia. These letters would carry on arriving through the course of 1937 and 1938, and intermittently thereafter for the next two decades.20 Some were sent by Americans who had been freed from the camps in the early thirties and managed to return home. Emma Popper, for example, wrote on behalf of Timothy Belakoff, whom she described as an American passport holder who had arrived to work in Russia as an engineer on an Amtorg contract in 1931, only to be arrested shortly afterward. She had met Belakoff in a prison hospital, suffering from malnutrition and in a "worsening" state of health. In her letter, sent from New York, Emma Popper enclosed a small piece of black bread, which she said she had brought back with her from her Gulag camp as evidence of how little they were given to eat. A State Department official read her letter, filed it, then placed the morsel of Russian bread into an envelope, where it remained, dried and preserved in the archives for the next seventy years, a strange relic of the lost American emigration to Stalin's Russia.[21]

Some of the correspondents had lost their entire families. Mrs. Edythe Habacon of the Bronx, New York, wrote asking for news of her parents, brother, and sister, all missing in Russia. Her brother and sister, named Carl and Sirkka Hakanen, she wrote, were born in Boston and had simply disappeared. Another letter came from Lillian Burton, of Detroit, seeking help on behalf of her father, Paul Burton: *"I am writing concerning the disappearance of my father from his home in Russia . . . I am sure my dad would not willingly stop writing to us . . . Therefore I am trying to locate him as I feel something is wrong. Can you help me find my father?"* Sarah Dansky's brother was searching for his sister, who had volunteered to work in Russian hospitals as a doctor before vanishing: "On account of late purges in that country, we feel that she may have met with foul play." Bennett Cooper of Wilmington, Delaware, wrote on behalf of his brother John Cooper, an American engineer whose regular correspondence had ended abruptly: "It is unlike him to forget or neglect." Bennett Cooper's reply from the State Department was typical of the official reaction to such letters: *"Since Mr. Cooper no longer has the status of an American citizen, this Department is unable to take any steps which may assist in the obtaining of information with respect to him."*[22]

A letter from Mrs. Hilma Oja of 1999 Madison Avenue, New York, dated October 24, 1938, provided evidence of hundreds of Americans in the same position:

Dear Secretary Hull, We the parents of Mrs. Bertha Kylma, (nee Bertha Kortes—born in Painestale, Michigan, December 26, 1915) want to report that she, a citizen of the United States, is being held against her will in Carelia, Russia, USSR! Please reply at once what can be done to enable her to return to the United States. We have definite proof, from her—by letter, that she is being held prisoner for no reason at all and that she is being forced to suffer untold misery. She says several hundred other women of American citizenship are also being imprisoned on several islands which are in Lake Ladoga.[23]

An insurance salesman, B. Jaffe, wrote to the State Department on May 2, 1938, asking for assistance for his brother Harry Jaffe, who had lived in Russia since 1933, working for the *Moscow News* before becoming an English teacher. Harry Jaffe had written home every two weeks until February 1938, when his correspondence abruptly stopped.[24] This was surely the same Harry Jaffe who had sung the tenor solos beside Thomas Sgovio in the Anglo-American chorus. The father of another one of Thomas' friends, Abraham Volat of 458 East Ferry Street, Buffalo, New York, wrote a handwritten letter addressed to the American secretary of state:

In 1932, my son Marvin Volat, age 20, applied for a passport to go to Europe to study music. The passport was granted to him and he left the state. He was in London and Paris but could not stay there on account of the world depression. Then he decided to go to the Soviet Union . . . A year ago last March we received a letter from a lady friend of his telling us that Marvin was in an accident. She did not specify the nature of the accident.

That was the last we heard of him . . . Mister Secretary as a citizen of this country and Marvin born in Buffalo, I appeal to you to take a hold of this matter through our Embassy in Moscow to find out whatever became of him . . . I sincerely hope my wish will be fulfilled under your supervision, Yours truly, Abraham Volat.

Eleven days later, Abraham Volat received a terse reply from the State Department: "Since your son no longer has the status of an American citizen, this Department is unable to take any steps to which may assist in the obtaining of information with respect to him."[25]

Another father, Yakim Dubin of 233 Tenth Street, Pottsville, Pennsylvania, wrote asking for help for his son Ivan, who had called at the American embassy on March 1, 1938, to apply for a passport and had been told that he was missing the necessary photographs and to come back when he had them. His father had called in at his congressman's office excited because he had discovered the address of Ivan's concentration camp in Russia. Now, apparently, the State Department could do something.[26]

But no concerted action was ever taken on their behalf at the State Department in Washington, or at the American embassy in Moscow, or from the presidential office at the White House. Instead there was just an uncomfortable silence, and these missing men and women and their children were simply left to their fate. In 1937, at the height of the Terror, Ambassador Joseph Davies contrived to remain outside Russia for precisely 199 days of the year, either at home in the United States, touring Europe, or cruising the Baltic on his yacht. Anywhere save the very place his presence was so urgently required.[27]

ONLY RARELY DID the news of the arrest of an American in Russia ever make it into the newspapers back home. Joseph Davies was away in December 1937 when an American reporter told embassy officials of the

sudden disappearance of his neighbor Donald Robinson from the National Hotel, the building adjacent to the American embassy. When Angus Ward and Loy Henderson knocked on the door of Room 333, Donald Robinson's wife told them that her husband had fallen sick and been taken to a hospital, where he was being kept in an "iron lung." The American diplomats returned to the hotel room the following day, only to discover that Ruth Robinson had also vanished.

On this occasion, news of the couple's mysterious disappearance bypassed Soviet censors to become a sensational crime story in the American national press. The mystery deepened when a State Department investigation revealed that the American passports issued to Donald and Ruth Robinson had been obtained in the United States by fraud. The Soviet newspapers, meanwhile, denounced the couple as "American Trotskyite spies," the news of which prompted Max Schactman, a friend of Trotsky's, to reply acidly: *"There is nobody in Russia, except the Government, who can cause people to disappear like that. The Soviet Union has no private gangsters who kidnap people and hold them for ransom . . . If the couple are alive today, they are in some dungeon in Lubyanka Prison."* [28]

In her passport photograph, Ruth Robinson gave the impression of a very attractive, confident woman in her late twenties, with hazel eyes and light brown hair styled in a fashionable bob. Loy Henderson, who had met her briefly in her hotel room, wrote to the secretary of state that her "speech and gestures were those of an American woman who has lived for the most part in native American environments and who has had at least a secondary education. She did not appear to be Jewish." Quite why Henderson chose to speculate upon her religion was less surprising—given the anti-Semitism of many within the State Department at the time—than the subsequent FBI discovery that Donald Robinson was, in fact, a Latvian communist whose real name was Adolph Rubens. It was confirmed, however, that his wife was indeed an American citizen, and Ruth Rubens' only mistake appeared to have been marrying a man who had used her for his own ends. On December 28, 1937, Constance Boerger was interviewed by the FBI, and positively identified her younger sister, Ruth, born in Germantown, Pennsylvania. She told the investigators that her sister had left behind a daughter in America. On December 30, 1937, the New York *Daily News*

printed a photograph of Ruth Delight Rubens, aged seven, with her dog Brownie, taken at her grandparents' home in Miami, Florida.

In Moscow, because of the publicity their disappearances had received in the United States, the American embassy officials were finally moved into action, and pressed to be allowed to visit Ruth Rubens, who everyone knew was being held in custody by the NKVD. After a lengthy delay, the Soviets bowed to pressure and gave unprecedented access to Ruth Rubens, held captive in Moscow's notorious Butyrskaya Prison.

At four o'clock on the afternoon of February 10, 1938, Loy Henderson was driven into the prison. A huge sliding iron door, operated by heavy machinery, opened slowly to allow his car into the courtyard. The first secretary was then escorted down a maze of corridors into an interrogation room, where he was introduced to Major Yamnitsky of the NKVD. A bell was rung, and Ruth Rubens suddenly appeared, led under guard into the room dressed in a "simple woollen American house-dress with low neck and long sleeves." The twenty-nine-year-old American prisoner, wrote Henderson in his report, was *"under complete domination of Major Yamnitsky . . . who insisted that English questions and answers be translated into Russian."* Loy Henderson then described how Ruth Rubens had

changed greatly in appearance since Mr. Ward and I had seen her in the National Hotel on night of December 8th. Her face was puffy and swollen. She had a sallow complexion and seemed completely broken in spirit. Although she appeared to be listless, and talked in a monotonous tone of voice, I could ascertain from the clenching of her hands and other involuntary movements that she was under severe nervous strain . . . She kept her eyes fastened on Major Y, until he told her that she could sit in a chair at the side of his desk between him and us.

When Loy Henderson asked if he might offer her a cigarette, the NKVD major snapped, that "there was no reason why Mrs. Rubens should be given a cigarette."

Their interview lasted forty-five minutes, at least half of which was spent translating the questions and answers into Russian for the benefit of Major Yamnitsky. Ruth Rubens confirmed that she was born in Philadelphia on May 27, 1908, and explained that her husband had given her the passport in the name of Robinson: *"I know my husband has committed a serious crime against the Soviet Union and I feel that the Soviet authorities are justified in their actions against me. I quite understand their reasons for holding me. I am grateful for your offer of assistance, but I request you not to try to help me. I intend to stick to my husband."* At this point, Loy Henderson asked if she had any children, and showed her the picture of Ruth Delight cut from the New York *Daily News.* The little girl's mother looked at the picture, and tears welled in her eyes as she confirmed that this was indeed her daughter. Their interview continued rather abjectly—*"Do you have an attorney?" "Not yet." "Do you desire the services of an attorney?" "No."*—until Major Yamnitsky decided he had heard enough, and rang the bell again, which brought the armed guard back into the room. At this point, Henderson wrote, *"Mrs. Rubens stood up, and at signal from Major Y turned a right-about-face and marched out with the guard without a word of farewell and without even a backward glance."* [29]

DURING HIS DEBRIEFING in America, the Soviet defector General Walter Krivitsky revealed to the FBI that when Stalin was first told of the procedure for American naturalization and citizenship, his reaction had been one of delight: "Wonderful—send a thousand men to America at once and let them sit there." Krivitsky also confirmed that Adolph Rubens had been "sent to the US to get genuine American passports which could be used with no alteration preferably, or with merely a change of photograph if alteration were required. He said that prior to the adoption of the new style passport by this Department it had been possible to manufacture in Moscow the passports needed, taking apart genuine passports, washing the pages, and making up new ones to suit their needs. They found it impossible to remove the covers and take apart the present style passport without the

operation leaving noticeable marks." As well as explaining the mystery of the couple's disappearance in Moscow, Krivitsky provided further corroborative testimony as to why the NKVD had been so keen to confiscate the passports of the American emigrants.[30]

But it seemed that few people were willing to take Krivitsky's statements seriously, or his frequent complaints that Soviet agents had been tracking him for the past two years in New York. In December 1939, Krivitsky telephoned Loy Henderson "very alarmed for fear that attempts upon his life might be made immediately." Henderson's response was to advise him to call the New York City Police Department. On December 10, 1941, the body of Walter Krivitsky was discovered lying in pool of blood in a room at the Bellevue Hotel in Washington, D.C. A bullet from a thirty-eight-caliber revolver had passed into his right temple. An alleged suicide note was found at the scene, but one month before his death, Krivitsky had told a friend: "Don't you ever believe that I will be a suicide. They have shot everybody else and they are going to shoot me."[31]

ACCORDING TO LOY HENDERSON'S memoirs, "the Soviets never once informed American diplomatic or consular officers of the arrest of an American citizen within time limits. Usually we learned of the arrest through letters received from the US, through persons in the Soviet Union acquainted with the person under arrest, or from a person who had met the arrested man in prison."[32] Occasionally a press article was brought to the attention of an American diplomat, and the relevant clipping would be attached to an existing or newly created file. By this means, the State Department learned of the imprisonment of George Sviridoff, "a sixteen or seventeen-year-old fair-haired boy" who had been discovered as a stowaway on the steamer *Kim,* leaving the USSR bound for the United States. For the "crime" of attempting to exit the Soviet Union illegally, the American teenager was sentenced to ten years' "corrective labor."

Remarkably, and almost uniquely in the case of George Sviridoff, two handwritten letters sent from his concentration camp reached his father in America, most likely via an intermediary living in Russia. His father had then passed these letters on to the State Department in an effort to impress upon them the severity of his son's ordeal. The first letter was dated July 10, 1936:

Dear Papa, I am now in the far North in Vorkuta, not far from the island of Varchaga. I am working at present as a driller and in general work in a mine as a miner. The material conditions are all right but you know, Papa, in one word, a camp gets you in the end, no matter how good it may be, but you are subject to the regulations of arrested persons and cannot live in peace . . . Send food suitable for the North, photographs, views of New York, one sweater with a fastener, Papa, answer immediately. The post here does not operate accurately. Time is precious . . . Your Loving Son, George.

A year later a second letter arrived from Vorkuta, the Gulag epicenter, located above the Arctic Circle in northern Siberia. The second letter was dated July 17, 1937:

Greetings dear Papa . . . I have had one letter from you during three years and two months. All hope has collapsed . . . Dear Papa, I did not want to upset you up to now, but it would be even sadder were you not to know my actual situation and whereabouts . . . Now Papa my fate is sealed. I have left you, lost my country, lost my freedom, lost all the delights of life . . . There remains only to lose in addition my head, which may happen not being able to live through it all. Today is a day which brought me much unpleasantness. I refused to work in the mine . . . Your loving son, George Sviridoff.[33]

His case in particular sparked a moment of compassion from the State Department officials. On June 1, 1938, George Kennan wrote a lengthy note, attached to Sviridoff's case file:

The Soviet Government has the administrative power to arrest and hold incommunicado indefinitely any American citizen in the Soviet Union . . . Should this person have at the time of his arrest only American nationality the Soviet authorities apparently have only to notify us that he has been admitted to Soviet citizenship in order to create a situation in which under our usual practice we would not press further representations in his behalf . . . The upshot is that in reality no American citizen resident in the Soviet Union has any assurance that we will be able to help him in case the Soviet authorities should take repressive action against him. The situation is such that these people are virtually at the mercy of the Soviet authorities . . . Logically we should refuse to recognize the naturalization of Americans in the Soviet Union as voluntary and valid in the absence of confirmation of the voluntary character of the act on the part of the person concerned . . . An alternative would be to give publicity to the real situation, with a view to relieving the Department and the Embassy at Moscow of further responsibility for the protection of our citizens resident in the Soviet Union.[34]

George Kennan's belated recognition of the coercion used to strip Americans of their citizenship and his idea of publicizing their existence was, in retrospect, their only hope for salvation. But no such publicity was ever attempted, and Kennan was unwilling to act alone. Just like the others, he remained silent.

12

“Submission to Moscow”

To save one life is as if you have saved the world.

The Talmud

As the Terror worsened, Joseph Davies wrote steadily more bizarre cables to the State Department: “The secret police is the personal agency of Stalin and the party. It is in the saddle and riding hard! The new head of the organization, Ezhov, is comparatively a young man. He is constantly seen with Stalin and is regarded as one of the strongest men in the government. His effectiveness and ability are greatly respected . . .” At the twentieth-anniversary celebrations for the Revolution, Davies had watched Yezhov —“a man of very short stature almost a dwarf but with a very fine head and face”—standing constantly close to Stalin, “whispering and joking with him.”[1]

By the spring of 1938, the ambassador’s diplomatic staff in Moscow were reporting the daily arrests and disappearances of friends and their relatives. One member of Davies’ staff witnessed “a struggling unfortunate being arrested and torn from his eleven-year-old child on the street in front of the adjoining apartment house at 3:30 A.M.”[2] In March, as Charlie Ciliberti waited for Ambassador Davies, the chauffer watched the NKVD struggling to pull a fourteen-year-old boy into their car. The boy refused to go quietly, and a silently sympathetic crowd of Muscovites gathered to watch the scene. When the American ambassador unexpectedly appeared, as if by a miraculous force the NKVD released the boy immediately. It was proof that the ambassador had the power to save lives, if only by his

presence. But Joseph Davies deigned to use this power only by accident, and never by design.[3]

Instead, that same month, Davies attended the last of the Moscow show trials. Sitting once again at the very front of the court, on this occasion the ambassador knew personally many of the famous names sitting in the defendant's box just ten feet away. Among them was Dr. Pletnev, the Kremlin cardiologist who had treated him several times in Moscow. In his diary, Davies wrote that he found it difficult to look at Pletnev, "for fear our eyes would meet. They faced death and were in a desperate and hopeless plight."[4]

Beside Pletnev in the defendant's box sat Arkady Rosengoltz, the former commissar for foreign trade who had entertained Davies and his family in his mansion as the two men spent long days negotiating the Soviet debt. During the trial, Rosengoltz was mocked by the prosecutor, Vyshinsky, because his wife was discovered to have sewn into his jacket a copy of the Ninety-first Psalm.[5] During the Great War, Russian soldiers had carried excerpts of the psalm either in an amulet or sewn into a piece of their clothing to offer protection from the bullets and shells. Twenty years later, Stalin's prisoners were repeating the old traditions of Mother Russia:

Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night;
Nor for the arrow that flieth by day;
Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness;
Nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.
A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy
right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee . . .

In the courtroom for a special report, Walter Duranty noticed, high above the judge's table, a space resembling a window which was screened so that nothing could be seen through it, bar the occasional lighting of a match or the glow of a cigarette. In this small room overlooking the courtroom,

Duranty wrote that Stalin sat watching the enactment of the confessions his NKVD interrogators had so carefully scripted.[6]

This third show trial was even more fantastic than its predecessors. First up onto the witness stand was Nikolai Bukharin. Once described by Lenin as "the most able man in the Party," he was now accused of plotting the murder of both Lenin and Stalin, of conspiracy to return capitalism to the USSR, and of having worked for British and German imperialists since 1921.[7] Preserved in the Russian state archives is a letter Bukharin wrote to Stalin on March 13, 1938, from his prison cell, pleading for his life:

The former Bukharin has already died, he no longer lives on this earth. If physical life were to be granted me, it would go for the benefit of the socialist motherland, under whatever conditions I would have to work: in a solitary prison cell, in a concentration camp, at the North Pole . . . Let a new, second Bukharin grow . . . Great historical frontiers will be crossed under Stalin's leadership, and you will not lament the act of charity and mercy that I ask of you: I shall strive to prove to you, with every fibre of my being, that this gesture of proletarian generosity was justified.[8]

The Party's former ideologue ought to have known the futility of asking for "proletarian generosity" from a man so dedicated to "proletarian ruthlessness." Bukharin had devoted his entire life to the ends of the Bolsheviks. He once told William Bullitt that on the ninety-first day of the Revolution, Lenin had wrapped his arms around him and said, "Isn't it wonderful? We have lasted ninety-one days, one day longer than the French Commune!" Now Bukharin poured out his confession to the court and waited for his sentence to be announced, like a carpenter who has labored furiously day and night only to step back and realize he has constructed his own gallows.[9]

Beside him in court sat Henrikh Yagoda, the once-feared GPU chief who had persecuted the Soviet regime's enemies mercilessly throughout a long

and very bloody career. Now Yagoda confessed to a conspiracy with Trotsky, and of having masterminded espionage for Germany all along. Yagoda also claimed responsibility for the assassination of Kirov, the murder of the writer Maxim Gorky, and a plot to kill his successor, Yezhov, by redecorating his office with poisonous paint. Awaiting trial in his prison cell, Yagoda joked of his sudden belief in the existence of God. "It's very simple," he told his guard. "I deserved nothing but gratitude from Stalin for my loyal service. I had earned the severest punishment from God, however, since I broke his commandments a thousand times. Now look where I am—and decide for yourself whether God exists . . ."[10]

Only one of the old Bolsheviks, Nikolai Krestinsky, was willing to disrupt the smooth flow of confessions. As deputy commissar for foreign affairs, Krestinsky had accepted the diplomatic credentials of Joseph Davies on his arrival in Russia. Now Krestinsky astounded the court by announcing he was "not guilty" of all charges. The consternation forced the presiding judge, Vassily Ulrich, to call for an immediate adjournment. The following day, normality returned as Krestinsky requested to change his plea to guilty: *"Yesterday, under the influence of a momentary strong feeling of false shame caused by the atmosphere of the prisoners' dock and the painful impression created by the reading of the indictment, aggravated by my poor state of health, I could not bring myself to speak the truth, could not bring myself to say that I was guilty. And, instead of saying—yes, I am guilty. I replied almost mechanically—no, I am not guilty."*[11] A friend who had known him before the Revolution commented at the time, "You know they must have done something awful to Krestinsky because I simply didn't recognize him on the second day. Even his voice was somehow different."[12] Later it was discovered that Krestinsky had been severely tortured and admitted into Butyrskaya Prison hospital for treatment to his back, which was described as "like a single wound."[13]

Privately the defendants were reminded of the methods to be used against them if the "correct" testimony was not received in court. Their fate, therefore, depended not only on what they said but *how* they said it. Thus when Judge Ulrich gave Bukharin the veiled hint that he was defending himself, Bukharin responded frantically, *"This is not my defence. It is my*

self-accusation! I have not said a single word in my defence!"[14] His subsequent confession was abject: *"I am responsible as one of the leaders and not merely as a cog . . . I do not want to minimise my guilt, I want to aggravate it."*[15] As the old Bolsheviks reeled off their crimes in self-abasement, the sweat poured from their faces in front of the blinding klieg lights dazzling the courtroom for the newsreel cameras of the world's press.

At 4:00 A.M. on March 13, 1938, Judge General Ulrich once again read out the defendants' names, followed by a monotonous drone of death sentences: *"To be shot, to be shot, to be shot, to be shot . . ."* In the majority of cases their family members were also arrested and sent to the camps, the promises of leniency revealed as just another cruel deceit. Thus Bukharin's young wife, Anna, was torn from her one-year-old child and sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment. To entertain his boss, Stalin's bodyguard, Karl Pauker, re-enacted the moment when Bukharin was led away to his death kicking and screaming and clinging to the shoulders of his guards, shouting, "Please, somebody call Joseph Vissarionovich." Watching Pauker's impersonation, Stalin laughed uncontrollably, tears streaming down his face, until he had to wave to his bodyguard to stop. Later Pauker, too, was shot.[16]

From Mexico, the last survivor of the Revolution, a scornful Leon Trotsky, likened the proceedings in Moscow to the "witch-trials of the medieval inquisition." Stalin's most famous living enemy had already noted that "Krupskaya once said in 1927 that if Lenin were alive he would probably be in a Stalinist prison."[17] Now Trotsky set to work destroying the credibility of the trial: *"The whole Communist Political Bureau and almost the whole Communist Committee of the heroic period of the Revolution, except for Stalin, are proclaimed agents of the restoration of capitalism. Who will believe this?"* Within three years Trotsky, too, would be murdered by the "special tasks" agents of the NKVD, but not before his rhetorical question was answered. The one man willing to believe every word was sitting at the very front of the court.[18]

From Moscow, Ambassador Joseph Davies wrote to Secretary of State Cordell Hull: *"After daily observation of the witnesses, their manner of*

testifying, the unconscious corroborations which developed . . . it is my opinion so far as the political defendants are concerned sufficient crimes under Soviet law . . . were established by the proof and beyond a reasonable doubt to justify the verdict of guilty of treason."[19] No other American diplomat working under Davies shared his view. His diplomatic aide Charlie Thayer summed up their consensus in his diary entry for March 2, 1938: "I have this moment heard the indictment on the Bukharin trial read over the radio. A more incredible document I could hardly have imagined. Gulliver's Travels sounds in comparison like a scientific exposition of Euclid . . . The Russian may be naïf, but this is too much for a dog to believe."[20]

CONSIDERING THE AMBASSADOR'S reaction to the trial, it was unsurprising that Davies did so little to help the American emigrants being arrested in Russia. But while run-of-the-mill emigrants lacked sufficient influence to bypass the ranks of embassy officials, the ambassador did occasionally receive one of the more highly placed of the exiles. Shortly after the end of the Bukharin trial, he sat down for a meeting with Tamara Aisenstein, a naturalized American artist whose husband had signed on as an engineer for the Soviet Oil Trust before he was arrested. As an enthusiastic art collector, Joseph Davies might have sympathized with the fate of Tamara Aisenstein, whose paintings of Californian landscapes had recently been exhibited at the Moscow Union of Soviet Artists. Her West Coast impressionism had only attracted the hostility of Soviet art critics, the hypervigilant guardians of Stalin's socialist realism: "*We are faced with a naive, slightly lady-like art with a clear and even deliberate bent towards infantilism . . . They lack life, they are not pervaded with a sense of reality, nor warmed with the breath of living man."* [21] Sitting in his office, Ambassador Davies patiently explained to Mrs. Aisenstein that since both she and her husband had received Soviet citizenship, they were no longer entitled to his protection. And, like many others before her, she was forced

to leave the embassy empty-handed.[22] She, too, was arrested shortly afterward, and little more was said on the matter. Only Monroe Deutsch, the provost of the University of California at Berkeley, wrote a letter, in vain, to Secretary of State Hull asking for intervention on behalf of his former student, who was *"well known to many engineers in the region and his artist wife Tamara, who had left behind many good friends in California."*[23]

If Davies' conscience troubled him, there is no evidence to suggest so. Above all else, the ambassador sought to avoid even the slightest appearance of conflict with the Soviet authorities. He left complete responsibility for the protection of American citizens to his staff. If pressed by the State Department, according to Loy Henderson, he would talk to Foreign Minister Litvinov "in an apologetic manner as though he were asking a personal favour."[24] According to Maxim Litvinov's official diary, at one particular lunch party Joseph Davies *did* politely ask about an arrested American citizen, whom he requested to be released and expelled *"if possible."* But Litvinov had simply sidestepped the issue, explaining that he was leaving Moscow soon, and requesting that Davies address the matter to the "Third Western Division of the Soviet Foreign Affairs"—the usual bureaucratic dead end for American diplomatic inquiries. In an internal memorandum drafted to his Soviet colleagues, Litvinov added, *"I see no need for explanations with the NKVD. The Ambassador named the prisoners, but I cannot recall them."*[25]

Clearly Maxim Litvinov had not the slightest desire to entangle himself in the affairs of the NKVD, especially when he was in fear for his own life. From 1937 onward, the Soviet foreign minister slept with a revolver next to his bed, "so that if the bell rang in the night, he would not have to live through the consequences." But unlike Litvinov, Ambassador Joseph Davies could never claim his life was in danger. Only at the very end of his Moscow posting did the puzzled first secretary, Loy Henderson, understand the real reason for the American ambassador's curiously supine behavior. But by then it was already all too late.[26]

AT THE BEGINNING of one of the hottest Russian summers in living memory, on June 5, 1938, Ambassador Joseph Davies was summoned to the Kremlin to exchange diplomatic farewells with Maxim Litvinov on the eve of his departure from the USSR. When Joseph Stalin unexpectedly walked into the room, a meeting took place that Davies later described as causing "nothing short of a sensation in the Diplomatic Corps." For the past several years, Stalin had consistently refused to meet the ambassadors of even the great powers.[27] Through the course of the Terror, the Soviet leader had grown ever more reclusive, appearing in public only rarely, for May Day or the anniversary of the Revolution, when he would stand and wave from Lenin's Mausoleum, above the roar of the crowd below.

Catching sight of the almost mythic figure of Stalin walking toward him, Joseph Davies leaped to his feet and began an off-the-cuff speech describing how he had "heard it said that history would record Stalin as a greater builder than Peter the Great or Catherine." Davies then explained how honored he was to meet "the man who had built for the practical benefit of common men." Well used to such sycophancy, Stalin showed no surprise at the unctuous flattery pouring from the mouth of American ambassador. Instead he preferred to talk business, asking what was holding up Soviet arms purchases from the United States; and why, when he was offering one hundred million dollars in cash, were the Americans so reluctant to sell them their latest battleships? Soviet representatives were locked in their thirteenth month of negotiations with navy officials in Washington, although Roosevelt himself had already approved the deal. Ambassador Davies duly promised to expedite matters, and the two men continued a two-hour discussion ranging from the political situation in Europe to the personality of Franklin Roosevelt.[28]

Returning to his office at Spaso House, Joseph Davies was unable to contain his joy, telling Henderson, "I have seen him; I have finally had a talk with him; he is really a fine, upstanding, great man!" Loy Henderson

later described how the ambassador confided that “this was one of the great days of his life, that the President had instructed him that his main mission in Moscow was to win the confidence of Stalin, to be able to talk over Soviet-American relations frankly and personally with Stalin, that he had been striving ever since his arrival in Moscow to carry out this mission, and that just on the eve of his departure he had finally succeeded.”[29] After the meeting, in a letter to his daughter, Davies wrote that Stalin *“gives the impression of a strong mind which is composed and wise. His brown eyes are exceedingly kind and gentle. A child would like to sit in his lap and a dog would sidle up to him . . .”* [30]

On their departure from Russia, once again the diplomatic corps turned out to see the American couple off from Moscow’s Belorussky Station. A delighted Marjorie Davies was presented with the parting gift of a pair of vases from the Sheremetev Palace, and just before the train departed, the Soviet chief of protocol, Vladimir Barkov, rushed up to the ambassador and handed him a silver frame with four red stars embossed in its corners, holding an autographed photograph of Joseph Stalin.[31] The gift gave Davies an opportunity to write Stalin a gushing letter of thanks:

I shall always value it. It will occupy a prominent place in my photographic gallery of the Great of the Earth. May I say, also, that I was deeply gratified at the opportunity of meeting you personally before I left Moscow. It has been my privilege to meet most (and to know quite well some) of the great men of my time. I was, therefore, very glad to meet, and measurably to feel that I now know, the leader of the Great Russian people; and to find in him a greatness of spirit that is absorbed in the cause that he is serving, and one who has the courage to dare and to do what he considers to be for the benefit of the common man.[32]

True to his word, Joseph Davies kept the signed photograph of Joseph Stalin in its silver frame on prominent display in his library for years to

come. It was an inadvertent reminder of the lives he had not saved and of the man who had killed them.[33]

FACED WITH SIMILAR circumstances, other diplomats behaved very differently. Dr. Heinrich Pacher-Theinburg served as the Austrian ambassador to Moscow through the worst period of the Terror. During the summer and autumn of 1937, small groups of Austrian emigrants had sought refuge at their embassy as they attempted to escape the predations of the NKVD. The conservative and aristocratic Pacher-Theinburg was faced with a stark choice over the fate of these Austrian asylum seekers, whose left-wing politics he plainly did not share. Like his American contemporaries, Pacher-Theinburg clearly understood that all foreigners were being methodically arrested in Stalin's Russia, often immediately after they left their embassy buildings. Like the Americans, too, he was fully aware of the consequences of NKVD arrest: the reports circulating Moscow of torture, concentration camps, and executions were impossible to avoid. Unlike his American counterparts, however, Ambassador Pacher-Theinburg felt sufficiently compelled to save the lives of his fellow Austrians by offering them shelter in the basement of the Austrian embassy.

Just feeding these refugees during the months of their confinement stretched the resources of Pacher-Theinburg to their very limit. Quite predictably, the Soviet authorities did their utmost to obstruct this small ark of salvation from the Terror. But fearful of an international scandal, the regime eventually allowed this lucky group of refugees a negotiated exit from the Soviet Union under Pacher-Theinburg's protection. According to Loy Henderson, the Austrian ambassador saved the lives of between twenty and thirty young men in this way. He had little opportunity to do more. By March 1938, Hitler's Anschluss had deprived Pacher-Theinburg of a country to represent. The Austrian diplomat returned to Vienna with his family and to severe financial hardship. For rare individuals, the choices

they made in response to the crimes of totalitarianism were relatively simple. There was no other acceptable moral alternative.[34]

For their part, the American embassy staff did attempt to keep a list of Americans in the USSR. But given the disinclination of the NKVD to inform the embassy whenever they arrested another American emigrant, unless the diplomats learned of the disappearance from a relative in the United States or through a personal friend of the victim contacting the embassy, they remained none the wiser. Even the starting point for their list was wrong, since there was no record of the majority of Americans who had arrived at the beginning of the Depression, in the preceding three years before the embassy opened. Instead, the diplomats resorted to advertising in the pages of the *Moscow Daily News* to gain a clearer picture of the numbers. And although they gathered sheets and sheets of American names, many of which they subsequently marked with a cross or an asterisk to signify their arrest, the project remained fraught with error.[35] Neither Thomas Sgovio nor any member of the Sgovio family, for example, ever appeared on the American embassy list, although Thomas had visited the embassy at least twice before his arrest. The American embassy list—unlike Oskar Schindler's four years later—became a source of self-deception rather than salvation.

In April 1937, during one of Joseph Davies' lengthy absences, Ambassador J. K. Huddle visited the Moscow embassy in his role as the State Department's inspector of posts. In his official report, Huddle wrote that he discovered the embassy in a state of considerable disarray: "*When I arrived I must regretfully state that morale was almost at the breaking point . . . The embassy in Moscow is afflicted with a tenseness, a nervousness, an apprehension of the unseen—a victim as is everything and everyone else in Moscow of the OGPU. Members of the staff and their families have been arrested and held temporarily on numbers of occasions, American members, even officers . . .*" [36]

Among his recommendations, Huddle criticized even the creation of this fragmentary list of Americans on the grounds of sheer wastefulness:

In January and February of each year almost the full time of one stenographer seems to be required for ten days for the work of typing a descriptive list of American citizens residing in the Soviet Union . . . Of the 872 listed . . . only 100 were persons whose presence in the Soviet Union has any political and economic significance to the Government of the United States. The other seven eighths of these persons now living in the Soviet Union represent merely flotsam and jetsam on the sea of life. They are born, live and die, and their existence has probably no individual effect on any governing or supervising authority.

As well as substantially underestimating the number of American emigrants in Russia, Ambassador Huddle regarded this "flotsam and jetsam" as valuable only in terms of a footnote for the State Department files. With bureaucratic detachment, Huddle acknowledged there might be cases of "intense human interest and such a case report might be of later historic value." As an example, he quoted the letter of a "lad born in Ohio in 1918," who had written to the embassy for assistance on January 15, 1937. The unnamed nineteen-year-old boy was obviously desperate:

I beg you once more to do something for me as soon as possible because I can't stand it here any longer. I am learning now and it is very hard for me to live. I have no place to live and only get eighty rubles a month, and you know yourself that on eighty rubles a month you can't live. I have a grandfather, grandmother, aunts and uncles in the United States and I know I won't have to suffer there like I do in the Soviet Union. "A free country." That's what the Russians say, but for me it is not a free country.

What happened to this nineteen-year-old Ohioan, Huddle never recorded, nor was the government inspector moved to action. As one of the "flotsam and jetsam" in Russia, it appeared this American teenager's life held no significance to the government of the United States.[37]

Alexander Kirk was the senior diplomat left in Moscow after Joseph Davies' departure. In the summer of 1938, Kirk wrote to Secretary of State Hull, informing him of the disappearance of further "former Americans" after they had visited the Moscow embassy. Elmer John Nousiainen, an American passport holder from Daisytown, Pennsylvania, had arrived at the embassy on July 18, 1938, with news of mass arrests of the American emigrants in Petrozavodsk. Directly from this eyewitness, the diplomats learned how "hundreds of families have been broken up and the morale of the inhabitants completely broken." In the preceding fortnight, two hundred Americans had been arrested when the NKVD launched an "industrialization drive." The majority were young men taken in the night. Elmer John Nousiainen gave chilling details in his statement to the diplomats: *"No cause is given. The sons are not even allowed to say good-bye to their mothers; the apartments are always searched; all things foreign are taken by the authorities . . . The young people are afraid to go home. Several girls have been arrested. One in the last stages of pregnancy was left behind with the warning that 'her case would be settled later.' The city's ski factory, which had once employed 160 Americans, was shut down and all its workers rounded up after local communists accused 'all foreign-born persons of being spies, wreckers, saboteurs.' "* [38]

Elmer John Nousiainen was twenty-two years old at the time, his biography that of a typical American emigrant to the USSR. In Pennsylvania during the Depression, his father was a miner put out on the dole. The family had sold their home and packed up their belongings in search of work in Russia. [39] After delivering his report on the Terror in Karelia, Elmer John Nousiainen was permitted to leave the American embassy building in Moscow. No attempt was made to warn him, to hide him, or even to delay his departure. Outside on Mokhovaya street, the twenty-two-year-old Pennsylvanian was arrested by the NKVD.[40]

In a memo copied into Nousiainen's file and sent on to Washington, D.C., Loy Henderson expressed a certain weariness and attempted to excuse the embassy's inaction:

It appears that persons who are considered by the Soviet government to be Soviet citizens are from time to time arrested if it is ascertained that their call at the Chancery is for the purpose of endeavouring to establish American citizenship or if they insist that they are also American citizens . . . I fear there is little which the American Government can do in this matter. No protest or action, in my opinion, can change these Soviet practices . . . Our citizens fare no worse than other foreigners in Soviet Union. In fact, the citizens of a number of other countries have encountered treatment which in so far as I know has not been meted out in our generation by one country to the citizens of another with which it has formally friendly relations. You will recall the recent despatch from our Embassy, for instance, containing the statement that more than 20,000 Greek citizens have been arrested.[41]

The snatched arrests of American nationals outside the embassy had been taking place for the past four years, and yet each new case was treated as if it were the first. Later, two more American exiles, Henry Webb and Bruno Wuori, were stopped outside the embassy building—but, for unknown reasons, were released. They then returned inside to "point out their interrogators to members of the Embassy staff as being the two plain clothes individuals whose custom it was to loiter or stand in front of a shop window between the Hotel National and the Embassy building within approximately forty paces of the entrance to the Consular Section." By December 1938, an unnamed American embassy official, presumably a recent arrival, typed another note to Washington: "*Formerly there was a steady and considerable volume of correspondence between the Embassy and Americans of dual nationality, most of whom are young, in connection with their efforts to renounce Soviet citizenship, but during last year there has been a noticeable decline in this class of correspondence, which the Embassy is at a loss to explain . . .*" [42]

ON HIS RETURN to the White House, Joseph Davies gave a full briefing to President Roosevelt on his lengthy conversation with Stalin. At the Soviet embassy in Washington, Davies explained to Konstantin Oumansky—the former censor turned diplomat—how Roosevelt had questioned him closely and he had described Stalin as "a sage, simple man, who can look ahead and combine dignity with affability." For his part, Oumansky wrote back to Moscow that Joseph Davies had told him that he "took all measures to stop the campaign on the Rubens case organized by officials from the American Embassy in Moscow in his absence without any pressure from Washington."[43] It seemed the American ambassador was apologizing for the attempted intervention on behalf of Ruth Rubens in Butyrskaya Prison.

Despite an intense lobbying campaign, Franklin Roosevelt passed Joseph Davies over for the promised Berlin ambassadorial post, with the tactful excuse that to appoint someone of his "high profile" might send the Nazis the wrong message. The world travels of the "freshman ambassador" had already prompted a skeptical reaction in the American press, and the president was acutely sensitive to bad public relations and obviously wary of a repeat performance in Berlin. As a consolation, Joseph Davies was appointed ambassador to Belgium, where the potential for damage was obviously more limited. After brief service in Brussels, Davies turned his attention to writing *Mission to Moscow*, a memoir of his diplomatic service in Russia, full of praise for Stalin's tough-minded ability to protect himself from internal threat.

Quickly retitled "Submission to Moscow" by the diplomats who had served under him, Davies' book was published in 1941 just as America entered into a wartime alliance with Stalin. For an American public still reeling from the shock of Pearl Harbor, the book provided welcome reassurance that their democracy was in alliance with a fair-minded and trustworthy Soviet leader as characterized by Davies, rather than the ruthless and genocidal dictator already responsible for the deaths of millions. *Mission to Moscow* became a runaway international success, selling seven hundred thousand copies in the United States alone, and topping the bestseller lists in the thirteen languages into which it was translated. On the flyleaf of the personal copy he kept at his bedside,

President Roosevelt wrote the words “This book will last.” Buoyed by the success of the president’s favorite memoir, Joseph Davies returned to his wife’s Florida estate at Mar-A-Lago to recuperate. For the Americans he had left behind in Russia, life was to follow a very different course.

13

Kolyma Znaczit Smert

Whoever was tortured, stays tortured.
Torture is ineradicably burned into him . . .

Jean Améry, At the Mind's Limits[1]

After his arrest outside the American embassy, Thomas Sgovio was escorted to a Moscow militia precinct before being placed in a Soviet Ford and driven the short distance to the Lubyanka. Almost immediately an NKVD officer began the interrogation: "Tell us of your espionage activities. We know you are a spy. You have to tell us." Usually the arrested prisoners were met with a cascade of blows but Thomas was not beaten perhaps because early on in the interrogation he admitted to being homesick. His words were written into his NKVD file as a confession: "*When I came to the USSR everything was so strange and I felt hostile to the Soviet system so I decided to return to America which is my real homeland.*" [2]

Later Thomas was taken to Taganka Prison for processing. Here the prisoners were fingerprinted, photographed, and strip-searched. Barbers cropped their heads with clippers and shaved their bodies; buttons were cut off, belts and shoestrings confiscated, pockets turned inside out, and those with gold teeth were taken to the prison dentist. Then the arrested prisoners were pressed into the already desperately overcrowded cells. There were 165 men in Thomas' cell in Taganka Prison—so many they could barely shuffle their feet.[3] In the midst of this ordeal, when Thomas heard the piercing screams of the men and women inside the jail, he still did not fully understand what was taking place around him. A fellow prisoner had to

explain that the unearthly noise was simply some poor soul being beaten. Even then, Thomas' reaction was one of naïve amazement. He was not yet willing to believe that a person could be tortured within the Soviet prison system.[4]

The prisoners were beaten by teams of NKVD interrogators working in shifts, who kept their victims awake for nights on end until they signed the confessions placed before them. Usually the more fantastic the charges, the greater the ferocity required in a system known by prisoners and guards alike as "the conveyor." In the memoirs of the survivors, there were many examples of those driven mad under the strain of their ordeal. A tortured Red Army officer, Colonel Vikhorev, asked his interrogator, "Tell me, this counterrevolutionary organization of which I am a member—does it really exist?"[5] A member of the Communist Party of Palestine, Ephraim Leszinsky, was beaten so savagely to force him to confess the names of his accomplices that he broke down in tears in his cell, banging his head against the wall and shouting, "What's that other name I've forgotten? What's that other name I've forgotten?"[6] Often the final outcome of the conveyor was mental breakdown. Lucien Blit, a Jewish Bundist, recorded the outburst of a powerfully built peasant from Kolno, who awoke the entire cell to tell them he was Jesus Christ and that it was time they took him down from the cross. His screaming lasted for five days.[7]

In Taganka, Thomas Sgovio's cellmates included Harry Jaffe, the tenor from the Anglo-American chorus, and Michael Aisenstein, the naturalized American engineer from California whose artist wife had attempted personal intervention with Ambassador Davies. The oil engineer explained that he had been arrested after an informer had denounced his unwise comment that "in America the unemployed were better off than Soviet engineers."[8]

IN THE CITY OF GORKY—420 kilometers east of Moscow—between

“fifty and seventy bodies” were removed each day from the NKVD headquarters on Vorobievka Street. According to one survivor, a prisoner was nominated to whitewash the cell walls to remove the names left behind by the dead. The desire to leave some trace of their existence appeared to have been a common impulse among those who sensed the end was fast approaching. [9] At night in Gorky, screams were heard emerging from the NKVD prison courtyard—*“No. Don’t shoot, Comrades! Don’t shoot me, I have done nothing wrong!”*—followed by the crack of a gunshot, a brief silence, and then another shot to make sure.[10]

Inside this building, another surviving American was taken from his prison cell for interrogation. Victor Herman was confronted by the figure of a swaying, slightly drunk NKVD guard who introduced himself as “Citizen Belov” and then demanded, “You will tell me about your counter-revolutionary activities. I will hear every one!” When Victor failed to respond, the heavyset interrogator ordered him to turn around and face the wall. Then Belov began to punch the twenty-three-year-old Detroiter with steady blows to his kidneys.[11]

Torture was a legally sanctioned method of inquisition in the USSR. Stalin had issued an explicit instruction for the long-standing practice on January 20, 1938: *“Physical pressure in NKVD practice is permissible . . . Physical pressure should still be used obligatorily, as an exception applicable to known and obstinate enemies of the people, as a method both justifiable and appropriate.”* Many NKVD interrogators framed these words on their desks to act as a continuing threat when they grew physically tired from beating the prisoners. [12] Nor was there ever a shortage of men such as Belov, happy to don a new uniform and, in exchange for increased living space and food allowances, to torture these “enemies of the people.” A newly hired NKVD staff member earned between twelve and fifteen hundred rubles per month, roughly twice the income of a Soviet official with ten years’ experience, and that was excluding the potential bonuses for their “special work.”[13]

The moral boundaries had been redrawn some two decades earlier. The arrested were no longer to be regarded as fully human, worthy of

compassion. Instead, they were recategorized as something “other,” outside the fold of “progressive” humanity, whose excision could only benefit the construction of a classless, socialist society. Within this totalitarian underworld, an enthusiasm to inflict physical violence upon such “enemies” was regarded as a cherished character trait by an organization that elevated the psychotic to the heroic, and fêted their most successful. This was the NKVD’s heralded “revolutionary instinct” with teeth barred, which turned a brutal interrogator like Belov into a local celebrity—the generator of corpses collected every day from the building on Vorobievka Street.

Each night, Belov would punch Victor Herman’s back three times on his right side, and then again on the left. He would pause, pacing himself by stopping to drink a beer or whiskey, before starting up again with steady deliberation. Shortly after midnight, Belov would begin and he would continue until dawn. On the first night, Victor Herman managed to stay on his feet, but on the second night he fell, and every night thereafter. On the eleventh night, Belov pressed his fingertips across the length of Victor’s back, in a macabre impersonation of a medical doctor, asking his victim where it hurt. Victor remained silent but when he flinched, Belov sensed he had found his mark. After the fifteenth night, Victor began bleeding from his penis, his rectum, his nose, and his eyes. He was returned to his cell each morning at dawn. Eventually the cell “elder” pleaded with him to talk —“Save your life, American”—but Victor Herman stubbornly refused to confess to a crime he had not committed.[14]

On the fifty-third night of his torture, he was told he would be released if he only signed a list of names. When Victor refused again, he was taken to a basement cell and beaten by a gang of men with clubs. The next morning he was coughing up clots of blood, and the following night he was beaten again and told he was going to be killed. Losing consciousness, Victor was woken by the sensation and smell of his leg being burned to bring him back around. On the fifty-fifth night, believing that he was about to die and knowing that he might never get the chance again, Victor Herman spat in Belov’s face. He woke up in the prison hospital.[15]

LYING BESIDE HIM in the hospital ward was a prisoner named Romanoff, who had also emigrated from Detroit to work in the Soviet Ford factory. Romanoff was in a terrible state but seemed oddly cheerful; he said he would soon be released and then find a way to return home to Detroit. When Victor asked how this was possible, Romanoff told him that he had signed a confession denouncing McCarthy, an engineer at the auto factory, as an American spy. The following night, Romanoff died in the hospital of internal injuries. And at this point, convinced that he, too, would soon be beaten to death, Victor Herman signed the confession placed before him. He was immediately returned to his crowded holding cell, where he recognized another American from the auto factory, a man named Janssen, lying prostrate on the concrete floor with blood bubbling from his mouth. A few hours later, Janssen's body was removed from the cell.[16]

A Polish prisoner, Z. Stypulkowski, detailed the psychological effect of torture by the NKVD: "*After fifty or sixty interrogations with cold and hunger and almost no sleep, a man becomes like an automaton—his eyes are bright, his legs swollen, his hands trembling. In this state he is often convinced he is guilty.*" [17] With sufficient beatings, a prisoner lost even the sense of his own self, which had been broken and replaced by only an overwhelming fear. New prisoners quickly learned the value of confessing their "crimes" and spitting out names. Their compliance often saved their lives.[18] Some chose to incriminate everyone they knew, hoping vainly to overload the system of terror. Others attempted to name only the dead. But given time, even the toughest minds dissolved under the brutality of the conveyor. Under extreme duress, it was easier to consider oneself a Trotskyite spy working for Germany or Japan than to keep hold of your own past. In such circumstances the mind gently protects the body from that which it can no longer endure.

Between interrogation and sentencing, Victor Herman was transferred without warning into a very different cell, which held just nineteen prisoners in far less crowded conditions. As he entered the doorway, he saw a perfectly clean white towel laid out in front of him. As soon as he stepped

around this towel, two heavily tattooed prisoners jumped down from their bunks to attack him. What they did not expect was that Victor Herman was a trained boxer who, even in his weakened condition, could fight off two untrained men. When a third prisoner came toward him with a prison-made knife, Victor worked him like a heavy bag in the gym, holding the man's body up over his shoulder and continuing his frenzied attack until the man slumped to the floor. At this point, the atmosphere in the prison cell changed dramatically.[19]

Thrown in with a group of Russian criminals, or *urkas,* Victor Herman discovered his savage fighting skills had won their immediate respect. A heavy man with a scarred face and dark eyes beckoned him over. "I am the Atoman, the chief here, and you, fighter, what are you? A wolfblood, yes? One of us, yes?" Far from being angry, the *atoman* appeared pleased: "Hey fighter! . . . Next time you wipe your feet on the towel, yes?" And thus began Victor Herman's first lesson on how to pass among the criminals, a casual introduction into the subculture of murderers and thieves used by the Soviet authorities to terrorize the "enemies of the people." From the *atoman,* Victor learned why he had been transferred into that particular cell: "They put one in here, and we do the rest, you know?" And when the NKVD guards returned to find the wrong body lying on the floor, the *atoman* explained that there had been an accident. "It was a bad fall," he shrugged.[20]

Perhaps because they were both young and physically fit, Victor Herman and Thomas Sgovio survived their months in prison. In time each was convicted of "crimes" against the Soviet state, and each was handed a piece of paper with his name and a number written on the back and circled in red.[21] Victor Herman received a "ten," whereas Thomas Sgovio's paper showed only a "five," but their sentences carried a purely arbitrary quality since their prosecutors did not expect them to survive. And for their part, all the prisoners sent out into the "zone" of the "corrective labor camps" would look back upon their time spent in jail with the curious nostalgia reserved for the easiest part of their sentences. Within the Gulag, both Victor Herman and Thomas Sgovio would suffer ordeals far worse than that which they had

already known. For suffering comes not only from the pain one receives, but also from the pain one inflicts on others in trying to survive.

ON THE NIGHT of June 24, 1938, Thomas Sgovio left Moscow sealed into the carriage of a prison train with roughly seventy other prisoners. They formed one unit of a transportation of prisoners, packed tight onto the train for their long journey east. These NKVD prison trains had been specially modified with steel spikes under the carriages to prevent escape, and machine-gun emplacements on the roofs. The number of cars on each train ranged from 60 to 120, allowing several thousand prisoners to be moved at a time to destinations across the Soviet Union's vast Gulag system. The prison trains moved slowly, in part because of the number of cars on the line but also because the drivers rightly feared the consequence of an accidental derailment. And the slow progress was regularly interrupted by guards, who hammered with wooden mallets on the walls, ceilings, and floors of the train to check that the prisoners were not attempting an escape.[22]

None of the prisoners knew their final destination, although there was an expectation that the farther they traveled the worse it would be—and to a certain extent this was true. But the measure was only relative, not absolute. While Victor Herman's journey ended in the forest wilderness of central Russia, Thomas Sgovio was transported across the entire length of the USSR to the very end of the line. His ten-thousand-kilometer journey locked in the carriage lasted twenty-eight days, and every stop along the way was marked by the burial of prisoners who had died on board the train. This, too, was completely normal.[23]

A month after his train's departure, Thomas arrived starved and traumatized at a vast transit camp near Vladivostok, on Russia's Pacific coast. His transportation was still not over. Here the prisoners waited within a barbed-wire enclosure, inside a vast city of eighty thousand souls, ready for the next stage of their descent.[24] It was the place from which the poet

Osip Mandelstam managed to send his last letter, in December 1938, the month of his death: *"My health is very poor. I am emaciated in the extreme, I've become very thin, almost unrecognisable, but send clothes, food and money—though I don't know if there's any point. Try nevertheless, I get terribly cold without any [warm] things . . . This is a transit camp. They didn't take me to Kolyma. I may have to winter here."*[25]

All prisoners would experience the same shock of the vertiginous fall into the abyss, and at every moment, when they believed they had reached the final depths, they would fall again, lower and lower, until they scarcely recognized themselves as human beings at all. Only then—when they had lost all self-awareness and respect, when they existed only in the most savage primal sense as men stripped bare of all humanity—only then would they have arrived at the very heart of the Gulag. And in this state of starving desperation, they would scarcely recognize their loss. They would be dismissive of even the notion of freedom—like Kant's dove, which feels the weight of the air on its wings and thinks that it can fly better in the void.

THE VLADIVOSTOK HOLDING camp was a vast field where, according to one survivor, "as far as the eye could see there were columns of male and female prisoners marching in one direction or another, like armies on a battlefield. A huge detachment of security officers, soldiers and signal corpsmen with field telephones and motorcycles, kept in touch with headquarters, arranging the smooth flow of these human rivers."[26] At intervals the guards would shout warnings—*"Those who are bored with life should take one step out of the column"*—while unlocking the bolts of their rifles. Their prisoners had little idea what awaited them, nor were there any explanations. In the holding camp, they died by the score in epidemics of typhus and dysentery, or they were murdered by the criminals in their midst. Attempting to survive, the English-speaking prisoners of Thomas Sgovio's transport grouped together. With Michael Aisenstein, Thomas came across an American boot-legger who had escaped jail in California

only to be arrested in the Soviet Union. The American had sold off all his clothes and was left in a pitiful, ragged condition, swearing, "I'd kiss a skunk's ass to be in a prison in California again, even if it was for life."[27]

After weeks of waiting, the prisoners were eventually marched down toward a fleet of ships waiting at anchor in the Vladivostok dockyard. The NKVD ships were old tramp steamers that once had names such as *Commercial Quaker, Ripon,* and *Dallas,* and had been bought up in America and Europe for rock-bottom prices after the Crash. The smoke-stacks of the Gulag fleet were painted in the blue of the NKVD, but the ships themselves were always at the very margins of seaworthiness. Already old and decrepit when they were bought, the fleet had since been corroded by the fierce weather, the sea salt, and the ice floes.[28] Now Thomas Sgovio found himself being pushed down a steep and slippery wooden stairway into the filthy depths of the ship. It took a while for the prisoners' eyes to adjust to the dim light of the lower decks, but looming out of the darkness was a scene that one survivor compared to a nightmarish vision by Francisco Goya.[29] In the cavernous depths of each ship were crammed five or more levels of wooden bunks containing thousands of battered men and women from all over the Soviet Union who had been arrested. Thomas Sgovio was pressed into the human cargo of the steamer *Indigirka,* which ferried between three and five thousand other prisoners north across the Sea of Okhotsk into another world. He remembered the date of his transportation exactly. It was August 2, 1938, three years to the day since he had left New York Harbor on the deck of a passenger liner, waving goodbye to the Statue of Liberty bound for Soviet Russia.[30]

THE *INDIGIRKA* STEAMED north out of Vladivostok toward the Arctic Circle, passing through the narrow Straits of La Pérouse and across the Sea of Okhotsk. The voyage of the prisoners could last up to two weeks depending on the sea conditions, and during that time no guard ever ventured down into the hold. They feared the savagery of the criminals who

reigned in the darkness below, robbing the political prisoners of food and clothing. Their attacks were impossible to withstand; if any political prisoner dared resist, a pack of criminals simply murdered him. One fallen Red Army general, Aleksandr Gorbatov, who had survived five sessions of torture by the NKVD in Lefortovo Prison, described having his boots stolen by a gang of thieves in the hold of the *Dzhurma*. His decision not to fight back very likely saved his life.[31]

Terrible events regularly occurred on these sea transports. The criminals would often break through the thin partition walls of the hold to attack the female prisoners who traveled with them. These mass rapes were reported in many survivor accounts and appeared to have become a ritualized part of the Sea of Okhotsk crossing. One female witness remembered watching the horror of the violence inflicted upon her fellow prisoners in close proximity. Over the screams of their victims, the criminals most violently abused the women who resisted. In one instance, not untypical, two female prisoners were left dead in the bottom of the hold.[32]

Although the escorting guards were heavily armed, their usual response to such events was to do nothing. Only if the riots belowdecks became too unruly would any action be taken. Then the hold would be drenched with freezing ocean water from the fire pumps. One ship, the *Kim*, set out from Vladivostok carrying three thousand prisoners. When the prisoners mutinied, starting a fire below deck, the guards simply flooded the hold and the prisoners arrived in Magadan frozen from hypothermia.[33] Similarly, if one of the Gulag ships was caught in a storm or ran aground, its human cargo would be left to their fate as the guards attempted to save their own lives, firing shots at the prisoners to prevent their escape.

