

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: CULTURE AND DIPLOMACY:
MARJORIE MERRIWEATHER POST AND
SOVIET-AMERICAN RELATIONS, 1933-
1939

Lindsay T. Inge, Master of Arts, 2016

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Marjorie Merriweather Post is best known for her Russian art collection (the largest collection of its kind outside of Russia), showcased at Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens. This thesis examines Post's role as the first "ambadress" to the Soviet Union, during which time she began her interest in collecting Russian art. I argue that Post's role as ambadress was not purely ceremonial, and was instead essential to her husband's, Joseph Davies's, diplomatic mission. I also argue that Post's collecting habits reveal not only details about the Soviet art trade and its role in Soviet-American cultural diplomacy, but also speak to the United States' ambivalent attitude towards the Soviet Union in the 1930s: while embracing artifacts of Russian and Orthodox culture, Post essentially ignored the destructive Soviet policies that made these artifacts available for purchase.

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by

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Introduction

In March of 1937, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt responded to a letter from Marjorie Merriweather Post recording Post's observations of Moscow: "From what I have heard, I feel just as you express it, that the Russian experiment was so colossal that it would discourage one to even think of what needed to be done, but I suppose somebody must begin and no matter how great the magnitude of the piece of work, the only way to carry it through is to do little bits at a time. I am glad you are finding it interesting."¹

"Interesting" was something of an understatement. Post was in Moscow at a time of tremendous social and political upheaval. She arrived in the Soviet capital in January of 1937, in the midst of the purges of the Stalinist Terror. Post's reason for being in Moscow was also "interesting." Her husband, Joseph Davies, was the second United States Ambassador to the Soviet Union. The previous ambassador, William Bullitt, was single at the time of his appointment, making Post the first ever American "ambassadress" to the Soviet Union. United States and Soviet diplomatic relations were still in their infancy, having only been established in 1933. It was therefore a period of great uncertainty for the two nations: would their relationship be one of mutual respect and peace? Or one of antagonism?

Post's own background also contributed to her unique experience in Moscow. She was the fabulously wealthy heiress to the Postum Cereal Company (later renamed General Foods). Her celebrated parties at estates in New York, Palm Beach, and Washington D.C. marked her as one of the nation's social elites. In addition to her role as the first female board member of her father's company, she also devoted considerable time and resources to philanthropic work, both locally

¹ Eleanor Roosevelt to Marjorie Merriweather Post, March 29, 1937, Box 24, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

and abroad. Post's real passion, though was collecting: prior to her time in Moscow, her primary focus was on French furniture and decorative arts. While in Russia, she discovered Russian imperial-era art and Orthodox art. This discovery led her on a journey of collecting that would ultimately result in the largest Russian art collection outside of Russia. That collection, now on display at Hillwood, Post's former Washington, D.C. estate, contains Faberge eggs, crowns, rare books, and Orthodox icons.

This thesis argues two points: First, Post's role as ambassadress was not purely ceremonial, and was instead essential to Davies's diplomatic mission. Traditional political histories tend to ignore the social activities carried out by politicians' wives; events like informal teas or even formal Embassy-sponsored dinners are typically viewed as superficial and separate from the real meat of the diplomatic mission. Diplomacy viewed through a cultural lens, in contrast, places emphasis on these social and informal spaces.² According to historian Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, the term "cultural diplomacy" grew out of studies on Soviet-American relations in the Cold War, so it seems appropriate to apply that lens to Post's case.³ Because Davies believed that his primary role as ambassador was to maintain positive relationships with the Soviet government, he came to value personal friendships and exchanges over policy debates and diplomatic agreements.⁴ In this context, Post's social activities (including her personal relationships as well as the formal events she organized in Moscow), take on a new significance. Through her social and cultural activities, Post played a vital role in Davies's mission to foster cordial relations with the Soviets following the tense years of his predecessor's tenure. I take the view that Post's extensive experience

² Cultural diplomacy can focus on material objects (art, visual culture such as posters, and exhibitions), events (such as social gatherings or performances), and even the abstract exchange of ideas (including propaganda and political messaging). In this thesis, I use "cultural diplomacy" in its broadest sense, and seek to draw on all three facets of the term to demonstrate the importance of Post's unofficial role in American diplomacy to the Soviet Union.

³ Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried, ed., *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 3.