Fifteen months after Thomas' transportation, on December 13, 1939, the *Indigirka* ran aground on a reef in shallow waters just a mile off the coast of Japan. At the time the ship's hold contained twelve hundred highly skilled engineers and scientists specially selected from the Gulag population to return to the "mainland" as part of the Soviet preparations for war. Three days after the wreck, the Japanese authorities learned from the *Indigirka*'s captain that he had abandoned ship with the prisoners still alive inside, trapped under the upturned steel hull in only a few feet of water. A Japanese

rescue team was dispatched to the wreck with cutting torches, but they found only corpses trapped in the cold dark space. The prisoners had clambered on top of each other in their desperation to survive. Just twenty-eight prisoners were discovered alive at the top of this pyramid.

It was the end of the ship built in 1920, in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, and originally named the *Ripon* in honor of the town where a group of American Republicans first announced there could be no political compromise with slavery.[34]

THOMAS SGOVIO SPENT six days and nights trapped inside the darkness of the *Indigirka*. As the atmosphere grew overpowering, the Americans compared their fate to that of African slaves transported to the United States. Then one of their group reminded them that while a slave might have been sold for several hundred dollars, their lives were no longer worth "two kopecks."[35] From a Russian prisoner they learned that the ship was bound for Kolyma, in the far northeastern corner of the USSR. It was an area so remote it could be reached only by sea and so cold it was called "another planet" by its prisoners:

Kolyma, Kolyma wonderful planet,
Twelve months winter—the rest, summer.

In Kolyma, the coldest temperatures on earth had been recorded at below minus sixty degrees centigrade.[36] Officially a rule existed in the camps that the prisoners' work was canceled if the temperature fell to minus fifty degrees. But the rule was never enforced, and the prisoners never saw a thermometer. Instead, they judged the temperature by other means: at minus forty, the human body made a clinking sound as it exhaled; at minus fifty-five degrees, the man in front disappeared as the air froze into an impenetrable fog; below minus sixty degrees, spit froze in midair.[37] In Kolyma, nature was said to be "in league with the executioner," the extreme cold accelerating the destruction of its victims. Alexander Solzhenitysn

would later describe the region as the "pole of cold and cruelty" of the Gulag Archipelago. And, like the train timetables of Auschwitz, the logbooks of Andrei Sakharov's "death ships of the Okhotsk Sea" would reveal the scale of the tragedy that took place in this one unknown corner of the Soviet Union.[38] In complete secrecy, the NKVD fleet had been silently ferrying its human cargo since 1932, and the ships would continue their operations for the next two decades. During this period, millions of prisoners would disembark onto Kolyma's rocky shore, the majority never to return.

On his arrival at the port of Nagaevo, Thomas Sgovio was ordered down the gangplank to join the column of prisoners for roll call. The prisoners were routinely referred to as "slaves" by their guards. Even the word used for their death was one not normally applicable to human beings: the Russian word *paddochnicht* was used, meaning to "croak."[39] From the shore of Nagaevo Bay, the prisoners were force-marched up the cliffs to the city of Magadan, the wind howling all around them, drowning out the commands of the guards and the barking of the Alsatians which, when let loose, could knock a starved prisoner down with ease.[40] Thomas Sgovio was marched up these cliffs at night, the guards holding lanterns amid the barking of the dogs. To distract himself from his fear, and the sudden coldness of the air, he started humming the "St. Louis Blues."[41]

AS ELSEWHERE, STALIN'S portrait dominated Magadan, a declaration of both of his authority and responsibility for the crimes taking place within its hinterland. Hung across the buildings and streets were red banners with slogans: GLORY TO STALIN, THE GREATEST GENIUS OF MANKIND, and KOLYMA WELCOMES YOU![42] As if the prisoners could feel welcomed after their arrival in the hold of a ship. Most had already heard the rumors describing Kolyma as "the land of white death" or

"the white crematorium." Or there was the most straightforward warning of all: *Kolyma znaczit smert*—"Kolyma means death."[43]

Columns of prisoners were marched though the city streets of Magadan, named after the ever-changing chiefs of the NKVD. Above them, guards aimed machine guns from watchtowers, and searchlights reflected back their shadows across the snow and ice. The whole of this closed city was effectively one large concentration camp policed by rifle butts and baying dogs, one of "the slave capitals" of the Soviet Union. Marched out of Magadan, the first prisoners had been harried along the only road north into the Arctic wilderness, toward their designated camps and the primitive mines hollowed out of the earth with pickaxes.

To the outside world Kolyma was a void, not even a mystery, just another closed zone of the Soviet Union where no cameras or foreign visitors were permitted to travel. As for the millions of people who vanished into it, the Western world had no idea they even existed. In 1942, the *New York Times* reporter Walter Duranty described a figure of between "thirty or forty thousand" killed during the Terror. If a Pulitzer Prize winner could publish an error of such magnitude without immediate public derision, what hope did anyone else have of discovering the truth? After all, how could an empty space be detected in a hermetic, totalitarian state unless the witness happened to be himself a prisoner? [44]

Unwittingly the Soviet Union's own statisticians provided an oblique form of an answer in the results of the 1937 census, which revealed a dramatic shortfall in the Soviet population. According to a report from *Mech*, a Russian-language weekly published in Poland, the census declared a population total of 159 million, instead of the projected 176 million, amounting to 17 million people who had disappeared.[45] The Soviet defector Walter Krivitsky, who had access to the NKVD files, quoted the same statistical shortfall as 26 million.[46] Whichever number was closer to the truth, the results of the 1937 census were suppressed and Stalin reacted to the news by having the hapless statisticians shot. A new census was ordered whose experts learned from their predecessors' mistakes and wisely presented the "correct" set of results. Years later a secret report ordered by Nikita Khrushchev revealed that between 1935 and 1941, the NKVD

arrested more than 19 million citizens. Seven million of the arrested were shot straightaway. An unknown proportion of the rest perished later, by the many means there were to die in the concentration camps of the Gulag.[47]

Down this pathway of arrest, imprisonment, execution or the corrective labor camps were driven the American emigrants to the Soviet Union. There was a selection process, and those who survived, such as Thomas Sgovio or Victor Herman, were delivered to work their sentences in the camps. Strangely, it was only the consequence of their labor, never the circumstance of their disappearance, that caused alarm in the capital cities of the West.

14

The Soviet Gold Rush

When we are victorious on a world-wide scale, we will make public toilets out of gold on the streets of the world's largest cities.

Vladimir Lenin, 1921[1]

From the early 1930s, the American secretary of the treasury's first appointment was an early morning meeting in the president's bedroom at the White House. According to Henry Morgenthau's diary, Franklin Roosevelt "would lie comfortably on his old-fashioned, three-quarter mahogany bed. A table stood on either side; on his left would be a batch of government reports, a detective novel or two, and a couple of telephones. On his right would be pads, pencils, cigarettes, his watch, and a plate of fruit." Refreshed after a night's sleep, Roosevelt would eat soft-boiled eggs while Morgenthau reported on the behavior of gold and commodity prices. Together their strategy was to keep the gold price moving upward by intervening in the markets and, by boosting the price of every other commodity in its wake, to claw the American economy out of the Great Depression.

However, to prevent speculators from predicting future price increases, they deliberately varied the amount they wished to raise it by each day. On October 25, 1933, for example, the president took one look at Morgenthau, who was feeling "more than usually worried about the state of the world," and suggested a price rise of twenty-one cents. "It's a lucky number," said Roosevelt with a smile, "because it's three times seven." In his diary, Morgenthau noted gloomily that "if anybody ever knew how we really set

the gold price through a combination of lucky numbers, etc, I think they would be frightened."[2]

"Henry the Morgue," as the president liked to call his rather dour treasury secretary, owed his position to his predecessor's sudden ill health. One reporter described him as the "most obscure Secretary of the Treasury this country has ever had"—not long earlier he had been a New York apple farmer in Dutchess County, next to the Roosevelt family estate.[3] Unexpectedly elevated early in the first New Deal administration, Morgenthau was naturally nervous. If the American economy was the sickest of patients, he was the least experienced of physicians.

Four years later, in April 1937, a substantial increase in the world's gold supply was creating an inevitable downward pressure on price, and Morgenthau was forced into buying ever-increasing quantities to maintain the U.S. government's fixed price. There was no secret where this surplus gold was coming from, since the Soviet Union had been openly selling shipments of bullion on the metals exchanges of London, Paris, and New York. Here, then, was the explanation behind the sudden cash wealth in Moscow that had allowed Stalin to buy up American factories like so much confetti and wave one-hundred-million-dollar naval contracts beneath the nose of Joseph Davies, salted with ironic promises to help "alleviate American unemployment."

Furious that his first term's work might soon be undone, Henry Morgenthau summoned Konstantin Oumansky to his office in Washington. Very bluntly the treasury secretary asked what the Soviets thought they were playing at—"the Russians were children about international finance; I used to call them American Indians. They dumped commodities like quicksilver and killed their markets." But in response to Morgenthau's irate line of questioning, Oumansky steadfastly refused to reveal either how much gold was being produced or the amount still held in reserve. Stone-faced, Oumansky volunteered nothing, and so resolutely feigned either real or pretend ignorance that the frustrated Morgenthau found himself having to teach him how the central banking system worked.[4]

Unbeknownst to the Soviet diplomats, the treasury secretary had been conducting a private investigation of his own. Shortly after his arrival in

Moscow, a carefully briefed Joseph Davies had written a report back to Morgenthau: *"I have been making every effort to try to get a line on the gold reserve here. It is practically impossible to get anything definite. It is more or less a military secret which is guarded with care . . . The other day I was privileged to see the collection of treasure and jewels at the State Bank. What surprised me was the size of the gold nuggets. They had two nuggets of solid gold ranging between forty and fifty pounds each. From their appearance I should judge that they were practically pure gold."*[5] Six months later Davies wrote again, describing a meeting with Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov in which he had asked straightforward questions about Soviet gold production and reserves. The wily Litvinov volunteered that "he could state confidentially that current estimates were rather exaggerated." In his letter, Davies suggested that the Soviet government was " *jealously guarding the facts with reference to the gold supply* . . . *constantly exaggerating its size for propaganda purposes and its possible effect on their enemies."* [6]

As so often before, Ambassador Davies' deductions were completely misplaced. Ironically, the one expert who could answer Morgenthau's questions was lurking right beneath the ambassador's nose. Stranger still, this expert was an American mining engineer and frequent guest of the American embassy in Moscow. In almost a decade's service to the Soviet government, Jack Littlepage had played a crucial role in their gold industry.

WHEN LITTLEPAGE FIRST arrived in Russia, it seemed self-evident that the fledgling Bolshevik state was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy and ruin. After the role of the market was abandoned, prices in the USSR were no longer used as a mechanism for the allocation of resources. With inflation running out of control, most Western economists were confidently predicting the imminent collapse of a regime they perceived as an economic absurdity. Within the Soviet Union itself, everyone understood that the ruble was virtually worthless. Whenever the government required extra

money, the State Bank simply printed more and more notes, often with identical serial numbers and on paper so thin it literally fell apart in your hands.[7] And although the Wall Street Crash was greeted by Soviet ideologues as obvious proof of the Marxist conception of history, their evident satisfaction was tempered by a growing awareness of the damage inflicted upon the Five-Year Plan. All the factories and specialists arriving from Detroit or Cologne had to be paid for in precious, and fast-diminishing, foreign currency. After the Crash, the Soviet commodity exports were suddenly worth only a fraction of their former value.[8]

Thus the Kremlin's schemes to gather hard currency were driven by a mounting sense of desperation. In one project, the NKVD began counterfeiting one-hundred-dollar bills for distribution across Europe and China, forcing the American Federal Reserve to issue widespread warnings against the excellent forgeries.[9] At the same time, Stalin authorized the Soviet Art Export Trust to sell off art treasures accumulated over generations by the Tsars. Very quietly a selection of old masters from the Hermitage Museum was delivered to the auction rooms of the West. In one deal, worth over seven million dollars, some twenty-one masterpieces, including Raphael's *Alba Madonna*, Titian's *Venus with a Mirror*, and Velázquez's *Innocent X*, were sold. The paintings were simply taken down from the walls of the Hermitage. The curators rearranged the remainder to cover the gaps and later blamed their absence on the 1931 fire or the Nazi siege.[10]

Fortunately the principal buyer in the latest Soviet art sale happened to be an American citizen equally anxious to maintain the secrecy of the deal. And for good reason, since the gentleman in question happened to be none other than Henry Morgenthau's predecessor in office. At the time, Andrew Mellon was an elderly, frail man with high cheekbones, sharp blue eyes, and a slight stammer. Ultrareserved, he ranked alongside Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller as one of the world's wealthiest men: the Mellon family fortune dominating the American banking, oil, steel, and ship-building industries. He was America's secretary of the treasury through the Roaring Twenties, and three Republican presidents—Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover—were all said to have "served under him." And while publicly

Andrew Mellon ran the nation's finances as he saw fit, the scant responsibilities of laissez-faire appeared insufficiently fulfilling for the Republican statesman. Privately, Andrew Mellon was consumed by an altogether more demanding passion—the desire for fine art, regardless of its provenance.

Even while his art dealers were negotiating with their Kremlin intermediaries, Mellon was responsible for the American government's economic policy with the USSR—including the controversial question of the first exports of Gulag labor into the American market. It was, of course, a direct conflict of interests. However, in a more discreet age, secrecy remained assured on both sides, and the flow of pictures by Hals, Rembrandt, Rubens, Van Eyck, Van Dyck, Raphael, Velazquez, Botticelli, Veronese, Chardin, and Perugino continued to disappear from Leningrad's Hermitage collection, to reappear, as if by magic, on the walls of Andrew Mellon's private apartment at 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, Washington, D.C.[11]

The truth became public only in the spring of 1935, under the bright lights of a tax-evasion case. In court, Andrew Mellon was forced to reveal both the value and origin of the art collection he intended as a gift to the nation. His lawyer David E. Finley spoke on his behalf: "Mr. Mellon wanted to keep the thing a surprise until the right moment. It probably would not have been very good politics for the Secretary of the Treasury to spend millions for rare paintings at a time when the government was swamped with unemployment, bank failures and general distress." Mellon would die before the completion of his National Gallery in Washington, D.C., but when asked why he had collected the paintings, his answer had been characteristically concise: *"Every man wants to connect his life with something that is eternal."*[12] It was a strange echo, albeit from the opposite end of the economic spectrum, of the cause that had drawn so many American emigrants to Russia.

AND WHILE IT was suitably ironic that the finances of the USSR were

being saved, at least partially, by millions of dollars from the very men the Revolution had sought to destroy, it was also apparent that Stalin's state coffers required a more constant source of replenishment. Through the early 1930s, a campaign was launched across the USSR obliging all citizens to hand in their gold to the state. Cash rewards were offered for the denunciation of neighbors' hoards as investigators from the GPU hunted for gold, foreign currency, and jewelry, tearing through apartments in their quest. In the midst of universal shortages, "gold stores" were opened, fully stocked with every conceivable item to be priced and paid for in metal, the scales on their counters weighing wedding rings and christening spoons. Naturally the state robbed its citizens blinder than a Chicago loan shark—the American reporter Eugene Lyons once calculated that a pair of shoes was charged at twice its weight in silver. There was also another hidden danger to the transaction, since the stores were carefully watched by the GPU, who checked the identities of the customers, ready to arrest them if they considered it worthwhile.[13]

When private pockets were exhausted, more radical solutions had to be found. In the Kremlin, Stalin ordered the translation into Russian of books on the Californian gold rush and summoned the pre-Revolutionary Bolshevik Alexander Serebrovsky to a meeting.[14] In the past decade Serebrovsky had earned a reputation as "the Soviet Rockefeller" for returning the Caucasian oil fields to production after the Civil War. Now Stalin instructed him to repeat his success in the Soviet gold industry. Their plan was to duplicate American mining techniques; and exactly one week later, Alexander Serebrovsky was dispatched to Alaska.[15]

Described by Littlepage as "a medium-sized, inconspicuous man, smooth-shaven, with American clothes and an American air," Serebrovsky posed as a humble "Professor of Mines" as he toured the Alaskan gold mines. He met Jack Littlepage in one of the first mines he visited, and was impressed by this tall, lean American mining engineer who worked alongside his miners and knew how to get the job done quickly. In Alaska, Serebrovsky was surprised by the lack of class distinction between the engineer and the miners. "Isn't it the same way in Russia?" asked

Littlepage. “It’s not that way yet,” Serebrovsky replied with some honesty.[16]

But when Serebrovsky inquired if he would like to work in Russia, Jack Littlepage had refused point-blank, stating bluntly that he “did not like Bolsheviks.” “You don’t like Bolsheviks? Well, what’s wrong with them?” wondered the astonished Serebrovsky, who had joined the Party in 1903. “They seem to have a habit of shooting people, especially engineers,” replied Littlepage, who even then had read the reports of show trials. But Serebrovsky was unfazed by what to him were the naïve misperceptions of the bourgeois press, and quietly sought to allay Littlepage’s fears: “Well, I am a Bolshevik, and have been one for many, many years. Do I look so dangerous?”[17]

In a Soviet propaganda pamphlet, Serebrovsky described the American engineer as “drawn to the Soviet Union by the grand scale of our construction work, the ideas of great Stalin, the chance to unfold his talents freely.” If the financial allure was left unstated, it was also clear that Serebrovsky was a sound judge of character. Jack Littlepage arrived in the Soviet Union on May 1, 1928, with his wife, Georgia, and their two young daughters. Quickly renamed Ivan Eduardovich, he soon learned to speak Russian and, with an indefatigable energy, “set about verifying calculations, designs, estimates, plans of work.” In the next six years, the USSR outstripped America in gold production figures and was ready to overtake the world’s number one producer, the British Empire, which controlled the vast gold wealth of South Africa.[18] Jack Littlepage’s career as the deputy commissar of the Soviet Gold Trust was so successful that he was decorated with the Order of the Red Banner of Labor, and rewarded with a Soviet Ford Model A, one of the most prestigious gifts of the era. Publicly praised in an article in *Izvestiya*, Littlepage was sent back to the United States several times to recruit more engineers, “the beginning of the great American invasion” hired to oversee work in the Soviet gold mines. In those Depression years, there was never any shortage of willing recruits.[19]

On his way to Moscow via Berlin, one of the Soviet apparatchiks had taken a shine to Jack Littlepage and offered him some advice that he later remembered: “*He said I needn’t get worried if Russians working with me*

suddenly disappeared under what would seem to me to be mysterious circumstances. There wasn't any other way to manage things at present, he told me, and I would find the police active in the mines and the mills. He told me I should take it that the police were helping rather than hindering my work, and not be bothered by them."[20] Although Jack Littlepage was never forced to take up Soviet citizenship or stripped of his American passport, he was required to turn a blind eye to the scenes he witnessed of Russian peasants driven from their homes and forced to work in the gold mines. Later he claimed to believe the confessions of the Bolshevik defendants in the show trials, and their wild accusations that "wreckers" and "saboteurs" were responsible for the lamentable performance of Soviet industry. In the midst of the repressions, Jack Littlepage continued to fulfill his role as a deputy commissar, advising Serebrovsky on the use of Alaskan-style prospecting parties working in twos and threes to scour the vast unexplored lands of the USSR in search of gold.[21]

IN 1932, A geological prospecting team made its way to the remote corner of northeastern Russia. It was, they said, a wasteland of such cold and darkness that it had never been permanently settled by man. In the valley of the Kolyma River, the prospectors discovered vast placer deposits of gold, often lying in nuggets close to the surface of the earth. But who would volunteer to work in this Godforsaken wasteland whose winter temperatures were colder and more extreme even than the North Pole's? The answer, of course, was simple since, as Jack Littlepage himself had recognized elsewhere in the USSR, "*the secret police have an advantage over other Soviet organizations as they can always count on a steady supply of labour, no matter what kind of living conditions exist, where the given task has to be done.*" While Tsar Nicholas II had once made the decision that the conditions in Kolyma were too atrocious for human beings to live or work, Stalin never had such qualms.[22]

In exchange for the soft yellow metal, Stalin offered up the lives of legions of prisoners, safe in the knowledge that he possessed an almost inexhaustible supply. If, after all, Matvei Berman had consumed up to a quarter of a million lives in the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, how many more would the Kolyma gold be worth? A vast new Soviet enterprise was called into being, given the euphemistic title of the Far North Construction Trust and known by its Russian acronym as Dalstroi. The trust would control an area three million square kilometers in size, larger than western Europe, and the ships of the NKVD fleet were purchased at auction ready to deliver the labor force.[23]

The first waves of prisoners were marched under guard across the snow-fields. In Kolyma they were forced to build their own camps beside the newly prospected gold mines, and those who faltered or lagged behind were shot. These early camps were primitive affairs regularly cut off from the new city of Magadan by the ferocity of the winters. Supplies often failed, and when communications were restored—days, sometimes weeks, later—often there were no survivors left to continue. From the early years, it was said that only one in every hundred survived, and these “last of the Mohicans” reported watching Eduard Berzin, the first Dalstroi chief, travel along the main highway to inspect the mines in a Rolls-Royce that had once belonged to Lenin, the reward from Stalin for his success.[24]

From Dalstroi’s inception, Stalin kept close control over its operations, demanding regular updates, which required its top officials to report back personally to Moscow.[25] The Politburo resolutions for Dalstroi were obscured by layers of official secrecy. Selected items from key reports were placed in special folders for “eyes only” secrecy, and relevant Party officials were allowed to read just one or two points from the whole report. Only Stalin and the highest levels of the NKVD hierarchy had knowledge of and responsibility for the whole enterprise, both in its creation and continued expansion in the annual prisoner transfers across the first “open water.”[26]

In his first two years, Eduard Berzin delivered the news that Dalstroi’s harvest of gold had leaped tenfold. In response, Stalin poured more and more prisoners into the wilderness, and the production rose still higher.[27]

But however much gold Berzin sent back to Moscow, it was still never enough. Above all, the gold plan must not just be fulfilled, it must be overfulfilled; and during the Terror, Stalin came to the conclusion that Berzin had been "coddling" his prisoners. The powerful Dalstroi chief was lured to a meeting with a visiting NKVD delegation in Magadan, who promised further medals but arrested him on the airfield. Flown in handcuffs to Moscow, Eduard Berzin was executed in a basement of the Lubyanka. The "Berzin affair" resulted in the execution of several thousand of the Dalstroi apparat. Collectively they were accused of a conspiracy to turn Kolyma into "the 49th state of the USA."[28]

THE EFFECT ON his successors was predictably savage. In time, Berzin was replaced by a functionary named Pavlov and his deputy, Garanin, a thirty-nine-year-old NKVD colonel whose response to Moscow's demands for gold made him notorious in the camps. Colonel Garanin personally oversaw the prisoners' lineups when those who had not fulfilled their work quotas were ordered to step forward. The NKVD colonel then walked down the line personally, executing the "enemies of the people," closely followed by two guards who took turns reloading his revolver.[29] The prisoners' corpses were then stacked up at the gates as a reminder to the rest. While executions continued throughout the Gulag, under Garanin, a camp named Serpantinnaya was constructed in the wilderness, several hundred kilometers west of Magadan. This camp became widely known as an extermination center. The weakest prisoners were transported there in trucks to be executed en masse. They were described by surviving prisoners as being "sent to the moon."[30]

Less than a year into his reign, Garanin was himself arrested and shot as a Japanese spy. All his subordinates, from executioners to grave diggers, followed in the Kremlin's methodical effort to conceal what had taken place. New Dalstroi functionaries arrived in 1938 and, like their

predecessors, did not last long, since the exigencies of the Terror applied just as equally within Kolyma as every other region of the Soviet Union.[31]

Eventually an NKVD general, Ivan Nikishov, was appointed as the new Dalstroi chief, and a degree of stability was reestablished. Still in his forties, Nikishov had been promoted from his ruthless administration of the Terror in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan.[32] A powerful man, he was selected for his pragmatic cruelty, which allowed him to steadily overfulfill the plan for gold. Quickly made a Soviet "hero of labor," Nikishov pursued his given task with the grim fixation of a man who knew his life depended on it. In his ascendancy, Nikishov divorced his wife and married a pretty twenty-nine-year-old named Aleksandra Gridassova, well known to the female prisoners as the commandant of a Magadan women's camp. Thanks to Nikishov's patronage, Gridassova had risen through the Gulag hierarchy until she was responsible for the lives of thousands of female prisoners, who christened her "Catherine the Fourth" for the peremptory way she decided human destinies and the lavish lifestyle she created for herself and her husband in Kolyma.[33]

Together the couple occupied a country house to the northwest of Magadan, surrounded by luxury, with the usual retinue of chauffeurs, cooks, maids, and personal doctors provided for the Soviet elite. The couple organized their own "cultural brigade": a slave theater of singers, actors, and ballerinas whose lives were saved from the mines in return for their performances. Gulag society, in the form of the camp commandants and their wives, attended Magadan's Gorky Theatre to watch their gala performances, as the gaunt former stars struggled to reproduce past glories in costumes flown in from Moscow.[34]

Two decades after the Revolution, Lenin's promise that the leaders of the Revolutionary state would "receive the same salary as an average worker" had long been forgotten. It was all as hopelessly naïve as another Leninist prediction, that under communism, gold would become "valueless," used only for the building of public conveniences. Instead, millions of prisoners' lives became subject to the regime of Dalstroi, forced into hard labor to maintain the steady supply of gold flown back to Moscow in the NKVD planes, and ready to be sold in the markets of the West. By the end of the

1930s, Dalstroi was producing annually more than eighty thousand kilograms of chemically pure gold, worth over one hundred million dollars at the price kept fixed by President Roosevelt and Henry Morgenthau. It was precisely this gold that resuscitated the ailing Soviet economy and ultimately kept Stalin in power. And Stalin understood this economic imperative only too well.[35]

DALSTROI'S SUCCESSFUL OPERATION meant that Alexander Serebrovsky's services were no longer quite so essential to the Soviet state. Calling Milchakov, Serebrovsky's Russian deputy, into the Kremlin, Stalin explained that Serebrovsky had been "unmasked" by the NKVD as a "vicious enemy of the people," responsible for the delivery of fifty million gold ingots to Trotsky. Milchakov was then ordered to shadow Serebrovsky until the moment arrived for him to be publicly denounced. The "Soviet Rockefeller" was executed soon, while Milchakov lasted only two months before he, too, was arrested.[36]

Politically tainted by his close friendship with Serebrovsky, Jack Littlepage found himself unable to work. Terrified Russian employees refused even to come near him, carrying as he did the double stain of his status as a foreigner and his friendship with an "enemy of the people." Fortunately, either because Littlepage had carefully guarded his American passport or else had acquired the valuable reputation for keeping his mouth shut, the American engineer was allowed to leave Soviet Russia unhindered.[37] On September 22, 1937, Littlepage called at the American embassy before his final departure. He told the diplomats that he had been asked to investigate alleged "wrecking activities" by Soviet industrial commissar Georgy Piatakov in various gold mines, and reported his conviction that "there had been deliberate wrecking in these mines and he was of the opinion that this wrecking had been ordered by Piatakov." An American official described Littlepage's rationale as being "somewhat vague," but it appeared his real motive had been overlooked. Jack

Littlepage was simply paying for his ticket home, and the safety of his life in America.[38]

On the train out of Russia, Littlepage wore his Order of the Red Banner of Labor prominently displayed on his jacket, evidently anticipating last-minute difficulties. But the only reaction came from a Polish customs official on the other side of the border, who saw the medal and snapped, "Take that thing off."[39] In a series of articles for *The Saturday Evening Post,* Littlepage described how *"the Far Eastern gold rush continues. An army of intrepid men and women push ever farther into the unexplored wastes of Eastern Siberia, Yakutia, and Kazakstan. Prospectors work in blinding blizzards and tropical heat, and penetrate into districts which man may never have seen before."*[40] Only later, in secrecy, would Littlepage answer questions from the American War Department. Marking a map of the Soviet Union, he wrote the number one in a circle over Kolyma, and informed the intelligence officer that here was *"the richest gold field in the world from which the gold can be produced by placer mining without refining process . . . Twice as much can be obtained from this one field alone as we are now getting from all of Alaska."*[41]

In neither case did he mention the existence of legions of prisoners marched out into the frozen wasteland to extract the gold. Dumped from the hulls of the slave ships, the prisoners' lives would soon be exhausted. When their bodies became useless for the mines, the last iota of strength was squeezed from them in road-building tasks before the end claimed them falling down by the side of the road, or from the bullet of a gun. Into this infernal world had fallen Thomas Sgovio, just one of the millions of prisoners whose lives would be governed by the unremitting demands of Dalstroi.[42]

MEANWHILE, in his offices at the Treasury Department in Washington, D.C., Henry Morgenthau had long been aware that the Soviet gold was

mined by “forced labor.” If Jack Littlepage stayed largely silent about the horrors he encountered, other American mining engineers had been more forthcoming in their reports. As early as 1932, Raymond Vandervoort had briefed a State Department officer in Berlin:

A good deal of the labor employed in the gold mines is forced labor and that the casualties among these people are exceedingly heavy and he estimates that 50 to 60 thousand a year die from exposure, hardship, and cold throughout Siberia . . . They are the most persecuted people on the earth . . . The attitude openly expressed by officials with regard to the casualties among the workers is one of unparalleled hard-heartedness. They take no notice of the deaths and insist that through these casualties they have less persons to feed . . . The Russians butcher and butcher and butcher. There has been no let-up in the number of executions.[43]

By the late 1930s, Raymond Vandervoort’s estimate of the annual mortality rate had become a distant memory long surpassed. And through all those years—as the Gulag casualties mounted by orders of magnitude—Soviet gold bonds were offered for sale as a guaranteed investment to the American public, freely advertised in the financial pages of *The New York Times: “Facts and Figures prove the economic growth of the Soviet Union . . . a series of accomplishments unparalleled in the history of modern nations . . . the second largest producer of gold in the world.”*[44]

Nor did Henry Morgenthau have any intention of antagonizing Stalin when upbraiding the Soviet diplomats on their gold sales. It was simply a question of commerce, not morality, as the treasury secretary made clear when he assured Oumansky that “the methods they used were of no interest to the American government.” All the pragmatic Morgenthau wished for was the markets to function smoothly. In pursuit of this end, he suggested the formation of a direct liaison committee between the Soviet State Bank and the American Federal Reserve, to facilitate the sale and transit of Soviet gold to the United States.[45] In 1937, Konstantin Oumansky was invited to

Morgenthau's Washington home and complimented on "the finesse of the refining of the Russian bars," which Morgenthau recognized as "second only to American" in purity and weight accuracy. The Soviets had sent sixty million dollars' worth of gold to America just in the past month, to be sold at the guaranteed price of thirty-five dollars an ounce. The glimmering bars of chemically pure yellow metal arrived stamped with the emblem of the hammer and sickle.[46]

Had Henry Morgenthau considered his actions more carefully, he might have concluded that he was actively facilitating the deaths of countless innocent men and women and, as we shall later discover, children, too, by allowing the gold mined by Soviet prisoners in Arctic temperatures to be transferred to the federal deposit in the blue hills of Kentucky. We can be fairly certain, however, that the treasury secretary did not see that far along his particular chain of moral responsibility, and rested peacefully at night, ready for his early morning meetings with the president.[47]

15

"Our Selfless Labor Will Restore Us to the Family of Workers"

So few my roads, so many my mistakes.

Sergei Esenin[1]

In Kolyma, Thomas Sgovio awoke each day in a realm of suffering at the cruelest margin of human existence. Death was all around: for saying the work was too harsh, for not responding to the orders of a guard, for remaining silent when a crowd of prisoners shouted, "Long Live Stalin." Silence was a crime, refusal to work was a crime, to consider oneself innocent was a crime—"The Five-Year Plan is the law! Not to carry out the Plan is a crime!"[2] Next to gold, human life was an ill-valued commodity that Dalstroi only suffered to support. Orders came down to carry out executions at the slightest slowdown, with individual camp commandants given a free hand to take whatever measures they considered necessary to maintain the supply.[3] One NKVD "camp doctor" explained the situation to the prisoners in the starkest terms: "*You are not brought here to live, but to suffer and die. If you live it means that you are guilty of two things: either you worked less than was assigned, or you ate more than your proper due.*"[4]

As the operations of Dalstroi consumed the prisoners' lives, it created the continual need for their replacement. This, too, was a predetermined and carefully calculated policy, since the Plan for gold included a measure for the consumption of life. With remorseless logic, the labor force was to be replenished in proportion to the projected mortality rate, which was one target that never fell below the norm. Lev Inzhir had once been the chief accountant of the Gulag before he was himself arrested. To a fellow prisoner, Inzhir revealed how he had monitored the flow of life through the

camps from his offices at the Lubyanka in Moscow. The daily accountancy was dominated by two headings: “Arrivals” and “Deaths,” and it seemed to Inzhir that the whole of the Soviet Union was about to be absorbed into these two columns. With his colleagues in the upper echelons of the NKVD, the accountant discussed how they might steady the ever-rising death rate, and instructions were sent from the Center to the individual camp commandants. Although it was impossible to investigate thousands of deaths per day, a maximum permitted rate was agreed, and as long as the mortality did not exceed this norm then it was deemed to be acceptable. Instructions arrived from the NKVD headquarters specifying that the Dalstroi prisoners were to be delivered to Magadan “completely healthy,” not as physical wrecks, worn half-dead by the corrosive regime of prison, train, holding camp, and ship.[5]

Within the bureaucracy of the Gulag, a human being became a mere abstraction, a biological machine stripped of all essential worth beyond his or her utility to the state. The logical consequence of such thinking was that the numbers of casualties within this grand “social experiment” ceased to bear any meaning to the camp administrators. Each incremental zero in a column of statistics required only the necessary dispassionate Bolshevik logic to proceed on to the next. And all regulatory agreements between the Moscow administrators and the camp officials were always made to ensure the efficiency of the mechanism, which, in their eyes, was ultimately the most important value. Once the mortality was set at the agreed rate, the hands of the mechanism were left to turn, and millions of lives were eventually consumed without conscience or respite, over the next two decades. Thus the deaths of the Gulag’s victims became the cause as well as the effect of Stalin’s mass repressions. Viewed from the methodology of power, the mechanism had become self-perpetuating.

Of course, Lev Inzhir’s privileged insights did nothing to help in the camps. Desperate to save his life and conceal his status from those who hunted down his kind, Inzhir became a camp informer and eventually fell victim to the system he had worked so hard to perpetuate. Then the Gulag’s former chief accountant was transformed into another statistic in a mortality column sent back to Moscow.[6]

FROM THE MAGADAN transit camp, Thomas Sgovio was transported by truck four hundred kilometers north and force-marched another seven kilometers to the Razvedchik goldfield.[7] On arrival at their camp, the new prisoners were immediately sent out to work between fourteen and eighteen hours per day, the first twelve hours at the goldfields and the remainder spent digging infrastructure projects.[8] They arrived in the midst of the "Garanin days" during the winter of 1938, when lists of names were read out after roll call throughout the Kolyma camps and thousands were sentenced to be shot. Colonel Garanin himself visited Razvedchik only once. Entering the camp barracks, he discovered two criminal prisoners refusing to work, and shot them both on the spot.[9]

For many, the shock of arrival was too great. Such men suffered an immediate psychological collapse, which led quickly to their deaths. After the first day in Camp Razvedchik, one of the Americans slashed his wrists with a razor blade. The victim was Harry Jaffe, the tenor who had once stood next to Thomas Sgovio singing solos in the Anglo-American chorus in Moscow. For the others, Jaffe's suicide strengthened their awareness that they had been abandoned to their fate, since his brother was rumored to be a committee member of the American Communist Party. If any of the Americans had a chance of being rescued, it was he.[10] A short while after Jaffe's death, on January 28, 1939, *The New York Times* carried an article, "American in Russia Believed Arrested." The report stated only that Harry Jaffe of New Jersey, a former employee of the *Moscow News*, "is believed by persons who knew him to have been arrested a year or more ago." Later, Senator James Slattery wrote to the American chargé d'affaires in Moscow in response to a letter from the seventy-eight-year-old Rachel Jaffe of Chicago, seeking news of her son, "who had volunteered for service in the US Navy during the World War." From Moscow, Angus Ward answered that Harry Jaffe had expatriated himself, and advised his relatives to "address themselves to the Soviet embassy in Washington."[11]

The prisoners who wanted to live were forced to mine the Kolyma gold, pushing vast wheelbarrows filled with earth up runners into the sluices to be washed. Officially they were allocated three days' rest per month, but such measures were universally disregarded by the authorities. All prisoners

were worked every day of the year—if they lasted a year—knowing that to refuse would be the end of their ordeal.[12] Intellectuals who expressed doubt over their capacity for hard labor were mocked by the criminals: *“Don’t worry, here they’ll give you a twenty-kilogram ‘pencil’ [a crowbar], and you can ‘write’ in the quarry.”*[13]

From the old-timers, the new arrivals learned that it was impossible to survive on the meager food they were given. Each prisoner received a ration based upon the work completed. But the calories used up in fulfilling, or overfulfilling, the “norm” were always greater than those in the food itself. Similarly, falling below the 60 percent “norm” resulted in a penalty ration, which accelerated the process of starvation. Thus the prisoners learned the course of action that would preserve their strength for as long as possible, or kill them the most slowly. Even achieving this 60 percent “norm,” their labor stripped first the fat from their bodies and then burned up their muscles, too, until nothing was left but skin and bones. It was a physiological certainty that hard labor combined with starvation and subzero temperatures would only end in their death.[14]

From breaking the ground with picks and pushing the endless wheelbarrows filled with frozen earth, the prisoners’ hands became grotesquely misshapen into blackened claws, which ached through the night as they tried to sleep. At dawn, Thomas Sgovio would wake up unable to open his fingers and try to summon the strength of will to survive another day. His youth and good health were important factors in his favor, but such qualities alone were insufficient defense—both disappeared very quickly with every march out of the wooden stockade of the camp into the goldfields, under the sign over the gates that read LABOR IN THE USSR IS A MATTER OF HONOR, COURAGE AND HEROISM.[15]

Although he was not brought up in a religious family, Thomas Sgovio began to pray. In the midst of despair and with no hope of human intervention, he prayed with all the faith of someone who, until then, had none.[16] With nothing left to lose, he prayed for his life as he swung his pick into the frozen earth. And through prayer, Thomas discovered a stubborn streak within himself, which presupposed that the worse his ordeal

became, the stronger would be his resolve to live—so that if, by some miracle, he ever returned to America, he could at least tell his father's friends what life was really like in "the workers' paradise."[17]

There were many innocent prisoners in Kolyma who prayed as faithfully as Thomas Sgovio but lost their lives. Why one man is saved and another is lost is a mystery, just as faith itself remains a mystery. Rationally, of course, some would survive, and perhaps it was all just pure luck. Perhaps the real mystery was why the innocent were being killed with such unrelenting cruelty.

EVERY TEN DAYS the prisoners were forced to endure a visit to the bathhouse, where they noticed the bones poking through their disappearing flesh. With a thousand others, Thomas was forced to stand in the cold, waiting his turn. They were then ordered to undress, their prison clothes thrown into a giant heap while they were given a cup of cold water and a cup of hot water to wash: "And how could you wash? And my hands were just like a monkey's hands, black, all chapped with blood." Sexual violence regularly occurred within the bathhouse walls, as the criminals abused the weakest and most vulnerable of the prisoners. Their visits were followed by a fight to retrieve their clothes. The strongest and most brutal grabbed first choice—and their bodies, better protected from the cold, became a little stronger—while the weakest were left with the most worn and fragile remainders from the pile, which only steepened the trajectory of their descent. In the extreme cold of Kolyma, the prisoners' clothing was as vital as food: "We killed each other. We tore each other's eyes out for these clothes."[18]

Those left without gloves had to fashion their own, and if a prisoner woke in the morning and the man in the next bunk had died, he considered himself fortunate to take the dead man's clothes and perhaps find a hidden portion of bread. The camp barracks were constructed with sleeping platforms on two levels, with a stove in the middle to provide some warmth.

But there was no insulation, and often the roofs were so poorly built the prisoners could see the stars above them. In winter, the temperatures inside could fall below minus forty degrees with no blankets to cover them. Each night Thomas bowed his head and whispered the Lord's Prayer; using his rag boots as a pillow and his outer jacket as a blanket, he would attempt to sleep knowing that he would have to get up during the night to warm himself by the stove.[19] And then a new workday would begin with the morning roll call, when Thomas would stand waiting to shout out his name, year of birth, and sentence under the Soviet criminal code.[20]

By necessity Thomas' Russian quickly improved, since very soon there was no one left who could speak English. Of the twelve Americans, or Russian Americans, who had arrived with him on the transport, ten had died within the first year. Overall, three quarters of the prisoners in Kolyma did not survive their first winter. One survivor testified that the "*average lifespan of a convict at Kolyma is usually taken as four months. People with a weaker constitution are, as a rule, finished by the end of the second or third week. For reasons that I do not know, their leg and arm joints soon begin to swell; later on the swelling spreads to the face and in a few weeks they die.*" According to the Polish prisoner Kazimierz Zamorski, "*The number of so-called 'three year men,' that is, prisoners who have survived three Kolyma winters, was very small indeed. They could be easily recognized by their dark-coloured cheeks, a stigma of numerous frostbites. They were highly respected by their fellow-prisoners as heroes of the incessant and hard struggle for existence. Every one of them had had at least one toe amputated . . . Generally not more than fifteen percent of the prisoners survived the first winter.*"[21]

The larger men died first, since they needed the most food. Prisoners from the Baltic states, for example, died more quickly than Russians because they tended to be physically larger and needed more calories to sustain their work.[22] The most susceptible to the cold and disease were the Central Asian prisoners. Transported from their subtropical homelands into Arctic temperatures, according to one prisoner, "they died like flies. All their vital forces were numbed as soon as they went out into the terrible cold . . . They stood motionless, their arms crossed, their bowed heads

hunched between their shoulders, waiting for the end."[23] Only the prisoners who had once been peasants or laborers could withstand the shock of heavy manual labor. Worst off were the intellectuals or former office workers, who were persecuted at every turn by the NKVD guards and doomed by their education to the hardest labor; their mortality was among the highest.[24]

Such men and women quickly degenerated into *dokhodyagas,* the walking skeletons whose ironic name derived from the Russian verb *dokhodit,* meaning "to arrive." Within the camps the *dokhodyagas* were those who had "arrived" as the finished citizens of their model socialist society.[25] They could hardly be missed: their faces were taut and sharpened by starvation, their unfocused eyes lost deep in the sockets of their heads, their cheekbones protruding, and their gait uncertain, as if their every next step would be their last.[26] Such men would collapse and die quite suddenly, often while working. They would swing a pick, stumble, and fall facedown to the ground. Their physical deterioration created a feeling of mutual helplessness and passivity. In this condition, on the threshold of death, it became difficult to distinguish one from another, or even men from women.[27]

The conditions of camp life were such that even healthy-looking men could be transformed into *dokhodyagas* with startling speed. Michael Aisenstein was one of the first from Thomas' group to deteriorate. The engineer had been assigned to a different work brigade, and had his American camel-hair coat stolen on the first day. Thomas saw him lurking around the camp kitchen gathering empty plates from the mess tables, his listless eyes scanning them for scraps of food. When Thomas approached, Aisenstein looked right through him as though he did not recognize his friend. That winter, when Aisenstein disappeared, Thomas presumed he had died.[28]

In the context of the Gulag, grief became a superfluous emotion to those preoccupied with their own survival. Within the camps, the death of their fellow prisoners was normal and to be expected, most commonly dismissed with a shrug and a laconic eulogy learned from the others: "*You die today, I*

die tomorrow." [29] As the temperatures fell steadily that winter, Thomas felt the stinging sensation on the tip of his frozen nose, and was taught to take his hand from his mitten to cover his nose and warm it a little, careful not to rub it, or the skin and tissue would fall off. Gradually the survivors' faces became covered in scabs, which they were warned not to touch: "Let them heal by themselves—otherwise you'll find yourself without a nose in the spring."[30]

Worse torments came from the criminals who preyed upon the political prisoners in the camps just as they had in the prisons and along their transport. Within the hierarchy of the Gulag, the criminals were favored by the guards with an ideological status above the "enemies of the people." The criminals were thus encouraged to act as an internal killing machine. One Kolyma camp survivor, Anatoly Zhigulin, recalled that "their moral impact on camp life was boundless, they beat to death dozens of thousands. They corrupted hundreds of thousands. And those they corrupted equally ceased to be human." Within the camps, these criminals were not just physically stronger; they hunted in packs and possessed few, if any, moral prohibitions to limit their violence.[31]

They did, however, possess a peculiarly human weakness, reported time and again in the accounts of the survivors. Starved of entertainment, the criminals loved to listen to stories, not only anecdotes or jokes but whole works of literature, told, if possible, in an educated manner. In the camps there were prisoners who created a niche for themselves as storytellers, recounting the novels of Dumas, Conan Doyle, or H. G. Wells from memory in exchange for an extra ration of bread.[32] In this way, too, Thomas Sgovio's life was saved, as the criminals asked him curious questions about America, and he told colorful stories of famous gangsters such as Al Capone and John Dillinger, or of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. And when Thomas exhausted his gangster tales, he would switch to the stories of O. Henry, which carried a satisfying twist in the tail for his discerning audience.[33]

Later they taught him how to make tattoos with homemade needles and ink from a chunk of burnt rubber mixed with a little sugar and water. On

their bodies, Thomas Sgovio inked the markings of their subculture, from simple scrolls—I LOVE MY MOTHER—to elaborate tableaux of a bottle of vodka, the ace of spades, and a naked girl, Our Ruin.[34] The criminals' tattoos carried an ever-present symbolism created to inspire fear in others. Skulls on fingers counted the number of murders committed, the spires of cathedrals or monasteries the number of years spent within the prison system. On their shoulders, the criminal leaders had tattooed the epaulettes of the White Army, and by this self-identification, a strict hierarchy was enforced.[35] In Thomas' camp, a criminal leader named Goncharov had taken a shine to the young American and offered him some advice: "We give you extra food. Just don't let your spirits fall. If you live through this first winter, the chances are about fifty-fifty that you'll survive the next. You're still young." With this help, Thomas Sgovio survived his first winter in Kolyma, while others were dying all around.[36]

To survive long-term was much harder. Each prisoner had to find a way to remove himself from the physical labor in the goldfields. There was a common piece of advice in the Soviet concentration camps—"You can only survive on a function"—which emphasized the necessity of finding a precious job as a cook, a camp clerk, or a medical orderly, or any other role away from the mines, which killed without fail.[37] Thomas' function came when the camp authorities chose to make use of his expertise as a sign painter for their propaganda displays. Transferred to a new camp, he gained temporary respite painting the slogans chosen to boost the morale of the prisoners sent out to work. OUR SELFLESS LABOR WILL RESTORE US TO THE FAMILY OF WORKERS was a typical example of a propaganda slogan inscribed over the gates of the Kolyma camps—it was the Soviet precursor to ARBEIT MACHT FREI.[38]

Now Thomas was fearful lest he ruin his good fortune by making grammatical mistakes in his rudimentary Russian. The rest of the Americans from his transport were dead, so he was surprised one afternoon when he heard a voice call out "Hello" to him in English. He turned to see the smiling face of Alex Shopik, one of the Pittsburgh miners who had been

sent to Kolyma on the same transport as his friend Marvin Volat. Although Marvin had died in the camps, Alex Shopik had survived thus far working in the camp engineer's office, where he was given the task of translating the instruction manuals for two American excavating machines, newly imported to boost Dalstroi's gold production. Thomas Sgovio and Alex Shopik's friendship would, however, prove to be only fleeting. When Shopik's translation duties ended, he was reassigned to general work and quickly became a *dokhodyaga.* In the ever-worsening conditions, and despite Thomas' efforts to send him extra food, he soon died.[39]

In 1931, Alex Shopik had been one of a party of seventy-five American miners emigrating to the USSR from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At the beginning of the decade, their stirring speeches had been reported in the newspaper *Sovietskaya Sibir*: *"We the members of the fifth group of miners which have been exploited by the bosses of Amerika, and thrown out of work for our services into the thirteen million army of unemployed have decided to leave that capitalist country and help the Soviet Union . . . We, ourselves, have come to Soviet Russia not to sleep but to work and work with all our power to help and complete the Five Year Plan."*[40] No one counted how many of the seventy-five American miners ever returned home, or how many of their lives ended in solitary deaths scattered in camps across the Gulag Archipelago. In their eagerness, they had all been as innocent as children.

IN A CAMP HOSPITAL in Kolyma, Elinor Lipper, a young Dutch socialist arrested in Moscow, had gained temporary reprieve as a nurse. With almost no resources, she attempted to help the prisoners regain their strength, but her best efforts were in vain. Their cause of death was invariably starvation or the consequences thereof, which left the body vulnerable to disease or the slightest infection, which would quickly kill.[41] Elinor Lipper noticed that the female prisoners seemed to survive in greater numbers than the male, perhaps because they had a greater determination to live, or possibly

because they were marginally better treated. But her observation was only relative. The female prisoners also succumbed to starvation and disease, and were subject to executions just like the men.

Of the many women coerced into prostitution to save their lives in the camps, some became pregnant, but they were kept at work until their final month of pregnancy. The mothers were allowed to nurse their babies until they were nine months old, at which point the children's heads would be shaved before they were transferred to the camp orphanage. Growing up in camp conditions, the children ran wild, unable to speak because they were hardly spoken to, communicating in grunts and howls. There were so many young babies in one orphanage that it took a prisoner-nurse an hour and a half to change all their diapers. Uncared for and deprived of a mother's attention, the youngest ones died in droves.[42] Only very occasionally could it be clandestinely arranged for a mother to see her child. Thus a three-year-old girl whose entire life had been lived within "the zone" was led to see the face of a prisoner through a snow-covered window. And then a very frightened woman spoke to her for the first time: "Daughter, I'm your mother."[43]

The older surviving children were taught songs: "I'm a little girl, I sing and I play. I haven't seen Stalin but I love him each day."[44] On every orphanage wall was hung the same picture that could be seen all over the Soviet Union. It showed Stalin, "the Greatest Friend of Soviet Families," holding a pretty little girl in his arms above the inscription THANK YOU, COMRADE STALIN, FOR A HAPPY CHILDHOOD. The photograph became a ubiquitous image of Stalinism. Later it was discovered that the six-year-old girl's father and mother had both been killed in the Terror.[45]

In Elinor Lipper's hospital a group of prisoner-doctors attempted to keep a record of the crimes they had witnessed, so that future generations might at least be informed of what had taken place within the camps. But as so often happened—since every aspect of Soviet life was riddled with informers—their plan to create a historical archive was betrayed. The doctors judged to be ringleaders were shot, and the rest were given lengthy additions to their sentences. As one of the few survivors, Elinor Lipper

resolved to commit to memory all she had seen, for the sake of those who lost their lives.[46]

SEVERAL THOUSAND KILOMETERS farther west, in central Russia, another surviving American, Victor Herman, was suffering equal hardships in a concentration camp named Burelopom, or "Stormbeaten." Within the Gulag there was a policy of naming many camps after themes from nature — Mineral, Mountain, Oak, Steppe, Seashore, River, Lake, and Watershed — which belied their ferocity.[47] Like the others, Victor Herman's camp was encircled by a wooden stockade and guarded by watchtowers standing at diagonal corners. The actions of its commander had given Burelopom the justified reputation of a death camp.

Starvation here, too, was routine. The prisoners attempted to trap rats with sticks or pull up weeds to chew on their roots and supplement their meager ration. Every day they were marched out into the forest to cut down the surrounding birch, maple, and pine trees. During the winter, as the snow piled ever thicker, more and more prisoners fell short of their norms and, on punishment rations, died of starvation. The few who attempted to escape were either shot immediately or hunted down by dogs and returned to the camp. They were then placed in an isolator dug into the frozen ground into which the guards would throw water until the prisoners froze in the winter temperatures.[48]

Just as in Kolyma, Victor Herman witnessed scenes of extreme violence committed by the criminals, and condoned or encouraged by the guards. Often the violence was inflicted only out of boredom, almost casually, for "fun." Across the Gulag, the criminals played a card game called "loser cuts," in which a knife would be taken to the nose, ear, or head of a randomly selected victim. In the barracks, Victor Herman overheard them discussing the rules: *"See that one there—the bald one? His nose. The one with the scar over his eye and the limp? Him. His life."* On another occasion, he witnessed the NKVD guards lead a gang of criminals out into a clearing of the forest to rape a transport of female prisoners newly arrived by train and still dressed in their summer clothes. A criminal leader who attacked a heavily pregnant woman was hacked to death in front of them all.[49]

It was then, as he struggled to survive in their midst, that Victor Herman became aware of the degenerative effect such violence was having upon his psyche. Worse yet, he was conscious of a vague feeling of "excitement" or "zest," provoked by his exposure to this violence. In the camps, he felt an increasing sense of shame and wondered if something "evil" had not begun to grow inside him that caused him to stay silent, and the other political prisoners to keep away.[50] After his torture in prison, anger was always very close to the surface. He had fought to gain a place on the upper bunk of the train during his transport, which protected him from being crushed with the other prisoners, some of whom had died before the train even left the station. Transferred on to a new camp from Burelopom, Victor fought again for a place nearest the stove, when the prisoners were forced to live in tents covered in Iceland moss.51 Soon they were shipped farther north to a place named Fosforitnaya, where he was ordered to cut down pine trees and punished for infractions by being sent to work in the phosphorus mine next to the camp. After only two or three days' work in the mine, the weakest prisoners began to cough up blood and quickly died. Victor was sent to the phosphorus mine seven times, but on each occasion he survived his punishment and was returned to general labor cutting down trees.[52]

Transferred back to Burelopom, at hard-labor camp No. 231/1, he met other American emigrants from Detroit and elsewhere. Among them he befriended Albert "Red" Lonn, the former captain of the American baseball team of Petrozavodsk, the champions of 1934. All that was lost after Lonn's arrest as a "Very Dangerous Person" and his three-year sentence in the camps. With him in Burelopom were others whose names Victor remembered as Benny Murrto, "Blackie" Pessonen, and Jim Domyano. Together they reminisced about the lives they had left behind in Detroit, and tried to encourage one another to survive. Albert Lonn's warmth and good humor, in particular, helped to restore a feeling of humanity to Victor, which he knew he had lost in the violence of the camps. Albert told him also that the guards in Burelopom did not want the prisoners to survive. The Americans, therefore, never walked through the camp alone. They traveled in groups, armed with clubs, to ward off the criminals' attacks.[53]

Victor Herman was briefly transferred to prison in Gorky, his presence required there by the unexplained machinations of the NKVD. On his return to Burelopom, he discovered that Benny Murrto had died. He was transferred once again to build another subcamp for the expanding numbers of prisoners. After a punishment in the camp isolator, his toes became frostbitten. The camp doctor removed the dead flesh with a pair of scissors, and Victor Herman was again sent out to work.[54]

None of the Americans surviving in the Soviet camps had any idea of the wider world around them. Transported to the remote outposts of a totalitarian state, they were cut off from the outside world, with no knowledge of the rapidly unfolding pace of world events. While public opinion in the West showed little concern for the existence of the millions in the Gulag camps, whose lives were reduced to a daily struggle to survive the greater purpose organized to kill them.