⁴ Joseph Davies, *Mission to Moscow*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1941), 6.

managing multiple estates and her experience mixing in elite social networks (which included business and political elites from across the United States) constitute real, valuable skills that Davies tapped into to fulfill his role as ambassador.

Second, this thesis will also examine the collecting Post did while stationed in Moscow. I argue that Post's collecting habits reveal not only details about the Soviet art trade and its role in Soviet-American cultural diplomacy, but also speak to the United States' ambivalent attitude towards the Soviet Union in the 1930s: while embracing artifacts of Russian and Orthodox culture, Post essentially ignored the destructive Soviet policies that made these artifacts available for purchase. Just as Roosevelt's administration chose to turn a blind eye toward the Stalinist purges (despite extensive reporting by members of the Foreign Service), Post chose to purchase cultural objects that she knew had been seized from the Orthodox Church and private Russian citizens.⁵ Even though both the purges and the Soviet seizure of cultural artifacts flew in the face of the ideals of American democracy, the American government and its representatives chose to ignore those policies in order to maintain positive relations with the Soviet Union. Post, Davies, and Roosevelt all explained this apparent conflict of interest by arguing that the growing danger of fascism in Europe made it essential for the United States to maintain positive relations with the Soviet Union at any cost.⁶ This thesis hopes to demonstrate that cultural exchanges, such as Post's collecting, can supplement the traditional sources for political history to provide a more complete picture of American-Soviet relations in the 1930s.

In this introduction, I will first provide some biographical details for Post, followed by a few notes on the secondary literature and primary sources examined in this thesis. Chapter 1 seeks to provide context for the second two chapters by examining the state of the Soviet art trade and

⁵ David Mayers, *The Ambassadors and America's Soviet Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 119.

⁶ Elizabeth MacLean, *Joseph E. Davies: Envoy to the Soviets* (London: Praeger, 1992), 23.

Soviet-American relations from 1917 through 1936, when Davies was appointed ambassador. It also seeks to demonstrate that, despite the fact that the United States did not have official diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union until 1933, the two nations did engage in cultural exchanges. These exchanges demonstrate that the Soviet Union was far from isolationist in the 1920s and 1930s, and that culture is an important supplement to traditional political histories. Chapter 2 focuses on Post's role as ambassadress, examining how she prepared for the position, who she socialized with and developed friendships with in Moscow, and how she fostered positive Soviet-American diplomatic relations through the formal dinners she organized for the Embassy. Finally, Chapter 3 looks at Post's collecting while in the Soviet Union. It considers both what she collected as well as what she knew about the origins of the objects she purchased. The chapter compares Post's approach to collecting with Davies's approach to the Stalinist purges, demonstrating that both were informed by a desire to maintain cordial relations with the Soviets, and an understanding that Soviet law (even when it violated American legal standards) took precedence. The conclusion will address Post's legacy as a collector, and will suggest avenues for further research.

Who Was Marjorie Merriweather Post?

Accounts of Post's life tend to focus on the carefully cultivated image she projected to the press in her later years: that of an elegant, aristocratic, fabulously wealthy patroness and collector. And indeed, Post did lead a lifestyle that would be considered lavish by any standard: she spent enormous sums on the latest fashions and beauty routines, owned collections of European, Russian, and Asian art, and maintained multiple estates across the east coast, including Hillwood Estate in Washington, D.C.

Born in Illinois in 1887, Post's early years were spent mostly in the Midwest, although her family took frequent trips to sanitariums across the nation in attempts to find treatment and better climates for her chronically ill father. The most significant trip, both for Post's father's (known as C.W.) own health and the family's future fortunes, was to the Battle Creek, Michigan sanitarium run by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg (his brother--and business partner--W.K. Kellogg assisted in the administration of the sanitarium). At the time of their arrival in Battle Creek, C.W. was weak and dangerously ill, and it looked as if he might not live much longer. The family's finances were similarly in decline: C.W., his siblings, and his parents were joint partners in the Illinois Agricultural works, Inc., which despite early success, had been liquidated by 1887.⁷

While in Battle Creek, C.W. and his wife Ella became involved in the Christian Science movement, which they credited with improving C.W.'s health, rather than the care of Dr. Kellogg. Although C.W. doubted the efficacy of Kellogg's treatments, he was intrigued by the breakfast cereals Kellogg served to his patients. Inspired, C.W. began to develop his own line of cereals and coffee, which would eventually become the Postum Cereal Company. There is still debate over the extent to which C.W. and the Kellogg Brothers "borrowed" ideas from each other. Regardless, by the late 1890s, the Postum Cereal Company had taken off, drastically improving the family's financial standing.⁸ The family eventually moved out of their farmhouse and into an "elegant rented home," complete with servants.⁹ Post's simple Midwestern life had ended before she had even turned sixteen.