BY THE END of the decade, very few Americans could even remember the emigrants who had traveled to Russia at the Depression's height. At the New York World's Fair in 1939, few protested against the grand opening of the Soviet Pavilion or the party for a thousand VIP guests at which an orchestra alternately played "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "The Internationale" for NBC's new television cameras. Drawn by the fanfare and publicity, millions of American visitors flocked to see this lavishly expensive pavilion, which advertised the bold achievements of the Soviet Union to the world. Ordinary New Yorkers jostled into its entrance marked by twin columns of marble, each carved with the giant faces of Lenin and Stalin. Beneath Stalin's profile was the inscription FOR THE USSR, SOCIALISM IS SOMETHING ALREADY ACHIEVED AND WON. Then they marveled at the life-size replica of the Mayakovsky Square metro station, and believed those words to be true.[55]

At the opening ceremony, Stalin's regime received the enthusiastic endorsement of the popular mayor of New York, Fiorello La Guardia, who

delivered a warm welcoming speech in front of the microphones:

The Soviet architects deserve the highest praise for the beautiful concept and design of this building. I believe that in your exhibition here the opportunity will present itself to show to the American people what has been accomplished by a young government in an old country. After all our own country, our own concept of government was the result of a bloody revolution. We did not obtain freedom by requesting it on a postcard and receiving it on an engraved certificate. We fought for it. And you know, Mr. Ambassador, our young republic was not so very popular with the dynasties of Europe at the time . . . All beginnings are difficult. But I believe that there are contributions that have been made by your government which should be recognized by all.[56]

Outside the Soviet Pavilion, a 250-foot-tall stainless-steel statue of a heroic *Soviet Worker* had been constructed to serve as a landmark and tourist attraction. The statue was quickly christened “Big Joe” by New Yorkers, and held in its outstretched hand a five-pointed red star measuring ten feet in diameter. At night the red star was lit with the powerful brightness of a five-thousand-watt lamp. The Second World War had just recently begun, and across the Lagoon of Nations other pavilions, representing the independent democracies of Poland and the Baltic states, were consumed in the aftermath of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. But in the cool night air of fall, “Big Joe” held the red Soviet star aloft high over the World’s Fair, shining out beyond the fields of Flushing Meadows and across the whole of old New York.[57]

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June 22, 1941

Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature— that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov[1]

The buildup to World War II changed Kolyma. By 1939, the system of repression in the Soviet Union was bursting at the seams. The NKVD was operating beyond capacity, gathering information faster than it could be used—one tenth of the population might possibly be arrested, but not half. And so, quite abruptly, the Terror was scaled back. Overnight, the orders of the NKVD were no longer approved by "the Commissar of State Security, Nikolai Yezhov." Instead, a story appeared on the back page of *Pravda,* just a few lines to say that Yezhov had resigned, and immediately afterward his photograph disappeared from the public sphere.

At the closed military tribunal, the fallen commissar pleaded vainly for his life: *"I was always by nature unable to stand violence against my person. For that reason I wrote all sorts of rubbish . . . I was subjected to the severest beating."*[2] Yezhov even attempted to defend himself: *"If they now accuse me of violating legality let them first of all ask that bitch Vyshinsky . . . He was the Union Procurator, not me. He had to take care of legality. By the way, Comrade Stalin knew all about it."*[3] Yezhov was shot as a "British spy," since, during the period of Stalin's alliance with Hitler, the spies of the Soviet Union had, with preternatural cunning, switched their allegiances from Nazi Germany to the "British imperialists."

When the German foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, flew to Moscow to sign the pact, the Soviet chiefs of protocol realized late that there were no Nazi flags available to greet him, and in a panic they had to use stage props from an anti-Nazi propaganda film. As a Soviet military band played the unfamiliar "Horst Wessel Song" to welcome their guests, Gebhardt von Walther, an attendant German diplomat, whispered to his colleague, "Look how the Gestapo officers are shaking hands with their counterparts of the NKWD and how they are all smiling at each other. They're obviously delighted finally to be able to collaborate."[4]

At 2:00 A.M. on August 24, 1939, the pact was signed by Ribbentrop and Vyacheslav Molotov, who had recently replaced Maxim Litvinov as the new and necessarily non-Jewish Soviet foreign minister. In the Kremlin ceremony, a delighted Stalin raised his glass in a toast: "I know how much the German nation loves its Führer," he said. "I should therefore like to drink to his health."[5] The official German photographer, Helmut Laux, snatched a picture of the Soviet dictator at that moment with his glass raised, which caused Stalin to suggest that it might not be wise to publish that particular photo. When Helmut Laux started to remove the film from his camera, Stalin waved him to stop: "I trust the word of a German," he said. And thus, over champagne toasts in the early hours of the Kremlin morning, the Second World War had effectively begun.[6]

One week after their pact was signed, Hitler's armies invaded Poland from the West. Two weeks later, on September 14, 1939, the Red Army occupied their predetermined portion of eastern Poland almost unnoticed. The cynical choreography of the division prompted Benito Mussolini's observation: "Bolshevism is dead. In its place is a kind of Slavonic fascism."[7] In Moscow, a program of cultural exchange was organized to strengthen ties between the two totalitarian regimes, with Wagner's Ring Cycle arranged for the Bolshoi Theatre, and German businessmen once again crowding the tables at the Metropol Hotel.[8] Over Soviet radio, Foreign Minister Molotov broadcast lectures on the "progressive" nature of the Nazi regime, which had successfully eliminated unemployment with its

autobahn construction projects. Fascism was now simply "a matter of taste."[9]

In December 1939, an exchange of telegrams between Hitler and Stalin was published in the Soviet press: "*Mr Joseph Stalin, Moscow. Please accept my most sincere congratulations on your sixtieth birthday. I take this occasion to tender my best wishes. I wish you personally good health and a happy future of the people of the friendly Soviet Union. Adolf Hitler.*" To which Stalin politely answered: "*Herr Adolf Hitler, Head of the German State, Berlin. Please accept my appreciation of the congratulations and thanks for our good wishes with respect to the peoples of the Soviet Union. J. Stalin.*" [10] Such courtesies would, of course, soon be excised from Soviet history, along with every other trace of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. During the war, even to mention its existence became punishable with a ten-year sentence under Article 58 of the Soviet criminal code. In such circumstances, people quickly lost their ability to remember.[11]

As Norway and France fell before the Nazi blitzkrieg, and with London bombed relentlessly through the Blitz, Stalin lifted not one finger in support of the Western democracies. Even the notion of Soviet assistance was absurd, as the Red Army invaded Finland in the so-called Winter War of December 1939. On June 18, 1940, after the collapse of France, Vyacheslav Molotov sent Adolf Hitler a message of praise via the German ambassador, Schulenburg, to express "*the warmest congratulations of the Soviet Government on the splendid success of the German Armed Forces.*"[12] Fulfilling his role as Hitler's ally, Stalin authorized the export of the necessary raw materials required by the Nazi blitzkrieg. Through the course of 1940, Stalin delivered more than 700,000 tons of Russian oil to the victorious Nazi armies. Traveling west across the Soviet-German frontier, alongside cargos of iron ore and wheat, was also a hidden trade in human beings. Since, as one of the conditions of their pact, Adolf Hitler had demanded that which Franklin Roosevelt scarcely knew existed; the return of his nationals from the USSR.[13]

Those Germans and Austrian nationals still alive in Soviet prisons or camps were ordered to be sent back to the Reich. Thus the Austrian

communist Franz Koritschoner, who had been arrested in Kiev in 1936 and tortured into an abject confession by the NKVD—*"I stand as a criminal before Soviet power. I request nothing more than to be shot as soon as possible as a criminal. My many years of service to the Communist cause are not grounds for mercy"*—was delivered into the arms of the Gestapo.[14] Margarete Buber, the wife of a German communist, was removed from the brutal Karaganda Gulag and returned to Moscow for questioning: *"Has your health suffered in any way during your stay in the reformatory camp?" "Good heavens, no. What a question!"* The NKVD kept her until her hair grew out and she had put on sufficient weight for her return to Germany, since in the words of another survivor: "They don't want to hand over a band of skeletons; it would look bad."[15]

At Brest-Litovsk, Margarete Buber watched as the SS and the NKVD exchanged salutes and pleasantries while the latest consignment of fifty prisoners was exchanged over a bridge. Photographs were taken of the Soviet and Nazi secret police socializing in their respective uniforms over a triumphal archway decorated with both a swastika and the hammer and sickle, next to the ubiquitous portrait of Stalin.[16] Along with the German prisoners, the NKVD handed the SS their official documentation, presumably as some form of professional courtesy. Virtually all the German prisoners were avowed anti-Nazis destined to be transported directly into Hitler's concentration camps. Franz Koritschoner was murdered at Auschwitz in June 1941. Margarete Buber was consigned to the women's camp at Ravensbrück, where she found herself shunned by those German communists who had never been to Russia. They accused her of spreading lies about Stalin and the Soviet Union.[17]

IN OCCUPIED POLAND, Red Army soldiers experienced a similar conflict between ideology and the outward expression of reality. "Comrade Colonel," one soldier was reported to have asked, "didn't we come to Poland to liberate our brothers, oppressed by landowners and capitalists? . .

. A peasant has three or four horses, five or six cows, there is a bicycle in front of every house. Workers wear suits, hats—the same as a big Soviet director. There is something here that I don't understand."[18] The Red Army soldiers of the Polish campaign brought back news of shops piled high with goods, a world without queues or ration cards, where the ordinary workers' flats had running water and two taps: "You turn one tap and you get hot water; you turn another—it's cold." Poland was almost miraculous, as if communism had finally arrived in the very place it had never been attempted.[19]

Inevitably, the NKVD followed in the Red Army's wake to clear the population of all "enemies of the people." In this process, approximately 1.7 million Poles were arrested and transported east into the Soviet camps.[20] The Polish families were separated, the men from the women and children, although the NKVD did not inform them at the outset, in order to avoid needless hysteria and consequent delay. Rather, they were told to pack their toiletries separately, since they would be led to separate places for a sanitary inspection.[21] The Poles were then pressed and shut into crowded cattle cars, to be tormented by thirst and cold during the long journey to the terminal points of the Gulag. At Kotlas, in the northern Russian province of Archangel, the trains traveled slowly for ten days across a landscape of barbed wire and watchtowers. A Polish survivor recounted how twelve railroad tracks conjoined at the end of the line, each one occupied by a prison train disgorging thousands upon thousands of frail human beings, their faces blue with cold, shivering in temperatures well below freezing. This mass of humanity was then divided by the tall figures of the NKVD officers wearing long coats, black leather boots, and guns.[22]

With the world's attention focused on the fall of France, the Red Army occupied the formerly independent Baltic states almost unnoticed. Just as in Poland, the NKVD arrested the "enemies of the people" en masse. Approximately 1.2 million Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians were deported by train, and disappeared into the inexhaustible Gulag.[23]

What serious hope did President Roosevelt have when he asked his acting secretary of state, Sumner Welles, to negotiate with Soviet

ambassador Konstantin Oumansky in Washington? The president's intention was to persuade Stalin to withdraw from his alliance with Hitler, which Roosevelt lightheartedly described as "Stalin's Mugwump policy."[24] As Sumner Welles sat down to barter with Oumansky, the lives of the Americans in Russia depended on the negotiating skills of this childhood friend of Roosevelt's, like him a product of Groton and Harvard. When Oumansky asked for American engineers to be sent to Russia to provide technical assistance for the manufacture of high-octane aviation fuel, Sumner Welles refused the request: *"So long as American citizens were not given freedom of movement and were not allowed at will to appear at the American Embassy at Moscow, this Government did not feel that it could afford to facilitate the visits of American citizens to the Soviet Union by the issuance to them of passports."*

His statement showed that, at the very least, the acting secretary of state was aware of the American emigrants' continued existence in Russia. For his part, Oumansky cynically wondered if these citizens "really were Americans at all" and answered that he would have to report back to Moscow.[25] But whereas Adolf Hitler had successfully managed to retrieve his nationals from Russia only to have them killed out of "motiveless malignity," neither Sumner Welles nor Franklin Roosevelt was willing, or even attempted, to force the diplomatic issue any further.

ALTHOUGH HE WAS warned by American and British intelligence for several months beforehand, the Nazi invasion of June 22, 1941, appeared to take Stalin completely by surprise. It was left to Molotov to break the news to the public over the radio:

Citizens of the Soviet Union: the Soviet government and its head, Comrade Stalin have authorized me to make the following statement. Today at 4 o'clock in the morning, without any claim having been presented to the

Soviet Union, without a declaration of war, German troops attacked our borders at many points . . . The attack on our country was perpetrated despite the fact that a treaty on non-aggression had been signed between the USSR and Germany, and that the Soviet Government has most faithfully abided by all the provisions of this treaty.[26]

For the Red Army officers who had survived the Terror, the outbreak of war represented their best hope of salvation. Eighty percent of the Red Army command, from majors up, had already been killed by the NKVD. Marshal Rodion Malinovsky, the Soviet defense minister after Stalin's death, later quoted a figure of eighty-two thousand executions. It was, said Malinovsky, as if a crystal vase containing their most experienced commanders had been wantonly smashed, and "on the eve of the war, we found ourselves decapitated." [27] For the Russian officers who survived the Terror, the Second World War would prove to be a safer experience. Fewer would die on the Eastern Front, the greatest theater of conflict in modern history, than had been already killed by the NKVD. Thus Konstantin Rokossovsky, a future marshal of the Soviet Union and defense minister of Poland, was flown back from Kolyma ready to resume his military career with his teeth kicked out. In the Kremlin, Stalin questioned him: "Konstantin Konstantinovich, did they beat you up there?" "They did, Comrade Stalin," replied Rokossovsky.[28]

For ordinary citizens, the outbreak of war was a breathing space in Russia, a time of relative freedom after the overwhelming fear that had dominated their lives before. Foreigners discovered Muscovites to have become peculiarly more cheerful upon hearing the news of war. The visiting American writer Erskine Caldwell wrote: "On face after face smiles broke out, plainly indicating genuine happiness that at last they would give full vent to their long-pent-up emotions."[29] Meanwhile, Joseph Stalin had disappeared from sight altogether, refusing to meet any of his staff between June 24 and July 2, 1941, a week that Khrushchev later claimed had been lost to a drinking binge.[30] Stunned by the rapid German advances, and fully aware that his personal safety was at risk, Stalin retreated to his dacha

outside Moscow. When Politburo members arrived to visit, he shrank away from them in fear, his voice becoming tense as if he expected to be arrested. "What have you come for?" Stalin asked. The loyal functionaries replied that they wished to create a State Committee for Defense with Stalin at its head.[31]

It took until July 3, 1941, for Stalin to finally address the nation for the first time in three years. His radio speech was made at 6:00 A.M. without any forewarning, just a statement that loudspeakers should be left on at that time. The reason for the strange scheduling, the visiting American journalist Alice-Leone Moats learned, was that Stalin spoke Russian with a thick Georgian accent, "like an Italian waiter in an American movie speaks English." When the Great Leader sipped his water, the clink of the glass was heard from Moscow to Vladivostok: *"Comrades, citizens, brothers and sisters, fighters of our Red Army and Navy! I am speaking to you, my friends! . . ."* [32]

In western Ukraine, villagers greeted the invading Nazi armies with the traditional Slavic gifts of bread and salt. The older peasants touched the black crosses on the German tanks in awe, naïvely believing them to be emissaries of Christ.[33] Statues of Stalin were pulled down and beaten furiously with pickaxes, and when Soviet planes were shot down, the villagers laughed and clapped their hands, announcing that Stalin's regime would soon fall.[34] The Ukrainian famine had taken place just eight years earlier, followed by a vengeful and very bloody Terror. Millions of Ukrainian lives had been already lost to Stalin. Perhaps if a father watches his children starve to death in his arms, he might welcome the devil himself.

In Moscow the chimneys of the offices of the Soviet government billowed with smoke, as the records of the NKVD, the Foreign Ministry, and the Prosecutor's Office were burned, destroying the evidence of their crimes. In October 1941, the first snows settling in Moscow were "sooty with burnt paper." As the German armies advanced to the very outskirts of the city, witnesses saw Communist Party members committing the ultimate sacrilege of tearing up their Party cards and flushing away the pieces into the sewers. Others just tossed the cards into the street, with their names and pictures safely scratched off. The pieces littered the Moscow pavements.

The action was both a measure of people’s fear and an assessment of the likelihood of Moscow’s fall, amid well-founded rumors that brigades of the SS were executing Communist Party officials. Moscow’s Jewish population was particularly conscious of the horror that awaited them if they were caught in the city.[35] The Luftwaffe had recently dropped leaflets over Moscow with the words “Death to all Jews” written in heavy Teutonic typeface. Underneath was the information that the leaflet should be kept as a guarantee of safe conduct to the German side.[36]

That summer Moscow was lit up with antiaircraft fire shooting red, green, and orange tracers into the night sky. The defense of the city against the Luftwaffe was deafening as shrapnel rained down over rooftops and city streets.[37] The Soviet commissariats were evacuated, and the most famous buildings and bridges in Moscow were all mined with explosives. During the night, the embalmed body of Lenin—the most sacred relic of the atheist state—was removed from its marble mausoleum in Red Square. Vladimir Ilyich was evacuated on the same train to Kuibyshev as the American diplomatic corps and reporters.[38] Earlier that day, on October 15, 1941, the Americans had gathered in the courtyard of Spaso House amid the noise of approaching gunfire. A thousand-pound German bomb had recently blown out the Spaso House windows, and now a Russian chauffeur was taking bets on whether Nazi tanks had already entered Moscow.[39]

It was during the diplomatic evacuation that many of the confidential files of the American embassy in Moscow were destroyed, and much of the history of the American emigration to the USSR was lost.[40] Appropriately enough, the evacuation train carrying Lenin’s body and the American diplomats had cars attached filled with prisoners—since even in moments of the highest crisis, the needs of the Gulag were met and the system of repression remained firmly intact. When the American diplomats reached the safety of Kuibyshev, their NKVD minders stood out even more conspicuously in this closed city on the banks of the Volga. Eight hundred kilometers southeast of Moscow, the same faces patroled the relocated buildings of the foreign embassies in case anyone should have the foolish idea that the normal rules no longer applied.[41]

IN KUIBYSHEV, just as in Moscow, the diplomats were harried by a few surviving American exiles, often female family members who had escaped the NKVD thus far. Anna and Anastasia Wardamsky, for example, called at the new American embassy building in February 1942, hysterical after their father had disappeared and their third sister, Helena, had fallen "sick with nerves." The Wardamsky sisters described how their American passports had been confiscated by the Soviet authorities, and Anna frantically complained that "the Embassy was not protecting them." As their family waited for the hundreds of dollars they needed to pay their passage home, the sisters received the written assurance from American diplomats that *"should the Soviet authorities attempt to prevail upon you to accept Soviet passports, or should efforts be made to force you to accept Soviet passports, you may inform them that any attempt on their part to force any American citizen to bear a Soviet passport involuntarily is a matter of the gravest concern to the Embassy and will be brought to the urgent attention of the Government of the United States of America."*

Inevitably their case became mired in bureaucracy, not helped by the telegrammed refusal of Sumner Welles to issue an emergency repatriation loan. As their case dragged on, the Wardamsky sisters were ordered by the NKVD to leave the closed city of Kuibyshev. In May 1942, Helena telephoned the American embassy to let them know that her sister Anna had been arrested. After the arrest, Helena continued to write frantic appeals to the diplomats asking for intervention on behalf of her missing sister. She was still waiting for the State Department to act when she received the official news that Anna Wardamsky had died in an NKVD prison, supposedly of "heart failure."[42]

As might be expected, the death certificates of Americans in Soviet custody were regularly falsified to disguise the true cause. On December 8, 1942, and January 9, 1943, embassy officials were allowed to visit the imprisoned Isaiah Oggins, a forty-five-year-old from Willimantic, Connecticut, after a sustained letter-writing campaign by his wife, Norma, in the United States. In her letters, Norma Oggins had stressed the need of their eleven-year-old son, Robin, to see his father. The boy, she wrote, was "as promising a young American as ever lived." Although the American diplomats were allowed to visit Isaiah Oggins, nothing more was done to

obtain the release of the former American Communist Party member, imprisoned since February 1939.[43]

For their part, the Soviet security services had no intention of ever allowing Isaiah Oggins to return home. A letter was sent from Victor Abakumov— a protégé of the new secret police chief, Lavrenty Beria—to Stalin in connection with the case:

The appearance of Oggins in the USA might be used by persons hostile to the Soviet Union for active propaganda against the USSR. Based on this, the MGB of the USSR considers it necessary to execute Oggins, and then to report to the Americans that after the meeting of Oggins with the representatives of the American Embassy in June of 1943, he was returned to the place of confinement in Norilsk and died there in 1946 in hospital as a result of tuberculosis of the spine. In the Norilsk camp archives we will reflect the course of Oggins' illness and medical and other aid rendered to him. Oggins' death will be recorded officially in his medical records along with an autopsy and burial certificate . . . I request your instructions. Abakumov[44]

Soon afterward, Isaiah Oggins was executed in Moscow by poison administered by an NKVD doctor named Grigory Mairanovsky. The official Soviet documentation recorded death due to "paralysis of the heart owing to acute sclerosis of the coronary artery with associated angiospams and papillary carcinoma of the urinary bladder." In the chaos of war, hardly a soul knew or cared about the solitary deaths of such victims.[45]

Nor was it easy to imagine there were still a few naïve Americans attempting to emigrate to the USSR. Edward Speier was a thirty-six-year-old metalworker from Detroit who had taken the latest proclamations of Soviet-American friendship perhaps a little too seriously. With the United States not yet in the war, Speier chose to help the Soviet cause by stowing away in a boxed locomotive loaded onto a Soviet steamer in Richmond, California. Before organizing his departure, he had told his mother,

Henrietta Speier, that he believed "the Russians would welcome the services of a skilled mechanic." He was arrested on his arrival in Vladivostok in September 1941.

Unusually, American diplomatic officials were allowed to visit Edward Speier twice during the relatively brief period of his detention, a possible sign of Stalin's new concern for American friendship. The first visit took place only weeks after Speier's arrest, on December 20, 1941. In his interview, the rugged-looking metalworker—whose black hair and hazel eyes stare out defiantly from his photograph—described himself as one of *"Uncle Sam's disinherited sons, kicked around and not given a chance to work . . . In every country there are good and bad people, but whereas in the United States the bad people are running the Government in the Soviet Union the bad people are all in jail."* Edward Speier claimed that he had been persecuted many times in the United States for "stealing food and eating in restaurants without paying." The American vice consul, Donald Nichols, was left unimpressed by the visit, describing Speier in his dispatch back to Washington as "a very uncouth person who seasons his conversation liberally with profanity and obscenities."

Six months' incarceration in an NKVD prison changed Edward Speier's attitude completely. By his second visit, on March 25, 1942, Speier was denying that he had ever felt badly about the United States, and begging the American consul to help him return home. Twice the Soviet authorities asked the American officials if they wanted Speier back; otherwise "normal Soviet law would be applied." But nothing was done to save Speier, and his subsequent fate was all too predictable. According to the Soviet death certificate issued to the American diplomats, Edward Speier died on January 3, 1943, at 7:00 A.M. The chief of Speier's prisoners' convoy testified that he died of pneumonia on prison train No. 74 en route to a "reformation-labor camp" at Karaganda. His corpse, they said, was forwarded for burial at the camp. With exacting thoroughness the Soviets listed his personal effects: *"1. Warm jacket old. 2. Brown fur hat, old. 3. Knitted black hat, old. 4. Sweater woollen, old. 5. Woollen trousers, green, torn. 6. Pillow, filled with feathers. 7. Leather shoes, torn. 8. Leather shoes, torn. 9. Leather slippers, torn."*[46]

On hearing the news of her son's premature death, Henrietta Speier of San Bernardino, California, wrote a series of three letters addressed to the American diplomatic staff in Kuibyshev, which she requested to be forwarded to the Soviet authorities. In her handwritten letters, Mrs. Speier's spelling was often less than perfect:

In the very heart of your beloved land of Russia is buried my dear son Edward Henry Speier exact location being 300 meters west of the hospital of the 4th district in Karaganda Reformatory Labor Camp . . . I his mother knows that if there's any way of one knowing what happens after death to ones body I know that my son would be well pleased to be buried where he is deep in the heart of Russia. The country he learned to love and admire through books and liditure he's read . . . The only thing that might sadden my son's heart would be the thought of having to lay in a prison and paupers grave after all his efforts to help our beloved allies. He perhaps offered his services but not being trusted had to be detained. I his mother worry about his burrial. Did he have a coffen? And a rough box? you know its my very own flesh and blood no one knew and understood what a real noble heart he had. Can any one tell me how long my son was ill before he died? Did the people in who's costidy like my son? Did my son suffer hard or long before he died? Did he leave any message? To anyone. Did he work or serve Russia? . . . Did my son have cloths on when buried? Was he buried dishonarably? Hope not. Can we visit his grave after the war? . . . Can the Dr at the dispensary or Drs on train no 74 who treated my son in his illness tell me anything how my son contacted pneumonia. Sincierally Yours, Mrs Albert C. Speier. PS Can you answer me?

Lacking an answer to her questions, Henrietta Speier found her grief could only worsen. In her second letter, she continued:

All I hoped was that my son had left a last letter or made a spoken last request to me his mother as most folks do when they become very ill. I hope

my son wasn't put to death by Russian government by my son entering their country in wartime. Truly he only wanted to offer his services to our allies . . . as there been so much talk in Russian lititure stating that there was a great need for skilled help. Seeing I cant or havn't had a better explanation about cause of his death I feel so sad and fear foul play theres such a haunting unrest in my heart. My son's spirit haunts me kindly forward this to Russian officials who had charge of my son during his illness and death and buerial. Tell them I expect to come to Russia after war and if possiable have my sons remains removed to a private buerial grounds. I had a dream of a man leaving a train woke up frightened then several mo's later I got word my son passed away on train always feared my son tried to escape and was shot we're honest folks and neither our government or Russian need fear he ment to harm either government. Sincierally Yours Mrs Henrietta Speier. Kindly forward.

Henrietta Speier's third and final letter reflected a mother's gradual understanding of the truth behind her son's death:

I'm worried to distract when I read all his cloths and shoes had holes in them. No wonder my son took down with phnuemoni . . . We can thank God we live in a land of plenty among people who believe in treating prisoners of war and I'll bet even stowaways like my son was would at least be given warm enough cloths to keep them from getting ill. Like my son did. Are my letters sent direct to the Russian government? Everthing seems so hushed not enough in detail conserning my sons illness I fear he met with a terriable fate perhaps put to death . . . Sincierally Yours, Mrs Henrietta Speier, I wonder how cold it was on Jan 3, the year my son died at Karaganda Kasah? Is it very cold at Karaganda Kasah in Jan ??? . . . My God I prayed every day to God for my sons welfare surly God must of heard me. And I trusted God that he wouldn't let any harm befall my son.[47]

There is no record of any answer to Henrietta Speier's letters.

BY THE END of 1942, the conditions within the Soviet concentration camps were already well known to the American authorities. In the early stages of the war, Stalin allowed an army to be gathered from the survivors of the 1.7 million Poles consigned to the Gulag in 1939. The American journalist Alice-Leone Moats happened to be present in Kuibyshev in 1941 when a trainload of two thousand Poles arrived back from one of the camps. She found their condition heartrending:

There were sixteen corpses in the cars—men and women who had died of hunger on the way . . . By a strange coincidence I encountered a man in his thirties whom I had known well in Vienna ten years before as a rather fat and very gay young blade. It was not until he told me his name that I recognized him. Although six feet tall, he weighed only one hundred and twenty pounds; his face was gaunt and gray, most of his teeth were gone, and the short stubble of hair just growing in from the prison haircut was white. Just three days before the signing of the Russo-Polish agreement he had been condemned to death and was still dazed by his miraculous escape. A doctor who had been allowed to treat his compatriots in one camp told me that all had dysentery from hunger, one in three had scurvy, and fifty per cent of those under twenty had tuberculosis.

The so-called Anders army had been granted permission to leave the USSR to fight alongside the British. One Polish survivor of the camps remembered: “The Russians had a hard time seeing us leave. The elderly ones said it is a miracle, a true miracle. This never happened before. The younger ones envied us.”[48]

As the Poles gathered in Iran, Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Szymanski, an American military liaison officer, wrote a detailed report dated November

23, 1943, describing the facts he had learned concerning the earlier deportations of Polish men, women, and children into the Soviet Gulag:

The plan was very carefully worked out, and its purpose was the extermination of the so-called intelligentsia of Eastern Poland . . . Families were broken up and in many cases the husband shot. Very little time was given for preparation. One or two suitcases were all that was permitted to be taken . . . The destinations were forced labor camps, concentration camps, and prisons . . . Because of the lack of vitamins, scurvy, beriberi and many other diseases were prevalent. Night-blindness and loss of memory resulted from the same causes . . . Pictures taken by men in Pahlevi indicate the privations that those people had to undergo in the land of the Soviets. The children had no chance. It is estimated that 50% have already died from malnutrition. The other 50% will die unless evacuated to a land where American help can reach them. A visit to any of the hospitals in Teheran will testify to this statement. They are filled with children and adults who would be better off not to have survived the ordeal.

In his report sent back to Washington, D.C., Lieutenant-Colonel Szymanski emphasized that “overwork and undernourishment . . . have done the job of bullets.” Among the witness statements, he quoted a letter from Stanislaus Haracz to his brother in Brooklyn, New York, describing his journey to Siberia. Of the seventy people packed into their train car, *“not a single child arrived at destination, my three children died; their bodies were placed on the snow beside the car and the train moved on; that was their funeral.”* Near the end of this startling document, which read as a shocked American soldier’s first encounter with genocide, Szymanski added: *“One of Mr. Willkie’s secretarys stated to me in Tehran, that Russia and the United States will dictate the peace of Europe. When I repeated this (without mentioning the source) to a very prominent Pole in Tehran, he at first begged me not to jest, and then very sadly said to me that ‘In that case Poland has lost the war and the Allies have lost the war.’ The choice in*

Europe is not merely: Democracy vs Hitler, as so many Americans seem to think it is."

Almost as an afterthought, tucked in a folder at the very end of the report, Szymanski enclosed a series of black-and-white photographs taken of the starved Polish children in the hospitals of Tehran. It was the pictures of these children, even more than the written accounts of their suffering, that conveyed the immediate truth of what was then taking place within the Gulag camps. Here was possibly the first photographic evidence of the consequences of Stalinism on the human body. The Polish children gazed back at the camera lens unaware of their unexpected reprieve. Their tiny bodies were only skin and bone, and their bulging eyes stared out in lifeless accusation.[49] Of the 1.7 million Poles deported into Soviet Russia, only 400,000 returned and were saved. What happened to the rest—the remaining 1.3 million who simply disappeared—was revealed in the eyes of the child who was spared.

A Polish survivor of the Soviet camps, Antoni Ekart, wrote in a memoir that the *"deliberate NKVD policy of undernourishment makes it difficult to regard the majority of the camps, especially those in the North and the so-called Penal Settlements, as being in any way different from the German concentration camps with their crematoria and gas chambers. The death rate is the same."* [50] One significant difference was the lack of photographic evidence ever to emerge from the Gulag. Nor was this accidental, since photography within the wider Soviet Union, let alone the camps, was always one of the most heavily proscribed activities, guaranteed to lead to swift arrest unless overseen by the NKVD. And without the photographic evidence of their victims, the essential inhumanity of the Soviet camps could never fully enter into the Western public's consciousness, where such issues were open to judgment. Later the written evidence from the survivors might be understood intellectually, and their drawings and sketches from memory acknowledged. But as was undoubtedly true in Nuremberg, it was only the photographic evidence that elicited true comprehension from all parties, irrespective of their politics. We trust, it seems, only with our eyes.[51]

It might, therefore, appear criminally unjust that such rare evidence gathered in the early stages of the war was judged too politically sensitive ever to see the light of day. Lieutenant-Colonel Szymanski's report, and its photographs, were classified as "secret" and buried away in an archive in Washington, D.C.—"This document contains information affecting the national defense of the United States within the meaning of the Espionage Laws, Title 18, U.S.C., Sections 793 and 794. The transmission or the revelation of its contents in any manner to an unauthorized person is prohibited by law." And thus its revelations were safely hidden from the public gaze by the moral exigencies of the American-Soviet alliance.

With much of European Russia occupied, and Leningrad and Stalingrad under siege, it was perhaps difficult to rationalize how Stalin was prepared to use valuable men and scarce resources to keep millions more imprisoned. But this would be to overlook the fact that in Soviet Russia, just as in Nazi Germany, the consequences of totalitarianism accelerated in the shadow of World War II. In Kolyma, General Nikishov's principal difficulty was managing the shortage of materials he required to keep his vast operation running. Remarkably, his predicament was solved by the intervention of the United States government.

17

The American Brands of a Soviet Genocide

So that prisons should vanish forever, we built new prisons . . . So that work should become a rest and a pleasure, we introduced forced labor. So that not one drop of blood be shed any more, we killed and killed and killed.

Andrei Sinyavsky, On Socialist Realism[1]

One month after the invasion of Russia, in July 1941, Roosevelt's most trusted adviser, Harry Hopkins, flew into Moscow. A key policy maker of the New Deal, the hollow-faced Hopkins was described by one Democratic Party rival as having "a mind like a razor, a tongue like a skinning knife, a temper like a Tartar and a sufficient vocabulary of parlor profanity . . . to make a muleskinner jealous."[2] In the Kremlin he was welcomed with open arms by Joseph Stalin.

The Soviet leader now declared President Roosevelt the "best friend of the world's down-trodden," and was asking for American troops to be sent to Russia to fight alongside the Red Army under their own chain of command. It was a project involving up to thirty Allied divisions, which Winston Churchill described as "a delusion," not least because in the summer of 1941 most military intelligence experts were predicting an imminent and total Soviet collapse. Even Roosevelt's cabinet members were making private bets on whether the cities of Leningrad, Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa would all fall before September 1, 1941.[3]

For Hopkins' visit, Stalin ordered the portraits of Marx and Engels to be taken down and replaced by two large paintings of Mikhail Kutuzov and Alexander Suvorov, the traditional Russian military heroes of the pre-Revolutionary age.[4] The gambit appeared to work very well: "It is ridiculous to think of Stalin as a Communist," Hopkins reported back home. "He's a Russian nationalist." In an American magazine article, Hopkins went still further in his praise: *"He talked as he knew his troops were*

shooting— straight and hard . . . an austere, rugged, determined figure in boots that shone like mirrors, stout baggy trousers, and snug-fitting blouse. He wore no ornament, military or civilian. He's built close to the ground, like a football coach's dream of a tackle. He's about five feet six, about a hundred and ninety pounds. His hands are huge, as hard as his mind. His voice is harsh but ever under control."[5] *Harry Hopkins returned with a list of Soviet military requirements and a glowing impression of the Soviet dictator who had spoken so sincerely of "the necessity of there being a minimum moral standard between nations."*[6]

In response, Henry Morgenthau noted in his diary, President Roosevelt "went to town in a way I have never heard him go to town before. He was terrific. He said he didn't want to hear what was on order, he said he wanted to hear only what was on the water." Attempting to gain swift congressional approval for Lend-Lease aid to Russia, Roosevelt set out to persuade the American public that Stalin's regime was at the forefront of "peace and democracy in the world." At a White House press conference, the American president even ventured to claim there was freedom of religion in the Soviet Union: *"As I think I suggested a week or two ago, some of you might find it useful to read Article 124 of the Constitution of Russia,"* Roosevelt patiently explained to the White House press corps. When a reporter interrupted to ask him what it said, the president amiably continued: *"Well, I haven't learned it by heart sufficiently to quote—I might be off a little bit, but anyway: freedom of conscience . . . freedom of religion. Freedom equally to use propaganda against religion, which is essentially what the rule is in this country; only, we don't put it quite the same way."*

In the aftermath of the controversial press conference, Secretary of State Cordell Hull was immediately instructed to wire Moscow with the request that the president wanted from the "highest authorities of Soviet government some statement which can be sent to the press in this country" to confirm the truth of what he had just said. Stalin, of course, was only too happy to oblige.[7] In Moscow, the celebrated American photographer Margaret Bourke-White was given permission to take pictures of overflowing congregations in Russian churches. The images were rushed into publication for a book titled *Russia at War,* with her husband, Erskine

Caldwell, responsible for the unconvincing copy: *"The Protestant Churches had gained much with the coming of the Soviet regime and they were quick to recognize it . . . The coming of Bolshevism meant for them a chance to worship in peace, unaided by the Government, but unpersecuted by it."*

Inside the Kremlin, Margaret Bourke-White was given rare permission to photograph Stalin himself. Unnerved by her proximity to absolute power, Bourke-White appeared to have fallen headlong into the Leni Riefenstahl school of totalitarian devotion, dressing up especially for the occasion in a pair of red shoes with a red bow in her hair. Later she described their meeting: *"I thought he had the strongest face I had ever seen. When I dropped to my knees to get a low camera angle he began to laugh. And when he pressed his interpreter into work, changing flash bulbs and holding reflectors for me, he chuckled."* Afterward, as Bourke-White packed away her photography equipment, she noticed Stalin's expression had changed. *"When the smile ended, it was as though a veil had been drawn over his features. Again he looked as if he had been turned into granite, and I went away thinking that this was the strongest, most determined face I had ever seen."* [8] In the Kremlin, Stalin smoked his favorite brands of American cigarettes—the Camels, Chesterfields, and Lucky Strikes delivered as a courtesy by the American embassy along with his regular consignment of Hollywood movies. During their small talk, Margaret Bourke-White never mentioned the names of her Russian friends in government, who had helped her on her previous visits to Russia a decade earlier. They had all since vanished, and the American visitors understood that it was impolite to mention the missing. From 1938, their diplomats had coached them on the correct etiquette of silence.[9]

Had there been the slightest desire, the State Department need only have consulted their files to correct the president's claim, and confirm the truth that Russian priests of every denomination had been among the first to be arrested and killed in the atheist campaigns. Some of the victims were personally known to the American diplomats in Moscow. In November 1936, the Reverend Strekh, a Lutheran evangelist pastor who risked his life to minister to the American embassy, was arrested on the same day he was supposed to perform a marriage ceremony for the American vice consul in

Moscow.[10] The following year, Loy Henderson reported that Monsignor Frison, the apostolic administrator of the Crimea, "the last Catholic bishop remaining in the USSR," had been shot on June 27, 1937.[11]

For years, the State Department had been sent correspondence from Americans asking for intervention on behalf of the persecuted Russian clergy. A recent example was a letter sent on July 29, 1941, from Pastor Alfred Anderson of the Salem Lutheran Church of Brooklyn, New York: *"Dear Mr. President . . . Kindly have Mr. Hopkins inquire of 'Comrade Stalin' where the 40 theological students of a few years ago in the Lutheran Seminary in Moscow are today . . . Also where the 318 Lutheran pastors of that date are. We know some were shot, some sent into the woods as slaves, but where are the rest? Their blood cries up to heaven."*[12] Other letters had asked for protection for missing American clergymen in Russia; for example, from M. A. Matthew of the First Presbyterian Church of Seattle, Washington: *"My Dear Brother—I am writing you in behalf of Rev. John S. Voronaeff and his wife, Katherine Voronaeff, American citizens who have been imprisoned in Russia. Rev. Voronaeff preached here for years, had a church in this city . . . That infernal, hell bound country of Russia has no right to imprison American citizens. Will you see that these two good people are released at once?"*[13]

The question of freedom of religion, and what had happened to Russia's missing clergy, had been candidly answered by Joseph Stalin himself, in an audience given to a visiting American delegation just a few years earlier: *"The Party cannot remain neutral regarding the propagators of religious prejudices, with regard to reactionary clergy poisoning the minds of labouring masses. Have we annihilated the clergy? Yes, we have annihilated it. The trouble is that it is not yet completely liquidated."*[14] When Stalin made statements using verbs such as *annihilate* or *liquidate,* the result was always organized violence on a mass scale. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the former Politburo member Alexander Yakovlev led a human rights commission, which concluded that two hundred thousand Russian clergy had been executed during the Stalinist period.[15]

WHILE WINSTON CHURCHILL all but bankrupted the Bank of England to pay for American arms, Soviet Lend-Lease was funded on generous credit terms destined never to be repaid. “I think it is a mistake at this time to bother Stalin with any financial arrangements and take his mind off the war,” Henry Morgenthau told Hopkins in October 1941. “It would make him think we are nothing but a bunch of Yankee traitors trying to squeeze the last drop out of him. Do you feel or does the President feel that because the English paid down so much cash that we have to get so much gold from the Russians?”[16] During the course of the war, the United States shipped fifteen million tons of materials to the Soviet Union, valued at eleven billion dollars, less than half of which were munitions. An endless supply of American equipment began arriving at the wharves of Magadan, and at any other Soviet port with open water. Naturally, the American cargo was unloaded by Gulag labor.[17]

The master of the SS *City of Omaha*, Captain J. S. Schulz, spent ten months trapped in the new port of Molotovsk, thirty-five kilometers west of Archangel, penned in by ice and German bombing. The port, named after the Soviet foreign minister, had three concentration camps attached, and the Gulag prisoners who unloaded the American ships were starved to the point where they risked eating the raw flour spilled onto the decks, although they knew the penalty for such behavior was death. In his report, Captain Schulz wrote that the Soviet authorities *“were very careless about life over there. It means nothing. If a convict steps out of line—any small thing at all— they kill him.”* When the scrapings of the ship’s garbage was taken away in trucks to be fed to pigs, Captain Schultz watched one prisoner “rummaging in a garbage-filled truck and, upon refusing to leave when warned by a soldier, was bayoneted and shot.” Another Gulag prisoner was killed on the *City of Omaha*’s deck, and was left lying there until the American crew objected and the body was taken away. In his report, Captain Schultz noted

the Soviet prisoners were worked fourteen or fifteen hours a day, and included young women just seventeen years old.[18]

Approximately half the American Lend-Lease cargo was shipped to the Soviet Far East ports where the conditions in the camps were, if anything, worse than at Molotovsk. In Magadan, much of the cargo intended for use in the war against Germany was channeled by General Nikishov into the service of Dalstroi. Brand-new American icebreakers were used by the Soviets to keep sea-lanes open around Magadan, further extending the transportation season for the Dalstroi fleet. Having delivered their cargoes, the American "Liberty" ships were then converted to transport prisoners into Kolyma, while the aging Dalstroi fleet was sailed across the Pacific to shipyards on the West Coast for expensive overhaul and repair. In the United States, the NKVD steamers were reconditioned at the expense of the American taxpayer, before their quick return to service as "the death ships of the Sea of Okhotsk."

On January 31, 1942, for example, the *Dzhurma* arrived at a Seattle shipyard for an overhaul costing over half a million dollars. Before the war the *Dzhurma* had caught fire in a riot belowdecks and had limped into Magadan with the prisoners still locked in the hold. Three years later, when the American fitters opened up the ship, they were met by the same appalling stench of death.[19] Nothing was said or done, as one Dalstroi ship after another arrived in America for refitting and, having been made seaworthy again, returned to Vladivostok to pick up more prisoners, often on the very next voyage. Without the NKVD fleet, the operations within Kolyma would have become impossible to sustain. The ships were an essential link in the mechanism, required to replace the prisoners who had died, and to expand still further the network of concentration camps. It was as if the Reichministry had arranged to have its railway engines repaired in Philadelphia and then shipped back across the Atlantic to recommence their journeys to Auschwitz.

AT THE TIME, it was the surviving American prisoners such as Thomas Sgovio or Victor Herman who felt the keenest sense of outrage at the most famous brand names of American industry being used in the service of the death camps. In Kolyma, Thomas Sgovio witnessed the arrival of enormous black, fifty-ton American Diamond trucks with trailers and iron sides, and five-ton Studebakers that could easily manage the unforgiving terrain. These American trucks were used to transport prisoners across the vast distances of Russian wilderness into the camps.

Within the Kolyma camps and mines, suddenly everything was American: the machinery, the tools, the shovels; even the detonators and blasting equipment were all "Made in the U.S.A." In one camp, the prisoner Varlam Shalamov, a former law student from Leningrad, described watching the NKVD guards eating "magical jars of American sausage."[20] Meanwhile, Thomas Sgovio was fed a new kind of soup, one that tasted very different from any other he had been given and, astonishingly, contained meat and bones. For two weeks the prisoners ate what they were given, reassuring themselves that the meat must be reindeer from the Yakut breeding farms. Eventually they heard that the cooks in the camp kitchens had stolen the American canned pork and replaced it with the bodies of the dead. The prisoners hardly flinched when they heard this news. They were all too starved to care.[21]

In her women's camp, the Dutch nurse Elinor Lipper blessed the Americans for delivering their flour in such splendid white bags. The bags could be turned into extra clothing to protect the prisoners from the extreme cold, a practice that spread rapidly through the camps of Kolyma. And thus the starving Gulag legions became clad in American flour bags, whose brand names ran across their emaciated bodies in irregular patterns, like a Cubist rendering of suffering.[22] The prisoners' desperation for food was revealed when the American bulldozers were first delivered, each with its own barrel of machine grease. Varlam Shalamov watched one barrel attacked by a crowd of starving prisoners, who convinced themselves that the grease was "Lend-Lease butter." By the time a guard arrived to protect the "food for machines," only half the barrel was left.[23]

Nor did the arrival of the bulldozers ease the burden of the prisoners' labor. Shalamov witnessed how the first American bulldozer was driven out of the camp away from the mines, to the place where a series of stone pits had begun to slide down the mountain. The pits contained the bodies of the male and female prisoners who had been shot, beaten, or starved to death at that particular camp. Newly exposed to the elements after months or years underground, their bare skeletal bodies had been perfectly preserved by the extreme cold. Standing on the side of the mountain watching the bulldozer rebury the bodies, Varlam Shalamov described how even the expressions on the faces of the dead could still be recognized: "They were just bare skeletons over which stretched dirty, scratched skin bitten all over by lice . . . eyes burning with a hungry gleam." He also realized that what he had witnessed was only a pitifully small part of a vast world of hundreds of camps, and that so many more "could be hidden in the folds of a mountain."[24]

At the end of the war, Allied investigators found it difficult to comprehend how one million people could have been killed in the few acres of the Nazi extermination camp at Treblinka. Only after the downfall of the regime, and the arrival of the victorious Allied armies, could the enormity of the crime be revealed—and later, at Nuremberg, a measure of justice brought to bear. In the Soviet Union there was never a victorious army to expose the consequences of Stalin's rule; nor would there ever be a Nuremberg. Instead, the victims of Kolyma, and every other terminal point of the Gulag, remained concealed even as the killings continued unabated. In Kolyma, the rhetorical question Joseph Goebbels had asked in his diary actually came true: *"For when we win who will question us on our methods?"*[25]

VAST TERRITORIAL LOSSES in western Russia only accelerated the destructiveness of the NKVD. Foreigners from within the Gulag population, in particular, were targeted for execution. In Kolyma they were placed into

convoys of trucks driving toward the extermination center at Serpantinnaya. Thomas Sgovio was selected for the Serpantinnaya list three times. On each occasion his life was saved by the intervention of an NKVD officer who had taken a personal interest in the young American prisoner. To circumvent the order, Lieutenant Terentyev would telegraph headquarters stating that he required Sgovio's sign-painting skills. Spared by the miracle of a compassionate NKVD officer, Thomas continued his "function" as a sign painter in the war—A GRAM OF GOLD IS A CANNON SHOT IN THE HEART OF THE ENEMY! THE FATHERLAND DEMANDS MORE GOLD! But his good fortune could not last forever.[26]

All prisoners were regularly transferred within the system of camps to prevent overfamiliarization, and soon Thomas Sgovio was returned to gold mining. His situation worsened further with his transfer into the so-called Valley of Death, located some six hundred kilometers north of Magadan.[27] In his new camp, Thomas watched twenty-strong brigades of prisoners, who had themselves no more than a month or two to live, making two trips daily up a slope just over two kilometers from the compound. On their shoulders these men carried the frozen corpses of prisoners to a burial site. When three or four hundred bodies were stacked like logs on the slope, a burial brigade bored holes into the frozen earth and blasted out pits with explosives. The pits were then filled with the dead.[28]

There was no electricity at Camp No. Seven, since it was too far north. At night the darkness concealed a level of violence so high that the guards did not attempt to step inside.[29] Driven to fury by hunger, all human qualities of the prisoners became submerged beneath the animal desire to survive the work, and the killings within the zone. Even as the prisoners died, a steady stream of new arrivals filled their ranks, delivered in the holds of the Gulag fleet. Reduced by overwork to a ninety-pound skeleton, Thomas Sgovio gradually realized that he, too, had become a *dokhodyaga*. Anticipating his death, Thomas tattooed his name on his hip so that if, years later, his body was ever discovered frozen in the ground, someone might at least know of his existence.[30]

Instead, another intervention occurred. His brigadier, a Russian engineer named Dmitry Prokhorov, took pity on him and sent him for a medical examination. When Thomas undressed for the first time that winter in the local camp hospital, every bone was projecting from his body. The doctor who examined him told him, "You are as emaciated as any living skeleton I have seen, but it's amazing you have the heart of a horse. I can't put you in the hospital at all." Thomas was then returned to work in Camp No. Seven. Days from death, a second respite occurred: *"It was always like this, every time I was about to die, something happened. God saved me, I think."* [31]

His brigadier, Prokhorov, had spoken to the camp bread cutter, who commissioned Thomas to draw a series of nudes in a notebook in exchange for a consignment of bread. While Thomas was completing the artwork, he would be excused from work and gain time to restore his strength. Prokhorov persuaded the other prisoners in the brigade to agree to the deal: "Look, he's American, he's young, aided by some miracle—he'll go back to America and tell the world about Kolyma." Perhaps the rest of the brigade realized that Thomas was scarcely fit for any work at all, but it was also true that the prisoners dearly craved a witness for their suffering. Realizing that their own deaths were likely and impending, above all else they wanted the outside world to learn of their fate.

After their bargain was struck, Thomas attempted to straighten his gnarled hands and make his blackened fingers supple enough to draw. At first he could barely hold the pencil he was given, but eventually his work improved. *"I said what does he want, does he prefer blondes or brunettes? He said anything I don't care, as long as they have big breasts."* In Camp No. Seven of the Valley of Death, Thomas' teenage ambition to become an artist in the Soviet Union was finally fulfilled, drawing pictures of naked women to save his life.[32]

HUNGER HAD ALWAYS been a necessity of the Gulag, a calculated policy since it was understood that a starved man became more pliable, more passive, and more easily stunned into submission. Starvation turned the prisoners into automata, quite incapable of acts of conspiracy or resistance. Across the Gulag, food became so scarce that the each prisoner ate his thin ration of soup while running from the others. Out of calculated

desperation, increasing numbers of prisoners chose self-mutilation in an attempt to be moved to lighter duties. At first they hacked off their fingers and toes; then they paid others to remove a whole leg or an arm, using either an axe or a detonator charge. The self-mutilators reasoned, and not without a certain terrible logic, that it was better to lose a limb than one's life. Within the camps of Burelopom, Victor Herman heard how prisoners had disappeared in the woods, falling down only to be attacked by the criminals, for whom the fallen man was "nothing but food." What remained was buried beneath the snow.[33]

Victor Herman was also singled out for extermination. Shortly after his arrival in Burelopom, he was marched with eighteen other foreigners from Subcamp Five. A guard then ordered that "the filth from the capitalist nations" must each load a sixty-ton railroad car with lumber before he would be allowed to eat. With the tree line more than a mile away, it was a deliberately impossible task. But Victor had noticed a cache of logs that formed a ramp next to the railway track onto which timber was rolled up into the train. Using this wood, over the course of the next three days, without food, he loaded his railway car, spacing out the stacks to cover the spaces so that the wagon appeared to be full. By this subterfuge he survived the task, while the other seventeen foreigners died of exhaustion and exposure. When his cheating was eventually discovered, he was put into a punishment cell, beaten regularly, and kept on a starvation diet of thin soup.[34]

After a year in solitary confinement, Victor was returned to the general population of the camp. At this point, he was too close to death to be able to work at all. He had started to go blind, and when his emaciated body was dumped facedown in the frozen mud of the camp, he found he was too weak even to lift himself up. There he might have died, his fate ignored by the other prisoners—since within the camps a dead body attracted no attention—but the next morning he was recognized by his friend Albert Lonn, who picked him up and carried him back to his barracks: *"Son of a bitch, look what they did to old Vic. Hey, old Vic, look what they did to you, lad. Why I bet you don't weigh twenty-three pounds . . ."* For days

afterward, Albert Lonn shared his precious ration of bread and nursed Victor Herman back to life.[35]

In the midst of the war, Albert Lonn's gift of food carried a far greater significance than the small number of calories it contained. Fragments of the best qualities of human nature endured even in the darkest hours of a concentration camp in Burelopom. Albert's compassionate action provided hope for the spirit, and with hope came a renewed willingness to find a means of survival. While he lay hidden under Albert's berth, Victor had the idea of trapping the rats he had seen in the camp outhouse where the prisoners' corpses were stored. Using a trap built for him by Albert, he caught and ate those rats until he was strong enough to return to work.[36]

It was while cutting lumber in the snow that Victor first saw the NKVD guards opening cans of Campbell's Pork and Beans, Franco-American Spaghetti, and Dinty Moore Beef Stew. When he recognized the labels on the cans from his childhood in Detroit, Victor became so enraged that the guards waved a machine gun at him and threatened to kill him. Then he sat back down in the snow and wept.[37]

IN KOLYMA, Thomas Sgovio's original five-year sentence had long expired, but he clung to the faint hope that if he could survive another day or another week, he might perhaps be unexpectedly transferred or reprieved. Every prisoner's life depended on such fragile glimmers of hope, on rumors of change or of people arriving from far-off places who might bring intervention or respite.

In the spring of 1944, another rumor swept the camps of Far East Russia. The Soviet Union, it was whispered, was preparing to cede Kolyma to the Americans, in return for the Lend-Lease aid. The sale of vast swathes of frozen wasteland was, after all, an old Russian tradition. Had not Tsar Alexander II traded Alaska to the United States in the nineteenth century? The Tsar had also freed the Russian serfs, two years before President Lincoln freed the American slaves. Perhaps this, too, was an omen of

freedom? And the Kolyma prisoners noticed other strange changes taking place in their midst. Another rumor began to circulate, as the wooden watchtowers lining the access roads to Magadan were dismantled and thousands of starving prisoners marched out of the city—the vice president of the United States of America was arriving on a visit to Kolyma. And this time, as fantastic as it seemed, the rumor was true. The American vice president was on his way.[38]

18

An American Vice President in the Heart of Darkness

Show us not the aim without the way. For ends and means on earth are so entangled, that changing one, you change the other too; each different path brings other ends in view.

Ferdinand Lassalle, Franz von Sickingen[1]

As a politician, Henry Wallace was never quite of this world. In the early days of the New Deal, the former secretary of agriculture had devised a scheme to raise farm prices by ordering farmers' crops to be plowed under and their livestock slaughtered. To his critics, the wastefulness of the cure only magnified the Depression misery of American farmers. In cabinet, Secretary Wallace read long-winded statements on agricultural economics, whose every sentence seemed to end in a question. Even the president found it hard not to mock him: "That is very nice Henry. Now suppose you write the answer to all your own questions."[2]

After two New Deal presidencies, the native Iowan's manner was still viewed with some unease by his colleagues. But Roosevelt gifted Henry Wallace the vice-presidential nomination in 1940, as a reward for his loyalty and hard work. *"Henry's a good man to have around if something happened to the President"* was Roosevelt's public justification, which provoked the fury of southern Democrats, for whom Wallace's union ties and early denunciation of racial segregation branded him a high-risk deputy for the third term. "They'll go for Wallace or I won't run" had been Roosevelt's laconic riposte.[3]

After Roosevelt's third election triumph, Henry Wallace inherited the vice presidency from John Nance "Cactus Jack" Garner, the Texan Democrat who had first deemed the office as "not worth a pitcher of warm

piss."[4] Whatever influence Wallace was supposed to wield behind the scenes in the Senate was lost after he ordered the removal of Cactus Jack's bourbon bar and urinal from the vice-presidential office. As a teetotaler and fitness fanatic, Wallace attempted to cajole the senators into taking up paddleball, boxing, and rowing. Unfortunately few shared his advanced views on the value of exercise, preferring hot baths and rubdowns in the Senate gym. Very soon they stopped dropping by the office at all.[5]

In the circumstances, it hardly mattered. Henry Wallace was destined to hold the vice-presidency during the most critical period of modern history. After the outbreak of World War II, his oratory made him internationally famous as he delivered speech after speech on his favored theme of "the Century of the Common Man." Even before Pearl Harbor, Wallace had been unafraid to issue unpopular warnings that "civilization was burning," and that America would soon have to defend herself against Nazi aggression. The tall Iowan, with his high forehead and the strained eyes of a prophet, took upon himself the role of passionate interventionist in a war in which, the opinion polls revealed, a substantial majority of Americans were happy not to be involved.[6]

Throughout the course of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, as Luftwaffe bombs rained down on London in the Blitz, left-wing protesters kept up peace vigils advocating America's nonintervention in this "imperialist war." Outside the White House, advocates like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger sang protest songs declaring that their government meant to have American boys "plowed under" just as Wallace had done with the farmers' hogs:

Remember when the AAA
Killed a million hogs a day
Instead of hogs it's men today
Plow the fourth one under . . .
(Don't you . . .) Plow under
(Don't you . . .) Plow under
Every fourth American boy [7]

The day after the invasion of the Soviet Union, this chorus ended as abruptly as a needle lifted from a record. The same voices were now united in favor of immediate intervention. But Roosevelt's attempts to mobilize support for a Soviet Lend-Lease program were still faced with continued conservative opposition in Congress. An obscure Democratic senator from Missouri, Harry Truman, pithily endorsed the majority, isolationist position: *"If we see that Germany is winning the war we ought to help Russia; if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany and that way let them kill as many of each other as possible."*[8]

The national hero Charles Lindbergh had become the leader of the "America First" campaign. On September 11, 1941, Lindbergh gave a speech in Des Moines, Iowa, in which he identified a coalition of "warmongers" hastening America into the conflict—the Roosevelt administration, the British, and the Jews. *"Instead of agitating for war,"* Lindbergh warned ominously, *"the Jewish groups in this country should be opposing it in every possible way for they will be among the first to feel its consequences."* His audience responded with a standing ovation. Only former president Herbert Hoover advised Lindbergh that the speech was a mistake, in particular his statement that the Jews were responsible for the war. When Lindbergh insisted that what he said had been "moderate and true," Hoover answered, "When you had been in politics long enough you learn not to say things just because they are true."[9]

STEERING A COURSE through the isolationism and prejudices of the left and right, Henry Wallace championed America's intervention in the war, and lent his considerable support to the Soviet cause. Addressing a Russian Aid rally at Madison Square Garden, the American vice president announced his belief that the American and Russian revolutions were both part of *"the march of freedom of the past 150 years. It is no accident that*

Americans and Russians like each other when they get acquainted. Both peoples know their future is greater than their past. Both hate sham." Nor was Wallace content to leave his support merely at the level of progressive rhetoric. Evidently something more substantial was required.[10]

In May 1942, the Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, arrived on a clandestine mission to the United States. At the White House, a moment of comedy ensued when the American valets unpacking Molotov's suitcase discovered a large hunk of black bread, some Russian sausage, and a revolver. Eleanor Roosevelt wondered quizzically if "Mr. Molotov evidently thought he might have to defend himself, and also that he might be hungry."[11] While the White House press reporters were informed that Molotov was traveling under the pseudonym "Mr. Brown" and were asked to observe a news blackout for the duration of the visit. Apart from an obviously facetious question asked by one of the reporters—"Why not Mr. Red?"—no one was at all disturbed that Stalin's henchman-in-chief, who had signed the death lists throughout the course of the Terror as well as the pact with Hitler, was now an official guest at the White House. He was placed in the bedroom next to Harry Hopkins'.[12]

Over dinner, Roosevelt attempted to loosen Molotov's tongue by plying him with brandy and champagne cocktails. Obviously this was a strategy doomed to failure, since a Soviet apparatchik forced to binge-drink liters of vodka by Stalin would obviously find the president's "Haitian libations" as pleasant as a summer's walk in Gorky Park. When Roosevelt informed him that Lend-Lease shipments might have to fall to cover the Allied second front, Molotov had looked at the president with disapproval: "The Second Front will be stronger if the First Front stood fast." But such minor differences caused no lasting damage, and did nothing to prevent Roosevelt from raising his glass in a toast to the health of Joseph Stalin.[13]

For his part, Henry Wallace met with Molotov in Washington to discuss his idea for a grand project in the spirit of the New Deal. Ever the visionary, Wallace spoke passionately of an international public-works program that would symbolize the bond between their two great nations, and bring them still closer together. What Wallace had in mind was a great "highway and airway" stretching west from Chicago, over and across Alaska to Siberia,

and onward to Moscow. The hard-boiled Molotov—who had arrived in America to obtain increased Lend-Lease shipments and an immediate second front in Europe, not to listen to wild schemes of highways in the sky—nevertheless quickly agreed, and extended an invitation to the American vice president to visit his embattled country. In preparation for which a delighted Wallace began taking Russian lessons.[14]

On April 21, 1944, Henry Wallace issued a press release describing his hopes for his trip to the "Wild East" of Russia, where "the common men of the world will fill up the vacant spots as they try to attain a fuller and deeper life by harnessing nature. This is the kind of job with which our fathers and grandfathers were fully familiar." In Siberia he "expected to feel that grandeur that comes when men wisely work with nature."[15] The journey had been carefully planned at the White House, with President Roosevelt's enthusiastic approval—*"Oh you must go, I think you ought to see a lot of Siberia."* In the midst of World War II, the American vice president was resolved to travel to the place he envisaged as the Russian starting point for his great highway. Unbeknownst to Wallace, the land already had its own, darkly tragic, purpose. Unable to sustain human life, it was being used by Stalin to end it. It was Kolyma.[16]

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT is well documented. On May 23, 1944, Henry Wallace climbed the steps of a silver Skymaster plane waiting at a military airport in Alaska and set out on the short flight over the Bering Strait. Traveling with him on the plane, and documenting their journey, was Professor Owen Lattimore from the Office of War Information, one of America's most gifted Orientalists, who maintained a keen interest in Soviet affairs. Professor Lattimore's published views on the Moscow show trials made interesting reading. In Lattimore's opinion the trials had given *"the ordinary citizen more courage to protest, loudly, whenever he finds himself being victimized by 'someone in the Party' or 'someone in the Government.' That sounds to me like democracy."*[17]

Coincidentally, the pilot of the plane, Colonel Richard Kight, had also flown Wendell Willkie on the Russian leg of his world tour just the year before. In an article for *Reader's Digest* magazine, the defeated Republican presidential candidate had hinted darkly at the presence of concentration camps in the Soviet Union, to which his party had been refused access. It was one of several warnings that Henry Wallace might have heeded before he left. Over dinner at the British embassy, Sir Oliver Lyttelton had warned him that Stalin held an estimated "sixteen million" Russians imprisoned in such camps. In his diary, Wallace's reaction to this news was openly skeptical, noting that *"the figure seemed to be quite fantastic and Lyttelton's motives seemed to be so obvious that I did not question his statement."* [18]

Henry Wallace landed at the airport in Magadan as the highest-ranking American politician ever to visit the USSR. He was greeted with an official banquet of welcome hosted by General Sergei Goglidze—formerly the people's commissar for internal affairs in Georgia during the Terror and now the NKVD "plenipotentiary" for the whole of Far East Russia.[19] The American vice president appeared completely uninformed of his host's grim reputation, and was impressed only by the fact that Goglidze was known to be an "intimate friend" of Stalin's. Nor was Wallace overly concerned that the Americans were surrounded at all times by officials of the NKVD. In his diary Wallace described his guardians as "old soldiers with blue tops on their caps. Everybody treated them with great respect."[20]

Sergei Goglidze introduced Wallace to plain "Mister" Ivan Nikishov, the Dalstroi "director," who had mysteriously lost the rank of an NKVD general and donned a gray civilian suit. "Magadan was founded by volunteers from all over the Soviet Union," Nikishov explained, and helpfully characterized Dalstroi as "a combination of the TVA and Hudson's Bay Company." Without batting an eyelash, Nikishov boasted that they "employed" some three hundred thousand men in more than one thousand mining operations across Kolyma. The walls of his office were lined with the minerals these "employees" spent their lives extracting: samples of lead, tin, uranium, and, of course, gold.[21]

Standing in front of this display, Nikishov and Goglidze presented a uniquely convincing NKVD double act. Between them, the two high-

ranking NKVD administrators were personally responsible for the death of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Stalin's victims, in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and now Kolyma. But their capacity for mass murder was hidden beneath an affable demeanor, as Nikishov was filled with loquacious enthusiasm for his American audience, and Goglidze teased his colleague's officiousness: *"He runs everything around here. With Dalstroi's resources he's a millionaire!"* [22]

Together they led their American guests down to the Magadan harbor, which Henry Wallace admired, noting how unusual it was for such a remote location to be able to berth three ships simultaneously. The *North Wind,* an American-built icebreaker, could be seen offshore. "We use it to keep the sea open for shipping," Nikishov explained as they walked past lines of Studebaker trucks stored in Dalstroi warehouses. Henry Wallace discovered that his Soviet hosts were very appreciative of the American materials. The latest U.S. industrial machinery was clearly identifiable in the factories of Magadan, and Professor Lattimore, in particular, had no doubt about the warmth of Russian feeling for American aid. As they walked through one factory, they were greeted by ripples of "spontaneous" applause.[23]

The minutely calibrated deceptions would continue through the length of the visit as the American vice president was walked through a charade designed to conceal the true nature of what was taking place around him. Like a moving stage set, everything in Kolyma had been carefully managed for Wallace's willing eyes. No beguiling detail was left untouched in the Soviet effort to convince Wallace that what lay before him was a vision of pioneers at work, not the reality of a network of death camps. The NKVD guards with their baying dogs had vanished, along with the skeletal prisoners. The watchtowers and searchlights had disappeared. Wondrous selections of food now filled the shops of Magadan. There were even greenhouses on show, built to provide "much-needed fruit and vegetables for the vitamin-starved miners of the Arctic."[24]

Meanwhile any schemes that a surviving American prisoner, such as Thomas Sgovio, might have hatched for contacting their vice president were dashed by the unprecedented security. Barring the NKVD interpreters, no English speaker was allowed near Wallace's party, and Sergei Goglidze

seldom left his side. Judging by a character sketch in his diary, Wallace had grown quite fond of his company: "Goglidze is a very fine man, very efficient, gentle, and understanding with people." Professor Lattimore's notes went even further in their praise: "Quiet but humorous. Gentle, cultivated, yet obviously a man of great organizing and executive ability." Ivan Nikishov the American professor compared to *"a top flight industrial or business management man. As somebody said, put him in Wall Street and in ten years he'd own half of General Electric."*[25]

With their NKVD escorts leading the way, the American visitors were launched on a twenty-five-day tour of Kolyma and Far East Russia. As they inspected a series of mines, collective farms, and factories, Henry Wallace was always ready to practice his rudimentary language skills on any terrified Russian who crossed his path. On one occasion Wallace's restless energy led him ahead of the game. Breaking clear of his guardians, he hiked up a hillside in Magadan alone, only to be chased after by an irate NKVD major, who barked at him to "come down at once." His host's nervousness was justified. In Kolyma, no one could be sure what sights lay in store over the next ridge, or opened up from the side of a mountain as the earth shifted in the briefest of summers. About to take offense, the vice president was calmed by an interpreter's assurance that what the major had actually said was "Dinner is ready."[26]

Two days into the trip, Goglidze and Nikishov had sufficient confidence to lead Henry Wallace into a gold mine in the Kolyma Valley. Here the Americans were shown Lend-Lease shovels, and the huge Bucyrus-Erie machines with forty-foot cranes, which had been intended for earthmoving on the Eastern Front, not mining gold. The American vice president was introduced to a group of miners—"big husky young men who came out to the Far East from European Russia"—who told him how they had written to Comrade Stalin asking to be sent to the front, but Stalin had replied they were needed right there. Mister Adagin, their "union leader," stepped forward and asked Henry Wallace to send "his best regards to American unionists." Noting that the Russian miners had good clothing and plenty of rubles to spend, Wallace wrote in his diary that he *"could not help but*

wonder how much better off these people were than they had been under the Tsars." [27]

For his part, Professor Lattimore seemed very pleased that these Russian gold miners were so obviously "very healthy, well-fed and strong; intelligent." In his journal, the professor recorded with some satisfaction that the State Department lawyer in their company, John Hazard, *"had been led to expect from the literature on the subject, that they would all be kulaks and other forced labour."* As the gold miners shook hands with the American vice president, Lattimore busily took photographs to illustrate the article he was writing for *National Geographic* magazine.[28] Judging from their physical condition, these strong, healthy "miners" could only have been NKVD guards playing the part for the American visitors. Their smiles for Lattimore's camera carried all the sincerity of successful con men, their eyes gleaming with cunning in the pale summer sunlight. While the persecutors took on the roles of the persecuted for a few hours, the real miners waited hidden in the shadows, worked close to death and clothed in American flour bags. Their faces would never grace the pages of the *National Geographic.*

Later, still unsuspecting, Henry Wallace walked through the taiga with Ivan Nikishov. In his diary, Wallace wrote that Nikishov "gamboled out like a calf enjoying the wonderful air, the larches putting out their new leaves and the valley looked marvellous against the snow covered mountains, thirty miles away in every direction."[29] Kolyma's physical beauty was often remembered in the memoirs of those prisoners who survived. The white nights of summer were adorned by the northern lights, flickering in violet and blue across the horizon. For the prisoners, the natural beauty of this wilderness served only as a reminder of the contrasting brutality of the camps all around; man's contribution to the landscape being nothing more than the means of their suffering. Here in the camps of Far East Russia was "the common man" of the twentieth century, in extreme representation as a concentration camp prisoner and guard. All that was missing from the triptych was the third party, the bystander, in this case a naïve American visitor from Adair County, Iowa. Always at the end of the road lay the

camp unseen—the hidden end point of this grand experiment in human evolution, the futile attempt at the perfectibility of mankind.[30]

HENRY WALLACE'S TOUR continued amid the elaborately choreographed deceptions. At a collective farm, the vice president had no idea of the confusion he caused with some harmless questions about pigs. According to Elinor Lipper, the girls tending the animals were actually NKVD clerical staff, handpicked to play the role normally filled by female prisoners. Never having been near pigs in their lives, the secretaries had no idea how to answer the former secretary of agriculture. Once again, an NKVD interpreter volunteered a vaguely plausible response, which left Wallace none the wiser.[31] On another occasion, the Americans stopped to dig one of the many "victory" gardens in Magadan. Both Ivan Nikishov and Sergei Goglidze happily joined in the manual labor: "What a story the gardener will have to tell tomorrow," Ivan Nikishov had joked.[32]

At night the Americans were entertained by a group of Russian singers and musicians whose depth of talent Henry Wallace found quite remarkable for such a remote place. When the Russian speaker John Hazard questioned Nikishov about the extraordinary professionalism of their theater, the Dalstroi chief became quite defensive: "We ought to have some very good people, for these are the exiles from Leningrad."[33] Earlier Nikishov had explained the need for entertainment in their town because in the winter "the men do not work outside when the weather is below forty degrees below zero." Professor Lattimore heard someone remark how "high-grade entertainment just naturally seems to go with gold."[34] Of course, the truth was the artists all belonged to Nikishov's "Cultural Brigade"—the former professional singers and musicians saved from the gold mines by their talent. When the applause ended, they were herded into trucks and returned to their imprisonment.[35]

Although Thomas Sgovio never witnessed their performance, later he met a former opera singer from Leningrad who explained how the Cultural Brigade had sung “Okay America-Soviet Union” as a welcoming overture. The NKVD had tried to teach them more English, but there had not been enough time. Naturally, all the singers in the Cultural Brigade who could actually speak English were not allowed to participate. The rest were forced to sign an oath promising to behave as “loyal Soviet patriots” in the presence of their American audience. One word or sign of their status as prisoners “would be considered an act of treason,” which, in case they needed reminding, carried “the supreme penalty.”[36]

Another evening’s entertainment was provided by a film screening at the Magadan theater. General Goglidze started the night with a documentary on the siege of Stalingrad, accompanied by serious-minded applause. Henry Wallace reciprocated with the Soviet premiere of the movie *North Star,* which he had brought with him in a print with Russian subtitles. On-screen was the Hollywood vision of life on a Soviet collective farm, complete with Ukrainian peasants dancing around a perfect set with pressed white shirts and flowers in their hair, playing balalaikas and accordions. The film was made by Sam Goldwyn as a favor to the president—with his son Elliott Roosevelt in charge of production. To say that it lightened the mood was an understatement. How could the NKVD generals not stifle their laughter? “It’s marvellous that Americans would produce such a picture about us,” proclaimed Mrs. Nikishov, as the vice president modestly insisted that what they had just seen was only “an artificial reality built for a film-set,” whereas the Soviet achievements in Kolyma were both real and substantial. “Hollywood built an entire village only to demolish it. Magadan’s not such a synthetic town. It has solid underpinnings,” said Henry Wallace.[37]

Filled with the evangelical fervor of someone who is sure because he has seen with his own eyes, Henry Wallace embarked on a series of speeches across Siberia using the Russian-language skills he had struggled so hard to master. In his booming midwestern accent, he addressed his assembled Russian audiences: “*Siberia used to mean to Americans frightful suffering and sorrow, convict-chains and exiles. For long generations Siberia remained thus without appreciable change. Then in this generation during*

the past fifteen years, all has been changed as though by magic. Siberia today is one of the world's largest lands still open to pioneer settlers." His words were accepted as a propaganda coup by his grateful hosts, heavily featured in the Soviet press as an endorsement of their way of life. TASS reported more praise from Wallace in a speech made in Irkutsk:

There are no more similar countries in the world than the Soviet Union and the United States of America. The vast expanse of your country, its virgin forests, its broad rivers and great lakes, all types of climate from tropical to polar, its inexhaustible natural riches remind me of my own homeland. The history of Siberia and its heroic population remind me of the history of the Far West of the United States. The pioneers of our countries in the titanic struggle with nature and with hard conditions of life went forward fearlessly, building new towns and villages, new industry and a new life for the welfare of their homeland and of all humanity . . . Free people, born on free expanses, can never live in slavery.[38]

At their parting in Magadan, the indebted Nikishov presented Wallace with two framed pictures of embroidered landscapes, a much-coveted item collected by the wives of the Kolyma elite. But even this simple gift carried the threat of revelation. When the American vice president innocently asked who had made them, Nikishov replied that he could not possibly know all the sewing women in the city. Later Wallace was told they were the work of Nikishov's wife, Gridassova. The truth, according to Elinor Lipper, was that the embroideries were another by-product of the camp labor system. Female prisoners, often former nuns, received an additional ration in return for their needlework, which, because of their pitiful working conditions, ruined their eyesight. The American vice president left Soviet Russia with the landscapes in his luggage, having written an open letter of thanks to Comrade J. V. Stalin to express his "deep gratitude for the splendid cordial hospitality shown to me."[39]

IN AN AMERICAN national radio broadcast, Henry Wallace had nothing but praise for his Russian hosts, eulogizing their "development" of Siberia and the patriotic spirit of the masses of "volunteers." Millions of Americans read more about the vice president's expedition in the December 1944 edition of *National Geographic* magazine. In his article, Professor Lattimore praised Nikishov and his wife's "trained and sensitive interest in art and music" and their "deep sense of civic responsibility." Pictured also were the "Far North's Husky Miners" grinning at the camera, over the caption: "These men had volunteered for war, only to be ordered to stay at work because of Russia's need for gold."[40]

A short while afterward a documentary film was released by the Office of War Information using footage shot by Soviet cameramen. *Soviet and Central Asia, America's New Gateway to Asia* was written and edited by the ever-industrious Professor Lattimore, its script narrated in the excited baritone of 1940s newsreel: *"Never before had so important an American representative visited these little-known territories, the Soviet authorities threw everything open to him. Soviet cameramen made a continuous record of the journey. And OWI now presents to you this film made by our Soviet allies, about a journey through lands and among people destined to be better known to Americans in the years after the war."*

In the film, American cinema audiences watched their vice president picking and eating a crisp cucumber grown in the special greenhouses of the north, "as characteristic of Siberia as the hot dog is of America." Henry Wallace smiles and grins at the camera, as happy as an Iowan farmer at harvest time. Later the American visitors are shown attending the village soviet of the "Red Dawn" collective farm, as Professor Lattimore tiptoes through the nuances of Stalinist democracy: *"A village Soviet in Siberia is a forum for open discussion like a town meeting in New England."* And thus, with dismal conviction, Lattimore's documentary transformed the scene of mass murder into possibly the saddest piece of American wartime propaganda. Its final reel ends with Colonel Kight, the pilot of the good

plane *Polar Bear,* waving at the camera, and to the soundtrack of blaring trumpets, “the mighty C54 heads for the snowcapped mountains and distant capital of our Ally China.”[41]

AMID RUMORS CIRCULATING in Washington that he was about to be dumped from the ticket for Roosevelt’s fourth term, an anxious Henry Wallace arrived at the White House on July 10, 1944, bearing presidential gifts of an Uzbek robe and a set of Outer Mongolian stamps. At their meeting, Roosevelt cheerfully explained that while Wallace was his personal choice for the nomination, many of his visitors disagreed, and many looked upon him as a “Communist or worse.” However, the president understood that there was “no one more American, no one more of the American soil.” A few days later, Roosevelt explained that he was going to write a letter to Senator Sam Jackson of the Democratic National Committee, explaining that if he were a delegate at the convention he would vote for Wallace. And then Franklin Roosevelt turned on his full charm: “While I cannot put it just that way in public, I hope it will be the same old team.”[42]

The night of the vice-presidential nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Wallace’s liberal supporters raised the roof for their man. There were tremendous ovations for Wallace, with placards waved proclaiming, THE PEOPLE WANT WALLACE, AND ROOSEVELT AND WALLACE, and WE WANT WALLACE! It was clear, however, that the Democratic Party bosses were following other instructions. Bob Hannegan and Mayor Ed Kelly approached Senator Jackson. “You’ve got to adjourn the convention,” Hannegan demanded. “The crowd’s too hot,” Jackson replied. “I can’t.” “You’re taking orders from me,” answered Hannegan, a hulking Irishman from St. Louis. “And I’m taking orders from the President.” Calls for adjournment were greeted by choruses of “No,” to which Senator Jackson promptly purred, “The ayes have it!” The following day, the Wallace supporters were kept out of the convention. They found

themselves with the wrong kind of tickets, the top galleries were cleared, and speakers for Wallace had their microphones unexpectedly switched off.[43]

In a Gallup poll for the vice-presidential nomination taken four days earlier, Senator Harry Truman registered scarcely two points to Henry Wallace's runaway sixty five-point lead.[44] No one seemed to know too much about Harry Truman, save for the fact that he had risen up through "Boss" Tom Pendergast's corrupt Kansas City machine. At the Chicago convention, the former sins of the "Senator from Pendergast" were charitably forgotten, and when the votes were counted, it was Harry Truman who won. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party bosses of the self-styled "conspiracy of the pure in heart" were delighted at their timely work. Years later, "Boss" Bob Hannegan told friends that his epitaph should read: "Here lies the man who kept Henry Wallace from becoming President of the United States."

For the rest of his life, Henry Wallace would attempt to recover from the shock of what had been done to him in Chicago. Though he lost the presidency by a whisker, Wallace's political nemesis had hardly begun. And as in an Aeschylean tragedy it would be ghosts—the ghosts of Kolyma—that would return to deal the former vice president his final blows.[45]

19

“To See Cruelty and Burn Not”

You know I am a juggler, and I never let my right hand know what my left hand does . . . I may be entirely inconsistent, and furthermore I am perfectly willing to mislead and tell untruths if it will help win the war.

Franklin Roosevelt, May 1942[1]

Days after Henry Wallace flew out of Russia, the prisoners in Kolyma were marched back to work as the watchtowers and searchlights rose above them once again. Later, Thomas Sgovio was asked by a Soviet supply officer to meet him at a warehouse. The building stood apart from the rest of the camp, its floor littered with American newspapers used to pack the Lend-Lease equipment. Shutting the door behind him, the NKVD officer handed Thomas a picture from a newspaper. “Don’t tell anyone I let you see these. I’m supposed to burn them, before I do, tell me what’s written here?” he asked, pointing to a picture of a fashion model in tights. Thomas replied that it was an advertisement. “And this?” the Russian asked, holding out another picture. “The same,” Thomas replied. “What the hell, your newspapers are full of advertisements!” As a reward for his translation, Thomas was allowed to read from a stack of American newspapers, at which point he discovered that the United States and Great Britain were fighting in an alliance with the USSR in World War II.[2]

For weeks after Wallace’s visit, Thomas became the butt of camp jokes, his presence greeted by taunts of “You Americans are really stupid.” There was hardly a single prisoner in Kolyma who had not heard of the vice president’s visit. And if the jokes themselves were insufficient reminder of the vice president’s folly, the camp commanders and their wives deepened

the ridicule by dressing up in expensive American clothes. Attached to each item delivered to Kolyma was a handwritten tag with a message in English, and the name and address of a donor from the Californian branch of "the USA-USSR Friendship Society." Thomas watched the Gulag officials' wives fighting over the clothes in the warehouse to which they were delivered. It was concentration camp chic, the Rodeo Drive of the damned.[3]

The starvation of the Gulag prisoners never diminished throughout the war, despite the ships loaded with American food supplied to the USSR. One prisoner, who had the task of processing the dead, took Thomas Sgovio to a mortuary where the dead prisoners' frozen hands were amputated before their meager bodies were taken away to be buried. The hands were kept on hooks until they thawed so that fingerprints could be taken for the camp files. In the mortuary the prisoner, named Vassya, explained how all the dead had to be properly accounted for—with their finger- and palm prints made on three sets of forms attached to their NKVD files. Thomas sensed that the man only wanted a witness for the duties he was forced to perform.[4]

It was at this time that Thomas Sgovio briefly met John Pass, another young American surviving in the Kolyma camps. Born in the Midwest, Pass had emigrated to the USSR as a child in the early 1930s with his family. He had been arrested in 1940 for possession of a copy of John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*. The book had been banned in the Soviet Union because "it did not show the leading role of Stalin during the October Revolution." [5] In Reed's account, it was Trotsky who appeared most often by Lenin's side directing the events of 1917, and Stalin was hardly mentioned. Had the author still been alive in Soviet Russia, he would most certainly have been shot for such heresy: his body dumped facedown in a mass grave, not buried as a Revolutionary hero at the Kremlin Wall. Instead, it was his readers who were vicariously punished twenty years later. In Camp No. Seven, John Pass had survived thus far on a "function" as the English teacher to the commandant's wife. But his friendship with Thomas Sgovio was brief. As was Kolyma's transitory nature, Thomas would be transferred on again to a new camp, and never learned if Pass managed to survive.[6]

Toward the end of the war, Thomas was moved to a camp farther north, as Dalstroi expanded to make room for the new waves of prisoners arriving in the holds of the Gulag fleet. When he had first arrived, the so-called road of bones leading out of Magadan was already four hundred kilometers long. Seven years later, it stretched a thousand kilometers into the wilderness, and every extra meter was built on the lives of the weakest prisoners. From this main highway, countless tributaries ran off into the landscape, each leading to a network of mines and camps.[7] As Kolyma expanded, the newspaper *Izvestiya* described how *"the total number of new names marked on the map of the region during the Dalstroi era exceeds ten thousand and includes all kinds of mining centers, gold fields, fishing villages, government farms, and so forth."* In the Soviet press, the existence of the prisoners, of course, was never mentioned.[8]

Within this expanding world, with his original five-year sentence long since expired, Thomas Sgovio was kept as "an overtimer," one of the prisoners "retained in the Corrective Labor Camps until Special Orders." His latest camp was a twenty-kilometer forced march from the highway's northern end. In "Camp Victory," Thomas survived once again as a sign painter, lettering the production signs of the work brigades, along with their percentage targets and propaganda slogans— THE FATHERLAND DEMANDS METAL!—while every day the rest of the prisoners were marched out into the goldfields.[9]

MEANWHILE IN MOSCOW, a fresh crop of patriotic American war reporters flew in to write stories on the burgeoning American-Soviet alliance, or how Stalin's "democracy" was—with a few minor indiscretions —so much like their own. Inevitably the reporters learned the awkward truth of the former existence of the American emigrants in Russia. But they mentioned them only in passing, almost as a historical curiosity, before moving on to the more pressing issues of the war.

Often the reporters hired the daughters of the American emigrants to work as bilingual assistants, since they themselves spoke little, if any, Russian. This was how the Associated Press chief, Eddy Gilmore, first encountered Lydia Kleingal, a young girl born in St. Louis whose family had left Missouri in search of work in Russia. Lydia's father had already been shot, and soon she, too, was arrested in the midst of the wartime alliance. Not yet realizing the consequences of his actions, Gilmore then hired Alyce Alex, the daughter of a River Rouge autoworker who had left Detroit to build Soviet Fords in September 1931. Alyce was born in Brooklyn and had managed to keep hold of her American passport throughout her stay in Russia.[10] In quick succession she, too, disappeared, but unlike her predecessor, Alyce managed to send Gilmore a note from her camp, pleading for his help. The message arrived a year later, in an envelope pushed under his door, with his name and address written in Russian. Eddy Gilmore recognized Alyce's handwriting straightaway: *"Dear Mr. Gilmore, I'm at a camp near Kirov. Won't you please ask the American Embassy to help me? Forever grateful, Alyce."*

The Associated Press reporter took the letter down to the American embassy on Mokhovaya Street and handed it to the same disinterested third secretary to whom he had first reported Alyce's arrest. "You've been here long enough to know we can't do anything," the anonymous diplomat replied. And upon that judgment and with an indifferent shrug, the young girl from Brooklyn, New York, was left to fend for herself in the concentration camp of her country's wartime ally.[11]

All the reporters heard one version or other of the American emigration to Russia during the early years of the Depression. In the account William White was told, the Americans had freely given up their passports and voluntarily acquired Soviet citizenship. In a wartime memoir, White wrote, *"Under any interpretation of international law they were indistinguishable from any other Soviet citizen, bound to their assigned jobs and with no hope of leaving."* White discovered how the emigrants had once clamored at the doors of the American embassy begging for help. As the Soviet Union's foreigners were transported into the Gulag, *"all trace of them was lost and no longer could they plead with their embassies in Moscow."* Not having

been in Soviet Russia long enough to understand their true narrative of deception, coercion, and arrest, White regarded the emigrants as the authors of their own misfortune, no longer in any true sense "American" or deserving of real sympathy.[12]

And yet some of the scattered families of the Americans still survived. During a Moscow air raid, the reporter Wallace Carroll woke up in a metro station next to a young woman who asked him, "What time is it?" in perfect American-accented English. Carroll described her as a "thin woman with deep lines under her eyes and a grey shawl over her head." She was from Minnesota, one of the Finnish Americans who had arrived in 1934. "Yes, there were lots of us," the young woman whispered, "but I am alone here now. They don't trust us Finns. They send us to Siberia. That's where they'll send me, too." Wallace Carroll christened them "Exiles in Utopia."[13]

But rather than worry over their fate, the American reporters and diplomats whiled away their free evenings playing in a jazz band. The Kremlin Krows were named after the birds that flew around the Spasski Tower in the Kremlin, and featured George Kennan on guitar and Eddy Gilmore on drums, with assorted American clerks and military attachés filling in the other spots in the lineup. At night in wartime Moscow, the Kremlin Krows thumped out 1940s jazz favorites for the endless round of embassy parties, while their compatriots clung to their lives in the camps.[14]

ALL THE OLD faces were returning, including Ambassador Joseph Davies, who had arrived in Moscow in May 1943 on a mission to arrange the first meeting between Roosevelt and Stalin. The ambassador brought with him the perfect ideological olive branch in the form of a special print of the movie *Mission to Moscow* complete with Russian subtitles. At the White House, the president had passed Davies' bestseller across the table to his guest, Jack Warner. "Jack, I see you're in the army," Roosevelt said, acknowledging Warner's uniform. "As one officer to another, I suggest you

do a film based on this book . . . Our people know almost nothing about the Soviet Union and the Russian people. What they do know is largely prejudiced and inaccurate. If we're going to fight the war together, we need a more sympathetic understanding." The Hollywood mogul had agreed to make the film there and then, without opening the book.[15]

On the evening of May 23, 1943, Stalin welcomed Joseph Davies with a Kremlin banquet in his honor. The Soviet banquets had continued throughout the war, with no concession made to the million Russians who were starving to death in the still-besieged city of Leningrad. The menu for Davies' reception began with a choice of cold appetizers of "soft and pressed caviar, white salmon, pink salmon, herring with garnish, smoked shamaia, jellied sturgeon, cold suckling pig with horseradish, English roast beef with garnish, cold ham with lanspig, wild game and shefru in aspic, braised duck galantine, 'Olivier' and 'Spring' salads, fresh cucumbers, garden radishes, assorted cheeses, butter and toast." The hot appetizers were listed as "champignon au gratin, and medallion of wild game poivrade," followed by a main course of "soupe de poularde à la reine, pirogi pies, consommé, borsht, white salmon in white wine, roast veal with potatoes, roast turkey and chicken with lettuce, cauliflower, asparagus." Then, finally, a dessert menu offered "strawberry parfait, ice cream, coffee, assorted cheeses, fruits, petit-fours, almonds, and liqueurs."[16]

At the end of their dinner, Stalin abruptly got up from the table to announce that they would now all watch *Mission to Moscow* in the Kremlin cinema.[17] According to Joseph Davies' account, the film "caused a great deal of joking," not least because of its dramatization of the lives of those watching in the elite audience. The inner circle of Stalin's court were all present, including Beria, Voroshilov, Mikoyan, Litvinov, Vyshinsky, and Molotov, who personally congratulated Davies on this high-budget Hollywood adaptation of his service in 1930s Moscow. The ambassador had been allowed to introduce the film with a monologue delivered directly to the camera, a picture of Marjorie hanging on the wall behind him: "*There was so much prejudice and misunderstanding of the Soviet Union, in which I partly shared, that I felt it was my duty to tell the truth . . . While I was in*

Russia I came to have a very high respect for the honesty of the Soviet leaders."

The same Soviet leaders now watched a Stalinist version of the history of the Terror projected on the silver screen. Naturally the show trials were presented as a truthful account of real events: from explosions in Soviet factories to scenes of Nikolai Bukharin nefariously conspiring with the Japanese ambassador. On-screen, the actor Walter Huston, playing the part of Ambassador Davies, declared his undisputed opinion that "based on twenty years of trial practice, I'd be inclined to believe these confessions." There was even a dramatic re-creation of Bukharin's confession: *"One has only to weigh the wise leadership of the Soviet government against the sordid personal ambitions of those who would wish to betray it, to realize the monstrous-ness of our crimes."*

Joseph Stalin watched his own likeness quite unperturbed. As the credits rolled, he told Davies that he "liked Walter Huston particularly." And with Stalin's approval, *Mission to Moscow* was scheduled for distribution across the USSR. The simple fact that the paranoid totalitarian regime saw no apparent need for censorship tells us all we need know of the film's historical accuracy and worth; its failings no more surprising than the fawning dedication Joseph Davies wrote in a copy of his book presented to Stalin:

To one of the very great men of this era of history—Joseph V. Stalin Premier of the Government of his People, Marshal of their Great Red Army, Whose Vision, Power, and Greatness enabled his people to save themselves and their land from enslavement by the Hun. And but for whose Valiant and Immortal Defense of the Ramparts of Liberty and Freedom, that Civilization which Free Men must have to live, would have been utterly destroyed, With the great respect and sincere admiration of His Friend.[18]

Hidden away in the film, like an unconscious clue of self-incrimination, was the most fleeting allusion to the American emigrants, in whose fate

both Stalin and Ambassador Davies had been so instrumental and so complicit. Almost in passing, as the briefest introduction to a scene set during the Terror, an embassy secretary walks into Davies' office at Spaso House holding a sheaf of documents. "More applications for American passports, sir," the secretary declares. "The pile's getting bigger every day." And Walter Huston, playing Ambassador Davies, replies, "It reminds me of animals scurrying for shelter from the storm." As thanks for the film, Stalin awarded Joseph Davies the Order of Lenin." The medal was presented by the show trial prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky, who assured Davies that "the Soviets had no higher honor."[19]

THE SUBJECT OF the Americans executed in the Terror, and those still imprisoned in the Gulag, became one of the unspoken taboos of the wartime alliance, although both the disappearance of the Americans and the deaths inflicted within the Gulag were known at the time in the highest levels of the American government. But of this sensitive issue, never a word was spoken publicly. Soon after the war, the acting secretary of state, Sumner Welles, had sent cables to the American embassy in Moscow authorizing appeals to Stalin for the arrested Americans "solely on the grounds of international courtesy and for humanitarian reasons." But no further action was taken, nor was the issue ever pressed.[20]

In Spaso House, Averell Harriman, the latest in a succession of wealthy American ambassadors, was not about to involve himself in a wartime confrontation over the fate of a few thousand of his not-quite-forgotten countrymen who, if they were alive at all, had been cast to the four corners of the USSR. Ambassador Harriman could scarcely save the few Americans who worked for him directly at the embassy. On March 24, 1944, he was informed of the Soviet request to discharge the embassy employees Theodore Okkonen, his wife, Freda, and their American-born son, Olav Okkonen. The Okkonen family were Finnish American emigrants who had arrived in the USSR in the early 1930s and found jobs at the American

embassy. They were now accused of espionage “on behalf of Germany and Finland.”

Ambassador Harriman wrote to Washington that the Okkonen family had worked for the embassy as domestic staff for a number of years. Theodore and Freda “both were of simple type and mentality and it was difficult to believe that either would have the ability to engage in espionage.” Their son, Olav, was a

dual national, born in the United States, who came to the Soviet Union as a minor and who has a longstanding application to renounce Soviet citizenship and return to the United States. He has rendered exemplary services for a number of years . . . Since he is an American citizen under American law and is officially employed by an agency of the United States government, I desired, before taking any action, to report this matter to the Department with a view to receiving appropriate instructions . . . It is my intention to continue to endeavour to persuade the Soviet authorities to withhold insisting on the request that these servants be discharged. However, I feel that I will eventually have to accede to their demands if pressed. There is no doubt that their discharge will lead to arrest and severe punishment.[21]

In response to Harriman’s request for “comments or suggestions,” the State Department replied that *“experience . . . has demonstrated that in cases of this character the Soviet authorities directly concerned are inclined to be arbitrary and adamant in maintaining the validity of the charges and consequently the Foreign Office is usually powerless.”* All three members of the Okkonen family were then given up with scarcely a murmur of complaint.[22]

According to the memoirs of Harriman’s secretary Robert Meikeljohn, the phone in Spaso House practically never rang, and the ambassador stayed in bed most mornings, rarely getting dressed before midday unless he happened to be visited by one of the American military contingent passing through Moscow. In the afternoons, Harriman would sit in his

comfortable armchair by a roaring fire, dictating memos so slowly that Meikeljohn could "usually steal a nap between words without him noticing." Harriman would then go over these sentences, "changing words, phrases and paragraphs time after time till nobody but him has the slightest idea of what the end product is . . ." His staff detected that the ambassador took his lack of access to Stalin rather personally. There was a period in Harriman's first winter when he "took to his bed with a sinus infection and didn't get out for six weeks. He was obviously suffering some kind of psychosomatic trauma."[23]

In the afternoons, a recuperated Harriman played badminton or skied with his twenty-six-year-old daughter, Kathleen, on slopes outside Moscow, nervously followed by one of his escort of four NKVD guardians. In the evenings, there was the usual round of diplomatic receptions to be attended either as guest or host. On January 30, 1944, for example, the American ambassador threw a party in honor of President Roosevelt's sixty-second birthday whose long guest list included the highest-ranking officers from the NKVD, including Lieutenant-General P. V. Fitin, Major-General Ossipov, and of course Lavrenty Beria himself—if they could only drag themselves away from the burning lights of the Lubyanka to enjoy the American hospitality. As these parties continued, Robert Meikeljohn expressed, his increasing sense of unease in his diary: *"It is a strange country where an American Ambassador takes pride in having the head of the secret police, probably as big a murderer as Himmler, dine with him."*[24]

But, then, the incomprehension worked both ways. On one social outing, General John Deane, the head of the American military mission, was invited to Aragvis, a Moscow restaurant so exclusive and expensive that he had never been able to afford the prices. Over dinner, the NKVD major-general Ossipov gravely broke the news that a group of American oil engineers had been overheard discussing the forthcoming 1944 presidential election while working at a refinery in Azerbaijan. One of them, Ossipov confided darkly, had called Roosevelt "a son of a bitch who should be taken out and shot." It seemed the NKVD general had delivered this intelligence with the expectation of a request for "special measures" to be made to

protect the president from the conspiracy. It was left to General Deane to explain how “colorful language” was often used during the American electoral process.[25]

As the official hostess of Spaso House, the glamorous Kathleen Harriman noticed how the Red Army officers were very careful to keep their distance from the NKVD guests invited to the American receptions. Once, she saw an NKVD general standing apart from the rest of their group and politely invited him to join their table, where he was scrupulously ignored by two Russian air force generals. At the time, Kathleen Harriman reasoned that their silence was caused by “jealousy” of the NKVD’s power, not sensing the natural abhorrence for the executioner in their midst. It was precisely this naïveté that the NKVD chose to exploit, when the exposure of a new scene of mass murder threatened briefly to disturb the night-water of the American-Soviet alliance.[26]

IN JANUARY 1944, Kathleen Harriman was invited to visit a clearing in the Katyn Forest of Byelorussia, where the mass graves of several thousand Polish officers missing since 1940 had been discovered. At Katyn, half the Polish officer corps lay buried in pits alongside several hundred Polish doctors, university professors, and priests.[27] The massacre had first been uncovered during the Nazi occupation, when Joseph Goebbels took full advantage of this propaganda coup to accuse Stalin of having ordered the killings. As World War II progressed, the Red Army had since recaptured the lost ground, and one year later, the Soviet propaganda machine now sought to convince the world that the Katyn massacre had, in fact, been a Nazi atrocity all along.

An international press corps was gathered to attend an official Soviet “Commission of Inquiry” at the site, and the ambassador’s daughter was selected as a prized witness, invited as a representative of the Office of War Information. Kathleen Harriman was driven into the Byelorussian forest in a Lend-Lease jeep. At the site of the murders, she gazed down into the pits

and watched Red Army soldiers prising out the decomposing bodies, stacked in layers facedown and twelve deep. Standing next to the Associated Press journalist Homer Smith, Kathleen Harriman had "moaned and choked" at the stench of death.[28]

The Polish officers had all been shot in the back of the head. A few had broken jaws and bayonet wounds, evidence of a struggle at the end. At the forest site, the Soviet forensic scientists proceeded with their demonstration, whose purpose was to explain how all this was the work of the SS. Their lecture was a long and unconvincing affair, not least because the bodies had been removed from the graves dressed in heavy winter clothes. When a reporter asked why this was the case, given that they said the Germans had allegedly killed the Polish officers in August, there was a brief moment of confusion. After consultation, the Soviet investigators replied that the weather in Byelorussia was extremely variable in August: people often wore heavy winter clothing even at the height of summer.

However shallow, such explanations were enough to convince Kathleen Harriman. From Moscow, by confidential telegram, her father cabled President Roosevelt the news that his daughter could confirm that in *"all probability the massacre was perpetrated by the Germans."* [29]

IF THE AMERICAN government wished to continue to portray Stalin's regime as worthy of the public's wholehearted support, then the suppression of the NKVD's culpability for the Katyn massacre became an essential part of the Allied war effort. All evidence to the contrary would have to be buried—just as the reports of the missing Americans had been buried—under a mountain of classified material, left to gather dust in the archives in secrecy until no one could remember why anymore and all the protagonists had long since left the stage.

In fact, President Roosevelt had already been fully briefed on the events that had taken place at Katyn Forest. On August 13, 1943, Roosevelt received a classified British intelligence report accompanied by a personal

letter from Winston Churchill, which made it transparently clear that the Soviets were responsible for the mass murder. The details provided in the report were precise and unremitting. In its pages, Roosevelt learned how the Polish officers had scratched on the train wagons “Don’t believe that we are going home”; how their letters to their relatives had abruptly stopped in March 1940; how Katyn Forest had been a well-known killing ground of the NKVD, “used by the Bolsheviks in 1919 as a convenient place for the killing of many Tsarist officers”; how “if a man struggled, the executioner threw his coat over his head, tying it around his neck and leading him hooded to the pits edge—in many cases a body was found to be thus hooded and the coat to have been pierced by a bullet where it covered the base of the skull”; how the bullets penetrated the skulls from close range or with the muzzle pressed against the base of the neck; how the wounds were regular, as if fired by experienced hands; how the bodies had been stabbed with four-edged bayonets of Soviet issue. The report read as a letter of protest from its author, the British ambassador to the Polish government-in-exile, Owen O’Malley:

We have been constrained by the urgent need for cordial relations with the Soviet Government to appear to appraise the evidence with more hesitation and lenience than we should do in forming a common-sense judgment on events occurring in normal times or in the ordinary course of our private lives; we have been obliged to appear to distort the normal and healthy operation of our intellectual and moral judgments; we have been obliged to give undue prominence to the tactlessness or impulsiveness of Poles . . . We have in fact perforce used the good name of England like the murderers used the little conifers to cover up a massacre . . . We now stand in danger of bemusing not only others but ourselves: of falling . . . under St. Paul’s curse on those who can see cruelty and burn not.[30]

The truth of O’Malley’s observations was later found in the Soviet archives. On March 5, 1940, a top-secret NKVD memo had been sent from Beria to Stalin:

A large number of former Polish army officers . . . and others are at the present moment being kept in the camps of the NKVD USSR for prisoners-of-war and in the prisons of the western districts of Ukraine and Byelorussia. All of them are bitter enemies of the soviet power, filled with enmity for the soviet system . . . The NKVD USSR considers as essential: 1. Recommend the NKVD USSR to the matter of the 14,700 persons . . . apply towards them the punishment of the highest order—shooting. 2. The matter is to be looked at without summoning the arrested and without the presentation of evidence.

Across the first page of the memorandum was scrawled Stalin's signature, followed by those of his Politburo functionaries—Voroshilov, Molotov, Mikoyan, and the votes of Kalinin and Kaganovich added by the recorder in the margin: *"For."* [31]

In terms of the history of the Soviet secret police, Katyn was a standard operation that happened to have been discovered. But the threat of exposure never materialized from the White House. Instead, Owen O'Malley's report was locked away in Roosevelt's "safe files," never to see the light of day until years later. And its pages revealed two further pieces of incriminating information. The first was that the American president encouraged Henry Wallace to visit Kolyma, even after the region had been clearly identified as another place of execution of Poles in the USSR. The second was that President Roosevelt was fully aware of Stalin's capability for mass murder, even as he was making preparations to meet him. But no one, it seemed, believed in the curse of St. Paul at the dawn of the atomic age.

AT THE WHITE House, when William Bullitt tried to warn Roosevelt about Stalin's true intent, the president lost patience with him. *"Bill, I don't dispute your facts, they are accurate,"* Roosevelt replied. *"I don't dispute the logic of your reasoning. I just have a hunch that Stalin is not that kind of man. Harry says he's not and that he doesn't want anything but security for his country, and I think that if I give him everything I possibly can and*

ask for nothing from him in return, noblesse oblige, he won't try to annex anything and will work with me for a world of democracy and peace." Bullitt purposefully reminded the president that "when he talked of noblesse oblige he was not speaking of the Duke of Norfolk but of a Caucasian bandit whose only thought when he got something for nothing was that the other fellow was an ass." But Roosevelt had heard enough: "It's my responsibility and not yours, and I'm going to play my hunch."[32] (Like most leaders, Roosevelt preferred the company of those whose views he shared, notwithstanding his affection, at the time, for Bullitt. In the last week of November 1941, Roosevelt had warned his first ambassador to Soviet Russia against traveling across the Pacific: "I am expecting the Japs to attack any time now, probably within the next three or four days.")[33]

At Tehran on November 28, 1943, Franklin Roosevelt met Joseph Stalin for the first time with only interpreters present. "I am glad to see you," said Roosevelt, "I have tried for a long time to bring this about." For security reasons, the American president was housed in the compound of the Soviet embassy, pushed into and out of buildings by his valet on a system of ramps, and lifted in and out of cars while Secret Service agents kept him surrounded.[34] In their long conversations Roosevelt happily discussed issues ranging from the future of India—"The best solution," Roosevelt said, "would be reform from the bottom, somewhat on the Soviet Line"—to the future liberty of Poland, a political question that Roosevelt reminded Stalin had domestic political considerations, since there were "six to seven million Americans of Polish extraction, and as a practical man he would not wish to lose their vote." Stressing the need for free elections in the once-independent Baltic states, Roosevelt agreed that he "personally was confident that the people would vote to join the Soviet Union."[35]

For his part, Stalin's contempt for the perceived weakness he saw in Roosevelt was revealed at the end of a morning session in Tehran. Roosevelt genially announced to the conference table, "Now we can adjourn and let's go have some lunch." After everyone got to his feet, the Soviet interpreter Valentin Berezhkov heard Stalin mockingly remark: "Some will walk and some will ride." When Berezhkov asked if this comment should be translated, Stalin answered, "Niet."[36]

With the other interpreters, Berezhkov worked around the clock translating Roosevelt's private conversations, since his living quarters were, of course, bugged by the NKVD. These conversations were not hostile in the slightest, so much so that Berezhkov wondered if perhaps Roosevelt was speaking not only to his American aides but also to the microphones.[37] Later at Yalta, a perplexed Stalin would ask: "What do you think? Do they know that we are listening to them? . . . It's bizarre. They say everything in the fullest detail."[38]

At Tehran, the most revealing conversation was made quite openly, over dinner on November 29, 1943. Stalin twice proposed that after the war in Germany "at least 50,000 and perhaps 100,000 of the German Commanding Staff must be physically liquidated." Franklin Roosevelt, evidently believing that the Soviet leader was joking, suggested that only "forty-nine thousand" should be killed. While Winston Churchill got up from the table and left the room in disgust. "I was deeply angered," Churchill later wrote. "I would rather, I said, be taken out into the garden here and now and be shot myself than sully my own and my country's honour by such infamy." Both Churchill and Roosevelt had read Owen O'Malley's report of the Katyn Massacre just three months earlier.[39]

AFTER HIS RETURN from Tehran, the president broadcast a fireside chat to the nation: *"To use an American and somewhat ungrammatical colloquialism, I may say that 'I got along fine' with Marshal Stalin. He is a man who combines a tremendous, relentless determination with a stalwart good humor. I believe he is truly representative of the heart and soul of Russia; and I believe that we are going to get along very well with him and the Russian people— very well indeed."*[40] Nor was this simply a public façade designed to reassure the American public. In her memoirs, Eleanor Roosevelt confided that her husband had been *"impressed by the strength of Stalin's personality. On his return he was always careful in describing him to mention that he was short and thick-set and powerful . . . He also said*

that his control over the people of his country was unquestionably due to their trust in him and their confidence that he had their good at heart."[41]

Just over a year later, the ailing American president was once again lifted "into automobile, to ship, to shore and to aircraft" to travel around the world for a second meeting with Stalin, at the soviet leader's summer retreat on the Black Sea. In the newsreel pictures taken at the Yalta Conference of February 1945, Roosevelt appeared pale and very drawn, struggling to summon his customary bright smile for the cameras. At their photo call, the three most powerful men in the world sat on a simple bench with their aides gathered behind them. In the newsreel, on a whim Stalin gets up to shake Churchill's hand, and for a moment, Franklin Roosevelt is left sitting on the bench alone, wearing a black cloak fastened at his throat with a chain, looking around him forlorn and somewhat confused.[42]

Inside the Livadia Palace, Joseph Stalin raised a glass to his Allies: *"I am talking, as an old man; that is why I am talking so much . . . In an alliance the allies should not deceive each other. Perhaps this is naïve? Experienced diplomatists may say, 'Why should I not deceive my ally?' But I as a naïve man think it best not to deceive my ally even if he is a fool. Possibly our alliance is so firm just because we do not deceive each other, or is it because it is not so easy to deceive each other? I propose a toast to the firmness of our Three Power Alliance."*[43]

Leaving us to wonder if such elegant rhetoric—such deceiving words on the nature of deception—was even necessary given Roosevelt's deteriorating health and his belief in "noblesse oblige." At their very first session in Yalta, Roosevelt announced that "the United States would take all reasonable steps to preserve peace, but not at the expense of keeping a large army in Europe, three thousand miles away from home. The American occupation would therefore be limited to two years." Churchill described the statement as "momentous."[44] What hope had Eastern Europe, or even Poland, whose liberty had been the very starting point of the war? When Roosevelt asked Stalin how soon it would be possible to hold elections in Poland, Stalin crisply replied, "Within a month," and the American president appeared to believe him. "The elections," Roosevelt emphasized to Stalin, "must be above criticism, like Caesar's wife. I want some kind of

assurance to give to the world, and I don't want anybody to be able to question their purity."[45]

In private telegrams to Churchill, Roosevelt often referred to Stalin as "UJ," or "Uncle Joe," with an avuncular affection that he clearly wanted others to share. It was a fantasy that Roosevelt continued to believe in almost to the very end. On his return from Yalta, the president described Stalin's character to his assembled cabinet as having "something in his being apart from this revolutionist Bolshevik thing." Warming to his theme, Roosevelt suggested that Stalin's early training as a priest meant that "something entered into his nature, of the way in which a Christian gentleman should behave." Perhaps Roosevelt wished to cling to the notion of their wartime alliance as morally unambiguous: a straightforward triumph of good over evil as scripted by the Office of War Information. Perhaps Roosevelt wanted to conceal from himself and others the bitter similarities between the two totalitarian dictatorships. Perhaps Roosevelt genuinely believed the views of his closest advisers, the publicly expressed enthusiasms of Joseph Davies, Sumner Welles, Henry Wallace, and Harry Hopkins. We do not know, since the American president always reserved the ability to hide the truth, if need be, even from himself.

Winston Churchill, at least, recognized the reality behind the façade. At the Livadia Palace in Yalta, when the British ambassador Archibald Clark Kerr raised his glass in a toast to Lavrenty Beria, "the protector of our bodies," it was Churchill who growled back at him, "No, no, Archie. None of that." The perspicacity of Churchill shone through the smoke and subterfuge of stateroom diplomacy. Unlike Roosevelt, Churchill never harbored any illusions over Soviet intentions, and he understood very well that Stalin made good on his threats.

Two years earlier, in August 1942, Churchill had visited Stalin in Moscow to discuss the delay of the second front. During their late-night conversation, Churchill asked if the strains of the Second World War were any worse than during the collectivization period a decade earlier. "Oh no," Stalin replied. "The collective farm policy was a terrible struggle." Churchill then mentioned that Stalin had dealt with not just "a few score thousands of aristocrats or big landowners, but with millions of small men."