Post was tremendously close with her father, and grew up learning about the family business at his side. She frequently traveled with him on business trips, and eventually served in a

⁷ Nancy Rubin, *American Empress* (New York: Villard Books, 1995), 9.

⁸ *Ibid*, 32.

⁹*Ibid*, 40.

dual role as both mini-assistant and hostess (her parents' marriage, never strong, had deteriorated to the point that her mother now took to traveling to avoid her husband; by 1904, they had divorced, and C.W. wed his (significantly younger) secretary).¹⁰ C.W. outfitted his daughter in the latest fashions, and sent her to the prestigious Mount Vernon Seminary in Washington, D.C. to continue both her academic and social education.

Her father was also responsible for nurturing her early interest in collecting. Under her father's tutelage, Post began collecting French decorative art and furniture as a teenager in the 1910s. Her role as a wealthy socialite with homes in New York, Washington D.C., and Palm Beach meant that she was the subject of headlines plastered on the front pages of newspapers across the east coast. While her spending and legendary parties often made headlines, Post was equally notable for her philanthropic acts. After volunteering for the Red Cross during World War I, Post decided to donate funds to establish a Red Cross hospital in France for the US military, which "grew to some three thousand beds and became the largest such Red Cross Institution in wartime Europe."¹¹ Following the stock market crash in 1929, she established the Marjorie Post Hutton Canteen in New York City, a meal center for people affected by the crash.¹²

Despite her love for beautiful things--fashion, art, decor--Post was far from the empty headed socialite the press sometimes portrayed her as. She had inherited her father's shrewd head for business. With the support of her second husband, E.F. Hutton, the two transformed the Postum Cereal Company into an even more lucrative business. In 1923 Hutton was appointed chairman of the Postum Cereal Company Board;¹³ Post was not a member of the board, but as the largest

¹⁰ Ibid, 62.

¹¹ Ibid, 100-101.

¹² Ibid, 178.

¹³ Ibid, 131.

stockholder in the company she still had tremendous influence on the company.¹⁴ Over the course of the 1920s, the Postum Company expanded to include Jell-O, Walter Baker & Company, the Log Cabin Products Company, Richard Hellman, Inc., the Sanka Coffee Corporation, Maxwell House.¹⁵ Post was instrumental in convincing Postum to purchase Birdseye (still considered experimental with its focus on frozen foods), a move that netted the company huge profits and ultimately led to its name change to the General Foods Company.¹⁶ Post's role in this decision, combined with other behind-the-scenes contributions she'd been making since she was a teenager, ultimately won her a seat on the Board of Directors in 1936.¹⁷ She was one of the first women to serve on the board of a major US company.¹⁸ It is worth noting that Post's position, while certainly due in part to her relationship to the founder of the company, was only formalized once she proved herself through savvy business deals. Post had to petition repeatedly for a spot on the board before finally being admitted on the strength of her business acumen.¹⁹

By the time Post met Joseph Davies in early 1935, she was an accomplished businesswoman in her own right. She owned multiple estates up and down the east coast, and was responsible for managing these households remotely (a gargantuan task considering the size of each estate and the attendant staff required for each).²⁰ Her philanthropic endeavors and social gatherings had made her a legend in high society. Post's personal life, however, was not as happy as her public image suggested. A mother of three children ranging in ages from 27 to 12, Post had

¹⁴ Ibid, 135.

¹⁵ Ibid, 136-137.

¹⁶ Ibid, 144.

¹⁷ Ibid, 215.

¹⁸ The very first, Lettie Pate Whitehead, had only begun serving on the board of directors of the Coca-Cola Company a few years earlier in 1934.

¹⁹ Rubin, *American Empress*, 215.

²⁰ For a discussion of Post's estates, see Rubin, *American Empress* (1995) and more recently, Estella M. Chung, *Living Artfully: At Home with Marjorie Merriweather Post* (Washington, D.C.: Hillwood Museums and Gardens Foundation, in association with D. Giles Limited, 2013).

already divorced her first husband, Edward Close, and was on the verge of divorcing her second husband, Edward Hutton, thanks to his affairs. It was at this point that she encountered Joseph Davies while in Palm Beach. Davies was nearly 10 years her senior, and was married with 3 children himself. He was a successful lawyer with close ties to high profile figures, not least of whom was President Roosevelt himself. After a brief courtship (begun while both were still married to their previous spouses), the two had decided to divorce their spouses and marry each other. On December 15, 1935 the couple married in Post's New York City apartment in an intimate (though predictably lavish) ceremony. Their relationship caused a huge scandal, especially in Washington, where Davies's first wife was well-liked and respected. The controversy of their marriage was soon replaced with news that Davies's would take up the post of Ambassador to the Soviet Union, an announcement that generated dozens of headlines (which Post meticulously clipped and pasted into the couples' joint scrapbook, which the couple began maintaining shortly after their wedding in 1935).

This thesis will primarily address Post's life from 1936 through 1938, the period of Joseph Davies's appointment as ambassador to the Soviet Union through the end of his tenure. After her time as ambassadress, Post returned to the United States. She divorced Davies in 1955, remarried (and divorced) once more, and returned to her maiden name.²¹ Following her tenure as ambassadress, Post continued collecting and engaging in philanthropic endeavors. Her family papers at the Bentley Historic Library at the University of Michigan reveal that Post continued to correspond with prominent political figures throughout her life, including the Roosevelts and

²¹ In this paper, I will refer to her as "Marjorie Merriweather Post," although many of the primary sources will refer to her by her married name Davies. This is in keeping with other publications on Post following her return to her maiden name.

Kennedys.²² Although she lived in Washington, D.C. for much of the year and participated in charitable functions with local political and social elites, she largely abandoned the political sphere following her divorce from Davies.

Upon her death in 1973, Post bequeathed Hillwood and her extensive collections to the Smithsonian Institution. While this partnership ultimately fell through, Post's estate still became a museum, now called Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens. There visitors can view Post's collection of European and Russian art, which includes porcelain, rare books, furniture, sculpture, and more. Also on display are photographs of Post and her famous friends, including Presidents, First Ladies, and celebrities. The museum's recent tagline, *Where Fabulous Lives*, invites visitors to bask in the opulence and beauty of Post's estate.²³

But Post was more than her wardrobe, more than her perfectly manicured gardens, more, even, than her collections. Post was a businesswoman in a time when that was still a rarity. As first ambassadress to the Soviet Union, she tackled an extremely challenging role and applied her business skills and social connections to fostering positive Soviet-American relations. While the pieces of her collection on display are polished and shining, Post first found those objects by sifting through dusty boxes in cold, dimly lit storerooms in Moscow and Leningrad.

Post's collection wasn't the only thing she curated; she was heavily invested in shaping her public image and her family's legacy. For instance, Post commissioned researchers Marieli G. Benziger and Nettie Major to conduct research and publish monographs on her father.²⁴ Post's interest in her family's lineage was so strong that she also arranged for a professional genealogist,

²² Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. Post's correspondence is arranged by last initial of her correspondent; for instance, letters from the Roosevelts can be found in Box 24, Alphabetical File R. Correspondence with the Kennedy family can be found in Box 19, Alphabetical File K.

²³ Visitors to www.hillwoodmuseum.org can get a taste for Post's collection and estate, as well as the narrative put forth by the museum.

²⁴ For Benziger's contribution, see Hillwood Archives, Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens. For Major's, see Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan

John Frazer, Jr., to establish her connection to Russian royalty. A letter from Frazer to Major indicates that he compiled a “record of Mrs. May’s [at the time, Post was married to Herbert May, her fifth husband] descent from several of the Grand Dukes of Kiev, assuming that the Lathrop line back to John and Elizabeth (Abell) Lathrop is correct.”²⁵ An outline of that genealogy was also included in Post’s papers at the Bentley Historical Library; Frazer managed to trace Post’s lineage all the way back to Vladimir, a Grand Duke of Kiev in the eleventh century.²⁶ Post’s collecting (and her decision to leave her collections to a museum) seem to stem from this same desire to immortalize her family’s history. Post certainly wanted to present a very specific image, for both herself and her family. This thesis seeks to go beyond Post’s curated life.