At which point Stalin corrected him: “Ten millions.” When Churchill asked what had happened to this kulak class, Stalin confided, *“Many of them agreed to come in with us. Some of them were given land of their own to cultivate in the province of Tomsk . . . or further north, but the great bulk were very unpopular and were wiped out by their laborers.”* There was then a “considerable pause” while the British prime minister understood the significance of the destruction of approximately one eighth of the Russian population, judged to be part of this kulak class.[46]

At Yalta, both Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to repatriate “without exception and by force if necessary” all former Soviet prisoners of war, fugitive Soviet nationals, and fleeing citizens of satellite nations. It did not require much political acumen to predict what fate awaited these men once they were returned to the USSR. Stalin himself had publicly warned that “in Hitler’s camps there are no Russian prisoners of war, only Russian traitors and we shall do away with them when the war is over.” But Churchill’s signature remained on the document that settled the fate of approximately two million Russian prisoners at the conference on the Black Sea. Churchill christened the retreat “the Riviera of Hades.”[47]

At Yalta, when Churchill asked for some lemon for his gin and tonics, he awoke the next morning to discover a lemon tree growing outside his palace window. Even this humble lemon tree concealed a private tragedy, which linked the forgotten Americans to this historic setting. Albert Troyer had been a citrus specialist, a graduate of the University of Nebraska, who arrived in the Soviet Union from his native Alabama in 1932, ready to take on the responsibility for revitalizing the moribund Soviet citrus industry. In the sunny climate by the Black Sea, Troyer had diligently crossed and grafted lemons for four years, until his arrest in 1936 and subsequent sentence to ten years in the Gulag. Eventually his wife’s parcels to him were returned, and Eva Troyer was informed that her husband had been “transferred to an undisclosed destination.” She had reported his arrest to the American embassy: *“My husband is an old man—71 years old. He has been a horticulturist practically all his life, with no definite political interests. He is essentially an idealist and an altruist. For fifteen years he taught agriculture in the Calhoun Colored School of Calhoun, Alabama . . .*

He believed his difficulties arose chiefly because of his inability to understand the Russian language." But no help was ever forthcoming for this humble lemon farmer from Alabama.[48]

RETURNING FROM YALTA, the USS *Quincy* stopped in Algiers to allow Harry Hopkins to be taken off on a stretcher and flown to the Mayo Clinic for treatment of the cancer that would take his life within the year. Another one of the president's closest aides, General Edwin "Pa" Watson, was confined in an oxygen tent after collapsing from a heart attack, and would die en route. Roosevelt himself, according to an eyewitness, looked worn out. His college friend Alexander Kirk commented: *"This is really a ship of death and everyone responsible for encouraging that man to go to Yalta has done a disservice to the United States and ought to be shot."*[49]

Two months later, Henry Morgenthau visited the president at the Little White House at Warm Springs, Georgia. The ever-faithful treasury secretary discovered Roosevelt "sitting in a chair with his feet up on a very large foot-stool with a card table drawn up over his legs. He was mixing cocktails." When he saw Roosevelt's face, Morgenthau was shocked, describing in his diary how the president

had aged terrifically and looked very haggard. His hands shook so that he started to knock the glasses over, and I had to hold each glass as he poured out the cocktail . . . I noticed that he took two cocktails and then seemed to feel a little bit better. I found his memory bad, and he was constantly confusing names. He hasn't weighed himself so he didn't know whether he had gained weight or not. I have never seen him have so much difficulty transferring himself from his wheelchair to a regular chair, and I was in agony watching him.[50]

The next day before lunch, Roosevelt was having his portrait painted by

Elizabeth Shoumatoff, a White Russian artist whose family had fled the Revolution. As Shoumatoff mixed her watercolors, she glanced up at the president, who was working on some government papers. The gray, drained look on his face had disappeared, and he seemed in good color, remarking, “We have fifteen minutes more to work.” As the cerebral hemorrhage struck, Franklin Roosevelt’s right hand passed over his forehead several times, his head bent forward in his chair, and he lost consciousness. Two hours after his collapse, at 3:35 P.M. on April 12, 1945, Franklin Roosevelt died.[51]

At 6:45 P.M. on the same day, Chief Justice Harlan Stone administered the oath of office to Vice President Truman. Harry Truman’s shock and surprise at the news was such that he forgot to raise his right hand when he repeated the oath of office with his left hand on the Bible. Chief Justice Stone had to quietly remind him of this obligation.[52]

Three months later, at their meeting at Potsdam in the ruins of Berlin, Stalin advised Truman that “a man must conserve his strength. President Roosevelt had a great sense of duty, but he did not save his strength. If he had, he would probably be alive today.”[53] Given that it was Stalin himself who had twice summoned the ailing, wheelchair-bound president around the world to his very doorstep in rapid succession, it appeared that the Soviet dictator was having a private joke with himself.

But that seemed to be Stalin’s way. When Averell Harriman left Moscow, Stalin presented him with a gift of two horses that the American ambassador had admired in the newsreel of the Red Square victory parade. One of the horses was given with special thanks to the ambassador’s daughter, Kathleen Harriman. At Soviet state expense, the thoroughbreds were transported across the Atlantic—with an escort of a Russian vet, a jockey, and two grooms—to the Harriman family estate in New York. Upon their arrival, Kathleen Harriman was photographed standing beside a magnificent sixteen-hand bay stallion named Fact. The horse’s Russian documentation, bound in red leather and presented with the gift, revealed that Fact had been bred at the military farm of the First Cavalry Army. The stallion was the offspring of a sire named “Pharaoh” and a dam named “Liquidation.”[54]

20

"Release by the Green Procurator"

The General Assembly signed the agreement on genocide . . . We signed the convention. Of course, 1937 was not genocide. It was the destruction of the enemies of the people. There was no reason not to sign the convention.

Varlam Shalamov, Graphite[1]

Stalin declared Victory Day in the USSR to be May 9, 1945, exactly one day after the Allies. On the morning of May 10, a crowd of joyful Russians gathered outside the American embassy cheering the Stars and Stripes and refusing to move on. From the balcony, George Kennan made a short speech—"Congratulations on the day of Victory. All honor to the Soviet allies"—and the crowd remained on the street waving and cheering until evening. No spontaneous mass demonstration had taken place in Moscow since the Revolution. As George Kennan recalled: "not even a sparrow had fallen . . . for twenty seven years and now suddenly this!" It seemed that the suffering of the Russian people during the war, and their courage in withstanding the invasion, had also given rise to a certain boldness in its aftermath.[2]

In July 1945, a scene was reported by an American witness one night outside a restaurant in the center of Moscow. A Russian man and a woman were confronted by several policemen, including one plainclothes man who appeared to have a pistol in his hand. Astonishingly, the Russian civilian refused to be arrested and instead shouted in the street, "I served the whole war on the front. And where did you serve, eh? Where did you serve?" In his choice of language, the former Red Army soldier used the familiar form of the Russian "you," signifying his contempt for the secret police. He then strode off down the street and was allowed to walk away.

Within the Soviet Union it was evident that the defeat of Nazi Germany contained the possibility for new liberties at home. If, therefore, the postwar period was rapidly transformed into a new prewar prelude, then this was never merely an accident of historical circumstance.[3]

WITHIN THE GULAG, the end of the Second World War made little difference, save for its continued expansion. New waves of prisoners began filling the camps in the summer of 1945, including the so-called *spetz* men, the Soviet prisoners of war whose fate had been sealed months earlier at Yalta. In the Allied-controlled prisoner-of-war camps of France and Germany, NKVD agents identified the men they wanted back. They handed out propaganda leaflets and posters showing a beautiful Russian woman stretching out her arms and saying, “Come home, dearest son, your motherland calls you.” After the propaganda was distributed, the NKVD agents read promises from the Soviet government that no prisoner of war would be prosecuted in his native land. Of course, they were universally disbelieved.[4]

During the postwar deportations, an estimated forty thousand Russians were hunted down in free France, with the assistance of the French police.[5] In one example, French witnesses looked on as a Russian former prisoner of war, Nikolai Lapchinski, was beaten and dragged across the street into a waiting car by the agents of the NKVD. The inside of his safehouse apartment showed the aftermath of a desperate struggle. The walls were covered in blood, the furniture smashed, and a broken kitchen knife lay on the floor. The measure of violence revealing how their victim understood very well what was at stake.[6]

The captured Russians joined thousands of others in transit camps in the Soviet zone in eastern Germany. At Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, and elsewhere, prisoners were once again clothed in the familiar striped pajamas the world knew so well.[7] Among them was John Noble, a twenty-one-year-

old American interned by the Germans and arrested by the Soviet police. As a prisoner-clerk at the Soviet jail at Munchenerplatz, John Noble learned of the guards' "humane" method of execution. On execution days a prisoner was undressed and walked down a corridor. As he turned a corner, he was shot in the back of the head. At the end of the day the bodies were piled up, ready to be doused in gasoline and set alight.[8] Five years after the end of the war, while still a prisoner in Buchenwald, John Noble learned there were prisoners who had suffered in this camp under the Nazi and the Soviet regimes. The bodies of thousands of prisoners who had been starved to death since the end of the war were taken out to the forest and buried in mass graves. In Sachsenhausen in the early 1990s, forensic investigators found 12,500 bodies buried in fifty mass graves around the camp, dating from its period as a Stalinist transit camp from 1945 to 1950.[9]

The surviving prisoners began the long journey east, transported into the Gulag on prison trains until they arrived in the dense and endless forest of barbed wire, watchtowers, searchlights, dogs, and guards that was the camp complex of Vorkuta. John Noble was given a black uniform with the number 1-E-241 sewn into the cloth and sent to work in the mines. When he arrived in October, the summer was over and the ground was already covered in snow. After work, Noble watched the prisoners gather the snow into blocks and build them up around the barracks in preparation for winter, when the temperatures in this Gulag center above the Arctic Circle fell to between forty-five and sixty-five degrees below zero. On a daily diet of approximately fourteen hundred calories, and performing heavy labor of pushing a two-ton car of slate through the mines, John Noble's weight dropped to 95 pounds. Bones protruding, face gaunt, he joined the army of skeletal cadavers who universally weighed between 75 and 115 pounds. Almost all the prisoners had half their teeth missing through scurvy; they fell out while they were eating. John Noble was not due for release until the mid-1960s.[10]

Many other Americans were caught up in the mass deportations into the Gulag after the war. Mieczyslaw Rusinek was an American citizen born in Detroit and brought to Poland as an infant by his parents. Although Rusinek was issued with an American passport in 1940, he was arrested by the

NKVD during their operations in Poland. On February 8, 1945, he was placed in a transport of 3,800 Polish men and women pressed into sealed wagons for the six-week journey east. *"About half the people died during the journey,"* Rusinek later wrote. In the camp *"we received to eat only nettle and some ivy and 400 grams of bread daily . . . Only 25% of our transport survived the camp."*[11]

A German woman, Marga Sochart, wrote to the American consulate in Bremen describing how she had been placed in a stock car containing ninety prisoners, where she had met a nineteen-year-old American citizen named Anneliese Thamm, captured by the NKVD with her mother in Elbing, West Prussia. Both Anneliese Thamm and her mother had been "beaten and raped by Russian troops," and were then transported to a camp in Turkmenistan, where they *"performed hard labour, though inadequately fed . . . Of the 3500 inmates of the camp about 3000 died."* Mrs. Thamm suffered continually from heart attacks and died in July 1945. Her daughter Anneliese died later that month. Marga Sochart wrote that *"Their bodies were stripped of their clothes and were buried in a common grave with 10 to 20 others in the cemetery."*[12]

THE GULAG COLLECTED prisoners from all over the world, including the United States. According to British and American military intelligence estimates, approximately one in ten soldiers fighting in the German army during the D-Day invasion of France was a former Soviet citizen, more than a million of whom had been enlisted.[13] In encouraging these Russian troops to surrender in Normandy, the U.S. Army psychological warfare operatives had given these soldiers their assurances, in leaflets, that *"they would be sent to America for the duration and subsequently would not be required to return to Russia."*[14]

At Fort Dix, New Jersey, a riot broke out when Russian prisoners of war discovered they were about to be repatriated. Tear gas and rifle fire were required before the prisoners were finally clubbed into submission. Three

men were found hanged in their barracks, and several others were hospitalized with self-inflicted injuries.[15] From Camp Rupert, Idaho, eleven hundred Russians were dispatched onto ships leaving from the West Coast. Once again, three men attempted to commit suicide, and two bodies were later found floating in the water.[16]

The British authorities resorted to deceptions of their own. One captured Cossack battle group was given Allied uniforms and promised that ninety thousand men would be allowed to serve in the British army. The Cossacks were asked to turn in their weapons before being given a standard-issue supply. Once disarmed, they were handed over to the NKVD. Knowing their likely fate, the Russian prisoners of war physically resisted their embarkation onto the trains. Since the NKVD lacked the necessary manpower and could not yet shoot the prisoners on the spot, it was left to the American and British military police, using tear gas and baton charges, to club them aboard. In one, not untypical, group of three hundred Russians, nine men hanged themselves, one stabbed himself to death, and twenty others preferred hospitalization with self-inflicted injuries rather than risk being sent back to the Soviet Union.[17]

A British witness watched a disembarkation of former Russian prisoners of war in the northern port of Murmansk that lasted four and half hours. The sick prisoners, those with broken legs, the amputees, the dying, and the failed suicides were *"marched or dragged into a warehouse fifty yards from the ship and after a lapse of fifteen minutes, automatic fire was heard coming from the warehouse; twenty minutes later a covered lorry drove out of the warehouse and headed towards the town. Later I had a chance to glance into the warehouse when no one was around and found the cobbled floor stained dark in several places around the sides and the walls badly chipped for about five feet up."* The executioners were Russian youths with automatic rifles, between fourteen and sixteen years old.[18]

In the Soviet Union, many of the Russian prisoners of war who had enlisted in General Andrei Vlassov's "Russian Liberation Movement" were executed as traitors. The rest of the *spetz* men—mainly ordinary Russian prisoners of war guilty of nothing other than having been captured in battle—were handed twenty-five-year sentences and transported to the harshest,

and most remote, camps. But whereas the mass of Gulag prisoners before the Second World War had been mainly civilian victims, unused to violence and preyed upon by the criminals, the *spetz* men were different. They arrived marked by the habits of war, and placed their trust in the gun, not Soviet propaganda. This made them especially dangerous.

VARLAM SHALAMOV would later describe the fate of Lieutenant Yanovsky, a Red Army officer and former prisoner of war in a Germany that refused the Vlassov emissaries' invitation to fight against the Soviet Union. Instead Yanovsky had managed to escape a Nazi camp and make his way back across enemy lines to his own side. He was immediately arrested by the NKVD and handed a twenty-five-year sentence. Eventually Yanovsky was transported to Kolyma, where one glance at his fellow prisoners convinced him they had been delivered to their deaths. Resolving to save himself once again, he spent the winter of 1945 planning one of the few armed conspiracies in the history of the Kolyma Gulag.

His fellow conspirators learned the information required to make their operation successful: the guard duty, the location of the munitions stores, the geography beyond the wire. According to Shalamov's account, Lieutenant Yanovsky spoke to many men who refused to join the escape, but no one betrayed him, and twelve agreed to risk their lives for the chance of freedom. Their plan was to overpower the guards, steal a truck, and head off into the taiga toward the nearest military airport, where they would hijack a plane to Alaska. Nor was this scheme quite so far-fetched as it might at first have appeared. Its very audacity worked in its favor. Only the year before, three Russian pilots had escaped from a Nazi prison camp, seizing Luftwaffe planes and flying out of Germany to what they believed was the safety of Byelorussia.[19] Far from being welcomed as heroes, the Russian pilots were arrested and sent to Kolyma. But in Alaska, Yanovsky reasoned, the Americans would not treat them like the NKVD.

In the spring of 1946, the Yanovsky conspirators killed two guards, changed into their uniforms, and overpowered the whole guard block. Taking food, weapons, and ammunition, they drove a truck out of the camp. There were several military airports in the vicinity, and the men headed for the nearest one. When their truck ran out of fuel, they got out and ran across the taiga. All available NKVD troops in the heavily garrisoned area were sent after them. Adopting guerrilla tactics, the escapees split into two groups: a main group of eight, and a reconnaissance patrol of four, led by Yanovsky. The advance party soon encountered a unit of soldiers whose dogs had picked up their scent. Three of the men were cut down by rifle fire, and only Yanovsky escaped. The main group of eight was caught in a flanking movement by the NKVD. Pinned down by crossfire, the soldiers formed a circle and fought at each other's side until their ammunition was exhausted and they were shot down. Only one of their group was captured, wounded but alive. He was taken to a camp hospital, where he was treated until he recovered, and then executed.

Perhaps, before he was killed, the wounded escapee gained grim satisfaction from the camp doctors' assumption that the World War Three had broken off, so numerous were the NKVD casualties. And it might have comforted the lone Russian to learn that despite every effort, Lieutenant Yanovsky's body had not been found. The Russian lieutenant had promised his men liberty, and had delivered, if only for a few precious hours spent running across the taiga. The conspirators had expected nothing more, and no one in the camp questioned their choice.[20]

Thomas Sgovio personally witnessed what happened to the *spetz* men in the Kolyma camps. Kept shackled with no names, only numbers, on their backs, they were subjected to the very worst conditions of food and labor. Very few survived their sentence—for most, the maximum life expectancy was two years.[21]

DESPERATION AT THEIR lengthened sentences led many prisoners to

make individual escape attempts from Kolyma in the spring of 1946. "Release by the green procurator" almost invariably ended in failure, since there was nowhere to run to in that vast wilderness. The nearest human settlements were hundreds of kilometers away, and the local nomadic tribesmen were promised flour and vodka for every escapee they returned. The bounty was only rarely collected. Most escape attempts were quickly ended by experienced teams of "head hunters" who tracked the runners with dogs and planes, shooting their victims on sight. They dumped the bodies in the wasteland and amputated their hands for identification.[22] Early on in his sentence, Thomas Sgovio had heard that two criminals, named Prosolov and Novikov, were planning an escape and were looking for a third person to join their party. All the experienced prisoners wisely refused, but eventually a new arrival was persuaded to join them. The young man could hardly have realized that the criminals were merely planning to use him as a food source. Somewhere along the way they killed their victim. Both men were then hunted down and shot by the guards.[23]

And yet for all the overwhelming odds against them, there were still a few individuals who managed to escape the Gulag. In the chaos at the end of the war, a few "captive Americans" turned up in Moscow in ones or twos, always furtive and clearly desperate. At the Associated Press offices in the Metropol Hotel, the American reporter Homer Smith answered a call from a man asking for Eddy Gilmore. Since the bureau chief was away, and knowing that the Metropol was closely watched, Homer Smith suggested a meeting at the Moscow post office. There he met a "heavy set, sallow-complexioned man" whose hands were "calloused as a stevedore's." Together they took the metro train to Sokolniki Park, in northeast Moscow, and sitting on a park bench, "K." told Smith his story.

The American was a former union activist from California who had arrived in Soviet Russia as "political immigrant" in 1930. Soon afterward his criticism of Stalin's regime had led to his arrest and deportation to Kolyma. Having survived fourteen years in the Gulag, K. explained that he had escaped from a prison train on a transfer in the Urals, and six weeks later arrived in Moscow. In the city he had acquired false identity papers, and was hidden in the basement of a Russian widow who had lost her

husband during the Terror. Then in Sokolniki Park, K. attempted to describe to Smith the conditions he had witnessed in Kolyma—“the inhumanity, brutality and horrors of life.”

Two days later, K. met Smith again, this time in Gorky Park. He asked Smith if he would be willing to drive him into the American embassy. Homer Smith refused but gave him the name of a friend who might be able to help. Later Smith heard that the Californian unionist had stayed in the American embassy basement for a week, where he was interviewed and given new clothes. K. was not, however, granted asylum and his escape from the USSR remained his own initiative. Two attempts to cross into Romania and Finland both ended in failure. Weeks later, K. met Smith for the last time, with a plan to cross the Polish border. Once again Homer Smith chose not to become involved, claiming that he was unsure if the Californian was the “real thing” or an NKVD agent. In the circumstances, Smith’s caution was understandable. Before he was hired by Gilmore at the Associated Press, Homer Smith had been just another American emigrant like K., who had arrived in the early 1930s to work at the Moscow post office. His press accreditation offered him a measure of protection, but he must have known of the disappearances of Lydia Kleingal and Alyce Alex.[24]

OFTEN AMERICAN FUGITIVES such as K. encountered the same diplomats who had failed to protect them several years earlier. After his return to Moscow to maintain his Russian-language skills, Elbridge Durbrow was presented with the case of Nathan Coalman, “a man claiming to be American citizen,” who called at the American embassy on October 26, 1945. In a telegram to the State Department, Elbridge Durbrow wrote that Nathan Coalman *“was at his rope’s end . . . He stated that if we could not assist him or give him asylum in Embassy we should turn him over to police in order that we would know that the police had him and furthermore that the police would be cognizant of the fact that we knew of his case. He was persuaded to leave the premises but in all probability will return within*

a day or two for a final answer . . . If he calls again and demands asylum he will be refused unless Department feels otherwise."

Three days later, just as predicted, Nathan Coalman returned to the American embassy and was once again persuaded to leave. *"If possible,"* Durbrow wrote, *"urgently request reply to his citizenship status since if impossible to try to protect him as American citizen I see no alternative but to turn him over to the authorities if he shows up here again."* [25] Durbrow's telegram was the last official trace of the existence of Nathan Coalman. In the USSR, it was only a question of time before a problem like Coalman disappeared. And while Joseph Stalin urgently coveted the return of every national back into the Soviet orbit "without exception," the same could not be said for the new administration of Harry S. Truman.

Like Durbrow, George Kennan had been posted back to the American embassy in Moscow. On November 14, 1945, as minister-counselor, he wrote to the new secretary of state, James Byrnes, "transmitting a report on Soviet Treatment of American citizens." In his letter, Kennan described the fate of hundreds of Americans caught "between the Soviet and American worlds," whose treatment could be "little different if our country were in a state of war with the Soviet Union." Kennan's letter showed a level of concern largely absent in the decade before the war:

The individuals affected are mostly little people. The officials involved are minor officials. Soviet cynicism with respect to capitalist society readily suggests that neither the individuals nor the officials will normally be able to make their voices heard in the councils of the United States Government, and that even if they do, the issues will be too petty and too confused to enlist any dangerous degree of official indignation. Banking on this, they feel that they can safely continue to follow a policy of unconcealed arrogance and hostility in this obscure field of inter-governmental relations, so important to them and—as they imagine—so unimportant to us.

Once again, Kennan suggested that the whole hidden issue of the American

emigrants should be presented openly: *"If we were to find means to state frankly to the American public what the situation is with which we are faced in this respect . . . I would recommend that this particular compartment of Russian-American relations, which has long remained so dark and so replete with uncertainty and unpleasantness, be given its airing and illumination."*[26]

Attached to Kennan's letter was a report from Roger Tyler, Jr., the second secretary at the Moscow embassy and the head of the Consular section. Tyler's report contained the first admission of the diplomats' earlier hostility toward the American emigrants: *"It cannot be denied that during the years where there were no diplomatic relations between the United States and Soviet Russia, a general feeling existed that any one who came to the Soviet Union was a damned Bolshevik and deserved what he got."* Tyler then continued:

An examination of the citizen files in the Embassy reveals with stark clarity the force, deception and threats employed by the Soviet authorities in preventing many American citizens from maintaining their citizenship status . . . The files are full of pleas from desperate people who want to come to Moscow to explain their cases . . . Few of those who were persuaded by propaganda to leave America in times of Depression or on contracts signed with Amtorg . . . had any idea that they would be under great and sometimes irresistible pressure to part with their American citizenship and never be allowed to return to the United States.

To underscore his point, Roger Tyler highlighted the precarious existence of three young Americans—Dora Gershonowitz, Alexander Dolgun, and Isaac Elkowitz—who had all found temporary sanctuary working in clerical jobs at the American embassy. His report also cited the case of Lillian Boft, an American citizen brought to the Soviet Union as a child. Her sister Edith Boft had recently written to the embassy: "Lillian used to keep a diary, and wrote in it that she would kill herself if she could not get back to the United

States. We didn't believe her." Tyler then added: *"The record shows that while on vacation in Odessa, she hanged herself."*[27]

George Kennan sent his letter with Tyler's report to Washington, D.C., but the publicity he asked for failed to materialize. Instead, the material was classified as "Top Secret" and filed in the archives. Nor were the American diplomats in Moscow willing to break the silence without official sanction. Three months later, Kennan wrote another, much longer, telegram advocating the policy of "containment" in America's relationship with the Soviet Union. The eight-thousand-word telegram was quickly passed around U.S. government circles, and the resulting publicity made Kennan internationally famous as a Cold War strategist. His earlier plea on behalf of the Americans trapped in the Soviet Union received no such publicity, and was soon forgotten, even by its author.[28]

21

The Second Generation

Under the spreading chestnut tree
I sold you and you sold me.

George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four

Within the camps, the American survivors clung on, preoccupied with survival and waiting for a new turn of events. In theory, at least, all prisoners remained subject to the laws of the Soviet judicial system, which retained an arbitrary quality described by one survivor as "like playing chess with an orang-utan."[1] In September 1946, eight and a half years into his five-year sentence, Thomas Sgovio was unexpectedly fingerprinted and asked to sign a warrant. As an "overtimer" he was informed that although he was not allowed to leave the Kolyma region, he could seek work among the free settlers shipped in to colonize the empty spaces of the North.

Now aged thirty, Thomas found a job drawing maps for a geological prospecting group. In the evenings he taught the geologists English, although his lessons grew less and less popular as the superpower relationship deteriorated. All over the Soviet Union, from this tiny ice-bound settlement in Kolyma to the busy streets of Moscow, the public loudspeakers were barking a daily diatribe against America, "the warmonger and imperialist oppressor." With bewildering speed, the United States was transformed from World War ally into Cold War foe.[2]

Nine months later, the hand of the "orang-utan" reached out to make another move. The petitions sent by his mother and sister in Moscow had finally reached the desk of a Soviet official willing to grant Thomas Sgovio permission to leave Kolyma. Once again without explanation, he was issued an internal passport authorizing leave for the "mainland." Gathering his scant belongings in a knapsack, he hitched a ride south toward Magadan.

On his arrival, he found the city filled with bewildered Japanese prisoners of war, who could make little sense of what was taking place around them.[3] One of the Japanese asked a former prisoner in pidgin Russian, *"Japanese soldiers walk down road, Russian soldiers guard. We understand—war! Russian ladies walk down road, Russian soldiers guard. We do not understand."* And who could begin to explain the nature of Stalinism that had led the Russian women to this end?[4]

In Magadan, Thomas bought his first apple in nine years and began the interminable bureaucratic battle to gather the necessary travel and identity papers required by an ex-prisoner to leave this closed zone. As the months wore on and his funds ran low, he started to despair but was helped by a Russian translator friend, who told him that there was another American living in Magadan and working as a free-citizen engineer. His name was Aisenstein, "perhaps he might be able to help?" Clutching the address on a slip of paper, Thomas Sgovio hurried down to the port ready for a reunion with his friend, who had been saved from starvation in the camp by his qualifications as an engineer. But Michael Aisenstein greeted him at the door stony-faced, and after a few cold questions and answers, Thomas left empty-handed. Many of the former prisoners were too fearful to risk even a conversation.[5]

Instead, Thomas' salvation came in the unexpected form of an alcoholic NKVD guard whom he ran into on the streets of Magadan. Lieutenant Vassilyev's only words of English were "Hey, Thomas! Intelligence service!" First the NKVD lieutenant roared out his greeting, and then advised him to hurry down to the post office and send a telegram to Moscow. Thomas' sister, Grace Sgovio, was by now an employee at the British embassy, and thanks to her intervention and the generosity of a British diplomat, she managed to wire her brother the necessary funds. Using this cash, Thomas bribed his way on board a flight leaving Magadan for Khabarovsk, the city six hundred kilometers north of Vladivostok. On the long train journey back to Moscow, his ragged clothes and knapsack made him instantly identifiable as a survivor from "over there." But no one shunned him; instead the Russian travelers treated him like a long-lost

brother. Almost everyone, it seemed, had lost a family member or friend to the Terror.[6]

Exhausted by his journey, Thomas arrived to a joyous reception at his mother's flat in Moscow. In the family's shared room, his sister, Grace, played American records on their gramophone while they talked, since she assumed "the walls were listening." When Thomas asked for news of their father, the mood turned more somber. Very calmly, Grace explained that after Joseph Sgovio's arrest in 1937, no one had heard any news of his fate for the next ten years. Then, in January 1947, just three months earlier, she answered the door to a decrepit old man dressed in rags. Thinking he was just another one of Moscow's beggars made homeless by the war, she had turned toward the kitchen to give him some food. Only when the figure whispered, "Grace, Grace is that you?" did she realize that this old man, too frightened to follow her into the hallway, was her father.[7]

On the verge of collapse, Joseph Sgovio had summoned the strength to return to his family after ten years in the camps. Estranged from his wife, and without permission to remain in Moscow, he had left just ahead of a visit from the secret police. On a collective farm in Tashkent, he was hospitalized, but he managed to return once again to his family in Moscow. On his second visit, Grace sent for a private doctor, who examined her father's skeletal body and diagnosed a combination of the typical illnesses of a Gulag prisoner: dysentery, pellagra, malaria, and pneumonia. It was also very likely that he was suffering from tuberculosis, since he was coughing up blood. There was little more that could be done, and a short while afterward, Joseph Sgovio died with his family by his bedside, having begged their forgiveness for ever bringing them to the Soviet Union. At the very end, he held their hands: *"Forgive me . . . goodbye."*[8]

It was a condition not uncommon among the survivors of the camps. Some men could willfully cling on to life with stubborn tenacity. No matter how hard the circumstances, they defiantly survived, exhausting their bodies' final reserves in an effort to see their families again. Once this end was achieved, they died very quickly. As Grace recounted her father's death, the gramophone played the hit record that Thomas had brought with him from America—"Painting the Clouds with Sunshine."[9]

HAPPIER TIMES WERE to come. In the months after his return, Thomas was reunited with Lucy Flaxman, his former sweetheart, who was still living in Moscow, her family having survived the purges unharmed. In spite of the years that had passed since Thomas' arrest, their romance was rekindled in long walks through the pine woods outside Moscow. But when Thomas asked her if she ever thought she might return to America, Lucy always had trouble answering. And she always asked him not to discuss the camps: *"I'm really very weak. If ever they arrest me and interrogate me about you—I'd honestly be able to answer I know nothing."*[10]

Later, to lighten the mood, Lucy Flaxman told a joke going around Moscow at the time: "When you find yourself in the company of three be careful what you say! One of you is certainly a secret agent, if not two, perhaps all three!" Thomas warned her to be careful, since jokes could have disastrous consequences. But Lucy had only laughed and claimed he was exaggerating. "I've told them before. How come I was never arrested?" In reply, Thomas could only mumble an expression he had picked up in the camps: *"When it happens to you, you'll know that it was true."*[11]

As a former prisoner, Thomas was not allowed to live in Moscow, or any major city of the USSR. So he found work as a sign painter in the industrial town of Alexandrov, 120 kilometers northeast of Moscow. Months later, his romance with Lucy was moving closer to marriage. At the same time, the political atmosphere in the USSR was deteriorating steadily, with a new ideological campaign launched against the crime of "cosmopolitanism," and all foreign influences "infecting" Soviet society.

If the latest antiforeigner campaign had been confined to plays ridiculing President Truman in the Soviet theater, the abandoned Americans might only have suffered another period of nervous apprehension. But Stalinist propaganda was seldom unaccompanied by repressive action. In 1948 and 1949, new articles were added to the Soviet criminal code banning "Praise of American Technology" and "Praise of American Democracy" as offenses

carrying a sentence of twenty-five years.[12] Prisoners were no longer being released from the Gulag, and those who had been freed were being rearrested in alphabetical order. The survivors understood what was approaching. In truth they had never been free at all, their release was simply the interval between two arrests. Survivors like Thomas Sgovio were always destined to become future detainees, marking time until Stalin "felt hungry again."

As the Berlin Airlift threatened to escalate into World War Three, Stalin tightened his grip still further and a new wave of Terror broke across the Soviet Union. Within the American community, along with the survivors disappearing in the latest arrests, a second generation of American sons and daughters suddenly became vulnerable. They had survived the Terror because they were children at the time. But by 1949, this was no longer the case, and that year would become known as "the twin brother" of 1937.[13]

THE THREE AMERICANS mentioned by name in Roger Tyler's report were still working as clerks or translators at the embassy in Moscow. Dora Gershonowitz had arrived in Russia as an eleven-year-old child, and had been trying to return to her birthplace in Paterson, New Jersey, since the age of fourteen. On December 18, 1945, she wrote a letter addressed to Secretary of State James F. Byrnes describing how

I was deemed expatriated as a result of my failure to return to the United States . . . I have done everything humanly possible to obtain a Soviet exit visa—have been refused several times. I have never discontinued my efforts to obtain a visa and as a result have been waiting one and a half years for an answer from the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, in order to be able to return to my native country . . . I am requesting your intervention on my behalf . . . I would not have turned for assistance to you if I were not desperate.[14]

Letters such as Dora's prompted Byrnes to telegram the Moscow embassy on May 23, 1946:

Long accumulation of unsolved cases has resulted in embarrassment to Dept in its communication with persons in US interested in American nationals in Soviet Union. Dept desires that discussions with Foreign Minister be on a plane of utmost frankness . . . Soviet authorities have since resumption of diplomatic relations molested and in numerous instances arrested American nationals who have called at the Embassy, some of whom have disappeared and Embassy has been unable to ascertain their whereabouts or fate . . . Dept is considering the disclosure of facts of this situation to American public.[15]

While the machinery of the State Department considered how to act, Dora Gershonowitz was arrested. Although she was both an American citizen and an employee of the American embassy, little was done to protect her from her ordeal.

Eight years after her disappearance, in March 1956, a released German prisoner named Vera Kemnitz reported having seen her alive in Camp No. Nineteen at Potma, approximately 350 kilometers south of Nizhni Novgorod. Vera Kemnitz described Dora Gershonowitz as being of "*slight build, approximately one hundred pounds in weight, dark brown hair, brown eyes and she is suffering badly from the effects of tuberculosis.*" As proof of her identity, she had asked Kemnitz to remember the names of two diplomats she had worked with at the American embassy: "*Robert Tyler Jr, and Louis Hirschfeld, both US citizens.*"[16]

Like Dora, Alexander Dolgun was employed as a clerk at the American embassy. His father had brought him to Moscow as a seven-year-old boy, having signed up on a dollar contract to assemble Fords at the Stalin auto factory in 1933. Now aged twenty-two, Alexander Dolgun was stopped on a

Moscow street by a secret police officer and bundled into the back of a car to be driven the short distance to the Lubyanka. His reaction was almost identical to his American predecessors ten years earlier: *"What is all this about! Don't you know you are dealing with a citizen of the United States of America!"*[17]

After the official embassy requests to visit Dolgun in prison were refused, there seems to have been a collective bureaucratic shrug. From New York, Dolgun's sister wrote frantic appeals to her senator, and received a reply from an assistant secretary of state that "every feasible means will be employed to ascertain Mr. Dolgun's status." But a short while afterward, a minor official from the embassy wrote back suggesting that it would "be useful" if they were authorized to dispose of some of her brother's belongings "by giving them to needy persons." On an internal note, another diplomat had handwritten, "Do you remember him?"[18]

In the Lubyanka, Alexander Dolgun's MGB interrogator took evident pleasure in ridiculing an American letter of protest written on his behalf: "Fuck your embassy. That's all you are going to hear from them. That's the end of it. That's all they are good for. You are going to be here for the rest of your life, do you understand that?"[19]

Transferred to the notorious Lefortovo Prison, Dolgun was put on the "conveyor" and placed in an isolation cell painted black. Severe physical abuse continued for nine months, as his interrogators attempted to force his confession to an alleged espionage plot while screaming at him, "The State fucks you, you stupid son of a bitch." As the starvation and torture continued, Dolgun's hair fell out and his weight dropped to less than ninety pounds. By early 1950, when his condition had degenerated to the point where he could hardly walk, he was sentenced to twenty-five years at the Gulag camp of Dzhezkazgan, in the deserts of Kazakhstan.[20]

On his arrival at the camp, the American embassy clerk was distracted by the sound of an orchestra drifting out from inside the gates of the concentration camp. The gates opened and an army of skeletal prisoners marched out in lines of five, wearing black jackets with white numbers, looking straight ahead and keeping time to the march. The camp's ragged

orchestra consisted of a tuba, a trumpet, a drum, an accordion, and a violin. Dolgun noticed how "the eyes of the brass players looked profoundly hollow over their puffed cheeks." The new prisoners were then forced to undergo a selection: those who still had flesh on their buttocks were sent directly to the mines. Given his already starved condition, Dolgun was chosen for outdoor construction work breaking stones, and was thus denied an early death. Later, a Latvian prisoner-doctor chose to train him as medical orderly in exchange for English lessons. And by the shelter of this "function," Alexander Dolgun's life was saved from the mechanism of a camp that killed one third of its population every year.[21]

Who then could blame a very frightened Isaac Elkowitz when he refused even to leave the safety of the American embassy at all? Like the others, the twenty-year-old Ike had been vainly attempting to gain an exit visa back to New York, his former home and place of birth. His family had tried to leave the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, but his parents had been killed during the war, and Ike found himself in an orphanage with his sister. During this period he lost his sister, too, and having nowhere else to turn, he traveled to the American embassy in Moscow, where he found temporary sanctuary in his work as a telephone operator.

Denied permanent asylum in the embassy building, he was called up for Soviet military service. Weeks later, he was arrested and held in Lefortovo Prison, still wearing a Red Army uniform but with its insignia torn off. Ike Elkowitz was then accused of "having betrayed his homeland," an offense that carried a twenty-five-year sentence or "the supreme measure of social justice." He briefly recounted his story to another prisoner who had survived Lefortovo and later remembered his existence. But no one knew what happened to Ike Elkowitz after his imprisonment.[22]

The three Americans mentioned by name in Roger Tyler's report ought to have been among the safest of the American emigrants' children, not just because all three worked at the American embassy. Official records were kept of their identities, and their disappearances were immediately noticed and reported. If the safest could not be saved, then what hope had the rest of the American survivors? In Moscow, the American diplomatic officials no longer wrote individual replies to the requests sent by their relatives from

back home. Instead, they sent out form responses to those asking for help for their loved ones who had disappeared: *"The embassy regrets, that due to the great number of welfare and whereabouts enquiries received and the inability of the Consular Section to increase the staff to handle them because of the housing and office space shortage, a form letter must be used in reply to your letter."*

Privately, in a secret memorandum dated January 12, 1949, an American diplomatic official admitted the embassy's failure to protect: "*With the exception of the period preceding the War of 1812, perhaps never have so many American citizens been subjected to comparable discriminations, threats, police interrogations, and administrative punishments, all for no greater offence than that of attempting to assert their American citizenship and depart from a country whose regime they abhor more strenuously than many of their more fortunate fellow citizens residing in the United States."*[23] The latest U.S. ambassador, Walter Bedell Smith, did put forward a proposal to exchange the "estimated two thousand Americans being held in the Soviet Union" for the remaining Russian former prisoners of war in the American zone of West Germany. But as they always did, the Soviets blocked the scheme, and this faint hope soon came to nothing.[24]

THOMAS SGOVIO KNEW personally many of the Americans who disappeared at this time. His friend Sam Freedman was arrested and executed. Before her arrest, Dora Gershonowitz had visited Thomas with her mother, and he had told her the little he knew of the fate of her father, Abe Gershonowitz, a mechanic from New Jersey, who had shared a cell with Thomas in 1938, and later died in the camps.[25]

Lucy Abolin, the former Young Pioneer at the Anglo-American school, was another one of the postwar American victims. She had already lost most of her family in the Terror of 1937 and 1938: her two brothers from the American baseball team and her father. During the Second World War, the American embassy had attempted to hire Lucy as a telephone operator.

Ambassador William Standley had telegrammed Washington describing how Lucy Abolin had told him *"her position has been made very difficult and that she has been ordered to stop seeing her American friends and forbidden to come to the Embassy. Her application to renounce her Soviet citizenship has never been approved. Please instruct what action, if any, Department desires taken on her behalf."* A five-word reply had come back from Secretary Cordell Hull: *"Subject: Lucy Abolin. No intervention."* By 1949, Lucy Abolin was old enough to be arrested by the secret police. That year, Thomas Sgovio learned that she had been sent to the camps.[26]

Like the others, Thomas understood that his own arrest was fast approaching. But whenever he voiced his increasing concern to Lucy Flaxman, she would always reassure him that he had nothing to worry about — everything would be fine. Although this was obviously untrue, Lucy projected such optimism that eventually Thomas became angry. One evening in his room in Alexandrov, Thomas persisted with his questions, sensing that she knew something more, until Lucy broke down in tears: *"All right, I'll tell you, promise you'll never tell . . . They'll give me twenty five years."* And then she confessed that she was an informer for the secret police.[27]

It had happened, she explained, after she had first applied for an exit visa to return to the United States, some two years earlier. Within days of her refusal, she was arrested and taken to the Lubyanka. There, the MGB agents had sworn at her and demanded to know if she was really "a loyal Soviet citizen." When Lucy replied that she was, her interrogator responded that she would have to prove it by "cooperating" with them. At first she refused, but they threatened her with deportation and degradation in the camps. Thoroughly frightened, Lucy Flaxman agreed to do as they asked, and was instructed to begin work straightaway. Assigned the code name "Nora," she was ordered to inform on other Americans in Moscow, and to report to the secret police once a week at the Moscow Hotel and private apartments located around the city. Tearfully, Lucy explained to Thomas that they had never asked if he was loyal, and that she had always praised him anyhow. The secret police knew all about their relationship. She was sure he would be safe.[28]

What Lucy Flaxman experienced was common among those Americans left "untouched" by the attentions of the Cheka, and allowed to live outside "the zone." Margaret Wettlin had been a teacher at the Anglo-American school in Nizhni Novgorod before facing a similar recruitment at the Lubyanka. Her fate, and that of others, was to join an alternate existence offered to a small number of the American emigrants who escaped execution or imprisonment.[29] In Margaret Wettlin's case, the new career of the young schoolteacher from Rhode Island was accompanied by a rapid rise in her fortunes, as she moved from teaching to broadcasting the news in English on Radio Moscow.

Of course, the most valuable benefit was also the simplest: by informing on others, they saved themselves. Only later, as the years wore on, did Margaret Wettlin realize she had became part of "an enormous, impersonal, diabolical machine." Once she had informed on a "Mrs. Davis," an American communist who foolishly mentioned that she hated Stalin. After Mrs. Davis disappeared, Margaret Wettlin abruptly understood "the evil of it, and that I was supporting evil." There were others who perceived the stark moral choice straightaway and refused the coercions of the secret police— preferring instead to suffer the consequences. But they were always very few, and seldom, if ever, lived to tell their stories.[30]

Three days after Lucy Flaxman's sudden confession, Thomas Sgovio was once again arrested.

FROM HIS PRISON CELL, Thomas heard the miraculous sound of a familiar bass voice singing in English, broadcast over a loudspeaker. In 1949, Paul Robeson was giving a concert in Moscow, preserving the myth of freedom of expression in a nation whose lips had been "sewn shut" with fear.[31] While every other American artist was excoriated in the "anti-cosmopolitan" campaign, Robeson alone remained untouchable—that year the Soviets had named the highest mountain peak in the republic of Kirghizia in his honor. And with such exalted status came other privileges

not normally paid to an ordinary visitor. On his arrival in Moscow, Paul Robeson asked to meet two Russian friends he had met in America during his wartime support for the Jewish Anti-Fascist League.

In the summer of 1943, at New York City Hall, the poet Yitzhak Pfeffer and the actor Solomon Mikhoels had been honored by Fiorello La Guardia, the New York City mayor, who brushed interpreters aside and spoke to the Soviet cultural ambassadors in Yiddish. On July 8, 1943, at a mass rally at the Polo Grounds, forty-seven thousand New Yorkers gathered to welcome them—*"Sholom Aleichem, Brothers!"*—in a show of solidarity between American and Soviet Jewry, with entertainment provided by Eddie Cantor, Larry Adler, and Paul Robeson.[32]

Six years later, in Moscow, Robeson was told that his Russian friends were both away on holiday. When the American singer insisted, the poet Pfeffer was eventually found and arrived to meet him in his hotel room. Their meeting was uncannily similar to the one Robeson had had with Ignaty Kazakov, a decade earlier, before Kazakov's show trial and execution. But on this occasion, Yitzhak Pfeffer arrived at the Hotel Moskva alone and dressed in a suit, although obviously in great distress. Knowing their hotel room was bugged, Pfeffer resorted to sign language and handwritten notes in an attempt to answer Robeson's questions. The actor Solomon Mikhoels, Pfeffer explained, had been "murdered on Stalin's order," and Pfeffer was himself imprisoned in the Lubyanka. When Robeson asked what would happen to him, the Jewish poet was unequivocal: *"They're going to kill us. When you return to America, you must speak out and save us."* [33]

In an interview, Paul Robeson, Jr., explained that afterward, his father had written a letter to Stalin on Pfeffer's behalf, and sang a song in Yiddish at a Moscow concert in a coded protest against the ongoing persecution of Soviet Jewry.[34] But Robeson refused Pfeffer's request to speak out publicly upon his return to the United States. Instead, Robeson rejected the rumors of mass arrests as anti-Soviet propaganda, and refused to denounce Stalin's methods although he had met the victims personally. To a reporter from *Soviet Russia Today,* Robeson denied also the reports of a purge against the

Jews in Soviet Russia, stating that he had *"met Jewish people all over the place . . . I heard no word about it."*[35]

At the beginning of the "anti-cosmopolitan" campaign, Politburo member Andrei Zhdanov had publicly promised: *"Since it is quite natural to punish failure in industrial production; how much more serious is ideological failure in cultural production. Consequently the punishment of literary and artistic offenders has to be most severe."*36 Three years later, in August 1952, Yitzhak Pfeffer was executed along with four other Jewish writers and poets, and ten other leading Jewish cultural and scientific figures, all falsely convicted of espionage during their wartime membership in the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. One after another, they were taken down to a basement cell of the Lubyanka Prison and shot.[37]

Nor did Paul Robeson attempt intervention on behalf of the American emigrants. When Robert Robinson first tried to enlist Robeson's help, he was met with suspicion from one of Robeson's entourage: *"What do you think you are doing, Robinson, running away from here? You must stay right where you are. You belong here for the good of the cause. Or maybe you're trying to tarnish Paul's reputation, by getting him involved in your attempt to leave. That is all I have to say to you. You may go now!"*[38] Two years later, perhaps disbelieving that his message ever got through, Robinson appealed directly to Eslanda Robeson for help with an exit visa for Ethiopia. Robeson's wife listened and then explained the situation firmly on her husband's behalf: *"We have thought about your request, and he has decided that he cannot help you. You see, we do not really know you well enough, to know what is in your mind. Suppose he were to help you leave, and then when you arrived in Ethiopia, you decided to turn anti-Soviet. We would find ourselves in trouble with the authorities here."*[39]

BY CURIOUS COINCIDENCE, another sympathetic American celebrity, the writer John Steinbeck, had chosen to visit the Soviet Union just two years before Paul Robeson. For his many readers, Steinbeck wrote an

account of his Russian tour of 1947, surveying the aftermath of World War II in the company of the Magnum photographer Robert Capa. *A Russian Journal* was, for the most part, simple reportage made in the company of his Intourist guides. John Steinbeck's published journal was only indirectly political, when he highlighted the overwhelming nature of Stalin's personality cult:

His portrait hangs not only in every museum, but in every room of every museum. His statue marches in front of all public buildings. His bust is in front of all airports, railroad stations, bus stations. His bust is also in all schoolrooms, and his portrait is often directly behind his bust. In parks he sits on a plaster bench, discussing problems with Lenin . . . At public celebrations the pictures of Stalin outgrow every bound of reason. They may be eight stories high and fifty feet wide. Every public building carries monster portraits of him.[40]

Even Intourist could not conceal the fearful atmosphere that permeated Stalin's Russia at the time. Privately Steinbeck renounced any political sympathies he might once have shared with the Bolsheviks. *The Grapes of Wrath* had been published eight years earlier, in 1939, its pages filled with the high notes of 1930s radicalism: *"Here is the node, you who hate change and fear revolution . . . If you could separate causes from results, if you could know that Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin, were results, not causes, you might survive. But that you cannot know."*[41] One long, lean decade after the Crash, the American public recognized the hard choices of the Depression years, and bought Steinbeck's novel by the million. To Steinbeck's readers, Tom Joad was always a kind of hero, a tarnished hero maybe, but a hero nevertheless. " *'A red is any son-of-a-bitch that wants thirty cents an hour when we're paying twenty-five!' . . . 'Well, Jesus, Mr. Hines. I ain't a son-of-a-bitch, but if that's what a red is—why, I want thirty cents an hour. Ever'body does. Hell, Mr. Hines, we're all reds.' "*[42] Eight years later, John Steinbeck's factual description of the "monster portraits" of Joseph Stalin made him persona non grata in the USSR.

By the time of Paul Robeson's concert tour, Steinbeck revealed in a letter to a friend how far his political views had changed:

I have been horrified at the creeping paralysis that is coming out of the Kremlin, the death of art and thought, the death of individuals and the only creative thing in the world is the individual. When I was in Russia a couple of years ago I could see no creative thing. The intellectuals parroted articles they had read in safe magazines. It makes me more than sorry, it makes me nauseated. And of all the books required and sent to Russians who asked for them, not one arrived, and even the warm sweater and mittens for a girl, and a doll for a little girl—not even these were permitted to arrive. I can't think that wars can solve things but something must stop this thing or the world is done and gone into a black chaos that makes the dark ages shine. If that is what we are headed for, I hope I do not live to see it and I won't because I will fight it . . . I do not think any system which uses such force can survive for long but while it does—it can ruin and maim for such a long time to come.[43]

The creator of the Joads was converted to an unflinching anticommunism he would hold for the rest of his life. It was a common enough journey among those who had seen the truth firsthand in the USSR, and lived to report their experience. Only the American emigrants in Soviet Russia were seldom so lucky. Their Damascene conversion arrived too late, and without the protecting cloak of international celebrity. It came at midnight in the back of a prison van, or after their first beating in a basement cell of Lefortovo Prison, or pressed down in the hold of a slave ship on the Sea of Okhotsk, or balanced at the edge of an execution pit in Butovo. And there was no one to write their collective story, or even to wonder what had happened to these real-life emigrants whose destination had been Russia, not California. Theirs was a Depression migration altogether more epic in its scope and more transgressive in its revelations of human nature than fiction could ever allow. In Soviet Russia, a free spirit like Tom Joad would have been dragged into a cell and beaten unconscious for weeks on end,

until all the defiance had been knocked out of him and he mumbled a false confession through broken teeth. And then his father, grandfather, uncle, and brothers would have been taken away to be shot, and his mother and sisters would have disappeared into the camps of the Far North. But there never was a Steinbeck to write the story of the Preedens, or the Abolins, or the Gershonowitzes, or the Hermans, or the Sgovios, or the many others like them.

THE SURVIVING AMERICANS in Russia never learned that back home the Depression poverty had been eclipsed by the full employment generated in the buildup to World War II, and the golden economic boom that followed over the course of the next three decades. In Moscow, the American reporter William White had noticed that few people living inside this carefully controlled world had any real notion of what life was like outside the USSR. They were told over and over again that capitalism was on the brink of collapse, and the state's propaganda was carefully edited to reflect that view. Only very occasionally did the clunking machinery of monolithic censorship make an inadvertent error. During the war, William White happened to watch a Soviet newsreel which featured the Detroit race riots. On the Moscow cinema screen the Russian audience watched a close-up of a black American getting beaten by the Detroit city police. The effect on the audience was, according to our American witness, immediate and "electric." In the darkness of the cinema, the Russians jumped to their feet. "Look," someone cried, "at that wonderful pair of shoes the Negro is wearing!"[44]

Convicted of "intention to betray the Fatherland," Thomas Sgovio was again marched from his cell onto another prison train to be transported to a lumber camp in central Russia. In a camp at Boguchanni, the rearrested were told that although they were "not considered prisoners . . . any attempt to escape would result in a twenty-five-year sentence." Thomas was then sent out to work chopping down trees in the never-ending forest, his isolation broken only by occasional reminders of the outside world. In

Boguchanni the prisoners were allowed to watch old black-and-white American movies confiscated by the Red Army from the ruins of Berlin. At night, in the darkness of the Russian forest, Thomas Sgovio watched James Cagney dubbed into German with Russian subtitles, and Henry Fonda playing the part of Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*.[45] As the cult of Stalin loomed ever larger, no one could possibly have imagined that this lost tribe of Americans had ever existed, let alone had once played baseball in Gorky Park.

SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES FACED another American survivor, the Detroit-born Victor Herman, who had served out his ten-year sentence in the camps of Burelopom to be freed in October 1948.[46] From his camp, Victor was exiled by railroad car to Krasnoyarsk, the city in central Siberia north of the Mongolian border. There he found a job coaching athletics and teaching the Siberians to box. In the brief space between arrests, he fell in love for the first time and married a Russian gymnast. Together the couple started a family of their own, and for three brief years Victor Herman lived the semblance of a normal life.

His fleeting happiness was ended by his arrest in the summer of 1951. Nine months later, Victor was arrested again, doubly suspect as an American and a Jew at the height of Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign. After his second arrest, he was sentenced into exile hundreds of kilometers farther north in the wilderness, where he was ordered to live a prescribed distance away from the nearest village settlement and forced to cut a house for himself out of the permafrost. There he lived alone until he was eventually joined by his wife and one-year-old daughter, who walked through a snowstorm to reach him. The Herman family survived by selling wood to passing villagers.[47]

To pass the time, Victor Herman would tell Russian fairy tales to his daughter, and also stories from his life in old Detroit. These stories would always begin the same way: "Once upon a time there was a place called

America . . .” Until eventually his little girl—perhaps sensing her father’s homesickness and the change in the tone of his voice when he spoke of home—no longer asked to hear the fairy tales. Instead she would chirp, “Tell America, Papa, tell America . . .” [48]

22

Awakening

In a totally fictitious world, failures need not be recorded, admitted or remembered. Factuality itself depends for its continued existence upon the existence of the nontotalitarian world.

Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 1951[1]

Of the millions incarcerated in the Soviet camps, very few had managed to escape and publish their stories in the West. After the war it seemed their potential audience had already grown weary of narratives of violence and human suffering. The existing horrors were more than enough— the clear confirmation that the Allied nations had been fighting a justified war against a manifest evil as represented by the vérité of the black-and-white newsreels from the Nazi camps. The most terrible crime of modern civilization was more than sufficient. To add a concurrent notion of a Soviet genocide, and one from within the wartime alliance, was perhaps too much to bear. And so, although reports had begun to emerge, to begin with at least, they were disregarded. If public opinion in the West found the accounts difficult to accept, then this, too, was understandable in many ways. There seems to be a natural human instinct to turn one's face away from suffering. Few had believed the scale of the reports from Poland or, in the early stages of the Holocaust, had dismissed them as "atrocity tales." How much more incomprehensible, then, that a society predicated on the equality and fraternity of mankind could commit a crime even remotely equivalent?

From Stalin's realm emerged no newsreels or photography, just the fragments of witness statements illustrated by drawings from memory by those who had escaped. Swaths of public opinion suspected the vehemence of these survivors; their claims against Stalin and the USSR could all too easily be characterized as "hysterical anticommunism," prone to exaggeration, bursting with fanatical damnation, susceptible to a host of

suspicious criteria that rendered their statements inaccurate, if not completely false. After the onset of the Cold War, Western intellectuals began to wonder if such voices were not merely serving a darker purpose, concocting useful anti-Soviet propaganda to justify the pregnant wishes of Langley or the Pentagon, and reinforce the spending requirements of America's rapidly escalating defense budgets. Skeptical of the truth that was emerging from the Soviet Union, there were many who fell into the trap of denial.