Notes on Secondary Literature

This thesis engages with literature on American-Soviet relations during the 1930s, and on Soviet sales of nationalized cultural objects. Most studies treat these two bodies of literature separately; I hope that examining them in conjunction here will demonstrate the importance of cultural diplomacy in American-Soviet relations before World War II.

The Soviet art trade prior to World War II is relatively understudied. There is a large body of literature on the theft of cultural artifacts in times of war and regime changes, but it largely focuses on European nations and their colonial holdings.²⁷ The bulk of the research on the twentieth century focuses on Nazi thefts of Jewish art; in the Russian context, most research

²⁵ John Frazer, Jr., to Nettie Major, May 24, 1962, Box 19, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

²⁶ “Outline of Paternal Descent of Marjorie Merriweather Post May from Grand Dukes of Kiev,” Box 19, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

²⁷ For example, see Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750-1850* (New York: Knopf, 2005); Phyllis Mauch Messenger, *The Ethics of Collecting Cultural Property: Whose Culture? Whose Property?* (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 1989); Robin Frances Rhodes, *The Acquisition and Exhibition of Classical Antiquities: Professional, Legal, and Ethical Perspectives* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

focuses on World War II-era “war trophies” seized from Germans.²⁸ The seizure of Russian aristocratic collections and estates, and subsequent efforts towards repatriation, has not received the same attention. I think there are several factors at play here. First, many of the victims of Soviet nationalization fled Russia with little more than the clothes on their backs. They had to establish lives for themselves in Europe or even further afield in the United States or Canada. What savings they had went towards subsistence, rather than towards legal fees to petition for the return of their property. And among the émigrés who did pursue legal action, their failed attempts likely discouraged others who may have joined the legal fight.²⁹ Without émigrés applying steady legal and political pressure, their cause went largely under studied. Additionally, the west’s alliance with the Soviet Union leading up to World War II also provided an incentive to ignore these issues and to focus instead on Nazi crimes.

Recent years have seen an increase in studies on the Soviet art market, though few are monograph length. Robert C. Williams’s landmark study *Russian Art and American Money*, published in 1980, still serves as the foundational text on the subject. In this study, Williams identifies three motives for the Soviet sale of nationalized art: economic gain, an ideological attack on bourgeois culture, and “the Soviet desire to use art as a political weapon of foreign policy.”³⁰ Subsequent authors writing on this topic have supported Williams’s list of motives (though there is some debate about which factor was most important).³¹ For the purposes of this thesis,

²⁸ For an overview, see Lynn H. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe’s Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994). For works focusing on the Soviet context, see for example Konstantin Akinsha, Grigorii Kozlov, Sylvia Hochfield, and Mazal Holocaust Collection, *Stolen Treasure: The Hunt for the World’s Lost Masterpieces* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995).

²⁹ Waltraud Bayer, “Soviet Art Sales to Europe, 1919-1936,” *Canadian American Slavic Studies* vol. 43 (2009): 213

³⁰ Robert C. Williams, *Russian Art and American Money*, 9.

³¹ For example, the collected essays in Anne Odom and Wendy R. Salmond, ed, *Treasures into Tractors: The Selling of Russia’s Cultural Heritage, 1918-1938* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009) focus on the financial motivations behind the sales, whereas Sean McMeekin, *History’s Greatest Heist: The Looting of Russia by the Bolsheviks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) puts emphasis on ideological motivations.

Williams's view of art as a tool for foreign policy is especially intriguing; it suggests that art, held symbolic as well as material value in cultural diplomacy.

Much of the literature on the subject of Soviet art sales has been published by the Hillwood Museum, written by curators specializing in Post's collection. As a result, the focus has been on Post's collecting, and relatively little attention has been paid to other American collectors whose experiences were quite different from Post's.³² In Russian-language scholarship, the focus has been on the Hermitage's role in nationalization and the art sales. While article-length studies on rural museums and church property exist, the focus has largely been on urban centers.³³

In literature relating to American foreign policy and American-Soviet relations in the 1930s, Joseph Davies emerges as a controversial figure. State Department officials who had trained in Russian language and extensively studied Soviet politics (including George Kennan, who went on to serve as United States Ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1952) were extremely critical of Roosevelt's decision to appoint Davies as ambassador.³⁴ After all, Davies had not carefully studied the Soviet situation and was, they believed, far too optimistic (perhaps even naive?) about the possibility of truly cordial relations between the two countries.³⁵ These critics--including George Kennan, who may have been the most vocal--set the tone for Cold War scholarship on Davies's