In France, a court case that centered on just such evidence was attracting international publicity. Victor Kravchenko had been a Soviet Lend-Lease official who defected in 1944, while stationed in New York. At the time, the Soviet embassy had tried hard to force Kravchenko's extradition as a wartime "deserter," and had engaged the willing intervention of Ambassador Joseph Davies to its cause. What followed was the farce of the FBI having to call up Kravchenko anonymously to tip him off that "the heat was on" from the State Department, and warn him that he should "carefully hide himself." But Kravchenko's English was not yet up to such head-spinning machinations, and the FBI agent had to repeat the whole conversation to a friend, who took the appropriate evasive action on Kravchenko's behalf.[2] Joseph Davies, meanwhile, appealed directly to the president and secretary of state to have Kravchenko sent back to Russia. The moral issue of Kravchenko's inevitable execution was elegantly sidestepped by Harry Hopkins, who argued that if he was returned, no one would *know* what happened to him.[3] Only President Roosevelt had sensed a fast-approaching political calamity: "Will you tell Joe that I cannot do this?" he instructed his secretary, and the defector's life was spared.[4]

Why the Soviet diplomatic machine went to such lengths to have him extradited was revealed when Kravchenko published his autobiography, *I Chose Freedom*, after the war. The book was a factual account of the crimes of Stalin, seen through the eyes of a midlevel Soviet industrial manager. Its pages contained detailed eyewitness descriptions of the Ukrainian famine —"*little children with skeleton limbs dangling from balloon-like abdomens. Starvation had wiped every trace of youth from their faces*"—the mass arrests and disappearances of the Terror, the Gulag labor delivered to the

factories that Kravchenko had once managed: *"Their unsmiling silence was more terrible than their raggedness, filth and physical degradation. They went about their work like people doomed, too pathetic to examine their surroundings or to commune with the free workers near them."* One prisoner in particular haunted Kravchenko. His face *"was of pasty gray hue and looked like a death mask. A raw gash, purple with congealed blood, zigzagged from one temple almost to his chin."*[5] From his privileged position within the Soviet industrial elite, Kravchenko reported that there were fifteen million such prisoners kept in Gulag camps by Stalin, and more recently, closer to twenty million.[6]

Quite predictably, the publication of Kravchenko's book in the West was greeted by furious attacks from Soviet critics. The former prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky—whose career had risen from the show trials to presenting evidence at Nuremberg—now led the campaign to characterize life in the "reeducation camps" as an entirely "happy" experience.[7] In a bid to smear Kravchenko's reputation, the French communist magazine *Les Lettres Françaises* accused him of never having written the book at all. His authorship was an impossibility, their editorship alleged, since Kravchenko was, in fact, an illiterate. *Les Lettres Françaises* reassured the French public, and in particular the quarter of the electorate who had recently voted for the French Communist Party, that *I Chose Freedom* was, in fact, written by an American intelligence agent.[8]

In February 1949, Victor Kravchenko arrived at the Palais de Justice in Paris to fight a libel trial. Smoking a cigarette and flanked by lawyers, he strode to the top of the steps to make a statement to the press: *"I assure my friends and all my readers that I will do my best, with their moral help in order to show the truth during the trial and show to the world public opinion the horrors of Soviet reality."*[9] At the so-called Trial of the Century, a succession of Kravchenko's former colleagues were flown in from Moscow to testify against him. But the tactic backfired, since the world of Stalin transplanted to Paris scarcely made any sense at all. Without an all-embracing fear, it was impossible not to suppress a smile at the absurdity of the evidence. Victor Romanov, who had worked alongside Kravchenko in New York, now accused him of the cardinal sin of "forming

impressions of America in a personal manner," which brought wry amusement to the courtroom. Kravchenko's ex-wife took the stand only for it to emerge that the NKVD had executed her father in 1937. One exchange in particular cut to the quick:

KRAVCHENKO: . . . It is one thing to repeat resounding formulas in honour of the "beloved chief Stalin" . . .

KOLYBALOV (ANGRILY): You will please not mention in this place the name of my beloved leader Stalin! . . . (Jeers, catcalls, and roars of laughter from the spectators . . .)

KRAVCHENKO: . . . And it is another to manufacture pipes. I can speak of your leader because I am in free France. I spit on your beloved leader! I have been waiting for this moment all my life" (Tumult in the court).[10]

After two months of argument, the French high court handed a hollow victory to Kravchenko, with one-franc damages. The verdict was immediately headlined across the front pages around the world. But in spite of the overwhelming evidence, there remained a reluctance to believe or—to express this reaction more pointedly—an apparent *willingness to deny* the truth of what was still ongoing within the Soviet Union. Jean-Paul Sartre was one of the more brilliant intellectuals who dismissed Kravchenko, supported the communists in North Korea—"Any anti-Communist is a dog!"— and justified the use of terror as the "midwife of humanism."[11] Thus Sartre lent intellectual credence to voices such as Pierre Daix, the editor of *Les Lettres Françaises*, who wrote that "the camps of re-education of the Soviet Union are the achievement of the complete suppression of the exploitation of men by men,"[12] or the French Communist Party leader, Maurice Thorez, who made a public speech in February 1949 declaring that if the Soviet army "*defending the cause of freedom and of socialism, should be brought to pursue the aggressors onto our soil, could the workers and people of France have any other attitude*

toward the Soviet army than have been that of the peoples of Poland, Rumania and Yugoslavia?"[13]

Turned by such men, the wheels of justification ground black into white and, if need be, back into black again, depending upon the ideological vagaries of Moscow. And always hidden from view was the sight of a starved and bloodied prisoner, cowed, his teeth knocked out, his eyes swollen with fear, frantically confessing his guilt. Thus the celebrated words of Jean-Paul Sartre lent existential apology to the fists of torturers such as Belov, and provided moral comfort to listening ideologues and embryonic tyrants such as the Cambodian student named Saloth Sar, who joined the French Communist Party in Paris in the early 1950s and would become better known to the world as Brother Number One, or Pol Pot.[14]

Nor could Sartre possibly claim ignorance; he had only to step into any library and take down from the shelves André Gide's account of his visit to Soviet Russia in 1936, whose publication had caused a sensation in France: *"The smallest protest, the least criticism is liable to the severest penalties, and in fact is immediately stifled. And I doubt whether in any other country in the world, even Hitler's Germany, thought be less free, more bowed down, more fearful (terrorized), more vassalized."*[15] Gide had been a communist when he arrived in Russia, and was predictably eviscerated by his former comrades upon his return to France. But his response to the Stalinist critics was unequivocal:

When I told you the apple was worm-eaten, you accused me of blindness . . . It is high time that the Communist Party of France should consent to open its eyes, high time that their lying should cease . . . The USSR is prolific enough to allow murderous drives to be made among its human live-stock without its being apparent . . . Those who disappear, who are made to disappear, are the most valuable . . . I see those victims, I hear them, I feel them all around me. Last night it was their gagged cries that woke me; today it is their silence that dictates these lines.[16]

The truth to Gide was always more important than the consolations of ideology. He had seen through the deceptions of the French colonial authorities in the Congo, and simply reapplied the same instincts to the USSR.

But the most damning evidence came long after the fury of Kravchenko's court case was over, when few people could remember the ferocious arguments his name had once evoked. As with so many other Russian defectors before him, no one had taken seriously Victor Kravchenko's repeated claims that Soviet agents were trying to kill him. In 1966, his body was discovered in his Manhattan apartment. The gunshot wound, the authorities stated at the time, was self-inflicted.[17]

THE TRUTH, although it may be initially disbelieved, will always surface. During the postwar period, two more witnesses escaped to the West, both survivors of the Soviet camps. The first was Vladimir Petrov, formerly a Leningrad law student, whose 1935 arrest had consigned him to the Kolyma gold mines. Much like Thomas Sgovio and Victor Herman, Petrov had survived his sentence by courage and repeated good fortune, the most essential prerequisite of all. At one point, he had been transferred to the eighth unit of the Shturmovoy mines, where the life expectancy was "less than a month," and was saved by the intervention of a friend in the camp bureaucracy, who transferred him in time. Later on, Petrov attempted to escape Kolyma with two others, on homemade skis. After three days he turned back, realizing that only death rose up to meet him in that frozen wasteland.[18]

Vladimir Petrov's case was unusual because he was released from Kolyma early on in the war, before the official order to keep all the "overtimers" had been introduced. Using the chaos of war to his advantage, Petrov returned to his mother's village in the Ukraine, and then retreated

west with the German armies, always conscious of the need to stay ahead of the NKVD. His refugee odyssey ended in America in 1947, where he settled and wrote several magazine articles describing the atrocities he had witnessed in Kolyma, later expanded into a book. The future Georgetown University professor's literary efforts were received coolly by many within the intellectual establishment, who viewed his descriptions as little more than the cold war ravings of a Nazi sympathizer.[19] There was, however, one famous American Progressive who was profoundly disturbed by the articles he read—so much so, in fact, that he sought an interview with their author. His name was Henry Wallace.

At this point, Wallace had already descended far down the glassy slide from political powerbroker to nonentity to pariah. Firing him from his Roosevelt appointment as secretary of commerce, President Truman scathingly described Wallace as "a pacifist, a dreamer who wants to disband our armed forces, give Russia our atomic secrets, and trust a bunch of adventurers in the Kremlin Politburo."[20] In the 1948 presidential election, Wallace ran against Truman as the leader of the Progressive Party. There was courage, at least, in his campaign in the Deep South, where he refused to stay in segregated hotels and slept instead in the homes of his black supporters. "Go back to Russia, you nigger lover" was regularly shouted back at him with all the raw hatred that prefigured physical violence.[21] But ultimately, Wallace's campaign self-destructed into failure, amid bitter accusations of Communist Party infiltration. Now a chastened man, he met with Vladimir Petrov in the fall of 1949 to talk to the Russian about his experiences in Kolyma. Strangely, the two men became friends, and Wallace publicly apologized for having allowed himself to be fooled by the Soviets.[22]

His belated apology was never enough to save him from his many enemies, as the once-shining liberal icon became firmly caught in the McCarthyite snare. Always under the surveillance of J. Edgar Hoover—whom Wallace had once derided as "our American Himmler"—the former vice president was now suspected of being a Soviet agent and of passing atomic secrets to the Russians. In closed testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Lieutenant General Leslie Groves,

formerly the director of the Manhattan Project, accused Wallace of advocating the transfer of uranium to the Soviet Union during the war. The FBI, on behalf of the Senate Judiciary Committee, began investigating claims that Wallace had met "a subversive agent during the war with data on the atomic bomb."[23] In response, Wallace hired a lawyer and wrote to Albert Einstein, asking for a "powerful statement enlightening the public with regard to the utter insignificance of five hundred pounds of uranium oxide and five hundred pounds of uranium nitrate even for experimental purposes."[24] Wallace's FBI file contained more than two thousand pages of accumulated surveillance, including details of the meetings he held with Molotov and Andrei Gromyko while planning his fateful journey to Kolyma. No evidence was ever brought against him in court, nor was Henry Wallace ever charged with any crime. But just as he was getting back up on his feet, another Kolyma survivor was about to kick him back down.

After concerted diplomatic pressure, the Swiss government had obtained an exit visa for Elinor Lipper, whose life had been saved by her job as a nurse in a Kolyma prison hospital. After sixteen years in the camps, and through the miracle of a Swiss citizenship by marriage, Elinor Lipper was placed in the hold of a Dalstroi ship with another woman prisoner and delivered from Magadan back to "the mainland." During the return voyage, a group of criminals gang-raped her companion, and Elinor was forced to witness the violence unfolding in front of her. She was eight months' pregnant at the time, and gave birth to a baby daughter in a transit camp on the mainland. Only a year later, with the continued intervention of the Swiss Red Cross, was she finally allowed to exit the Soviet Union.[25]

True to her promise to the executed camp doctors, Elinor Lipper published an account of the Kolyma camps to the disbelieving world in 1950. The following year, when Henry Wallace appeared before the Senate Internal Security Committee to answer questions about his vice-presidential visit to Kolyma, it was Elinor Lipper's testimony that inflicted the very worst damage upon his reputation. In front of a row of hostile senators, Wallace was forced to listen to his behavior compared to that of an American visiting Auschwitz only to compliment the SS on their work. His public defense was simply that in 1944, "there was no way in which I could

learn the full truth." But this reply was not quite accurate. The evidence had been there, but Henry Wallace had chosen not to believe it.[26]

At his farm in South Salem, New York, Wallace began to receive hate mail. *"Shame on you, Henry Wallace, for letting Stalin make a sucker out of you. Mr. Wallace you owe those tortured millions something, you helped Stalin. Do something. Get going! Faster! Faster!"* Opinion polls rated him "the second least approved man in America," just a few percentage points ahead of Lucky Luciano.[27] In the panic of the time, a New York school board banned the book *Twenty Famous Americans* for its offending chapter on the country's former vice president.[28]

As Henry Wallace's reputation disintegrated, his colleague on the Kolyma trip, Professor Owen Lattimore, was accused by Joseph McCarthy of being Soviet Russia's "top secret agent in the United States." At the senatorial investigation, Professor Lattimore proved to be a ferociously determined opponent: *"I am not and never have been a member of the Communist Party, I have never been affiliated with or associated with the Communist Party, I have never believed in the principles of Communism, nor subscribed nor advocated the Communist form of government either within the United States, in China, in the Far-East or anywhere in the world . . . I hope the Senator will in fact lay his machine-gun down. He is too reckless, careless and irresponsible to have a licence to use it."* Joseph McCarthy sat with his thin black hair and bull figure, grimacing in response. The witness Louis Budenz testified that Owen Lattimore had belonged to a Communist Party cell, based on the information he had received from Moscow while working as the editor of the *Daily Worker* newspaper. There were many who discounted Budenz's testimony as just another McCarthyite smear from a turncoat twisting to absolve himself of blame. Lattimore himself launched a waspish counterattack: *"Now gentlemen, I of course do not enjoy being vilified by anybody: even by the motley crew of crackpots, professional informers, hysterics and ex-Communists who McCarthy would have you believe represent sound Americanism."*[29] Five years on, the final charges of perjury against Lattimore were dismissed, and he left America to take up an academic post in England. Unlike the remorseful Wallace, Owen Lattimore never

apologized for his portrayal of their visit to Kolyma. Instead, he attacked the veracity of Elinor Lipper's account, accusing her of being a McCarthyite pawn.[30]

IN 1995, IT was publicly disclosed that the FBI had secretly collected coded telegrams sent from the Soviet consulate in New York during the Second World War. The so-called Venona Project only began decoding these cables in 1946, when resources became available. The messages revealed not only the extent of the Soviet spies' penetration of the Manhattan Project, but also the Soviet recruitment of American espionage agents from the very highest reaches of government. Less than half of the Soviet code names were ever discovered as named individuals, but among them, 349 American agents were revealed to be working for Stalin. Given that only a small percentage of the Soviet cables were ever decoded, the actual number of agents was likely to be higher. But because of the need to maintain the confidentiality of this source, the existence of the Venona Project was kept secret, and its evidence was never used in a courtroom prosecution. Had the decryptions been admissible, much of the legal and journalistic wrangling over the guilt or supposed innocence of controversial figures such as Alger Hiss or Julius Rosenberg would have been cut like the Gordian knot.[31]

The Venona decryptions served as confirmation for what was already known at the time. As early as September 2, 1939, Whittaker Chambers, a former American Communist Party member and Soviet military intelligence agent, gave a long interview to Adolf Berle, the assistant secretary of state, revealing the names of several Soviet agents working inside the State Department and other branches of the U.S. government, including Alger Hiss and his brother, Donald. According to Chambers' account, Adolf Berle immediately passed this information on to Roosevelt's secretary, but Berle had been unable to take seriously the notion that the "Hiss boys" were planning to "take over the United States' government."[32]

And no one prevented Alger Hiss from traveling to Yalta as the State Department leading strategist to President Roosevelt. Sitting five feet from Stalin, Hiss had passed handwritten notes to the ailing and increasingly forgetful American president. He was one of at least six confirmed Soviet sources working within the State Department.[33]

Also named by Chambers in 1939 was Henry Morgenthau's assistant secretary of the treasury, Harry Dexter White, whose career in government would continue for another decade. White's influence over American foreign policy was considerable, including his recommendation of a ten-billion-dollar loan to Stalin, and his authorship of the "Morgenthau Plan," advocating the partition and deindustrialization of Germany after the war. Eventually White was promoted to become the director of the International Monetary Fund. In August 1948, days after denying espionage in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee, Harry Dexter White suffered a heart attack and died.[34]

Four months later, White's colleague at the State Department Lawrence Duggan, having been questioned by the FBI on charges of espionage, fell sixteen floors from a Manhattan skyscraper. The former acting secretary of state Sumner Welles had always maintained Duggan's integrity as his protégé. [35] While Welles praised Duggan in public, privately he wrote that "there was not the slightest motive for suicide in his case . . . He is certainly the last man on earth whom one could think to have wished to take his life." Three days after attending Duggan's funeral, Sumner Welles was himself discovered unconscious and frostbitten beside a stream on his private estate in Maryland. The author of the Atlantic Charter had lain there all night and was found the next day close to death. The American public had no knowledge of why Sumner Welles had been forced to resign in 1943—Roosevelt had attempted to keep secret the affidavits of the Pullman porters of the presidential train to whom Welles had drunkenly offered escalating sums of money for sex. But the scandal of Welles' erratic behavior became widely known in Washington, and the Truman Committee reported rumors of "*various demands being made by Russia and that Russia had Welles sewed up . . . Russia knew about Welles having been caught in these acts.*" [36]

After he was pulled from the stream unconscious, Sumner Welles spent several months in the hospital recovering from tissue and nerve damage. Later he claimed not to remember the circumstances of the accident, but many remained unconvinced. The American reporter Jay Franklin wrote in his column of January 4, 1949: *"The death of Larry Duggan was followed shortly after by the discovery of his friend and sponsor, Sumner Welles, lying half-frozen in a Maryland field . . . It requires a heroic degree of self-control not to speculate as to whether—just as with Larry Duggan—there is not more to the tragic accident than the outward appearances."* It seemed unlikely that Soviet intelligence would miss such a straightforward opportunity for blackmail. Alcohol addiction, suicide attempts, and depression would haunt Sumner Welles for the remainder of his life. Such was the fate of the former acting secretary of state, whose face had once graced the cover of *Time* magazine. On Welles' shoulders had rested the slender hopes for rescue of all the American emigrants in Russia.[37]

DURING THE CONGRESSIONAL hearings of December 1949, Major Robert Jordan testified that in 1943 he had inspected a Soviet Lend-Lease plane at Great Falls airport, in Montana, that had been filled with black patent-leather suitcases sealed with white cord and red wax and marked "diplomatic." Working at night with a flashlight in the hold of the aircraft, Major Jordan pulled detailed scientific information from the suitcases. From one case opened at random, his eye had been caught by a piece of stationery marked THE WHITE HOUSE, WASHINGTON. At the top of the second page of a letter addressed to Anastas Mikoyan, the Soviet commissar of foreign trade, he copied the words "- - - - - had a hell of a time getting these away from Groves." The letter was signed by Harry Hopkins and was attached to a thick map, which Jordan unfolded into a technical drawing larger than his extended arms in size. The drawing was stamped with the notice OAK RIDGE, MANHATTAN ENGINEERING DISTRICT, and included documentation marked with the name HARRY HOPKINS. The top-secret scientific language of the report was unfamiliar

to Major Jordan, but he carefully noted the words "cyclotron . . . proton . . . deutron," and another unusual phrase: "uranium 92."[38] The Soviet plane was one of a regular series of flights carrying identical cargos of diplomatic suitcases out of Great Falls airport. The following month, according to Jordan's testimony, Harry Hopkins had telephoned to authorize a shipment of uranium to the USSR "off the records" but sent through the channels of the Lend-Lease program.[39]

During the Second World War, neither Harry Hopkins' loyalty nor his authority could be questioned. Who could doubt the integrity of the right hand of the president, who had an office and a bedroom at the White House, whom Roosevelt sent on his most confidential missions to the Soviet Union? Throughout the wartime alliance, Hopkins had never shied from expressing his wholehearted sympathy for the Soviet government. In a public speech at Madison Square Garden, he proclaimed: "*We are determined that nothing shall stop us from sharing with you all that we have . . . Generations unborn will owe a great measure of their freedom to the unconquerable power of the Soviet people.*" And privately he advised the vice president, Henry Wallace, "Henry, don't let anybody tell you that the Russians are against their regime."[40]

In the face of Major Jordan's evidence, Hopkins' friends defended him, claiming he had not "the faintest understanding of the Manhattan Project, and didn't know the difference between uranium and a geranium."[41] Only after the fall of the Soviet Union did the KGB defector Oleg Gordievsky reveal how he had attended a lecture at the Lubyanka given by Iskhak Akhmerov, the controller of Soviet intelligence in America during the war. To his KGB colleagues, Akhmerov identified the "most important of all Soviet wartime agents in the United States" as Harry Hopkins.[42]

At Potsdam, when President Truman revealed to Stalin the secret of the atomic bomb, the Soviet dictator took what was surely intended as a surprise with the calm shrug of old news. Both Churchill and Truman suspected that Stalin had failed to understand the true significance of what he had just been told, since he expressed no curiosity and asked no further questions. It did not occur to either of them that the reason for this unnatural

lack of inquisitiveness was simply that Stalin had no questions left to ask. The NKVD had successfully delivered the secrets of the Manhattan Project, with “atomic spies” from a number of sources passing a steady flow of scientific data from the United States back to Moscow.[43]

Even with the most detailed American technical plans and the resources of the entire Soviet state, it would take Stalin another four years to duplicate the atomic bomb. In the meantime, in anticipation of an imminent war with the “imperialist powers,” it soon became apparent that Stalin had taken some countermeasures of his own. And thus, a third generation of Americans was transferred into the Gulag camps.

23

“Citizen of the United States of **America, Allied Officer Dale”**

You are waiting for your friends, the Americans and the British, to come and rescue you from our hands, aren’t you? Well, they will never reach these shores! And even if they do we shall blow up the mine entrances and you will die like rats, two thousand yards below without seeing a single American or British uniform!

MVD officer to Michael Solomon, Kolyma prisoner, 1950[1]

The year 1949 was like any other in Magadan, with summary execu-tions continuing in the camps. In one scene, German prisoners of war looked on as the Russian prisoners were lined up and thirteen were ordered to step forward. A German survivor described what happened next: “Most of these Russians were immediately clubbed to death with crowbars, the rest finally shot with pistols. This took place in front of all men.” In December 1949, during an indoctrination session, a Soviet MVD officer told these German prisoners that many of them would be released *“to make room for American prisoners-of-war who soon would fill the camps.”*[2]

In the late 1990s, the United States government published a report that drew upon the evidence of a former Gulag prisoner initially identified as “Witness A.” Later the prisoner’s name was revealed to be Benjamin Dodon. In the summer of 1948, Dodon wrote that he had seen a group of American prisoners arrive at the Magadan transfer point in the Bay of Nagaev. Fourteen men were disembarked in the usual helpless condition of Dalstroi transportees: exhausted by the long sea crossing, hungry, cold, and disoriented. He could not remember any one face in particular, since they all appeared to be “uniformly lifeless.” There was little opportunity to communicate with them, since one night they were “taken off to the depths

of Kolyma, into the abyss of its vastness."[3] Elsewhere in the Gulag, another contemporary Russian witness reported having seen a similar column of prisoners, half-frozen in threadbare clothes, driven forward like cattle by their NKVD guards. Unable to speak Russian, these men could only repeat "American, American," and "eat, eat."[4]

Three years later, in January 1951, Benjamin Dodon was flown out to the island of Dikson, in Siberia, approximately north of the Arctic Circle in the Kara Sea. An emergency had occurred at a mine next to the Rybak Gulag camp, and as a qualified engineer, Dodon was enlisted to repair the damage. In response to his request for an experienced "pyrotechnic and demolition specialist," Dodon was brought a prisoner whom he described as *"tall, exhausted by hunger and the Arctic, with a very characteristic, slightly elongated artistic face with an unnatural protrusion of gray eyes in sockets sunken from emaciation."* In a Russian accent "clearly that of an English-speaker" the prisoner identified himself as *"a citizen of the United States of America, Allied Officer Dale."*

Working in the mine under the surveillance of the guards, Dodon had been unable to talk freely with Officer Dale. Before entering this closed zone, he had been strictly forbidden to communicate with any prisoners he met there. Six days later, Dodon was flown back to Dikson and informed that he had been working in a uranium mine in an area used for the testing of nuclear weapons. Returned to Krasnoyarsk, in Siberia, the engineer was required to sign a secrecy agreement covering all he had seen or heard at Rybak. Confidentially, a fellow camp survivor told him that many of the Americans "who had fallen into our hands in 1945 from the liberated Fascist camps" were being held there.[5]

Nor did his sightings of American prisoners end there. After Dodon was transferred to work in a gold-prospecting brigade in the Krasnoyarsk region, he met a radio operator who had worked on a fishing trawler of the Far East fleet. The radio operator told him they had recently received a message ordering all ships in the area to search for a shot-down American plane. No survivors were found, and the following week it was announced that the plane's crew had perished. Two months later, however, the trawler's captain told the radio operator privately that the American crew had been picked up

alive and was being held in pretrial solitary confinement in the city of Svobodnyi, near the Chinese border. When asked what would happen to them, the captain replied they would be squeezed for “what is required” and then “finished off.” Straight from the trains, the captain said, men had been killed in Svobodnyi “like nothing at all.”

After his release from his sentence, Benjamin Dodon gathered one final piece of news on the fate of the missing American aircrew. The information came from a former Dalstroi official who told him that although ten Americans had been captured alive, *“the guys from within worked them over so badly only eight were taken to Svobodnyi. Do you know what sort of arrogance they had? They were Americans! You understand!”* Later, from another former official, Dodon learned the names of two Americans from the plane’s crew, “Bush and Moore,” who would “remain forever in the soil of the Khabarovsk Region.”[6]

Shocked at the fate of Russia’s former allies, Benjamin Dodon began writing his memoirs. Like many survivors of the camps, he wrote with little expectation of ever being published, the manuscript destined only for the desk drawer. Although he did not realize it at the time, Dodon’s would prove to be one of a large number of eyewitness accounts documenting the existence of American servicemen held captive in the Gulag from the end of World War II through the course of the Cold War. Within the camps, the sightings of this “third generation” of American prisoners became relatively frequent and unambiguous. And as the Cold War threatened to escalate into all-out confrontation, it appeared that Stalin’s policy of hostage-taking had been quietly stepped up. The unacknowledged presence of these Americans would remain an official secret—guarded by both governments—until the fall of the Soviet Union.

WEEKS BEFORE HE DIED, Franklin Roosevelt made repeated personal requests to Stalin to allow the U.S. Army Air Forces permission to evacuate sick and wounded American prisoners of war from Poland. On March 17,

1945, Roosevelt telegrammed once again: *“I have information that I consider positive and reliable that there are a very considerable number of sick and injured Americans in hospitals in Poland . . . This government has done everything to meet each of your requests. I now request you to meet mine in this particular matter.”* Roosevelt’s appeals for the evacuation were consistently refused by Stalin; the Soviet dictator claiming, with cynical disingenuity, that he lacked sufficient authority: *“I must say that if that request concerned me personally I would readily agree even to the prejudice of my interests. But in this case the matter concerns the interest of the Soviet armies at the front and Soviet commanders who do not want to have extra officers with them.”*[7]

In the closing phases of the Second World War, Stalin’s well-documented suspicion was already starting to build. Five days before Roosevelt’s death, Stalin telegrammed the American president to complain of how the Germans on the Eastern Front “CONTINUE TO FIGHT SAVAGELY WITH THE RUSSIANS FOR SOME UNKNOWN JUNCTION ZEMLIANITSA—‘LITTLE STRAWBERRY’—IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA WHICH THEY NEED AS MUCH AS A DEAD MAN NEEDS POULTICES, BUT SURRENDER WITHOUT ANY RESISTANCE SUCH IMPORTANT TOWNS IN CENTRAL GERMANY AS OSNABRÜK, MANNHEIM, KAS-SEL. DON’T YOU AGREE THAT SUCH BEHAVIOUR OF THE GERMANS IS MORE THAN STRANGE AND INCOMPREHENSIBLE . . .”[8]

In his memoirs, Major General John Deane, the head of the military mission in Moscow, wrote that American prisoners “are spoils of war, won by the Soviets. They may be robbed, starved and abused—and no one has the right to question such treatment.”[9] From the vantage point of the American embassy in Moscow, Elbridge Durbrow understood very well the dangers of the situation. In a letter, he expressed his misgivings following the failure of the American mission to Poland, and its subsequent return to Moscow: “*This quite naturally caused us to be deeply worried about the fate of the many thousands of American prisoners of war being liberated at that time. Because of the past record of the Soviets, we became particularly concerned that they might not allow our liberated prisoners of war to be*

repatriated immediately, might have tried to propagandize many of them before they were released, cause other completely unjustified delays, or even retain some without our knowledge."[10] Elbridge Durbrow did not mention the past experience upon which his fears were based. The diplomatic class of 1937 had all seen firsthand the methods of the NKVD, and they realized also that the history of the Soviet Union was one of endless and very tragic repetition.

Using persistent negotiation and the lure of economic aid, the West German government had managed, by the mid-1950s, to secure the release of thousands of German prisoners of war, who remained in captivity in the Soviet Union. Almost a decade after the end of the Second World War, the survival rate of these veterans of the Eastern Front was very low, but those who did survive surely owed their lives to the fact that their existence had been officially acknowledged. The Soviets were obliged to present at least some notion of an accounting to a democratic government actively demanding the prisoners' release. At one point, the German chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, issued a forthright statement that Soviet armies had captured 3.5 million Wehrmacht soldiers at the cessation of hostilities. According to TASS, the Soviets had repatriated, or accounted for, almost 2.0 million. What, asked Adenauer, had happened to the remaining 1.5 million?[11] Of course, the question was only rhetorical. Of the 93,000 German soldiers marched through Moscow in a propaganda display after the surrender of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad in February 1943, only 6,000 returned home.[12] What had happened to the remaining German prisoners of war was clear. They had been subjected to the accelerated mortality of the "corrective labor camps."

In a study made by the U.S. Army Headquarters, out of a sample of 2,658 Germans released from Soviet captivity in 1955, almost two thirds had no known affiliation with the Nazi Party.[13] Not that the mechanism of the Gulag was ever mindful of ideology or nationality. Among the millions in the camps were representatives of virtually every nation on earth: Germans, Austrians, Italians, French, Yugoslavs, Greeks, Romanians, British, Poles, Norwegians—the list was endless. Spanish soldiers from Franco's fascist Blue Division were transported into the same system that imprisoned

hundreds of Spanish communists who had fled to Russia in the wake of their country's Civil War. The children of these Spanish refugees were consigned to the same fate.[14] In 1948, the Italian defense minister Luigi Gasparotto reported that "94 percent of Italian prisoners in Russian concentration camps have perished." It was the remainder—the fortunate ones—who brought back news of the Americans.[15]

BETWEEN 1947 AND 1956, the U.S. Air Force interviewed approximately three hundred thousand former German and Japanese prisoners of war who had returned from the Soviet camps. During this period, the air force sought to gather intelligence material for bombing targets in the USSR, in the event of the outbreak of World War III. But their interviewees, quite unexpectedly, volunteered firsthand accounts of American servicemen detained with them in the camps. For nine years, these so-called Wringer reports were meticulously logged, marked "secret," and classified away in the military archives. From their pages emerged accounts of "silence camps," in which the prisoners were forbidden to receive any contact with the outside world. Three quarters of the prisoners held in such camps had been sentenced to life terms, and the rest to twenty-five years. It was the legacy of a war that never came, and the last trace of the Americans who never returned.[16]

Viewed at random, the Wringer files spoke of men such as "Gerhard Klueck," a tall blond American with blue eyes and broad shoulders, who had been seen wearing an American major's uniform in the camps at Vorkuta, approximately one hundred kilometers north of the Arctic Circle, after his kidnap from Berlin in April 1945.17 From a camp near Petropavlovsk, on the Kamchatka peninsula, another survivor described an unnamed "brown-eyed, dark-haired" American from Fredericksburg, Virginia, who wore a pilot's suit and had received a twenty-five-year sentence. The pilot spoke broken German with an American accent, and his

gold teeth had been removed by the camp dentist. The interviewee then drew a sketch of the face of this Virginian held with him in the camp.[18]

A thirty-eight-year-old German serviceman named Guenther Kloose returned from war and subsequent incarceration with his right eye missing, his left eye partially blind, and nearly every tooth lost from his upper jaw. From April 1943 until December 1947, Kloose was interned in a "silence camp" among prisoners of all nationalities, who were forced to work the mercury mines in the South Ural Mountains. Because of his poor physical condition, Kloose was assigned an office job, where he worked with the camp files listing the prisoners by nationality. In this particular camp, Kloose recalled there were 2,800 Germans, 460 Italian soldiers, 210 French, 24 British, and 6 Americans, the last two groups listed in the records as "intelligence officers." The Americans had all arrived in the camp between the end of 1945 and the beginning of 1946. *"None of the prisoners are supposed to be discharged and they are not authorized any connection with the outside world,"* said Kloose. *"Mortality is very high."*[19]

The information given by those interviewed was often scarcely more than a location and brief description of the American prisoner. Occasionally more details could be supplied. Thus Dr. Anton Petzold, a German civilian returnee who was "intelligent and cooperative," according to his debriefer, brought news of a "Major Thompson" captured by the Soviets after a forced landing in 1944. This American major had been incarcerated in Budenskaya Prison until 1948, and was then sent to Tayshet camp on a twenty-five-year sentence for espionage. Major Thompson had told Dr. Petzold that he was from San Antonio, Texas. Dr. Petzold added the details that Thompson was thirty-eight years old, 1.85 meters tall, with fair hair and blue eyes. He was one of five Americans imprisoned in the USSR mentioned in that day's report.[20]

Another German witness, Dr. Geismann, described six Americans arrested by Soviet forces in Germany, two of whom were still being held in the Vorkuta camps in 1953. Dr. Geismann remembered that one of the men, called "Nielsen," was a naturalized American born in Denmark who had won a gold medal for boxing in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Although there was no medalist at the Berlin Olympics by that name, "Hans Jacob Nielsen"

was listed as having won a boxing gold in the 1924 Paris Olympics. [21] Other survivors brought similar fragments of information to be entered into the files. They spoke of an American consular secretary from a Balkan country named “Peters” who had been kidnapped from a steamer after the war. An American civilian employee of the Moscow embassy named “Brown” who liked to talk about classical music and the operas he had seen in New York City. An American sergeant named “Henry P” who spoke “broken German” and had “three nearly destroyed chevrons” still recognizable on his uniform.”[22] Or a U.S. Army Air Forces bombardier named “Joe Miller,” from Chicago, shot down over Berlin in 1945, who a former German prisoner explained was a “staunch believer in democracy” and had been “severely beaten and starved by the Soviets” before being sent to the Karaganda Gulag, where he was “very weak physically and was suffering from malnutrition.”[23]

AFTER THE FIRST Soviet atomic bomb was successfully tested, on August 29, 1949, a succession of events quickly unfolded that led the world to the brink of nuclear war. According to Gavril Korotkov, a former Soviet military intelligence officer, Kim Il-Sung secretly visited Moscow in February 1950 to inform Stalin that North Korea was not yet ready to launch an invasion of the South. Stalin’s response to the North Korean dictator was straightforward: “They were ready to start the fighting and couldn’t wait.” Kim Il-Sung was then sent out of Stalin’s Kremlin office to “think it over.” Four months later, on June 25, 1950, the North Korean armies, supplied with Soviet arms and air support, launched their invasion.[24]

Over the course of the next three years, the Korean War took the lives of approximately two and a half million soldiers and civilians, including more than thirty-six thousand American servicemen and -women, with approximately eight thousand listed as missing in action or unaccounted for.[25] During the conflict, Americans fought Russians directly in combat

for the first time since the Russian Civil War in 1919. Although neither side could admit this fact openly, the American pilots recognized the faces of Russian pilots wearing Chinese uniforms, flying MiG fighter planes in the skies over Korea. In the heat of combat, the instruction to issue commands only in Chinese was quickly forgotten, as Russian swearing could be clearly heard over the airwaves.[26]

On November 15, 1951, Colonel James M. Hanley, the judge advocate general of the Eighth Army in Korea, accused both the Chinese and Korean communists of the murder of American prisoners of war. Colonel Hanley provided the names of 2,500 captured American soldiers. Nine months earlier, General Matthew Ridgway, the commander of U.S. forces in Korea, sent a film back to Washington that showed the recovered bodies of American prisoners of war shot in the back of the head and buried in mass graves with their hands still tied behind their backs. One decade after the Katyn Massacre, the method of their execution was identical.[27]

In the United States, all the precursors to World War III were carefully being noted by intelligence agencies. The children of Soviet representatives in America had all been evacuated. The Soviet consulates in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York were closed, and the Amtorg offices in New York finally shut down. All Soviet bullion funds on deposit in the United States were withdrawn from the Federal Reserve and the cash balances run down. At the same time, a Soviet defector disclosed that there were four million Gulag prisoners in Far East Russia building the military infrastructure necessary for hostilities. On the Chukovsky peninsula, the Soviet Fourteenth Landing Army had gathered, with the strategic mission of landing in Alaska to launch a southerly offensive along the Pacific Coast in the event of an all-out nuclear war.[28]

On May 7, 1951, President Truman publicly addressed this prospect in a speech at the Civil Defense Conference, in Washington, D.C. The president had already raised the specter of World War III to the American nation on national television, his round glasses reflecting back the camera lights aimed at his taut, lined face:

The threat of atomic warfare is one which we must face, no matter how much we dislike it. We can never afford to forget that the terrible

destruction of our cities is a real possibility . . . Our losses in an atomic war, if we should have one, would be terrible. Whole cities would be casualties. Cleveland or Chicago, Seattle or New York, or any of our other great cities might be destroyed . . . Even with our losses, I think this country would survive and would win an atomic war. But even if we win, an atomic war would be a disaster. Communist aggression in Korea is a part of the world-wide strategy of the Kremlin to destroy freedom. The defense of Korea is part of the world-wide effort of all the free nations to maintain freedom. It has shown free men that if they stand together, and pool their strength, Communist aggression cannot succeed.[29]

Very quietly, in the midst of this epic confrontation, a press release was issued by the State Department. Given an unassuming title—"Soviet Refusal to Grant Exit Permits to American Citizens in the USSR"—and dated March 20, 1950, the government memo carried the straightforward admission of *"considerable evidence that repressive measures have been taken by Soviet authorities against American citizens attempting to arrange departure from the Soviet Union."* The State Department officials then explained that "two thousand citizens" were estimated to be trapped in the USSR. It was the first public acknowledgment of the lost American families of the Depression emigration.

Finally, in the midst of conflict, the existence of the forsaken had been publicized. But when the American diplomats in Moscow were planning the destruction of the embassy records by the use of thermite bombs (which, they noted, would have the disadvantage of destroying the Mokhovaya building, in which the Soviets would imprison them "to try and dissuade U.S. Air Forces from attacking Moscow with atomic weapons"), the fate of a couple of thousand American civilians hardly seemed a priority. Of the American servicemen who had so recently joined their ranks, nothing at all was admitted. Although their sightings within the Gulag continued, and the Korean War only increased their numbers.[30]

AT THE END of 1951 and in the spring of 1952, a Greek refugee from the Soviet Union was interviewed by the American air liaison's office in Hong Kong. The Greek witness stated that he had seen "*several hundred American prisoners-of-war being transferred from Chinese to Russian trains at Manchouli near the border of Manchuria and Siberia,*" and heard three prisoners of war under guard "conversing in English." Their uniforms had American sleeve insignia, and among them were a "great number of Negroes," a race the witness had not seen before. The American prisoners were carrying no belongings except canteens, and the Chinese guards transferred them through a gate bisecting the platform directly into the custody of their Soviet counterparts, who escorted them onto a waiting prison train. The first time he saw the prisoners transferred, there had been sufficient numbers to fill a seven-car train, however, "these shipments were reported often and occurred when United Nation forces in Korea were on the offensive." In his report, the American air attaché noted that "the source is very careful not to exaggerate information and is positive of identification of American POWs."[31]

This information was corroborated when Yuri Rastvorov, a Russian diplomat and lieutenant-colonel of the MVD, defected from the Soviet mission in Tokyo. In a debriefing document dated January 31, 1955, Rastvorov stated that "US and other UN POWS were being held in Siberia." The Soviet defector had received this intelligence information from "recent arrivals—1950- 1953—from the Soviet Union to the USSR's Tokyo Mission."[32] Philip Corso, a retired American Army intelligence officer, later described how Rastvorov had told him that "several hundred" American prisoners of war had been sent to Siberia. According to Corso, President Eisenhower received this intelligence but had not wished to force the issue for fear of escalation into nuclear war: "*The general feeling in policy-making bodies was that direct confrontation with the Soviets could be disastrous.*"[33]

Yuri Rastvorov's report remained classified for the next four decades, along with other evidence such as a CIA report, dated April 30, 1952, that

detailed the transfer of "approximately 300 prisoners-of-war" by rail from China to Molotov (the Russian city now known as Perm):

The prisoners were clad in Soviet-type cotton padded tunics with no distinctive marks. They were first transported from the railway station to the MVD prison and then sent by rail, in a train consisting of 9 wagons to Molotov on or about 5 April 1952. The train was heavily guarded by the MVD . . . According to information gathered between April 1 and 20 a certain number of American POW officers, among them was a group referred to as the "American General Staff," were kept at that time in the Command of the Military District of Molotov . . . They have been completely isolated from the outside world.[34]

Sightings of American prisoners in Soviet camps continued to be reported throughout the 1950s. Often former Gulag prisoners simply walked into American embassies in Western Europe to offer up their information voluntarily. Thus an Austrian former prisoner, Adalbert Skala, told American officials in Vienna of his meeting with a "Lieutenant Racek" in Prison No. Two in the city of Irkutsk, and later at the Lubyanka in Moscow. The Austrian witness remembered Racek as a "lieutenant of armoured troops" captured in Korea. Lieutenant Racek gave the Austrian the address of his father in New York City, to let him know he was still alive. Skala warned his interviewer that the American lieutenant's health was not good, *"having had a number of front teeth knocked out, having lost his hair, and generally having suffered the effects of mistreatment."*[35]

Occasionally, an American diplomat received a direct appeal from an American prisoner, smuggled out of the camps by a freed German or Polish former prisoner, although the messengers' prison clothes were always thoroughly checked for just such contraband. On August 22, 1956, a letter was delivered via the German embassy in Moscow from a camp at Potma in the Komi Republic, west of Archangel: *"I am in camp 7 eleven years without any help whatsoever. I have tried to get in contact with my friends*

and relatives in the States and so far have had no luck. I wonder if you will be so kind as to help me and send me something here . . .”[36] Two years earlier, in March 1954, the employees of a German import-export firm discovered a tag wrapped in a bundle of hides exported from the Soviet Union. The tag was a wooden rectangle about five centimeters long by three centimeters wide, with a round hole drilled in one end, similar to those used by the Gulag authorities to identify the bodies of the dead prisoners. The wooden tag was taken as evidence to the local police station, who reported it to the U.S. Army headquarters in Heidelberg. In tiny letters on both sides of the tag, a desperate plea had been written in English: “I AM IN JAIL IN RUSSIA. GO TO THE NEAREST POLICE STATION AND REPORT IT. MATTER OF DEAD OR LIVE. SAVE ME PLEASE AND ALL THE OTHERS. KRISTIAN HJALTSON.”

Rather than forming a banner headline in newspapers across the Free World, the discovered message was sent directly to the State Department, where an anonymous official placed the tag in an envelope marked “confidential,” and this small artifact of Cold War history disappeared into the archives. There it lay, waiting to be rediscovered, long decades after Kristian Hjaltson’s life had ended.[37]

AND STILL THE sightings continued. In July 1956, a German journalist named Werner von Borcke visited the American embassy in Vienna to explain how, before his return from a twelve-year sentence in the camps, he had sewn the names and addresses of two American prisoners into his clothes. The Russians had replaced his uniform and the names were lost, but von Borcke remembered that the first name was of an American woman arrested in Berlin who had sustained a grave injury to her leg while felling trees in the forest. She looked ten years older than she was, her brown hair streaked with gray, and her health was poor. The second name was of a “typical American” man, “tall, slender with dark hair and good build, about thirty-five years old, but with the fourth finger of the left hand missing.” He

was a lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force who had fought in Germany during the war, and spoke of New York and Milwaukee. The other prisoners assumed that he had been captured in Korea. The American was a silent person, and "after his interrogation by Soviet officers became yet more silent and depressed."[38]

On September 5, 1960, a Polish prisoner, Richard Romanowski, walked into the American embassy in Brussels, having survived a seven-and-a-half-year sentence in Soviet Camp No. 307, near Bulon, in Eastern Siberia. After his sentence, Romanowski had been returned to his native Poland, but had successfully crossed the Iron Curtain into West Germany, claiming political asylum in Belgium. Two American prisoners, both captured in Korea in 1951, Lieutenant Ted Watson from Buffalo and Sergeant Fred Rosbiki from Chicago, had asked Romanowski to report their presence to the American authorities. Both men, said Romanowski, were in poor health, having been forced to work in a phosphorus mine. At the Brussels embassy, the Polish survivor then carefully explained how the phosphorus attacked the head and liver, bending down to show his own scaling scalp. The American diplomat in Brussels noted in his report that although Romanowski was "almost destitute" and living off only a dollar per day, at no point in their interview had he asked for any money for this information, which he had given quite voluntarily. The Polish survivor had accepted two dollars only "very reluctantly," to help him return the sixty miles back to his home in Liège.[39]

That same year, Heinz Meier, a printer, had escaped East Germany. On July 27, 1960, Meier called at the American embassy in Bonn to report a tour he had made with an East German delegation of the Soviet printing industry. Their group had visited a camp 7.5 kilometers from Novosibirsk, where between "12,000 and 13,000 men" were being used as Gulag labor. In the camp, Meier "was approached by two persons who identified themselves as U.S. nationals who had been taken prisoner in Korea, taken to Red China for a year, and then transferred to the USSR." Meier described a "C. Colman, about 42-44 years of age, who had light blond hair" from Philadelphia. The other American stood nearby and told Meier he was a second lieutenant from New York City. According to Meier's report,

“Colman said there were originally 28 Americans in the group, but that it had been broken up, and there were now ‘6 or 7’ still together.”[40]

FEW STRONGER BONDS exist than those forged by soldiers during, and in the aftermath, of conflict. This phenomenon appears to transcend the differences of race and religion. In December 1956, a former prisoner of war from Niigata, Japan, sent a report to the American embassy in Tokyo. Keihachi Sakurai was very anxious to describe the fate of his friend, an American prisoner:

I was taken prisoner by the Soviet forces at the end of August 1945 and led a miserable life of slavery for twelve years at concentration camps in the Taishet region, north of Lake Baikal in Siberia . . . During my detention at the said concentration camps I happened to become acquainted with an American of German descent. He and I helped and encouraged each other all the time to get through the various difficulties of our captive life . . . I fear his release may be difficult because he had such a strong spirit of hostility that he always made anti-Soviet acts and remarks even while working at the concentration camps. From his condition at that time, I am anxious that he may not escape dying of sickness if some steps are not taken to save him. I stayed with him in Concentration Camp no 19 of the Taishet region from 1950 through 1951. He was about five inches and five feet high, slender, long-faced, smart in style and very cheerful.[41]

There was no logic within this hidden underworld in which American soldiers were held captive with German and Japanese prisoners, their wartime enemies, in camps run by their former Soviet allies. Both German and Japanese survivors kept promises they had made to the Americans to let their relatives know they were still alive. But only rarely did a report of the sighting of an American prisoner in the USSR reach the international media. In a press conference given on November 3, 1953, Secretary of State

John Foster Dulles referred to new information gathered on "Americans reported to be in Russian prison camps. We have asked Ambassador Bohlen to take their cases up with the Soviet Government." Days earlier, seven Norwegians who had been released after eight years' imprisonment had informed their national press that the Soviets were holding "scores of other Western prisoners including an American major." The item only ever made a minor story in the newspapers, and was soon forgotten.[42]

Two years later, on July 11, 1955, officials at the State Department recommended that President Eisenhower *"seek an opportunity at the next summit meeting to take up with Soviet Premier Bulganin the general question of American citizens held in custody in the Soviet Union, basing his approach on the eye-witness informants who have reported having been in every day contact with these imprisoned Americans."* In the State Department report prepared for Geneva, it was decided to concentrate their efforts on behalf of the pilots of a U.S. Navy airplane shot down over the Baltic on April 8, 1950, and eight other American citizens. An internal policy document stated *"It is recommended that no publicity be given to the Department's representations in these cases. The Department particularly desires no publicity regarding Major Wirt Elizabeth Thompson since without confirmation it hesitates to raise the hopes of this man's parents. They know nothing of his reported presence in the USSR."* This document then touched on the fate of the original American emigrants to the USSR: *"Two thousand claimants to American citizenship . . . have not been able to communicate with the American Embassy in order to have their citizenship established. Of this number approximately 704 have been verified as American citizens . . . It is believed that no mention should be made at the 'Summit' meeting of this group of claimants, our representations in their behalf being confined to approaches from the American embassy to the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs."*[43]

Nothing was ever achieved at Geneva, if the issue was ever raised at all. Nor did President Eisenhower ever present the matter to the American public. As superpower summits came and went, the faint trace of the existence of those left behind in Russia was all but washed away. Outside national security circles, the Americans imprisoned in the Gulag hardly

existed at all, nor were they likely to be officially recognized by the Soviet authorities, since their incarceration was, without doubt, a contravention of international law. Beyond the corridors of the State Department or Langley or the Pentagon, very few officials knew of their existence, or even suspected they might be there. In the United States, the families were told that their loved ones were dead or missing in action, presumed killed. As the Cold War settled into the quiet tension of mutually assured destruction —punctuated by violent proxy conflicts around the world—gradually the American officials responsible retired and died. And then, inevitably, the issue became lost with them.

Why quite so little was done to help these men and women is uncertain. The evidence of their existence may well have been deemed too sketchy or inconclusive, or perhaps a calculated decision was made that pursuing their fate would only have edged the superpowers still closer to nuclear confrontation, risking the lives of millions. All midlevel State Department inquiries were either denied or delayed by the Soviets, and there seems to have existed an unspoken willingness on both sides never to press or publicize the issue. That Western diplomats had a disturbing habit of turning away their gaze had already been proved in the case of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved the lives of thousands of Hungarian Jews at the end of the Second World War before his capture by the Soviet secret police. With Wallenberg imprisoned in the Lubyanka, the Swedish government immediately requested American diplomatic assistance to free him. From Moscow, on September 25, 1945, George Kennan sent a telegram addressed to the secretary of state: *"Soviet authorities pay little attention to our inquiries re welfare whereabouts American citizens in Soviet Union . . . They are particularly reticent in cases of person in hands of NKVD and if Wallenberg is alive it must be presumed that he is in custody of that organization which rarely pays even perfunctory heed to the normal demands of diplomatic practice. We consequently feel that any action here on our part on behalf of Wallenberg, a Swedish national, would serve no useful purpose."* Later, Dag Hammarskjold, the UN secretary-general, expressed the same weariness more succinctly: *"I do not want to begin World War Three because of one missing person."*[44]

According to the memoirs of Pavel Sudoplatov, a retired Soviet NKVD agent, Raoul Wallenberg was held for two years in Lefortovo Prison and at the Lubyanka:

My best estimate is that Wallenberg was killed by Maironovsky, who was ordered to inject him with poison under the guise of medical treatment . . . One of the reasons I believe Wallenberg was poisoned is that his body was cremated without an autopsy, under the direct order of Minister of Security Abakumov . . . The regulations were that those executed under special government decisions were cremated without autopsy at the Donskoi cemetery crematorium and their ashes buried in a common grave.[45]

WHETHER MOTIVATED BY tempered disbelief, or the cynicism of realpolitik, a third generation of Americans were abandoned to their fate in the camps. How many can only be estimated, but their existence was incontrovertible. The Gulag lasted longer than any other system of concentration camps in modern history, and the Americans remained at the behest of one man. The NKVD reports returned to Stalin always began with the words: *"In accordance with your instructions . . ."* [46]

In September 1952, Joseph Stalin and the Politburo held a meeting with Chou En-lai, and a party of Chinese communists, to discuss the ongoing war in Korea. According to the minutes of the meeting, preserved in the Russian state archives, Stalin had lectured Chou En-lai on the subject of prisoners of war, putting forward a "proposal" that "both sides temporarily withhold twenty percent of the prisoners-of-war." Stalin's explanation for this gambit was simple: *"Americans do not want to hand over all the prisoners-of-war. The Americans will keep some of them, intending to recruit them. It was like this with our prisoners-of-war: every day now we catch several [former] prisoners-of-war whom the Americans send to our country. They detain prisoners-of-war not because, as the Americans often*

claim, the prisoners say that they do not want to return, but in order to use the prisoners for espionage."

When Chou En-lai asked for a letter he might take back to Mao, Stalin explained that "it is better to manage without a letter, that he sees that Chou En-lai is taking notes and that he trusts him fully." Later when Chou En-lai asked for "instruction," Stalin replied, "Instruction or advice?" The Chinese foreign minister's answer was both deft and psychologically revealing: *"From the point of view of Comrade Stalin, this is perhaps advice, but in its presentation it is instruction."* In the early 1950s—well before the Sino-Soviet quarrels—if Stalin's "advice" had called for the retention of 20 percent of UN prisoners of war during the Korean War, then to the Chinese such a "proposal" carried the sanctity of a commandment from the "Great Leader" of the Communist cause. It was Joseph Stalin, after all, who had armed the sixty Chinese divisions poured into the conflict in Korea.[47]

24

Smert Stalina Spaset Rossiiu

And we will cut heads off mercilessly. We will crush sedition, eradicate the treason . . . A kingdom cannot be ruled without an iron hand . . . I stand alone. I can trust no one.

Sergei Eisenstein, Ivan the Terrible, Part One, 1944[1]

That Stalin could hold untold numbers of Allied servicemen hostage was unsurprising given his state of mind. By the early 1950s, the "cult of personality" had taken on a fervor and fanaticism seen only in the early stages of mass religious movements. Stalin, the former seminarian, had built a socialist religion with himself at its center: a god who demanded belief without rationale, obedience without a moment's hesitation. That hundreds of millions of people—the entire populations of the Soviet Union, China, and the newly satellite nations of Eastern Europe—could have their lives controlled by one man, who had usurped the entire power of a world revolution, was too much for ordinary citizens to contemplate. Far easier and far safer, then, to believe. But their collective adulation only magnified and reinfected Stalin's megalomania.[2]

How else could one describe the actions of a leader who personally signed a Politburo order on July 2, 1951, authorizing thirty-three tons of copper to be used for the construction of a gigantic statue of himself, built beside the Volga-Don Canal, a project that killed thousands of its prisoner-laborers?[3] The colossal statue was built with an electric current running through its head, to prevent migratory birds from defacing the idol. The birds would land and be electrocuted, their feathered bodies falling to the ground in silent tribute to this Soviet Ozymandias, the shoemaker's son from Gori, Georgia.[4]

Viewed through the methodology of power, the personality cult had a calculated purpose. The psychological effect of Soviet “giganticism” was always intended to create a feeling of awe, which rendered the individual meaningless beneath the towering ubiquity of the Great Leader. The blind adulation of the cult leader erased the notion of the self as a free-thinking individual, and in its place created an acolyte. Twice a year, Stalin’s tiny arm would wave from Lenin’s mausoleum, and a million marchers roared their approval in regimented unison into the Moscow air.

Most disturbingly, the essence of Stalinism was never based on fear alone. There were millions who supported Stalin with genuine fervor—who had adapted themselves to the demands of the Soviet state. These were his willing volunteers, the Stalinists who chose to subjugate their judgment to the will of the Leader and the Party. If they must pay a personal sacrifice—in the peculiar denominations of a father, mother, brother, or sister—then so be it. They remained convinced that their cause would provide the ultimate justification for the Party’s excesses. To such steadfast disciples, Stalin represented the essence of a society that would never change, the security of an individual whose every choice has been taken away.

There were those who convinced themselves that Stalin’s actions were for the benefit of all. These apologists could not separate the unprecedented suffering of the Russian people during the Second World War— and the courage and sacrifice of the Russian soldiers in defeating the Nazi invasion—from the actions of the tyrant who ruled their state. This was always a strange paradox: for the love of Russia, to grant approval to the very man who had killed so many millions of their countrymen. Since of the myriad nationalities of the Soviet Union, it was the Russians themselves who suffered the most casualties to the regime. But, then, blind nationalism, like a distorting mirror at a fairground, bends the critical capacity of the beholder; and those who distinguish their personal identity by accident of geography will always, in a sense, remain vulnerable.

IN THE KREMLIN, the late-night banquets had descended into drunken

farce, with Stalin forcing his henchmen into vodka-drinking contests, declaring, “Everyone must guess how many degrees below zero it is, and everyone will be punished by drinking as many glasses of vodka as the number of degrees he has guessed wrong!” The visiting Yugoslav communist Milovan Djilas reported how Lavrenty Beria had once erred by three degrees, and then claimed afterward to have done so deliberately in order to drink more vodka. At one point Stalin left their table to put some music on a huge record player. He tried to dance but quickly became exhausted. “Age has crept on me and I am already an old man,” he said, looking around him to watch his companions’ reaction. “No, no, nonsense you look fine. You’re bearing up wonderfully. Yes, indeed, for your age . . .” The surviving Politburo members had grown wise to their master’s wiles. When Stalin put on his favorite record of an opera soprano accompanied by the howling and barking of dogs, the most powerful man in the world would listen and laugh, and the chorus of faces made pale by their nocturnal Kremlin hours would laugh along with him.[5]

During a state visit Mikhail Kalinin, the aging figurehead president of the USSR, had asked Comrade Tito for a Yugoslav cigarette. “Don’t take any—those are capitalist cigarettes,” snapped Stalin. He watched Kalinin drop the offending cigarette through trembling fingers, and then began to laugh. “The expression on his face was like a satyr’s,” wrote Djilas. Kalinin’s wife had been arrested and was a prisoner in a Gulag camp, given the task of picking the nits out of the prisoners’ clothes at the camp bathhouse.[6]

In 1949, Joseph Stalin again suggested at a Kremlin meeting that he was getting too tired for the job; perhaps it was time for someone else to step in to replace him? Immediately the protestations began: “No, no. In Georgia people lived to be a hundred and sixty!” Stalin wondered if perhaps the leaders of the Leningrad siege should replace him as premier and general secretary. The rest of the Politburo immediately chorused, “No, no, Comrade Stalin!” But when Aleksei Kuznetsov and Nikolai Voznesensky hesitated, Stalin had them arrested. At the end of the show trial known as the “Leningrad Affair,” the former Soviet war heroes were draped in white shrouds and led out of the courtroom to be shot one hour later.[7]

Once again the Soviet Union was enveloped in a tyrant's fury. In a rare moment of candor, Stalin told Khrushchev, "I'm finished. I trust no one. Not even myself."[8] On New Year's Eve 1951, the former foreign minister Maxim Litvinov was killed in a car accident. According to the Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan, a truck had been deliberately driven into Litvinov's car as it rounded a bend in the road leading from his dacha. Stalin had met with the MVD department responsible for political assassinations and "instructed them personally."[9]

In June 1946, Maxim Litvinov had briefed Richard Hottelet, a correspondent for CBS, "to warn the western world that the Kremlin cannot be trusted and cannot be appeased." Litvinov explained that each concession of Stalin's demands would lead to "the West being faced, after a more or less short time, with the next set of demands." Litvinov then went on to discuss the political consequences of Stalin's death, thus ensuring he would never live to witness the event.[10]

The assassination of Litvinov marked an intensification of Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign. In November 1952, Stalin ordered the arrest of the mainly Jewish Kremlin doctors, including his own physician, Vladimir Vinogradov, who had treated him for years. Stalin wrote his instructions on the interrogation report of one of the doctors: "Put them in handcuffs and beat them until they confess."[11] The order was accompanied with a threat to Semyen Ignatiev, the minister of state security: "If you don't get the doctors' confessions, you'll find yourself shorter by a head." When the confessions duly arrived, Stalin passed them around the Politburo. "You are like blind kittens," he said. "What will happen without me? The country will perish because you don't recognize enemies."[12]

In January 1953, an article was published in *Pravda* entitled "Assassins in White Coats." The prose was a straightforward attack on Jewish doctors and, by extension, all Soviet Jews. It was written in Stalin's own style, recognizable because every grammatical or spelling mistake was left uncorrected by the fearful editors. (According to his interpreter, Valentin Berezhkov, for each one of Stalin's errors, an impression was formed that "perhaps now we should write this word in this way.")[13] The latest

propaganda onslaught was filled with diatribes against the “disease of contamination” of the healthy Soviet body politic by these Jewish doctors. Those who had taken Russian names were identified in the press with their former Jewish surnames in brackets, lest there be any doubt.[14] Cartoonists depicted them in anti-Semitic caricatures, with the general hysteria reflected in the language of the charges: *“It has been established that all these killer-doctors, monsters in human form, tramping the holy banner of science and desecrating the honour of the man of science, were hired agents of foreign intelligence services . . . established by American intelligence services for the alleged purpose of providing material aid to Jews in other countries.”* [15] In *Pravda,* it was announced that the trial of the Kremlin doctors would take place at the Hall of Columns on March 5, 1953.[16]

By February 1953, Stalin was an elderly man who often failed to recognize his henchmen as he sat in Dacha Number One, protected by rotating shifts of twelve hundred armed secret police.[17] Toward the end, he filled his time planning show trials to mark the beginning of the latest clampdown. Lists of questions were drawn up for the Politburo members, together with the confessions they would provide. The fear of neglected victims haunted Stalin, flashing in the corners of his paranoid, yellow-filmed eyes. At this point, even Vyacheslav Molotov’s life was in danger: he had been replaced as foreign minister three years earlier, when Stalin ordered the return of the original documents of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact to be used as evidence against him.[18] Years later, in retirement, the former Soviet premier admitted, “I think that if he had lived another year or so, I might not have survived.” Molotov had been forced to attend a Politburo meeting to authorize the arrest of his Jewish wife, Polina. At the meeting, Molotov had abstained from the vote but later regretted this veiled display of opposition and wrote to Stalin: *“I hereby declare that after thinking the matter over I now vote in favour of the Central Committee’s decision . . . Furthermore I acknowledge that I was gravely at fault in not restraining in time a person near to me from taking false steps.”* [19]

At this time Stalin’s daughter visited her father at his dacha. In her memoirs, Svetlana Alliluyeva described how surprised she had been to see

pictures pinned up on the walls of the dacha. Her father had surrounded himself with enlarged magazine photographs, mostly pictures of young children: a little girl drinking goat's milk from a horn, a boy on skis, children having a picnic under a cherry tree.[20] This was the private life of the most powerful man on earth, a recluse who held the destiny of the world in his well-guarded, uncommunicative reverie. According to Svetlana, "He saw enemies everywhere. It had reached the point of being pathological, of persecution mania." Once, Stalin even turned on his daughter, shouting angrily, "You yourself make anti-Soviet statements." Svetlana was, of course, watched over at all times "for her protection," but she was still aware of the truth of the society in which she lived. Her imprisoned aunt had told her how she had signed her own confession: *"You sign anything there, just to be left alone and not tortured! At night no one could sleep for the shrieks of agony in the cells. Victims screamed in an unearthly way, begging to be killed, better to be killed . . ."*[21]

BUT ALL MEN are mortal, even Stalin. This knowledge kept the Gulag prisoners alive, including Thomas Sgovio, who was still cutting down trees in Boguchanni during the winter of 1953. For a prisoner with the same routine, time starts to bend: each day seems interminable, and yet the minute hand of the Gulag swept years into decades. Early on in Thomas' sentence, Lucy Flaxman had visited him in Boguchanni, but the couple quarreled after she told him that she had informed on an English journalist in Moscow. They agreed to go their separate ways, and as Thomas' isolation continued, time fell away, until March 5, 1953.[22]

In the early 1930s there had once been a joke that "SSSR"—the Russian initials for the Soviet state—stood for *Smert Stalina Spaset Rossiiu* ("Stalin's death will save Russia").[23] The Russian people had waited long and grief-filled decades to find out. In the camps, the prisoners scrutinized photographs of "the Mustache," or "the Old One," as Stalin was called by those who knew better than to speak his name. One prisoner was heard to mutter, "He doesn't look well to me. See his eyes—how old and tired they are." And when the news reached them that Stalin had been taken ill, many prisoners openly prayed, "May the devil take his soul today!" One old man

fell to his knees in the water of a mine. "Thank God someone still looks out for the wretched."[24]

On March 5, 1953, Thomas Sgovio spent the day felling trees as normal. Only when he returned from the forest did he hear the rumors that Stalin was dying. The local store was suddenly filled with customers buying vodka to carry home in silence, ready for their secret celebrations. Across the camps of the Soviet Union, millions of prisoners marching under guard passed the news along in excited whispers: "He's croaked! He's croaked!"[25] The "Greatest Friend of Soviet Families" had suffered a stroke in his dacha outside Moscow, lying untreated on his bedroom floor for several hours, his bodyguards too fearful to disturb him. Surrounded by terrified doctors, Stalin's final hours were slow and agonizing. His face altered shape and grew dark; his lips blackened and his features became grotesque, his lungs struggled for breath, his body gasping as if he were slowly being strangled, choking to death in front of his henchmen. At the final moment, according to Svetlana, her father suddenly opened his eyes and cast a glance over everyone in the room:

It was a terrible glance, insane, or perhaps angry and full of fear of death and the unfamiliar faces of the doctors bent over him. The glance swept over everyone in a second. Then something incomprehensible and awesome happened . . . He suddenly lifted his left hand as though he were pointing to something up above and bringing down a curse on us all. The gesture was incomprehensible and full of menace, and no one could say to whom or what it might be directed. The next moment, after a final effort, the spirit wrenched itself free of the flesh.[26]

IN THE EARLY hours of March 6, 1953, Radio Moscow broadcast the news of an important announcement in fifteen minutes. The time passed in

silence, only for the message to be repeated. Finally at almost 4:00 A.M., the news was confirmed that Stalin had died at 9:50 P.M. the night before.

That morning Moscow was covered in red flags with black borders, and the newspapers carried the markings of national grief.[27] As preparations began for the state funeral, the whole of the Soviet Union fell into solemnity, everyone consciously watching their neighbors' reaction to the news. For some, it was a moment of suppressed joy. Others shed tears, if not for the man then for the years they had lost and the loved ones who had disappeared. And there were those who could not distinguish between public grief and private feeling. They had pretended for so long now, their self-deception had become real. As Radio Moscow broadcast requiems into the March air, green funeral wreaths were placed as tokens of mourning on trams and taxis.[28] Overcome with hysteria, grown men and women sobbed. They held Stalin's portrait aloft like an icon: the man who had promised them heaven on earth, and delivered an unremitting hell.

Millions converged from across the Soviet Union toward the Hall of Columns, where the body of Joseph Stalin was lying in state. Did they esteem him so much or did they want to make sure he was really dead? It was easy to believe in the immortality of evil, to forget that every dictator must eventually die. Although even from beyond the grave, Stalin would demand a final sacrifice. Rows of trucks had been placed around the building as a security barrier, and as the crowds surged, people began to be crushed against them. Eyewitnesses reported that hundreds were killed, screaming, "Save Me! Save Me!" as they were pressed and trampled underfoot.[29] The Moscow morgues were filled to overflowing, although there was never any public record of this disaster published in the Soviet media. When Robert Robinson went to view Stalin's body the following day, the crowds were still overwhelming. Caught in a surge, for fifteen seconds he felt his feet leave the ground and he was treading on thin air.[30]

At the front of the funeral cortège, holding Stalin's coffin, Lavrenty Beria marched with his black coat falling past his knees, a stern expression on his spectacled face. Beside and behind him were the rest of the inner circle: Malenkov, Molotov, Bulganin, Kaganovich, and Khrushchev, each looking suitably austere. The pallbearers carried Stalin's coffin decorated with a

solitary marshal's cap, the Plexiglas dome covering his face and lending the proceedings a strangely futuristic air. As the apparatchiks strained under Stalin's weight, they passed slowly out of the Hall of Columns. The coffin was then placed on a gun carriage and ceremoniously marched to Red Square, passing in front of the American embassy on Mokhovaya Street, where the Stars and Stripes was flown at half-mast as a mark of respect.

After the funeral eulogies, the embalmed body was carried down into the Lenin Mausoleum in Red Square, on which Stalin's name was already carved into the red marble. The American chargé d'affaires, Jacob Beam—as instructed by Washington—tendered "the official condolences" of the United States government.[31]

At the United Nations Plaza in New York, the flags of sixty nations were taken down as a mark of respect for one of history's greatest mass murderers. Only the United Nations flag was flown at half-mast. In America, the recipient of the Stalin Peace Prize for 1952, Paul Robeson, led the eulogies at a memorial meeting: *"Slava—slava—slava—Stalin, Glory to Stalin. Forever will his name be honored and beloved in all lands . . . Yes, through his deep humanity, by his wise understanding, he leaves us a rich and monumental heritage . . . He leaves tens of millions all over the earth bowed in heart-aching grief. But, as he well knew, the struggle continues. So, inspired by his noble example, let us lift our heads slowly but proudly high and march forward in the fight for peace . . .*

To you Beloved Comrade, we make this solemn vow
The fight will go on—the fight will still go on.
Sleep well, Beloved Comrade, our work will just begin.
The fight will go on—till we win—until we win." [32]

AFTER THE FUNERAL in the Soviet Union, there was an immediate lessening of the psychological pressure—as if the strong hands on the

windpipe had lost their grip and the body could finally draw breath. The poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko wrote of fear “slinking away from Russia,” as people sensed instinctively that Stalin’s death must change things. The Kremlin doctors awaiting trial in the Lubyanka were immediately released, their coerced confessions disregarded. For the Gulag prisoners, Stalin’s death was not yet sufficient cause to grant them freedom. Another man would have to die to allow them that hope, and thousands more casualties would follow as events proceeded apace.

In the power vacuum after Stalin’s death, Lavrenty Beria held the entire machinery of repression in his hands. Several divisions of Ministry of Interior troops, brought to Moscow to supervise the funeral, were left in the city to maintain order, ready, so it appeared, for a coup. But Beria was impatient and lacked his master’s political cunning. Knowing what lay in store for them should Beria claim power, Nikita Khrushchev and the rest of the Politburo acted decisively.[33]

At a Central Committee meeting in July 1953, Khrushchev delivered a speech in front of a shocked Beria, accusing him of crimes against the state. In a carefully planned maneuver, a buzzer was pressed under the table and ten armed men burst into the room, seizing the most feared man in the Soviet Union. Apparently spontaneously, a Politburo bodyguard then stepped forward to inform them that Beria had raped his twelve-year-old stepdaughter. It was a common accusation made against the secret police chief, who was known to cruise the streets of Moscow in his armored limousine looking for young girls to abduct. Four decades later, the workmen at the site of Beria’s former mansion at No. 28 Kacholovna Street —now the Tunisian embassy—discovered a dozen skeletons buried in the grounds.[34]

At his closed military trial, Beria appeared calm and insolent. Only after the death sentence was pronounced did his confidence evaporate. When he realized that his execution was to be carried out immediately, he “lost control completely.” According to General Ivan Konev, who presided over the trial, Beria “flung himself about the courtroom weeping and begging for mercy.” He was led away to a cell, where his hands were tied behind his back and attached to a hook driven into a wooden board on the wall. He

tried one last time to talk his way out—"Permit me to say . . ."—but the procurator general ordered the guard to gag his mouth with a towel. An officer then stepped forward and fired a bullet through the middle of Beria's forehead. Simultaneously across the Soviet Union, every school, library, and research archive was shut to allow staff time to tear Beria's photograph from their collections.[35]

Following his arrest, army detachments stormed the Lubyanka, and Beria's key supporters in the secret police were all detained. Those who resisted were shot in their offices. After organizing the security at Stalin's funeral, Sergei Goglidze had been flown out to East Berlin with orders to crush the nascent democratic uprising. A Polish railroad employee working at the border reported, "The Russians have shipped about forty thousand East German men, women and children to the USSR on this line after June 17th 1953." In Berlin, Sergei Goglidze, too, was arrested and transported back to Moscow to be executed on December 23, 1953.[36]

WITHIN THE CAMPS, Stalin's and Beria's deaths in such quick succession changed the atmosphere immediately. The prisoners began a series of mass uprisings in protest against their sentences, seizing control from their guards and killing the informers in their midst. At the Vorkuta camps, the American prisoner John Noble learned of the attempted rebellion in East Germany from hundreds of young Berliners, aged between sixteen and twenty-two, who had been added to the prisoner population. In Mine Nos. Seventeen and Eighteen, on the sides of the coal cars someone had dared to write in chalk: TO HELL WITH YOUR COAL. WE WANT FREEDOM.[37] Quickly a strike spread across the one hundred thousand prisoners of Vorkuta, their demands voiced by Gureyvich, a former Soviet diplomat, who called for a reduction in sentences and freedom for the men who had already served ten years. A former Russian professor of history from Leningrad gave a speech: "*Never in the story of man has working*

slavery been so extensive or cruelly exploited as here in the Soviet Union—the liberator of the working class!"[38]

At first the MVD's response was cautious. But by early August 1953, the deputy minister of the interior, Ivan Maslennikov, was sent to end negotiations and reassert control by the traditional methods. The striking prisoners who refused to return to work were fired on with automatic weapons. In one volley more than one hundred prisoners were killed and five hundred badly wounded. In the week after the general return to work at Vorkuta, three hundred of the strike's leaders were executed.[39]

Working as an orderly in the camp hospital of Dzhezkazgan, in Central Asia, the former American embassy clerk Alexander Dolgun gave comfort to the prisoners who were dying. In Dzhezkazgan, Dolgun heard of the uprising at the Kengir camp, just twenty-seven kilometers away.[40] On May 16, 1954, eight thousand male and female prisoners had taken over the camp. Alexander Solzhenitsyn chronicled the uprising in *The Gulag Archipelago*, describing scenes of Ukrainian girls meeting their husbands, whom they had secretly married with the blessing of imprisoned priests. Services for all religions were conducted in the mess hall according to a fixed timetable. The Jehovah's Witnesses were free to observe their own rules and, refusing to stand guard, volunteered to wash dishes instead. For forty days, the prisoners of Kengir were free once more, albeit barricaded within the camp. From the point of view of the authorities, their existence was now a threat to the state.

At first the Soviet police units punched holes in the camp walls, thinking that all but the ringleaders would flee. When this ploy failed, in the early dawn of June 25, 1954, parachute flares lit up the sky and cannon fire was heard overhead as tanks rolled into the Kengir camp. The assault was filmed by the cameras of the secret police: ranks of Ukrainian women dressed in embroidered dresses, which at home they wore to church, linked arms and, holding their heads up, marched forward, believing they might stop the assault. But the tanks only accelerated, driving over their bodies. Then the MVD troops started shooting in a massacre which began at three o'clock in the morning and continued for the next five hours. When the fighting was over, a secret police officer who had been seen shooting more

than two dozen prisoners with his revolver placed knives in the hands of the dead, ready for a photographer to record the pictures of these "gangsters."[41]

In 1953 and 1954, similar events were recorded across the Gulag Archipelago, proof that the pitiless functionality of the Soviet state had continued after Stalin's death. In Kolyma, an underground opposition group had been formed, calling itself "the Democratic Party of Russia." Little is known of the Russians who led the uprisings here—the documentary evidence of their existence is limited and there appear to have been few survivors.[42] But although their collective rebellions were all crushed, the political message was not lost on Stalin's successors. It was evident that ever-increasing levels of violence would be required to keep the Gulag legions in timid acquiescence. Over the next two years, between 1954 and 1956, Nikita Khrushchev ordered the release of millions of prisoners from the camps. And among the millions freed from their sentences were two surviving members of the ill-fated American baseball teams of the 1930s: Thomas Sgovio and Victor Herman.

THEIR LIVES WERE saved in different ways. Thomas Sgovio survived thanks, in part, to the gift of his artistic talent, and Victor Herman through his ability to fight. Born within months of each other, they were both young men when first arrested, and they were both relatively short, wiry, and extremely tough. Such physiological characteristics were important factors in their survival. But the most essential quality of all was luck. Their stories were extraordinary because the camps of Kolyma and Burelopom were not places from which prisoners normally returned. The Gulag itself was a system where men died, and that these two Americans survived should not deflect us from this essential truth. Both Thomas and Victor escaped death on several occasions and only by the narrowest of margins, and each believed himself to have lived a charmed existence. Most importantly, we know of their existence only *because* they survived. There were many

others just like them, the overwhelming majority in fact, of whom we know almost nothing at all—save for a passing reference in a chauffeur's memoir, a reporter's fleeting encounter in a subway shelter, or a forgotten face smiling in a baseball team photograph.

In his analysis of the Holocaust, Bruno Bettelheim wrote that concentrating on the few who survived must not draw our "attention from the millions who were murdered." The same lesson is surely true for the victims of Stalinism, the other great tragedy of the twentieth century.[43]

There was, however, a sense in which survival had an abiding moral quality, even when the life saved was simply one's own. Survival was also an act of resistance, hope, and triumph, inasmuch as it allowed an individual to bear witness on behalf of those who had lost their lives.[44] Both Thomas Sgovio and Victor Herman would fulfill this duty for the remainder of their lives. Eighteen years after they were first sentenced, each received an amnesty from the Soviet authorities for their respective "crimes." From his exile in the remote wilderness, Victor Herman returned with his family to the city of Krasnoyarsk to resume his career as a boxing coach.[45] Thomas Sgovio took the train, for a second time, back to his mother and sister in Moscow.

On March 24, 1954, Thomas' sister, Grace, had written her latest appeal to the Soviet president, Malenkov, requesting Thomas' release: "Please remember that of the nineteen years my brother has lived in the Soviet Union, sixteen of them have been in prison."[46]

In the backlash against the old regime, after his return to Moscow Thomas discovered that Lucy Flaxman had been arrested as a "spy" and sentenced to a twenty-five-year jail term.[47] The MVD had come for her on March 5, 1953, the day of Stalin's death. Her son Evgeny remembered clearly how the police had arrived at six o'clock in the morning. Suddenly the lights were switched on and a voice told him, "Don't get up." Then the uniformed men ordered his mother to "get dressed." Lucy Flaxman had looked back at them in surprise and incomprehension: "In front of you?"

After they took her away, the search of her apartment continued until four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the Chekists had told Evgeny: "You are

going to write a letter? Well don't address it to Beria." And for years afterward Lucy Flaxman's son would wonder how this man knew that Beria would soon be arrested. All his mother's possessions were confiscated, including her clothes and the family's precious television set. Evgeny was expelled from university the next day and drafted into the army. After his mother's sentencing, he was allowed to visit her before her birthday on September 25, 1953. At the Moscow prison they were separated by two sets of bars and a guard. In six months, Lucy Flaxman had lost some weight but according to her son, "she did not look awful." She told him that since the "Leader of Nations" had died, she hoped she would be freed soon: "I have signed everything they gave me," she said. "I can't bear it when they beat me."[48]

Lucy Flaxman's fate was like that of so many women, both those who had been coerced into working for the regime and those who had refused. Later Boris Pasternak remembered their lives in the fate of "Lara," the beloved heroine of *Doctor Zhivago*. Pasternak's novel was banned in the USSR, since the author was savagely critical of the Soviet regime. But ordinary Russians paid vast sums of rubles for the samizdat version on the black market. And in its pages they read a description of what had happened to their missing loved ones: "One day Lara went out and did not come back. She must have been arrested in the street, as so often happened in those days, and she died or vanished somewhere, forgotten as a nameless number on a list which later was mislaid, in one of the innumerable mixed or women's concentration camps in the north."[49]

Thomas Sgovio never saw Lucy Flaxman again. Instead, in Moscow, he came across other Americans, far guiltier than Lucy, who had survived. These were men such as Bernie Cooper, Eddie Ruderman, and Joe Adamov, whom he remembered as "the Hatchet Man of the American community." Seeing Thomas approach, they crossed the street to avoid him.[50]

25

Freedom and Deceit

I wouldn't want to go back to my family. They wouldn't understand me, they couldn't . . . No man should see or know the things I have seen or known.

Varlam Shalamov, Graphite[1]

In Moscow, Thomas Sgovio realized that everyone seemed to know something about Kolyma. The name had become a household word signifying the very worst of the camps. From the mid-1950s, the millions who returned brought back explicit accounts of suffering that, until then, had been concealed from the Soviet public. The survivors reappeared with little else besides their lost years, their lives, and a continuing trauma. "All I have left is the bones in my body and the skin stretched over them" was one description, repeated in endless variations by those who attempted to adjust to life outside "the zone."[2]

Some managed to create new lives and remarried. Others refused to have children, citing the simple reason "I don't want to be the father of slaves."[3] Their return was often the point at which the prisoners realized it had not been enough to survive. Their essential task was yet harder: to survive and keep one's soul intact. There were men and women who walked around the streets of Moscow "with horrifyingly empty eyes."[4] It was an easy condition to recognize, even after the weight had returned and the rags were replaced by clean clothes. They walked and yet they hesitated, unsure of what to do without instruction. For many who had spent long years confined within the regimen of prison cells and concentration camps, the idea of even limited freedom was terrifying. Crossing the street seemed a feat of extraordinary magnitude.[5] Even their journeys *away* from the camps had been difficult to bear. The prisoners returned to "Soviet civilization" in passenger trains whose mirrored bathrooms were often the cause of distress. One female prisoner described washing her face and catching sight of a

haggard old woman staring back at her. Frightened, she ran into the corridor and returned with a guard. Of course, there was no one there.[6]

As a survivor, the former law student Varlam Shalamov described the process by which human emotions returned to a prisoner saved from the prospect of imminent death. Out of nothingness, first a degree of indifference was felt, then fear, then envy. Love resurfaced last, if at all.[7] As the literary chronicler of Kolyma, Shalamov would die tragically. Forty-five years after his first arrest, he was confined in a Soviet psychiatric institution for his final incarceration. Only his prose remained to lend meaning to his suffering, and provide a degree of understanding to his future readers: a testimony to the events that had taken place in that far northeastern corner of Russia.[8]

Like Shalamov, many survivors who witnessed the execution of their fellow prisoners attempted to document their stories, anxious lest they themselves died and, according to Ivan Okunev, "they won't know where those who were killed were buried." Okunev was a survivor sent to Kolyma as a twenty-year-old in the terrible year of 1938:

Instead of shoes they gave us two sleeves from worn-out work coats and one pair of mittens and that was all for two years. We worked at the face in the goldmines and the sleeves quickly tore on the chippings at the face and the padding came out and our bare toes would become frozen . . . Not far from our camp there was a hill and a tractor stood on it. They brought [prisoners] in from other mines in trucks covered with canvas they cried farewell as they drove past our camp. There they stood people by the readymade trenches started up the tractor and shot them with a machinegun . . . There were thousands . . . Excuse the handwriting I have been paralysed twice and as I write now my shoulder is trembling. I am crying I remember what I've lived through. I would call it the Road to Calvary.[9]

Although they reawakened the events which they had endured, such

memoirs were also a form of catharsis, an unburdening that provided a degree of comfort to the survivor. In any case, it was impossible for the human mind to remain unscathed. Those who had denied themselves all feeling in order to survive discovered themselves to be something less than human when they left "the zone." At night the survivors lay sleepless, wide-eyed with fear lest they be arrested and sent back "there." Some were quite literally unable to close their eyes as a result of this all-consuming anxiety. The Greeks had invented a term for this condition of extreme shock, *lagophthalmia,* fusing together the words for *hare* and *eye,* since the hare was believed never to close its eyes. The survivors wondered when the knock on the door in the night might come—and in the morning they attempted to live.

Such were the consequences of severe trauma. There were those who remembered too much and went mad under the strain. Others recalled too little and became amnesiacs trying to piece together their fragmented minds. For many, their condition within the camps had been so unbearable, so traumatizing, that they lost all knowledge of both their families and themselves. One scientist named Nikolai Timofeev recalled, *"I remembered only that the name of my wife was Lyol'ka, but I forgot her full name. I forgot the names of my sons. I forgot everything. I forgot my last name. I remembered only that Nikolai was my first name." The same amnesiac response to severe trauma was recorded among the survivors of the Holocaust.*[10]

Some prisoners suffered the cruelty of losing the ability to make choices, and had to request that choices be made for them, anxious to get only what they were given, since they were unable to cope with any expression of individual identity or desire. Their sense of self no longer existed. Some did not want to leave the camps at all. If they could, they would have chosen to remain within the zone. Such psychological conditions fell within a whole range of experience. But there was one, very revealing, phenomenon reported among the survivors of the Kolyma camps in particular: they hated the sight of gold.[11]

FOR SOME OF those whose actions had consigned these people to the camps, the return of the "ghosts" was too much to bear. Alexander Fadeyev had once been a famous writer whose novel *The Young Guard* sold more than three million copies in the USSR. As the secretary of the Writers' Union, Fadeyev had also signed the arrest lists of his fellow writers. A long-term alcoholic, at first he had tried drunkenly to befriend his former victims who survived. Then, quite suddenly, Alexander Fadeyev stopped drinking and wrote a letter addressed to the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The suicide note was retained by the KGB, but its contents were clear from Fadeyev's bitter complaints: "I thought I was guarding a temple, and it turned out to be a latrine." And then he shot himself.[12]

Like Fadeyev, Ivan Nikishov, the former Dalstroi chief and deceiver of an American vice president, had lapsed into alcoholism. After the war, anonymous reports were sent to Moscow informing on the "unworthy behaviour of the head of Dalstroi, Comrade Nikishov." An MVD investigation in Magadan revealed the widespread abuse of state funds, and lavish drinking and debauchery on the part of Nikishov and his wife: "Nikishov and Gridassova organize binges on board the ships that arrive from America; afterwards, absolutely drunken Nikishov is being carried into his car in sight of all the personnel of the harbour." The secret police report described the "hand-kissing and sexual degeneracy" of Gridassova, and likened the atmosphere to a royal court: "Presents from America were not distributed among those who needed them; instead, they were given to Gridassova."[13] In 1956, the disgraced Nikishov died in a bath, apparently another suicide. He, too, left a note of self-justification: *"Yezhov and Beria demanded to fulfil the plan of gold production by any cost: 'Do not be sorry for prisoners. You will receive workers always when steamers can bring them' . . . I do not feel guilty . . . I was only an executor. Here are the copies of Yezhov's and Beria's orders. I kept them because I knew that I might be asked."* [14]

THAT YEAR, Alexander Dolgun, the former clerk of the American embassy, was finally released from the camps, eight years after his arrest on a Moscow street. His freedom was, of course, only relative, since he was warned that if he ever attempted to leave the USSR, his punishment would be a life sentence in a closed prison. He discovered that his mother had also been arrested, after she had asked for news of her son. Meeting her again in Moscow, Alexander Dolgun was shocked that she looked twenty years older than her actual age; her fingernails were "twisted and torn, and her temples and forehead were scarred." Like many prisoners, Mrs. Dolgun had suffered a severe mental breakdown in response to her torture, and was subsequently placed in a Soviet psychiatric institution. Twice a week, Dolgun visited his mother in the hospital, where she would reminisce about her life in New York and her sister living in New Jersey. Once, Dolgun was approached by a hospital psychiatrist who explained that his mother was suffering from severe paranoia combined with the most intricate delusions: *"She has told me the most vivid stories about living in New York City. Can you believe that? She describes the streets and the buildings with such clarity that I find myself believing her. I have seldom seen such an advanced case. I am sorry to have to tell you that she is very, very far gone into a world of her own making."* [15]

At the American embassy, Alexander Dolgun was invited to collect some money that he was owed. Accompanied by a KGB escort, he was offered a thousand dollars in back pay and asked how he would like to receive the money. When Dolgun requested to be paid in rubles, his only counsel came from his KGB minder, who advised him that he should not have changed the currency since "you could buy a lot with a thousand dollars in Moscow." An embassy official told Dolgun that his belongings were stored in a warehouse but that it would take some time to find them. His reaction to this news was muted: "But all the time I was running the consular file section, the records were in excellent shape."[16]

In 1956 there were still Americans imprisoned in camps who were forced to write to friends abroad in code. One letter was sent from "Vincent W.,"

who substituted the word *uncle* for the American embassy in Moscow, and *aunt* for the Soviet secret police: *"I can tell you that I received from my uncle a letter from Moscow; he writes very nicely, he did not give me up, I am considered their son."* After Vincent W.'s release from the camp, he wrote again: *"I was not permitted to see the uncle, the aunt herself talked to me for four hours . . . Please speak with my uncle who lives with you."*[17] In September 1956, Alyce Alex was still appealing to the American ambassador from her prison camp, by means of a letter delivered by hand: *"I am in camp seven years without any help what so ever. I have tried to get in contact with my friends and relatives in the States and so far have had no luck. I wonder if you will be so kind as to help me . . . Please help me."*[18]

On August 10, 1956, State Department officials met with the American Red Cross to ask the organization to "bring up the question of the release of American citizens imprisoned in the Soviet Union." Mr. Ellsworth Bunker, the president of the American Red Cross, replied that *"the Red Cross delegation had given careful consideration to this problem and had decided that it would be best to avoid raising the question which would be considered by the Soviets as a political issue."*[19] The attitude of the American Red Cross had remained unchanged since the Terror. Ten years earlier, a British inquiry for intervention on behalf of a missing legal adviser had received the following reply from Ralph Hubbell, the Red Cross director: "*We have made it a practice, if not a policy, however, not to make inquiries about those whom we know are political prisoners; those arrested by the Soviet police; those we know are domiciled in NKVD camps . . . In our opinion, inquiries about persons in this category would tend to be a source of annoyance, if not embarrassment."*[20]

AFTER MIDNIGHT ON February 25, 1956, at the final day of the Twentieth Party Congress, Nikita Khrushchev unexpectedly announced that the proceedings would continue in a closed session. A summons was issued to the Communist Party delegates staying in nearby hotels, and within half

an hour the congress hall was full. Then Khrushchev stepped up to the podium and, without warning, launched into a four-hour speech listing Stalin's crimes against "socialist legality" and the Communist Party. The delegates listened in silence, their shock interrupted only by the occasional expression of astonishment and indignation.[21]

In his so-called Secret Speech, Khrushchev acknowledged for the first time the catalogue of "mass arrests and deportations," "cruel and inhuman tortures," and the lists that Stalin signed condemning "thousands of honest and innocent Communists." The new Soviet leader mentioned several innocent parties by name, and attributed personal responsibility to Stalin for their deaths. At a stroke, the principal charges made against Stalin, so ferociously denied for so long, were suddenly accepted as truths by his successor. As Khrushchev candidly admitted to his audience, *"Stalin was a very distrustful man, sickly suspicious. We know this from our work with him. He could look at a man and say: 'Why are your eyes so shifty today?' or 'Why are you turning so much today and avoiding looking at me directly in the eyes?'"*[22] An American writer described perfectly the shock of Stalin's former followers as they listened to Khrushchev's speech: "In the eyes of a Communist, it was as if St. Paul, suddenly and without warning, had bitterly charged Christ with depravity and deceit."[23]

Of course, Khrushchev's candor went only so far. The issue that could never be addressed by the new general secretary was that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was not only the victim but also the institution that had allowed a judicially sanctioned genocide to occur. In terms of responsibility, the Communist Party had actively encouraged, and continually excused, the actions of its leader. Untold numbers of fanatical believers had pursued Stalin's will through conviction, not just fear, and one of those had been Khrushchev himself. So if the "Secret Speech" stunned its audience, it left a great deal else unsaid. The camps themselves were never mentioned, and while Khrushchev alluded to the "illegal" execution of "thousands" of communists, he could never fully acknowledge the death of millions of innocent victims of the Terror.

After the speech, Khrushchev cautiously remarked that "we must not carry out a St. Bartholomew's Massacre," and explained how bringing to

account all those who had participated in Stalin’s crimes would have incarcerated more people than had just been released. His own passionate speeches in defense of the Terror were erased from the record, just as he made certain to conceal his personal role in the mass arrests in Moscow and the Ukraine during 1937 and 1938. According to Semyon Vilensky, a Gulag survivor and the head of a support group for its victims, thousands of documents were burned during the Khrushchev regime, as “people wanted to eliminate the traces of their crimes.”[24]

To admit openly the enormity of the crimes against humanity, let alone the lies concealing it, would surely have sounded the death knell of the Soviet Union, and privately Nikita Khrushchev himself worried lest the “thaw” turn into a flood that might wash the regime away.[25] Instead of openness, Stalin’s inheritors—the willing Stalinists of the past—chose at first a partial revelation, and then to continue what Boris Pasternak described as “the inhuman power of the lie.”[26]

In the following months, new death certificates were delivered to the families of the victims. The causes of death were entirely fictional and yet medically plausible: dysentery, typhus, tuberculosis, pneumonia, heart attacks—the list was endless. Oscar Corgan had once been a leading organizer of the Finnish American emigration to Karelia, before his arrest and disappearance during the Terror. After Corgan’s posthumous rehabilitation under Khrushchev, his family was issued a death certificate that stated that Corgan had died of stomach cancer on July 18, 1940, the place of death unknown. Decades later the family received a second certificate, somewhat closer to the truth: Oscar Corgan had been shot on January 9, 1938, the place of his execution still unknown. The “inhuman power of the lie” was a function of the Soviet regime regardless of its leadership.[27]

AFTER HIS RELEASE, Thomas Sgovio bought a ticket to a Moscow cinema, where a documentary on Kolyma was about to be screened. Ten

minutes into the film, Thomas began to feel unwell, unable to cope with the images he saw on-screen. The film showed pictures of beautiful pine-covered hills, of Yakut villagers herding reindeer as the narrator praised "the heroic deeds of the Komsomol" in opening up these new Soviet lands. The emaciated prisoners, the frozen corpses, the guard dogs, and the watchtowers had all been quietly erased from the official record of Soviet history.

Watching the documentary pushed Thomas toward the realization that applying for an American passport to leave the USSR was too much to hope for, even in the heady days of the Khrushchev "thaw." Instead, he used his father's ancestry to obtain an Italian passport and an exit visa. Eventually, in 1960, he was permitted to leave Moscow on an Aeroflot plane bound for Italy, and from there he traveled on to New York. After years of exile, most of which had been spent as a prisoner, he had finally returned home. When Thomas Sgovio left the United States, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was battling the Great Depression. Upon his return, John F. Kennedy was promising a "New Frontier." A quarter of a century had passed.[28]

By strange coincidence, Nikita Khrushchev arrived in America not long before Thomas Sgovio's homecoming. It was the first visit of a Soviet leader to the United States, and Khrushchev remained in ebullient humor throughout, confidently declaring, "Your grandchildren will live under communism." In New York, Khrushchev explained how the "conical shape of A-bomb waves made tall buildings situated even at great distances from ground zero more vulnerable to destruction." When he confided that the Soviets were building not more than "four or five" stories high, an American aide remarked that perhaps soon they would "all live underground."

Unfazed by the shadow of Armageddon, Khrushchev appeared to enjoy the United States very much, and took the evident economic prosperity in his stride, ready with a quick-fired answer for every eventuality. The American automobiles, he reluctantly admitted, were "impressive," but in the Soviet Union they were setting up large rent-a-car garages for people to use collectively rather than creating all this wasteful individual ownership. And Khrushchev reminded American businessmen that in earlier days,

trade between their countries was “rather extensive and that Ford, for example, had found it profitable to deal with the USSR.”[29]

In San Francisco, Khrushchev was greeted by cheering crowds and his warmest reception yet. A lone dissenting voice came from the leadership of the United Auto Workers union. Walter and Victor Reuther were among a party of American trade unionists invited to a reception at the Mark Hopkins Hotel. When Victor Reuther greeted the Soviet leader in Russian quite naturally, questions were asked, with Reuther explaining that he had spent the years of 1934 and 1935 with his brother working at the Gorky Automotive Works “named in honor of Molotov. Is it still called that?” “Niet,” snapped Khrushchev. The Reuther brothers had managed to leave Russia in 1935, but there had been disappearances even then, and they never believed the official explanation that the Americans had left voluntarily. For his part, Khrushchev reacted to their criticism with predicable ill temper. Later, at a summit meeting in Vienna, he told President Kennedy, “We hanged the likes of Reuther in Russia in 1917.”[30]

In Los Angeles, 20th Century Fox organized a reception in Khrushchev’s honor—a glittering occasion attended by Hollywood’s leading producers, directors, and movie stars. The rotund Khrushchev happily posed for cameras surrounded by scantily clad showgirls from the set of *Can-Can*, with Shirley MacLaine and Frank Sinatra lending a touch of glamor to what was essentially a public relations campaign. One week later, just hours before his plane left for Moscow, the Soviet leader broadcast a live speech on American television: *“Everybody in the Soviet Union wants our two countries to live in peace, everyone wants peaceful co-existence . . . What do we have in mind? To abolish all armed forces completely . . . Everyone in the Soviet Union enjoys real freedom . . . Good-bye, good luck, friends!”* [31]

Three years earlier—with Khrushchev’s approval, and to lend “fraternal proletarian solidarity”—Soviet tanks had crushed the democratic uprising in Hungary. Three years later, the Soviet premier would precipitate the Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought the world to the brink of nuclear destruction. Those who saw Khrushchev only as a rotund, smiling, red-faced peasant

perhaps had second thoughts. Next to Stalin, of course, he appeared to be a saint.[32]

ON JULY 13, 1956, five months after Khrushchev's revelations and a month after the "Secret Speech" was published in *The New York Times,* Paul Robeson appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee. No hint of apology was forthcoming from Robeson, who claimed forgetfulness for his long years of obeyance to Stalin, before launching into a counterattack of his own:

CONGRESSMAN ARENS: While you were in Moscow did you make a speech lauding Stalin?

ROBESON: I do not know.

ARENS: Did you say in effect that Stalin was a great man and Stalin had done much for the Russian people, for all of the nations of the world, for all working people of the earth? Did you say something to that effect about Stalin when you were in Moscow?

ROBESON: I cannot remember.

ARENS: Do you have a recollection of praising Stalin?

ROBESON: I can certainly know that I said a lot about Soviet people, fighting for the peoples of the earth.

ARENS: Did you praise Stalin?

ROBESON: I do not remember.

ARENS: Have you recently changed your mind about Stalin?

ROBESON: Whatever has happened to Stalin, gentlemen, is a question for the Soviet Union and I would not argue with a representative of the people who, in building America wasted sixty to one hundred million lives of my people, black people drawn from Africa on the plantations. You are responsible and your forebears for sixty million to one hundred million black people dying in the slave ships and on the plantations, and don't you ask me about anybody, please.

ARENS: I am glad you called our attention to that slave problem. While you were in Soviet Russia, did you ask them there to show you the slave labor camps?

THE CHAIRMAN, REPRESENTATIVE FRANCIS WALTER: You have been so greatly interested in slaves, I should think that you would want to see that. ROBESON: The slaves I see are still as a kind of semi-serfdom, and I am interested in the place I am and in the country that can do something about it. As far as I know about the slave camps, they were Fascist prisoners who had murdered millions of the Jewish people and who would have wiped out millions of the Negro people could they have gotten hold of them. That is all I know about that . . . You are the non-patriots, and you are the un-Americans and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves . . . You want to shut up every colored person who wants to fight for the rights of his people.[33]

In answer to direct questions on his membership in the Communist Party, Robeson pled the Fifth Amendment more than thirty times, until the hearing was adjourned. Paul Robeson's steadfast campaign for civil rights in America made his acquiescence to Stalinism all the more tragic. There were many American communists who recanted once they understood the nature of the crimes committed in the USSR. There remained, however, a psychological conflict among those who understood, yet whose pride or ideology could not allow them to admit their error. Robeson's actions and speeches had justified, and therefore contributed to, the crimes of Stalinism, and for that at least, he was morally culpable.

In 1961, after his passport was restored by a Supreme Court ruling, Paul Robeson was free to travel once more to the Soviet Union, for his first visit since the death of Stalin. In a Moscow hotel room, the American singer attempted to end his life by slashing his wrists with a razor blade. His son, Paul Robeson, Jr., would later assert that his father's mental breakdown was fashioned by a CIA agent who drugged his drink at a cocktail party earlier that night. An alternative, and perhaps more likely, explanation was that

Robeson had succumbed to the same spiritual despair as Alexander Fadeyev.

After an extended convalescence in London, Robeson returned to America on December 23, 1963. According to press reports, at the airport, he looked "at least fifty pounds underweight, his face gaunt and his hair gray . . . The basso profundo that thrilled the world was silent." When his wife, Eslanda, died of cancer in 1965, Robeson retreated still further into isolation. The rest of his life would be scarred by a series of nervous breakdowns, bouts of depression, and a complete withdrawal from society. His last decade was lived as a recluse in his sister's house in Philadelphia, until his death on January 23, 1976. It was, according to a former friend, "a great whisper and a greater silence in black America." The honorary catcher of the American baseball team of Gorky Park was gone.[34]

OF COURSE, THOSE without ideology, only cynical expedience, suffered no particular trauma at all. In the early 1950s, Joseph Davies was briefly caught up in the McCarthy era, forced to defend the movie *Mission to Moscow* from the Un-American Activities Committee attacks, while his marriage was plagued by rumors that Marjorie Davies had interests elsewhere. Ever the chameleon, Davies emerged mauled but relatively unscathed, having learned to brandish his credentials as a corporate lawyer and businessman: "*I was one of the birds who in the 1920's put great business combinations together . . . all strictly within the law . . . and I made a fortune doing it.*" But his access to presidential power was cut off, and without this rejuvenating oxygen, Joseph Davies grew old and sick very quickly. It was as if he had nothing else to live for.[35]

In 1952, Marjorie Davies sued for divorce, citing "mental cruelty and incompatability," her husband's "whiplash temper," and "the lack of basic straight thinking that was awfully hard to live with." Three years later she married the nephew of Davies' first law partner. After her fourth marriage, Marjorie moved into another Washington mansion, which she filled with her vast collection of Russian art brought back from Moscow during the Terror. And in the garden, just outside the back door of the house, she had a shelter dug to withstand a Soviet nuclear attack. At the Hillwood mansion, she lived quietly until her death in 1973. In her will, Marjorie Merriweather

Post instructed that the mansion be converted into a museum and opened to the public. The collection included the vast socialist-realist painting *Peasant Holiday in the Ukraine,* which Joseph Davies had given her as a fiftieth-birthday present in 1937. The painting depicted a colorful, bucolic Ukrainian peasant scene, which the museum's curator carelessly chose to hang in the public dining room. Occasionally this cultural negation of a famine that killed five million attracts the complaint of an elderly Ukrainian American visitor, but there it remains, waiting for someone with sufficient grace to take it down.

In the years after his divorce, Ambassador Joseph Davies was left alone in Tregaron, the Washington mansion bought by Marjorie, who generously placed his name on the title deed. There was enough Russian art to fill this house, too, and the portrait of Stalin in its silver frame to remind the ambassador of his former proximity to power, if not the lives he had saved. His children from his first marriage attempted to contrive a reunion with his first wife, but by this stage Davies was already a sick man. After months of invalid care, he died on May 9, 1958, of a cerebral hemorrhage. His offer to gift Tregaron to the nation as a vice-presidential mansion was declined.[36]

Walter Duranty had died just six months earlier, at the age of seventy-three, in retirement in Orlando, Florida. The former "King of Reporters" had stopped writing years earlier, and was living in genteel poverty before the onset of a sunset romance with a rich Floridian widow, which ended in a marriage at his hospital deathbed. Duranty's son and former mistress had been left behind in Russia, and were long forgotten. Many years later, Victor Hammer—the brother of the notorious American businessman Armand— told an investigative reporter that Duranty had reported regularly to the OGPU throughout his period working for *The New York Times* in Moscow. According to Victor Hammer, Duranty had a weakness for young girls, and Victor's brother, Armand, had kept him supplied. By his death in October 1957, the name Walter Duranty meant very little to the American public.[37]

During the McCarthy period, while dining with a friend one night, Henry Wallace confessed that he did not want to live in America anymore. The treatment he was being subjected to, he said, was hardly what any citizen,

much less a former vice president, should expect. By the outbreak of the Korean War, Wallace had taken to making lengthy public apologies for his former support of the Soviet Union. He now understood that the "Soviets wanted the Cold War to go on indefinitely, even if it led to a hot one." His nemesis, J. Edgar Hoover, remained unimpressed: "Old bubble head has seen the light at last, but all too late." Henry Wallace then retreated to the isolation of his farm in upstate New York to cultivate strawberries and gladioli. He died in the midsixties of Lou Gehrig's disease; after a long illness and unable to speak, he was forced to communicate with his final visitors on a slate.[38]

Before his illness, Henry Wallace had given a long interview to Columbia University. As an old man, he spoke of his earliest memories, of getting lost in a cornfield in Iowa, aged three or four. The young Wallace had wandered deep into the field, where the sand burrs got into his socks and started to hurt his feet. And then he began to cry: "Where is mama's baby? Where is mama's baby?" until his family heard his shouts and found him. Later Wallace told his interviewer how he had genuinely loved Franklin Roosevelt for his "capacity to radiate joy and confidence to other people," and how he often dreamed that the president could rise up from his wheelchair and walk. In the last days of his illness, perhaps Henry Wallace found comfort in his recurring dreams of walking beside Roosevelt, the man with the "golden heart."[39]

HENRY FORD'S FAMOUS good health deteriorated soon after he suffered a stroke in his River Rouge cinema while watching the black-and-white newsreel taken at Majdanek concentration camp at the closing stages of the war. In the theater it appeared that Ford, the former publisher of *The International Jew,* had a sudden awareness of the consequences of his actions. The silver-haired billionaire had once given away the violent pamphlets against the Jews, saying proudly, "This came out of our factory." The Nazi propaganda machine had turned his book into a bestseller in

Germany, reprinting it throughout the Holocaust, by which time it was translated into a dozen languages and distributed throughout the occupied capitals of Europe, with a swastika on its title page. The world-famous figure of Henry Ford had lent his name and reputation to the anti-Semitic cause, paving the road to the Holocaust like a highway for one of his cars, which led its victims on the short journey to the crematoria. For Ford's words, once written, could never be taken back.[40]

Two years after suffering his stroke, Henry Ford died on April 7, 1947, at his home at Fair Lane, on the banks of River Rouge. On the day of his funeral, the bells of Detroit City Hall and every church in the city tolled, and the whole state of Michigan stopped to observe a minute's silence for America's greatest industrialist. In all the eulogies, what was never mentioned was that Henry Ford had been one of the few American businessmen to have maintained ties with both totalitarian regimes simultaneously.

Three years before his death, Ford had sent a message to Joseph Stalin, brought to the Kremlin by Eric Johnston, the young head of the American Chamber of Commerce. From the record of the meeting, preserved in the Russian state archives, we know that on the evening of June 26, 1944, Johnston told Stalin that he had talked with Henry Ford in Detroit before his departure and that Ford had requested he pass along his personal greetings to the Soviet leader. Stalin replied that he had not expected to receive greetings from Henry Ford: "We owe Henry Ford a lot, he helped us to construct automobile plants." At this point, Johnston conveyed Ford's willingness to help the Soviet Union again in the future, to which Stalin answered that "the Soviet Union would repay Ford for his help," just as they had done in the past. The Soviet stenographers then recorded that Johnston complimented Stalin: "In his opinion J. V. Stalin is in fact a real businessman." To which Stalin replied that "if he was born in America and lived there he would probably have really become a bu sinessman."[41]

The Ford Archives, almost a mile of boxed records of Ford Motor Company history, were stored at Ford's mansion in Fair Lane, Dearborn. According to the memoirs of Charles Sorensen, Henry Ford liked to roam among them in his old age. The octogenarian industrialist would step past

the records of those people he had dispatched around the world to do his bidding. Hidden in these archives lay the single slip of paper that had issued a Ford badge to Sam Herman, the defining gesture which began the Herman family's emigration to the USSR. And there, too, were the names of the other former Ford autoworkers who had followed him on their doomed journey to Nizhni Novgorod.[42]

IN THE LAST decades of the Cold War, very little was heard from the surviving Americans in the Soviet Union. Among the millions of Stalin's victims, the American emigrants scarcely registered as just one small tile in a vast mosaic of suffering. And of the thousands who had left in the early thirties, only a handful ever returned home in the footsteps of Thomas Sgovio. One of the few was Victor Herman, who managed to send a letter to a law firm in New Orleans, addressed to a cousin he had never met. After long years of bureaucratic struggle and harassment, Victor Herman finally received an American passport and was allowed to leave the USSR in 1976. Forty-five years after he had departed New York as a teenager on a passenger liner bound for Leningrad, he returned home to Detroit. He was sixty years old, and his story was featured in the pages of *The New York Times*.[43]

In America, Victor Herman published a memoir of his experiences entitled *Coming Out of the Ice*, which received a measure of critical attention, almost as an anomaly of the Cold War, a historical curiosity. Although his family was eventually allowed to join him in Detroit, the trauma of the camps of Burelopom remained with him and left him no peace. In the early hours of the morning, Victor Herman would awake with a start from his dreams, convinced that he was still starving and desperate for a scrap of food. The following year, he launched a ten-million-dollar lawsuit against the Ford Motor Company, charging that it had abandoned his family to their fate in the Soviet Union. The Ford lawyers responded that Sam Herman had never actually worked for their company, and the

case was dismissed by the Federal District Court of Detroit. Seven years later, on March 25, 1985, Victor Herman died of a heart attack in his hometown, at the age of sixty-nine.[44]

After the advent of glasnost, a few more Americans returned to the United States in the late 1980s like Rip Van Winkles whose lives had flashed by from youth into old age. As individuals they were not welcomed with any fanfare, just shrugs, scarcely a footnote of history, a few wide-eyed old men shuffling into airports, ready to be interviewed by the FBI checking they were the same people who had left in the 1930s, not Soviet agents who had already been caught using the American emigrés' identities. The collective existence of the American emigrants was hardly acknowledged in the short history of the young Republic. And yet their lives held a moral significance far greater than their numbers.

Abe Stolar's father had worked for the *Moscow Daily News* before his arrest and execution in 1937. Abe Stolar was wounded serving in the Red Army during the war, and his sister was sent to the camps in 1951. After years of waiting, Stolar was finally allowed to return to America in 1989: *"I cannot find words. It has been a long time. I tried very hard to get here."* In Chicago, he walked the streets of his youth, asking for places that had not existed for decades, his accent and speech still anchored in the 1930s. In fifty years, virtually everything had changed in Chicago; all the old landmarks were long gone. Only Wrigley Field remained standing, and the Chicago Cubs were still playing in the old baseball park. One more time, after almost sixty years, Abe Stolar was able to watch his beloved Cubs take to the field. Only baseball had remained unchanged, as though awaiting his return.

Take me out to the ball game,
Take me out with the crowd;
Buy me some peanuts and cracker jack,
I don't care if I never get back . . . [45]

OTHER AMERICANS STAYED on in Russia. Albert “Red” Lonn also survived his sentence in Burelopom, although Victor Herman had believed he had died in the camps. On his release, Lonn returned to his wife in Karelia, after fourteen years of imprisonment. In the small town of Suojarvi, Lonn worked quietly as an electrician, and started teaching a new generation of children the rules of baseball. He could not show them the baseball signed by Babe Ruth he had brought with him from America, but he remained the captain of the “championship” winning team of 1934. And despite his every hardship, Albert Lonn stayed a baseball fanatic until the very end.

Lucy Flaxman was held as a prisoner in the camps for three years, before her rehabilitation and release in 1956, under the general amnesty. On her return to Moscow, she received four hundred rubles’ compensation for her confiscated belongings, and her son gave her enough money to buy some material to have a suit made. She then worked as a literary translator at the Soviet news agency Novosti. Until her death, Lucy Flaxman never allowed anyone to say a bad word about Nikita Khrushchev. “He gave freedom to thousands of people,” she would say. Her son remembered his mother as “always young in her soul” with never much interest in politics. She worked hard, and liked to take her granddaughter for a walk to the shops, and celebrate the holidays. *“She was a very easy-going person, and did not reflect much, which was certainly for the best in the USSR.”* In 1965, she met Aleksandr Fisson, a retired prosecutor from the Far East fleet, and the couple lived happily together in Moscow. In 1979, Lucy Flaxman died of cancer that had progressed very quickly.[46]

OF THE AMERICAN servicemen held captive in the Soviet Union after World War II, nothing more was known. The American intelligence files remained closed, left buried in the vaults to accumulate dust and gradually be forgotten by succeeding generations of operatives. It seemed the

conscience of the world lay dormant through the Cold War, locked in the embrace of superpower antagonism. And while the Gulag camps lost the vast majority of their prisoners after 1956, the system was never completely shut down.

The state repressions continued until the very end of the Soviet regime. Through the 1960s and 1970s, political dissidents in the USSR were routinely diagnosed as suffering from "mental illness" by Soviet psychiatrists and placed in institutions to be force-fed drugs, or subjected to electroshock "therapy" until cured of their stubborn desire for freedom of speech. In the midsixties, the dissident Vladimir Bukovsky met someone in a special clinic who had been there almost a decade for demanding an inquiry into Stalin's crimes.[47] Another dissident, Andrei Sinyavsky, was arrested and put on trial in February 1966 for the "crime" of having his books published abroad. At Sinyavsky's trial, the judge's questions echoed the absurdity of a regime that had cut itself off from the world—*"Do you think reactionary publishers would have printed your books so beautifully if there had been nothing anti-Soviet in them? Just look at this paper, just look at this book jacket"*—before he sentenced Sinyavsky to seven years in "strict-regime" labor camps.[48] Within the Soviet Union, the United States must always be portrayed as in a state of semi-permanent crisis if Friedrich Engels was to be considered justified in calling Karl Marx "the Darwin of History." Upon this historical necessity— an idea as fragile and finely crafted as a Fabergé egg—was hung the whole justification for the Soviet's regime's existence, and the endless sacrifices borne by its people.[49]

After Nikita Khrushchev was overthrown in the coup of Communist Party hardliners in October 1964, the business of running the Soviet state was quickly returned to normal. Gone was the vain pretense of recognizing Stalin's "mistakes." It was far simpler instead to restore Stalin's name to uneasy eminence in the Soviet pantheon. After the coup, Nikita Khrushchev was turned into a "non-person," kept under house arrest by the KGB in a dacha twenty miles west of Moscow until his death in September 1971.[50] During the stagnation and repression of the Brezhnev years, an end game was taking place, although few were aware of it at the time. As a young Central Committee secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev remembered overhearing

an aging Leonid Brezhnev turn to ask Yuri Andropov, "How's my speech?" to which the KGB chief answered, "Good, good, Leonid Ilyich." Later, when Gorbachev inquired which Marxist-Leninist message Leonid Brezhnev was referring to, Andropov explained he had misunderstood: "Leonid Ilyich was having increasing trouble speaking."

As the Soviet Union slipped away into a gerontocracy, one aging Leninist hero with a chestful of medals succeeded another in a patient shuffle to the front of the queue, their collective belief in the socialist society lost to the evidence all around them. At the end, the entire country was still queuing for food. And in 1987, two years after Gorbachev came to power, the Russian writer Leonid Borodin was still serving a prison sentence for advocating religious freedom in the USSR.[51]

And there, perhaps, our story might have ended, except where Russia is concerned, little is straightforward and all endings appear false. In the summer of 1989, a Hungarian prime minister whose name few people can now recall made the fateful decision to open the border and allow East Germans permission to cross freely into Austria, thereby setting off the chain of events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Perhaps Miklós Németh was delivering a fraternal thank-you for the "socialist assistance" of 1956.

In the Kremlin, the final Soviet leader, the one man with sufficient power to halt the velvet revolutions of Eastern Europe, chose not to maintain the status quo through violence. Mikhail Gorbachev's grandfathers had both been arrested during the Terror, and his wife Raisa's grandfather was executed in 1937. Perhaps this family history might help to explain why Gorbachev was not prepared to follow the actions of the Chinese Communist Party leadership, who ruthlessly ordered in tanks to kill the Chinese students protesting for democracy in Tiananmen Square that summer. After the failure of the hardliners' coup against him in August 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev announced his resignation as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The "greatest social experiment in the history of mankind" ended on Christmas Day 1991, as the red flag was lowered from the Kremlin and the

new Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, declared that the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. Only then could the final act of a tragedy begin to unfold.

26

The Truth at Last

The Trojan War
Is over now; I don't recall who won it.
The Greeks, no doubt, for only they would leave
So many dead so far from their own homeland.

Joseph Brodsky, "Odysseus to Telemachus"[1]

Visiting the United States in 1992, President Boris Yeltsin made an unexpected announcement to the news media. In the early 1950s, he said, Soviet forces had shot down an American plane and taken its dozen-member crew hostage. Although the Russian officials accompanying their erratic new president made efforts to backtrack on the details of his statement, the end result was a Joint Commission of Investigation called into existence by the American and Russian governments. The commission was authorized to discover *"whether American servicemen are being held against their will on the territory of the former Soviet Union and, if so, to secure their immediate release and repatriation; to locate and return to the United States the remains of any deceased American servicemen interred in the former Soviet Union, and to ascertain the facts regarding American servicemen who were not repatriated and whose fate remains unresolved."*

At a press conference in the White House Rose Garden on June 16, 1992, President George H. W. Bush pledged, "I want to assure all Americans, and particularly those families of the American POWs and MIAs, that we will spare no effort in working with our Russian colleagues to investigate all information in the Russia archives concerning our servicemen." President Boris Yeltsin reciprocated in the spirit of the new Russian-American entente: *"I can promise that the joint commission which will be established*

. . . will report to the American public all the information that will be found in the archives that we are going to open for it . . . the archives in the KGB, in the Central Committee of the Communist Party, regarding the fate of the American POWs and MIAs." [2]

In a television interview, Yeltsin gave clues as to what may have happened to the missing Americans: "Some of them were transferred to the former Soviet Union and were kept in labor camps. We don't have complete data and can only surmise that some of them may still be alive. That is why our investigations are continuing. Some of them may have ended up in psychiatric asylums."[3] The following day, in the White House East Room, Yeltsin was asked by a reporter "if Gorbachev or any of his predecessors, even going back to Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, knew about the possibility that Americans were being held?" His reply was frank: *"Well, that's just the point. They did know. That's the very point, that they kept it a secret. The point is that that era, when we kept the truth from each other, has come to an end and we will now tell the truth to each other person to person."*[4]

DECADES AFTER THE first American prisoners of war had been reported missing, Task Force Russia began its investigation from offices at the U.S. embassy in Moscow. To begin with at least, optimism ran high, although the eight American investigators always maintained that much would depend on the goodwill of their hosts. In the first flush of the anticommunist Yeltsin government, a degree of progress was made. The leader of the Russian side, the historian General Dmitri Volkogonov, unearthed a KGB document revealing the existence of a plan *"to deliver knowledgeable Americans to the USSR for intelligence purposes."* It was the first official recognition that the imprisonment of American servicemen had been an approved, not merely accidental, policy of the Soviet government.

There were other notable early discoveries. In one find, Volkogonov reported that 119 American prisoners of war were held back by Stalin after

the end of the Second World War, because their names had "Russian, Ukrainian or Jewish" origins. But even a Russian general found it difficult to discover the extent of the disappearances. The former Soviet archives were vast, their guardians were recalcitrant, and incriminating documents had often been sequestered or destroyed. As Volkogonov attempted to explain to the American side, *"My own father was shot in 1937 and, to date, I can't establish where he is buried."*[5]

Three years into the investigation, Dmitri Volkogonov, already suffering from cancer, died of a heart attack. His Russian successors, meanwhile, denied all knowledge of the so-called "Volkogonov plan" or even the document outlining its existence, and the investigation's progress inevitably became mired in bureaucratic intransigence. As the decade wore on, Task Force Russia turned into a weather vane for the changing fortunes of the Russian-American relationship, veering from guarded cooperation to complete breakdown, depending on the political circumstance of the day. When American F-16s bombed the former Yugoslavia in 1997, for example, Task Force Russia was shut down completely and its investigators expelled, in a rerun of an old-fashioned Cold War spy drama.[6]

It soon became apparent that the wheels of bureaucracy turned as slowly in the new Russia as they had ever done in the past. Nor was the culture of secrecy vastly different, since the former Soviet officialdom below the highest ranks had survived completely intact. The KGB changed its name to the "new Russian" FSB, but this was a not-uncommon gambit for the organization, and the faces within the offices at the Lubyanka remained unchanged, the officials overwhelmingly reluctant to offer American investigators full, or even partial, access to their archives. Privately, many on the American side conceded, there was a growing preference for the investigation to wither and die for lack of access to documentary materials.

Such views were candidly expressed in declassified American policy documents: *"What started out as a dictatorship can also end up as a dictatorship . . . The Russians with whom we must deal sense instinctively that, sooner or later, the boot may come down on any neck that has been extended, dirtied their hands with the POW issue."* The Russian security

forces

have not diverged from their planned course and, when confronted by potentially damaging evidence by the US side, they react swiftly and aggressively, quickly moving to put the US representatives on the defensive. They appear willing to lie openly and repeatedly. Some Americans may have difficulty grasping this fundamental fact of Russian diplomacy . . . Security services have lost much of their earlier fear of the President and may be as willing to lie to him or to stonewall him on the POW issue as they are apt to do to the US side . . . The possibility also exists that President Yeltsin has undergone a change of heart as regards his full support for the resolution of this issue. He may have been informed of some details that he, too, finds too sensitive to release.[7]

Such analysis appeared uncannily accurate when President Yeltsin ordered Stalin's personal archives to remain closed for forty years. [8] It quickly became apparent that old views lived on in the new Russia. In the wake of national publicity over the search for missing American pilots, a letter from Lieutenant-Colonel Anatolij Dokuchaev was published in the newspaper *Red Star* in February 1993:

They say that angels from abroad were simply flying when they were shot down by vampires. Peaceful, bubbling with life Roberts and Johns perished. They were shot down by dour, Russian Ivans . . . There is sympathy not for our lads defending the Fatherland, but for the boys from abroad bringing us "happiness" from bomber hatches . . . Did they forget something at our borders? . . . Dostoeyevsky in his masterwork The Brothers Karamazov, depicted Smerdlyakov as a synonym of sadness, of obsequiousness before all foreigners and westerners. But the modern day Smerdlyakovs have gone even further—from obsequiousness to spitting on everything that is ours, everything Russian.[9]

In the former Soviet days, carefully phrased letters from members of the public were often used as a signal for changes in the party line. The subtext could be construed as a repetition of the Soviet reflex, which carried with it the undercurrent of threat, which had begun to reemerge even then. Yuri Smirnov, a Russian parliament member and head of a subcommittee on POW/ MIA affairs, stated that he had been warned: “You’re working too hard on the subject and should back off.” Mail sent by Gulag survivors to the Joint Commission offices disappeared or was intercepted. Other witnesses who came forward were warned off by anonymous visitors and, quite naturally, became reluctant to go public.[10]

And yet, for all the limitations of the process, documents were discovered in the Russian state archives that—the U.S. investigators stated in their joint meetings—referred to *“American POWS in Soviet camps during 1946 and 1947 in a seemingly matter of fact way.”*[11] From the State Archives of the Russian Federation, one document referred to “2,836 Americans” held in the Komi Republic, in the far north of European Russia. These Americans belonged to a larger group of foreigners kept as prisoners during the early 1950s. The response of the Russian side to such information was always skeptical. At their joint meetings, a view was proposed that perhaps these prisoners had been deemed Americans as part of a “criminal fabrication,” and then a familiar question was raised: *“Are any of these 2,836 Americans mentioned in this document American citizens in the traditional sense of the term? . . . Such a possibility cannot be excluded.”*[12]

Searching for corroborative evidence, the American investigators re-examined their own archives. From thousands of boxes of information, the “Wringer” reports of the early 1950s were unearthed, and the evidence of the sightings of Americans by German and Polish survivors was presented to the Russian side. One report retrieved from a German lieutenant described the Gulag camp of Atkars, five hundred miles southeast of Moscow, where between “three and five hundred” Americans were being held in June 1945. All had citizenship papers and had been interned first by the Germans during the war, before being captured by the Russians. Half of

the group had been forced to hand over their identity papers, but the German witness had seen camp files with one column headed “Citizenship” filled with at least ten to twenty “USAs” written by the camp inmates.[13]

Another German prisoner of war, interviewed in 1947, reported “130 US Navy personnel” held in the Gulag camp at Kashgar. The German witness stated that these men were the survivors of two American submarines sunk in the Pacific, who had been picked up by a Russian tanker. The Americans had arrived in Kashgar in July and August 1944, and had then been isolated, with the German prisoners only becoming aware of their presence after the Americans had thrown notes to them over the fence. When the Germans left in July 1946, around thirty of these Americans were already dead. Five decades later, the search for their existence led nowhere, and the American investigators’ requests for access to the Soviet secret police archives was consistently stonewalled. Amid claims, counterclaims, and denials, the work of the Russian-American commission continued through the 1990s.[14]

Meanwhile, other national organizations searching for their missing citizens in Russia appeared to be achieving better results. The Association Edouard Kalifat—named after a missing French prisoner of war and dedicated to tracing the hundreds of French nationals who vanished in the Soviet Union during and after the Second World War—found a fresh source of information in the St. Petersburg Medical and Military Archive. Searching through the sixty million files held on patients treated in combat, the French investigators discovered that, far from dying in battle as they had been told, many French servicemen had been imprisoned in Gulag camps. With the KGB archives still sealed, the St. Petersburg medical archive held the promise of a uniquely useful resource. But when the Americans knocked on the door, they were politely told that the archive was undergoing “restoration,” and were turned away. On another occasion, while investigating reports of “six or seven” U.S. prisoners of war held in a camp in Tambov, the American investigators interviewed a Russian archivist, Yuri Dulensky, who confided that many records had been destroyed “for unknown reasons.” The camp archives had been “cleaned up” over the years by their administrators, fearing retribution.[15]

OVER THE COURSE of the 1990s, the relatives of missing American servicemen had grown weary at the interminable delays. A coalition of families based in Roanoke, Virginia, issued a press release: "Promises can evolve into action taken, or they can deteriorate into lip service. We are waiting with growing impatience to see some leadership." Some families expressed their view that the Joint Commission was, in their words, "nothing but a front office, bent on managing a potentially explosive issue" to the least harm for America's political relationship with Russia. Harried by such criticism, the U.S. investigators continued their search across the former Soviet Union, traveling to the remote locations of former prisons and camps where prisoner lists were sampled for known names under variations of Russian transliteration. Appeals for information were broadcast on Russian radio and television, and limited access was negotiated with the archives of the Russian Ministry of Defense, navy, and coast guard.[16]

Public appeals made in the newly independent Baltic states brought forward several former Gulag prisoners who remembered Americans imprisoned with them in their camps. One Latvian survivor spoke of a pilot named *"Jimmy Braiton or Baker . . . 180 cm tall with dark eyes, and a limp which required him to walk with a cane."* Another witness reported the existence of an American pilot imprisoned in Norilsk in 1949, *"called Tim or Tom, although that was not his real name. The pilot was 175-180 cm tall; handsome with dark hair . . . After being implicated in a plot to steal a plane in the spring of 1949, Tim/Tom disappeared."* In the Tallinn City Museum, a notebook was discovered filled with prisoners' portraits. One picture carried a dedication in English "for Good memories," dated October 2, 1952. Over the man's face the artist had written the word *Yankee* in Estonian.[17]

A portrait or artifact always carried a tangible feeling of presence. In April 1995, another Gulag survivor handed in a ring that he said had

belonged to an American pilot, Captain Oliver Rom, who was born in 1923, a native of Minnesota, and had been shot down over Germany and subsequently imprisoned in a Gulag camp in Karelia. It was reported that Captain Rom had been shot by a guard in December 1958, some five years after Stalin's death.[18]

IN RESPONSE TO a newspaper advertisement, a Russian citizen named Yury Khorshunov wrote a letter from Nizhneudinsk, in the Irkutsk region of Siberia, addressed to the American embassy in Moscow, "fulfilling the will of my late mother." The author explained that his mother had worked as a conductor on the railways after the war. In March 1946, Mrs. Khorshunov was employed servicing the trains delivering prisoners to the camps of Far East Russia. Eight prisoners had died on that particular section of the journey, and their bodies were unloaded from the prison train and placed on a sledge for burial. As Mrs. Khorshunov was returning home from her shift, the driver of the burial sledge stopped to ask her "what he was supposed to do, since one of the dead prisoners seemed to breathe, and putting a live person into a grave did not correspond to Christian traditions." Faced with a choice, Mrs. Khorshunov elected to bring this prisoner back home with her.

Over the next three days the man began to speak a language Mrs. Khorshunov could not understand. All she could grasp was that the prisoner pointed a finger to himself and said "American." Then he asked for a paper and pencil, and with difficulty drew a picture of a "falling aircraft, three human figures, and then poles with barbed wire." In another picture, the American prisoner drew several-storied buildings and repeated the word "Kanifol." He also told Mrs. Khorshunov his name. His Christian name was "Fred," and his surname, she remembered, sounded like "Collins."

Perhaps because she had lost two brothers in 1937, Mrs. Khorshunov felt both a heightened sense of compassion for her patient and an awareness that there was nowhere she could turn to for help. One week later, "Fred Collins" died, and the Khorshunov family dug a grave and buried him,

along with his few possessions: a small book and a badge or medal hidden in the sole of his boot. For many years, Mrs. Khorshunov tended this unmarked grave, and her son, too, followed her there sometimes. Decades later, fulfilling his duty to the American prisoner, Yuri Khorshunov sat down to write his letter to the investigators: "*There may be nonsense in my writing to you, since one human life is really nothing for such a great country like yours, though the relatives of that man may still be waiting for some information about him. If you have any questions, I will be glad to answer them.*"[19]

Other Russian witnesses emerged with evidence gained from within the Soviet state. Vladimir Trotsenko, for example, had once been a Soviet army sergeant assigned to the aviation transport regiment of the Ninty-ninth Soviet Airborne Division. In November 1951, Trotsenko broke his leg in a parachute training accident and was sent to an air force hospital in the small town of Staraya Sysoyovka, northeast of Vladivostok. Due to bed scarcity, Trotsenko was taken to a separate facility on the second floor. There he was placed in a room next to four prisoners, whose door was latticed with metal bars. A guard was posted outside, but whenever this private needed a break, he asked Trotsenko "to keep an eye on the Americans."

According to his testimony, although Trotsenko could not speak English, he managed to communicate with the four Americans using sign language. The prisoners were convalescing in bandages and plaster casts, and their treatment was periodically interrupted by an interrogation by a visiting Soviet captain, who, on one occasion, pulled out the round medallion hanging around each man's neck to confirm his identity. Trotsenko remembered that one of the American pilots, who had his right arm in a cast, would slowly repeat, "America—San Francisco, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Chicago," indicating the home city of each of his fellow patients. He also pointed to a crewman in a body cast and "would make cradling motions with his arms, indicating that the man had left two small children back home." The American had blue eyes and light-colored hair, was around six feet tall, and was from Cleveland. A fifth American had died and was buried in the hospital cemetery.

Forty-four years after this meeting in the hospital, Vladimir Trotsenko saw an advertisement in a Khabarovsk city newspaper and came forward with his evidence. The American investigators interviewed Trotsenko twice and were convinced of his authenticity. But when they put their findings to the Russian side of the Joint Commission, the information was received with overt skepticism and the accuracy of Trotsenko's account was called into question. According to a Russian colonel, Vinogradov, "There are many inventive people in Russia who can conjure up good fairy tales." Three visits were made to the hospital, and it was discovered that Trotsenko's memory for key details of the building and its grounds were correct. A U.S. Navy historian also confirmed that between 1940 and 1956, the dog tags issued had been round and not rectangular. The grave of the fifth American was searched for in the hospital cemetery, and although remains were exhumed, they were not matched by DNA testing for ethnicity. Of the four surviving Americans, no further evidence was discovered, barring the self-evident facts that they had been seen alive in a Russian military hospital as prisoners and they had never returned home.[20]

Another witness, a former Soviet MVD colonel, Vladimir Malinin in response to an advertisement claimed to have seen a group of foreign prisoners in a Leningrad KGB prison in 1953 or 1954, who had waved at him from a separate room and shouted "American, American, American." Later, on duty in Kolyma, Malinin was told that "there was a nuclear power generating plant far north of Magadan and that a number of uranium mines were located within eighty kilometres of the plant. Foreign prisoners were used exclusively in this work area . . . Prisoners who were sent there were not expected to return."[21]

General Georgi Lobov, the former commander of the Soviet Sixty-Fourth Fighter Aviation Corps, was interviewed by a Russian journalist for a newspaper article: *"I know that in summer [of] 1952 at least 30-40 American POWs were placed in a separate and closely guarded carriage, attached to a goods train, and sent to the USSR . . . They must have been a treasure-trove . . . This is what I know for certain. As regards the subsequent fate of those 30-40 Americans, I, like yourself, can only guess."* [22] Colonel Pavel Derzskii, the former adviser to the Soviet ambassador in

North Korea, told the American commission that there had been a standing order to send captured American pilots back to the Soviet Union. Another witness, Colonel Gavril Korotkov, stated that he had personally interrogated two American prisoners of war in Khabarovsk during the Korean War.[23] In his interview, Korotkov discussed the method by which Americans had been screened in North Korea, and then transferred north for further interrogation in the USSR. In a subsequent interview, however, the colonel became more cautious. Korotkov explained that he had received phone calls and a late-night visitor whose behavior left him with the impression that he was from the "special services." His subsequent testimony became more tentative— retracting key points, Korotkov equivocated on the most politically sensitive details.[24]

Later, during a subsequent Joint Commission meeting, Colonel Mazurov of the Russian security forces denied that any pressure had been brought to bear on Korotkov: *"I exerted no pressure—if I wanted to exert pressure, I wouldn't do it by telephone, but by other means."*[25]

IN PURSUIT OF such clues, the Joint Commission continued its work in Russia. Led by aging witnesses, they searched for the missing American servicemen, and found only fragments of their lives. In 1999, their patience was, in a sense, rewarded when the American investigator Norman Kass unearthed the unpublished memoir of a Russian survivor of the camps, the response to another radio advertisement. The survivor was interviewed and his testimony judged to be the credible witness statement of a former prisoner in his late seventies, who had spent many years in the Gulag. Perhaps mindful of the forces brought to bear on previous witnesses, initially a decision was made to keep his identity secret. Only later was it revealed that Kass had found the memoir of Benjamin Dodin.

Key details of Dodin's recollections were checked against what was known of the historical record. The director of Memorial, the Russian organization dedicated to the victims of Stalinism, confirmed the existence

of Rybak, “a top-secret uranium mine located on the Leningradskaya River,” where Dodin reported he had encountered the “citizen of the United States of America, Allied Officer Dale.” No known archival records existed from Rybak, but geologists who had spent time there had passed on their knowledge to Memorial. When the Americans examined military records for the existence of the officer whose gaunt face Dodin remembered so clearly, they discovered two “Dales” listed as missing from World War II: Lieutenant Harvey Dale and Lieutenant William Dale.[26]

There were other American prisoners documented by name in the Dodin memoir. From the U.S. Air Force archives, it was already established that an RB-29 aircraft stationed at Yokota Air Force Base, Japan, had been shot down on June 13, 1952, while on a reconnaissance mission over the Sea of Japan. During the American search-and-rescue efforts one, possibly two, empty life rafts were spotted in the water, but no survivors or bodies were picked up, and a presumptive finding of death was issued to the entire aircrew on November 14, 1955. Benjamin Dodin had given the names of two of the men recovered by the Soviet authorities as “Bush and Moore.” In the U.S. Air Force records, the crew list of the lost RB-29 included a “Major Samuel Busch” and a “Master Sergeant David Moore.”

For decades, skeptics had doubted the credibility of the witness testimony of Gulag survivors. In key details, Dodin’s memoir validated the essential truthfulness of such men and women. It was also apparent that both Major Samuel Busch and Master Sergeant David Moore had been declared dead when they were still alive and imprisoned in the USSR. After the shoot-down, the U.S. government had issued a formal diplomatic note asking for an investigation into the missing aircrew of the RB-29, among several other lost planes of the Cold War. But such diplomatic requests were routinely ignored or denied by the Soviet Foreign Ministry, and when released to the American media, had warranted only a few lines in *The New York Times* of July 17, 1956. Nothing more was said or done. And just three years later, Nikita Khrushchev received his rapturous welcome on a state visit to the United States.[27]

For Major Samuel Busch’s surviving sister, Charlotte Busch Mitnik, the latest evidence was little comfort for the years spent agonizing over her

brother's fate. Her reaction was guarded: "*Time after time we asked the government to help us with our search for the truth. All we had received in the past were lies, half-truths and misinformation. How do you mourn a POW/MIA? You can't, you don't . . . We must insist that our government make North Korea, China, and Russia accountable as to what happened . . . These men paid the ultimate price, their lives. The cost was not too great for those men or their families to pay.*" For certain families, the price paid was disproportionately high. The Busch family had already lost one son, Morris T. Busch, killed in action during the liberation of France in World War II.[28]

What happened to Major Samuel Busch after the shoot-down of his plane remained unknown. However, one document relating to his fate was discovered in the Russian state archives. A military report dated June 13, 1952, had been sent to Joseph Stalin. The report, marked "top secret," recorded the American search-and-rescue efforts for their missing aircraft and stated that the shoot-down had been recorded on film. But neither the photography nor the fate of the missing crew could be discovered.[29]

At their meetings, the Russian side of the investigation could seldom explain the American evidence. Usually an effort was made to call into question the authenticity of the American sources, which were usually eyewitness accounts with little or no documentation. And throughout the period of the investigation, the Russians steadfastly refused to open the KGB archives or Stalin's personal archives for examination. It was evident, if always diplomatically expressed, that passive resistance took precedence over active quest. Any other outcome smacked too much of Cold War defeat for the Russians, or triumph on the part of the Americans. Colonel Mazurov, formerly of the KGB, first expressed this view in a meeting in 1993: "*We studied your report, sixty percent of the information was obtained from ex-prisoners . . . These people have their own axes to grind.*" A decade later, a Colonel Vinogradov of the FSB reported "to the incredulity of the US side" that "*a check of camp statistics revealed that there had been no American citizens detained anywhere in the camp system of the former USSR.*"[30]

When the same Colonel Vinogradov was presented with the memoirs of Benjamin Dodin, he commented that such evidence was "not realistic." It

was a “waste of time for Russians and Americans to follow up on such bad information,” which he claimed was a “fairy tale.” It was the same metaphor once used by the prisoners of Kolyma—“just like a fairy tale,” the years and their lives had disappeared.[31]

IN AUGUST 2001, some fifty-seven years after Henry Wallace’s ill-fated visit, Major-General Roland Lajoie boarded a plane for Far East Russia. As the leader of the American commission, Lajoie was in charge of overseeing the examination of the crash site of a U.S. Navy bomber missing since March 1944. Forensic scientists from the U.S. Army’s Central Identification Laboratory had recovered human bone fragments from the isolated site in Kamchatka scattered across the steep slope of a volcano, amid scrub brush and wildflowers. But despite months of painstaking investigation, the scientists had failed to locate the remains of the whole crew. Their bodies may have been taken away by wild animals; they may also have been removed by the authorities at the time. It was not known.

Standing next to the wreckage of the American plane broken into silver pieces over the desolate landscape, Major-General Lajoie spoke cautiously to American and Russian television news: “People are reluctant to talk about MIAs in the past tense for fear they might be alive, regardless of how many years go by.” If Lajoie understood that the history of the missing American servicemen cast a long shadow beyond this brief flare of media interest, then he was doubtless also aware that Russia’s vast empty spaces had a habit of throwing up the most unlikely of survival stories.[32] Just the year before, in April 2000, a Hungarian soldier had been discovered in a psychiatric institute in the depths of rural Russia, missing since World War II, unclaimed and forgotten for over half a century. Judging from his physical condition, doctors assumed that he was around seventy-five years old. His medical files stated that he had been in a “pitiful state” when he had first arrived, “emaciated in the extreme and suffering from extreme psychosis”—a not uncommon condition for a Gulag survivor. Eventually,

with care and attention, the traumatized patient was able to tell his carers that his real name was Andras Toma and that he came from a village in eastern Hungary. Six weeks later he was reunited with the brother and sister he had last seen as a nineteen-year-old conscript.[33]

Nor was Andras Toma's case unique. Two years earlier, in 1998, Kenji Maruko, a Japanese prisoner of war, was found living in Siberia and returned to a rapturous welcome in his home country—fifty years after being imprisoned in the Gulag at the end of World War II. Maruko told the press he had forgotten how to speak Japanese. In 1990, Ivan Bushilo, a Byelorussian peasant, reappeared in his village after forty-two years as a hermit hiding in the dense forest. In 1947 he had been called an "enemy of the people" by a local militiaman and Bushilo had fled to live alone for four decades in fear.[34] A Polish prisoner, "Mr. Strajinski," was reported to have died in a psychiatric prison hospital in Raizan, aged eighty-two, having survived fifty-one years of incarceration. Victor Hamilton, a defector from the National Security Agency, was discovered in 1992 at Special Hospital No. Five, near Moscow, where he had been held since 1962 and known only by the letter "K." The Memorial psychiatrists had long experience of treating such "unknown people with unknown identities." It would, of course, take a miracle to discover an aged American serviceman still alive in some remote Russian backwater.[35]

In September 1992, a letter was sent to investigators describing an American encountered in a Russian psychiatric hospital in 1979 who was seen again in 1986. The man went by the name of "Vladimir," spoke fluent English, and claimed to be an American pilot. Stripped of its wider context, the details of this single thread seemed far-fetched. And yet history is full of such improbabilities: the lost human casualties of a great ideological conflict. They were the men who were left behind. According to the American investigation, there were "hundreds like him."[36]

THE WORK OF the Russian-American commission has reached stasis in

its second decade, as the search for witnesses and evidence struggles against time and the priorities of international relations. The last best hope lies within the archives of the former KGB, which may yet provide definitive knowledge for the families of the disappeared, for the men themselves, and for history. According to the American investigators, three quarters of the available archival evidence has yet to be examined, despite the fact that Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin once described each other as friends and allies.[37]

While the KGB archives and Stalin's personal archives remain closed, there is little cause for optimism. In all likelihood, the demands of realpolitik have already prevailed. From the Russian side, a view is likely to have been taken that the release of such information would be too damaging to the reputation of the former Soviet Union and, by extension, the contemporary Russian state. Vladimir Putin remains, after all, a former lieutenant-colonel of the KGB. In the past decade, sage eyes have long recognized the ongoing shifts in the political landscape of Russia—the signals that began with the reinstatement of the former Soviet national anthem and the choice to commemorate the anniversary of Stalin's secret service with a set of postage stamps bearing the portraits of six NKVD agents. The warnings continued with the use of Stalin's portrait in an election campaign for the ruling United Russia Party, and the murder of the FSB defector Alexander Litvinenko in London by the use of the poison polonium-210, allowing his killers sufficient time to return to Moscow, leaving a trail of radioactivity in their wake. The chief suspect of the murder, a former FSB operative, Andrei Lugovoi, was then "elected" to Russia's national parliament.

After two terms of Vladimir Putin's presidency, democracy in Russia exists only as a simulacrum—in the form required to maintain the pretense of its existence. Freedom of the press has long been silenced amid the ebb of murders of those Russian editors and journalists who refused to obey the rules of the new order. In such a political climate, the Russian government can no longer distance itself morally from the consequences of the 1917 Revolution. Nor can there ever be the national equivalent of a "truth and reconciliation commission," since the relapse into state authoritarianism has already taken place.

When the most famous critic of the abuses of the Putin government, Anna Politkovskaya, was casually murdered in the elevator of her apartment building on October 7, 2006, the Russian judiciary blamed the killing on a plot organized from abroad. While such absurd explanations have a historical familiarity, the murder could only be regarded as another repressive signal to silence the voices of dissent. In her book published two years earlier in the West, Politkovskaya had detailed the promotion of six thousand former KGB servicemen into "every conceivable nook and cranny in the power structure" of Russia: *"We dragged ourselves out of the USSR and into 'The New Russia' still infested with our Soviet bedbugs . . . Everyone is convinced that the Soviet Union has returned, and that it no longer matters what we think."* She had then expressed her personal disregard for Vladimir Putin: *"In Russia we have had leaders with this outlook before. It led to tragedy, to bloodshed on a huge scale, to civil wars. I want no more of that. That is why I so dislike this typical Soviet Chekist as he struts down the red carpet in the Kremlin on his way to the throne of Russia."*[38]

None of which character evidence suggests that a Putin-controlled Russian government will ever voluntarily allow one of the Soviet Union's more cynical exploits to see the light of day. Rather, it appears that the cause of the forsaken American servicemen will once again be sacrificed, now just as it was before, on the altar of the American-Russian relationship. While the families of the disappeared will be denied resolution, the fate of the missing American servicemen will be forgotten, and the current U.S. president will remain as silent as his predecessors—unless, of course, sufficient numbers of ordinary people seek justice for the missing.

27

“The Two Russias”

Russia is a Sphinx. Grieving, jubilant,
And covering herself with blood
She looks, she looks, she looks at you—her slant
Eyes lit with hatred and with love.

Alexander Blok, “The Scythians”[1]

In Vladivostok, in Far East Russia—at the turn of this century—one of the last of the Liberty ships, the *Odessa,* sits rusting in harbor. Within weeks of her launch in 1942 from a slipway in Richmond, California, the 139-meter ship was being used by the NKVD to ferry three thousand female prisoners across the Sea of Okhotsk to Magadan. Sixty years later, the gift of American democracy to the Gulag fleet lies waiting to be sold to scrap metal dealers from South Korea—and then the final substantiation of the cruelty inflicted upon the men and women packed below her decks will be lost.[2]

Across the wilderness of Kolyma, the remaining evidence of the camps is gradually disappearing. Within the realm now long abandoned, the wooden watchtowers have slowly fallen to pieces. Only a few remain, as though awaiting the return of a familiar guard to climb the steps and, with the crack of a rifle shot, a cry to come echoing back across the zone. The camps that once swallowed men’s and women’s lives are slowly returning back into the desolate wilderness upon which they were built, their presence in the landscape marked by little more than the abandoned buildings and the rusted barbed wire that stubbornly refuses to yield. The perimeters of the zone that carried a life-and-death distinction have been rendered meaningless again, returned to the arbitrary by the death of an idea.

In the Kolyma summers the pathways and roads leading to the camps emerge briefly from the ice and snow. From the wasteland the entrances to the mines reveal themselves clearly as the evidence of man’s work. Black,

perfectly rectangular holes appear in the sides of the mountains as though to warn of the horror that once lay within the darkness of the galleries. Beyond the broken-down fences, the aftermath of misery is strewn across the landscape: a heavy prison door swung free, a rusted padlock burst open, a pyramid of worn-out leather boots beside the human bones that emerge from the earth that cannot hold them. The human eye is constantly drawn to this debris: to an empty rusted iron bed on which only a guard had slept, or a collapsed barrack where the prisoners endured another night of cold and hunger. In an abandoned guards' building in Butugychag, a map of the world dated July 19, 1952, is pinned to the wall. Next to the map is a photograph of Comrade Stalin. The prison bars of the isolator cell are still strong, although the doors and roof have collapsed. There are watchtowers still standing, with their crude ladders leading upward toward the sky. This is the abandoned archaeology of a forgotten genocide.[3]

The name *Butugychag* means "Death Valley" in the local Yakut language. From the population of fifty thousand at this particular camp, teenage prisoners from West Ukraine were selected to work four-hour shifts. The young men chosen for their "special" task had viewed it with pleasure in comparison to the ordeal of the regular fourteen-hour shifts in the mines. A survivor from Butugychag remembered how the selected groups had lasted just twenty days before they were sent to the treatment zone. At first the Ukrainian boys lost their hair in chunks, and then they started bleeding from their ears and nostrils, the first signs of radiation sickness. They were unaware that they had been drying, stirring, and baking the uraninite from the mine without any safeguards, their youth considered the property of the state.[4]

Only from the air does the taint of Dalstroi's intelligence fully reveal itself. The landscape bears the evidence of the work that sent the men and women to their deaths. During the short weeks of summer the breadth of this terminal point of the Gulag is revealed, and we are left to imagine the numbers required to tear the scars across the land, to build the roads, to build the camps, to puncture the black holes into the sides of mountains in an endless forced pursuit of gold, or silver, or lead, or uranium. The same is true for every other terminal point of the Gulag across the wide space of the

former Soviet Union. Within the archives there is a black-and-white photograph of an abandoned railway line built in the Far North, its sleepers buckled like a roller coaster and covered in arctic moss. The iron rails have long since rusted, useful only as evidence of the human labor that was consumed to lay them. On this forgotten line a train engine stands slowly rusting, another decoration to the futility and anguish and unattenuated cruelty of Stalinism.[5]

MANY OF THE current residents of Kolyma are the children and grandchildren of those who survived the camps. In Magadan, the youngest of the former prisoners live on into old age. Occasionally they meet and help their former guards, who have fallen into destitution. There coexists the uneasy consequence of Anna Akhmatova's "two Russias"—the prisoners and their guards—whose fortunes have often been reversed by time. Very soon they will all be gone.

In the 1980s, the Soviet government began reworking the old mines of Kolyma in response to the rise in world gold prices. According to Wladyslaw Cieslewicz, a Polish mining expert who survived his sentence, the "bodies of the victims, usually preserved in the permafrost, are being caught daily on dragline buckets and bulldozer blades."[6] More than three hundred mass graves have been found thus far in Kolyma, and no one knows how many more remain. Many of the camps were so isolated, and their conditions so severe, that no one survived to remember where the prisoners were buried. But the bodies remain, perfectly preserved by the ice, and the principal evidence of this unpunished genocide lies waiting in the permafrost.[7]

It was a crime that lasted decades and required constant concealment by the state. Throughout the former USSR, the bodies of Stalin's victims had a tendency to reveal themselves with stubborn regularity. In 1979, at Kolpashevo, the twisting river Ob overwhelmed the site of a former NKVD prison in the Tomsk region, four thousand kilometers east of Moscow. From

the shifting riverbank thousands of corpses were released in a torrent into the water.[8] Eight years earlier, in 1971, two Russian journalists on a journey to Dudinka, a Siberian town on the Yenisei River, which led to the Gulag center of Norilsk, recalled meeting an unexpectedly talkative riverboat captain: *"I made dozens of journeys, on the way out the holds were full and on the way back they empty. I've seen people, and I've seen what you'd call non-people."* The island of Dikson lies five hundred kilometers farther north.[9]

Near Minsk, in Byelorussia, workers laying a gas pipeline through a pine forest discovered a mass grave dating from 1937 to 1941. The bodies were still clutching reading glasses, purses, children's toys, medicines, and the host of random, everyday possessions that people take with them when they are seized.[10] The mass graves at Kuropaty Forest were estimated by Memorial to contain 150,000 victims. At Bykovna, outside Kiev, another mass grave was found in which an estimated 200,000 victims of the Terror lay buried.[11] In the Donetsk province, mass graves were discovered in Rutchenko fields containing 40,000 victims. On Golden Mountain, near Chelyabinsk, Memorial discovered a mass grave containing an estimated 300,000 victims. And so it continues, until we are rendered senseless by the numbers.[12]

Here too, in the catalogue of mass graves, is a connection with the American emigration. In 1997, Memorial located the site of a mass grave near Sandarmokh, in Karelia, one of four in the region. At this particular location 9,000 bodies were buried in trenches. The prisoners had been stripped to their underwear and shot on the edge of the pit with their hands and feet tied. The NKVD records revealed that in this particular mass grave were buried Oscar Corgan and at least 140 other Americans, born in Minnesota, Michigan, Washington, and San Francisco, who had arrived in Karelia to work as loggers, truck drivers, and mechanics. Among the victims was a young woman in her early twenties, listed as Helen Hill, born in Minnesota. According to the NKVD file, Helen Hill had been executed for the crime of having *"maintained contacts with relatives in the US. Collected information in favor of Finland's intelligence service. Praised life*

in capitalist countries. Spoke of her intentions to cross the border creating a spirit of emigration in the workers."[13]

Most of the mass graves were concealed beneath freshly planted forests or newly built factories or apartment buildings. Often access to the land of these "special zones" is still controlled by the Russian security services, and thus denied investigation by civic groups such as Memorial. In Moscow—where the crematoria were working overtime—the victims' ashes were often scattered in the bottomless "Grave Number One" of the Donskoi Cemetery. In 1991, a monument was added to this site with the words: HERE LIE BURIED THE REMAINS OF THE INNOCENT TORTURED AND EXECUTED VICTIMS OF THE POLITICAL REPRESSIONS. MAY THEY NEVER BE FORGOTTEN.[14]

THROUGH IT ALL, long after the rise and fall of the statues of Stalin, and Russia's fitful emergence into the post-Soviet era, the embalmed corpse of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin remains in its red marble mausoleum in Red Square. The Russian state archives confirmed Lenin as the initiator of the use of terror by the Soviet state. On August 11, 1918, Lenin wrote to the party leaders in Penza giving instruction on how to deal with the peasants:

Comrades! The revolt by the five kulak volosts must be suppressed without mercy . . . You need to hang (hang without fail, so that the public sees) at least 100 notorious kulaks, the rich and the bloodsuckers . . . Execute the hostages—in accordance with yesterday's telegram. This needs to be accomplished in such a way that people for hundreds of miles around will see, tremble, know and scream out: let's choke and strangle those blood-sucking kulaks. Telegraph us acknowledging receipt and execution of this. Yours Lenin. PS Use your toughest people for this.[15]

Here also was Lenin's order for the "execution by firing squad" of the priests of Shuia, his instruction to Nikolai Krestinsky: "It is necessary secretly—and urgently—to prepare the terror," and his admission in 1920: "We do not hesitate to shoot thousands of people." Was it surprising, therefore, that Lenin, who began the process, gave way to Stalin, who accelerated the disappearance of millions? Stalin methodically and ruthlessly applied the same methods on a larger scale, but the rhetorical statement "*When we are reproached with cruelty, we wonder how people can forget the most elementary Marxism*" was Lenin's own. The consequences of Stalinism were, therefore, neither accident nor a "socialist aberration," as Khrushchev sought to portray. The Terror was a historical continuity within a political system that glorified "Bolshevik ruthlessness" and denigrated the value of human life. In such a society, genocide was never a contingent aspect of this process. It was simply the casuistry of violence, the grim logic of an extermination process judged necessary to maintain absolute power. [16]

There have been bitter quarrels between the historians of Stalinism over the count of the dead. Scholars who rely on the official records from the Russian state archives arrive at counts in the single-figure millions. Those whose investigative evidence grants more credence to the insight of the survivors move substantially past ten million, toward twenty million victims. The truth is that no one can be sure. History was always propaganda for the Bolshevik state, and to place too much faith in the purely statistical evidence of the archives creates a modern danger of falling victim to a Potemkin village built from paper. It is to read the cause of death of "alimentary dystrophy," without recourse to an accompanying vision of a human being worked and starved into a skeletal form—every bone in his body protruding, his teeth gone, his knees forming the thickest part of his leg, collapsing in the snow to die. It is to fall victim to the most insidious form of denial: that such a death is not murder.[17]

Estimates for the total population of the Gulag run as high as thirty million over its life span. The Soviet nuclear scientist turned dissident Andrei Sakharov estimated that between fifteen and twenty million people perished as victims of the Stalin era. Anastas Mikoyan, the Politburo

survivor, wrote of a figure given to Khrushchev by the KGB that between January 1, 1935, and June 22, 1941, there were approximately twenty million arrests and eight million deaths.[18] Olga Shatunovskaya, a member of a 1960 commission to investigate the death of Kirov, and herself a former camp prisoner, stated that as part of that commission she had seen a KGB report giving the figure of 19,840,000 people "repressed" between 1935 and 1941, of whom seven million were shot. The percentage of the "repressed" who subsequently died in the camps can only be guessed at.[19]

SHUFFLING AROUND THE pathways of his dacha settlement in Zhukovka, Moscow, his slab face lined by old age, Vyacheslav Molotov lived on undisturbed into the Gorbachev era. Stalin's functionary-in-chief, who signed the death lists and arranged Soviet foreign policy with Hitler and then Roosevelt, now tapped his walking stick on the path to market to buy cabbages, checking first that he had not left the lights burning in his dacha.[20] In retirement, the elderly Molotov was visited and interviewed by the Marxist historian Felix Chuev. In one of these discussions, Molotov revealed to Chuev that during the May Day celebration of 1953, Beria had whispered to him, "I did him!" as they stood next to each other on Lenin's mausoleum. "I saved all of you!" Molotov took these words to mean that Beria was responsible for Stalin's death.[21] The former premier did not believe that Stalin died a natural death: "He wasn't seriously ill. He was working steadily . . . And he remained very spry."[22] Later Molotov confessed that even as a very old man, Joseph Stalin regularly visited him in his dreams. He would find himself lost in a destroyed city, unable to find his way out, and then Stalin would appear before him to lead the way. [23]

Vyacheslav Molotov lived until the age of ninety-six, eventually dying on November 8, 1986. He was survived by his colleague in the administration of the Terror, Lazar Kaganovich, who lived until the age of ninety-seven, dying on July 25, 1991. It was just long enough for Kaganovich to watch

the collapse of the Soviet Union unfold on his color television. “It’s a catastrophe” were the last words his maid heard him say.[24]

If they survived the Terror, most of those who signed the lists lived on into retirement untouched. Some of the former NKVD executioners suffered psychological breakdowns, perhaps a self-inflicted form of retribution. In 1982, the writer Yuri Druzhinikov interviewed Spirodon Kartashov, a seventy-nine-year-old former member of the Special Department of the Tavda District of the Ural OGPU. The aged Kartashov was living in conditions that “resembled a flophouse” but was nevertheless willing to talk openly about the methods he had once employed:

I figure, that thirty-seven people were shot dead by me personally, and I sent even more to the camps. I can kill people so that the shot won’t be heard . . . The secret’s this: I make them open their mouth and I shoot down their throat. I’d only be splashed by warm blood, like eau-de-cologne, and it doesn’t make a sound. That I can do—kill. If I didn’t have seizures, I wouldn’t have taken my pension so soon. I had seizures even before the war, but I didn’t pay them any mind. And then during the war I went into the hospital.

In his medical records, Druzhnikov discovered that Kartashov was suffering from “epilepsy aggravated by nervous exhaustion.” He was treated in a psychiatric hospital, where the doctors listened to his confessions about how he “ran the children through with a bayonet and trampled them on a horse.”[25]

DURING THE EARLY period of the Stalinist Terror, Bolshevik intellectuals spoke darkly of the violence of the French Revolution, not yet realizing their own Thermidor would be far worse. In the mid-nineteenth century the Russian writer Alexander Hertzen wrote of his fear of “Gengis Khan with a telegraph,” never suspecting that Stalin would belittle his premonition. In 1923, Vladimir Zazubrin wrote a novella called *The Chip* in

which he described how

future "enlightened" human societies will rid themselves of their superfluous or criminal members by means of gas chambers, various acids, electricity or deadly bacteria. Then there will be no cellars and no "bloodthirsty" Chekists. Learned scholars with learned expression on their faces will quite calmly put live people into huge retorts and test tubes, and with all kinds of chemical compounds and reactions and distillations imaginable will turn them into shoe polish, vaseline, and lubricating oil.

For such dystopic speculations, Zazubrin was himself executed in the Terror of 1938.[26]

Now we may wait in turn for "Stalin with a retinal eye scanner" and peer darkly down avenues of our own destruction. Perhaps our historical awareness will protect us from the creation of future tragedies of an electronic age to rival those of our recent past, and fend off our capacity to believe in a delusion. In Moscow during the 1990s, a historical exhibition was presented by the Russian state archives. An old man peered over an original copy of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact very intently before announcing: "I heard about this, but I never believed it." He then fainted over the cabinet and shattered the glass.[27]

The defining feature of the history of the Soviet Union, beyond which all else pales into insignificance, was the murder of millions of innocent citizens by the state. The Revolution began a process of imprisonment and killing that continued in virtually every country in which it was attempted. For while culturally distinct, the social experiment always reached a similar conclusion over the fate of those the regime had judged to be its "enemies." The "Killing Fields" of Cambodia were not a "socialist abherration" of Pol Pot so much as the Stalinist principle applied to one third of the population. The Cambodia of the 1970s was not an anomaly. It was repetition. Even in 2008, the "corrective labor camps" still exist in North Korea and China. And yet the world shuts its eyes and looks away.

We know that mankind has always been capable of demonizing our fellow man. But where this cruelty comes from, this ability to kill en masse, defies explanation. The true nature of our humanity is a recurring argument, and one that occupied the minds of the greatest thinkers of the Enlightenment. In 1793, the philosopher Immanuel Kant reflected: *"It will be noted that the propensity to evil is here established (as regards actions) in the human being, even the best; and so it also must be if it is to be proved that the propensity to evil among human beings is universal, or, which amounts here to the same thing, that it is woven into human nature."* [28] Beneath the veneer of our civilization lies the warning of Immanuel Kant.

28

Thomas Sgovio Redux

My days have raced past like the sloping
run of deer. The time of happiness was briefer
than the flicker of an eyelash. Out of one final effort
I squeezed only a handful of the ashes of delight.

Osip Mandelstam, "My Days Have Raced Past"[1]

After his return to America, Thomas Sgovio settled in Buffalo, the city in which he was born and raised. There he worked as a draftsman, lived a happily married life, and raised a family. In Buffalo he visited the Volat family to deliver the news that Marvin Volat had died in a camp in Kolyma. At the time, the family refused to believe him, and clung to the hope that Marvin might still be alive in Russia.[2]

During the day Thomas worked to support his family, but at night he labored on his memoir, *Dear America*, which was published in a very small print run and soon fell out of print. Undeterred, he gave lectures on his experience at the University of Buffalo, and used his artistic talent to draw illustrations of the scenes he had witnessed in Kolyma, which he donated to the Hoover Institution in Stanford, California. And in this way, he kept the promise he had made to the prisoners in the camps. He let the world know of the suffering that had been inflicted upon them.[3]

Eventually Thomas Sgovio retired, settling to live quietly in a suburb of Phoenix, Arizona. There he grew old under the desert sun, as far from the climate he had escaped as it was possible to find. In Phoenix he lived a normal life, one of the last survivors of a forgotten emigration, his gray hair and worn body hiding the glinting miracle of his life—the most extraordinary history walking anonymously down a Phoenix sidewalk. His return defied every expectation.

In his retirement, Thomas was interviewed every once in a while by a local journalist or a documentary filmmaker who had learned of his existence through the Hoover Institution. Then the old man would come alive with a passionate advocacy that belied his years. As he spoke in a frantic rasp, his eyes would fill with tears and his lips stumble over his words in a struggle to articulate his experience, and a continued effort to justify the sacrifices of others who had kept him alive.[4] Most dearly of all, Thomas wanted a younger generation to understand the terrible events that had taken place in Kolyma and across the Soviet Union. Although each explanation reawakened his trauma and caused him such obvious anguish, he willingly accepted his role as a historical witness of the Terror until the moment of his death. In fulfilling his perceived duty, this quiet American showed once again the evidence of the courage that had kept him alive.

In 1996, Thomas celebrated his eightieth birthday, an old age he had never expected to reach. His face was wrinkled, but his brown eyes still shone with the passion of a twenty-year-old baseball player. In 1995, he asked Chuck Hawley, a local journalist, *"Is that why God spared me ? To come back fifty years later and tell the story? I don't know . . . We always said, if any of us survived, we would tell the world about Kolyma . . . I have kept my promise."* Having kept his promise, he was at peace.[5]

Fate, however, had one final hand to play. That year, Thomas Sgovio was shown a copy of his NKVD file, recently released by the Yeltsin government. On page eighty, he learned the details of how Lucy Flaxman had informed on him. The file revealed that she had reported his comment that "Soviet power does not rest on the love of its subjects. It rests on fear." Lucy had also passed on the information that Thomas was waiting for a war between the USSR and the United States because if America won, he might be free. In 1948, she added that she had seen a copy of *The Saturday Evening Post*, an "anti-Soviet" magazine, in his apartment.[6] Sitting back in his armchair with the file, Thomas remarked to the journalist Alan Cullinson, who was interviewing him over the telephone: "She was not a very courageous person. It was a frightening time for everyone."[7]

At least there were happier times to remember. Sitting in the living room of his home in Phoenix, Thomas Sgovio could recall the American baseball

teams of Gorky Park. And if only for a moment in a daydream, his old legs returned to their youthful state, running around the bases on a summer afternoon.

The following year, on July 3, 1997, Thomas Sgovio died.

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NOTES

1 . THE JOADS OF RUSSIA

1 Photo from the collection of Thomas Sgovio, courtesy of Joanne Sgovio, published in article by Alan Cullinson, “A Secret Revealed: Stalin’s Police Killed Americans,” Associated Press, Nov. 23, 1997.

2 *New York Times,* Nov. 17, 1931; quoted in “American Jobless Begin National March to Washington,” *Moscow News,* Dec. 8, 1931.

3 *United News,* vol. 2, Reel 86; vol. 7, Reel 332; vol. 8, Reel 480, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland; Frank Tannenbaum, “The Prospect of Violent Revolution in the United States,” *Scribner’s Magazine,* May 1931.

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22 Nikita Khrushchev, *The "Secret" Speech: Delivered to the Closed Session of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1976), 44.

23 Medvedev, *Let History Judge, 296.* On the semantics of *genocide:* For all their similarities, the great historical crimes are also unique. There appears to have been a policy of eradication of segments of ethnic groups within the USSR that were seen as providing a source of opposition to the regime—the Ukrainians, Poles, Byelorussians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Germans, and so on—which was one part of the crimes of "Stalinism" that one could say was genocidal. Since the Americans were a tiny element of this antiforeigner assault, were the individual actions directed against them part of this overall genocide? I would argue that, yes, this was the case. The Gulag camps certainly had a utilitarian motive for their existence. But an essential part of their utility was also the eradication and execution of the various opponents of the regime. There was little expectation of survival in many of the worst camp centers. The prisoners' extinction was therefore also an end in itself. And if that is the case, then what took place within the camps was genocidal, if we perceive the intent as the eradication of life. Although one must be careful with language and use the word *genocide* with care. When the count of the victims enters the millions, then it appears justified and necessary.

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Hill “might be deported to the United States.” In response, the American embassy advised the Soviet Foreign Office that “Hill would be required to appear at the Embassy to execute the necessary application for the renewal of his passport,” and then nothing more was heard. Ten months later, on January 10, 1938, the American embassy officials were advised by the Soviet authorities that “Hill had died in Karelia during the summer of 1937.” The following year, the Soviet Foreign Office sent the Americans a copy of William Hill’s death certificate, which gave the date of death as July 11, 1936, and the cause of death “haemorrage in cerebrum (murder).” The circumstances of William Hill’s death and the Soviet request for the renewal of his passport eight months after his death raised the “grave suspicions” of the American diplomats: “*The possibility that Hill was killed by a GPU agent either in resisting arrest or later while under detention is not to be dismissed.*” “The Murder of William Hill, American Citizen,” July 28, 1939, 361.113 William, Hill RG 59, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

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3 Descriptions of Kolyma based upon footage from George Kovach (dir.), *The Camps of Magadan*, documentary film, 1990, Hoover Institute, Stanford, Calif., and rushes courtesy of David Elkind, LiveWire Media, San Francisco.

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RGASPI: Russian State Archive of Sociopolitical History, Moscow

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Tim Tzouliadis is a writer and filmmaker. Born in 1968, he read philosophy, politics, and economics at Oxford and went on to pursue a career in television current affairs and documentary making for the BBC, Channel 4, NBC, and the National Geographic Channel.