³² For example, see Anne Odom and Liana Paredes Arend, *A Taste for Splendor* (Alexandria: Art Service International, 1998); Wendy R. Salmond, *Russian Icons at Hillwood* (Washington, D.C.: Hillwood Museum and Gardens, 1998); Anne Odom, *Russian Imperial Porcelain at Hillwood* (Washington, D.C.: Hillwood Museum and Gardens, 1999); Karen Kettering, *Russian Glass at Hillwood* (Washington, D.C.: Hillwood Museum & Gardens, 2001); Estella M. Chung, *Living Artfully: At Home with Marjorie Merriweather Post* (Washington, D.C.: Hillwood Museums and Gardens Foundation, in association with D. Giles Limited, 2013).

³³ For the Hermitage's role in the Soviet art sales, see N.M. Serapina, *ЭРМИТАЖ, который мы потеряли: Документы 1920-1930 годов* (Sankt Peterburg: Zhurnal Neva, 2002); Elena Solomakha, "The Hermitage, Gosmuzeifond, and Antikvariat" *Canadian American Slavic Studies* Vol. 43, Nos. 1-4 (2009); Geraldine Norman, *The Hermitage: The Biography of a Great Museum* (New York: Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1998); Rifat Gafifullin, "Sales of Works of Art from the Leningrad Palace-Museums, 1926-1934," *Canadian American Slavic Studies* Vol. 43, Nos. 1-4 (2009). For an example of an examination of museums outside of St. Petersburg, see Susan N. Smith, "The Accidental Museum: Expropriating and Appropriating the Past." *The Russian Review*, Vol. 67 (2008).

³⁴ James Dunn, *Between Roosevelt and Stalin* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 68.

³⁵ MacLean, *Joseph E. Davies*, 24.

tenure as ambassador. State Department officials and historians alike painted Davies as either hopelessly bumbling and naive, or downright blatantly supportive of Stalinism.³⁶ It was not until nearly the end of the Cold War that Davies's role as ambassador began to be reassessed. In her 1992 biography of Davies, Elizabeth MacLean sought to situate his appointment and performance in Moscow in the context of Roosevelt's own attitude towards the Soviet Union. In her introduction, MacLean notes the partisan nature of early critical accounts of Davies, and observes that the end of the Cold War saw a rise in accounts that were "less extreme and more objective."³⁷ MacLean argues that she also adopts this approach, seeking to provide a "comprehensive analysis of Davies' diplomatic role" and a "multidimensional image" of Davies that goes beyond the stereotypical treatment he previously received.³⁸ This thesis adopts MacLean's approach, considering Davies's actions as ambassador in the context of his charge from Roosevelt.

For biographical information on Post, I have drawn primarily on Nancy Rubin's 1995 biography, *American Empress: The Life and Times of Marjorie Merriweather Post*. Rubin's is the definitive biography on Post (for instance, even Dunn cites her work when discussing Davies's and Post's time in Moscow), but her work presents Post primarily as a socialite. The title itself reveals that Rubin's interpretation of Post focuses on her wealth and social connections. She writes in her forward that "As one of the richest, most privileged and capable women in the world, Marjorie felt it was incumbent upon her to bring hope to others. She truly was an American empress."³⁹ While Rubin clearly views Post as an intelligent woman, the biography reads more as a romance or a novel than a historical analysis of Post. Rubin's work is invaluable since it does

³⁶ For instance, Dunn's *Between Roosevelt and Stalin* adopts this approach (and offers a detailed analysis of why other members of the State Department were critical of Davies).

³⁷ MacLean, *Joseph E. Davies*, 4.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

³⁹ Rubin, *American Empress*, xiv.

compile so many biographical details of Post that are otherwise scattered across various Hillwood publications, but it also presents a challenge to researchers wanting to look beyond the glitz, glamor, and newspaper gossip about Post. The primary sources I describe below helped round out the image of Post that I gained from reading Rubin's biography.

Notes on Primary Sources

This thesis relies primarily on material from the Hillwood Museum Archives and the Post Family Papers at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan. An especially valuable source is a scrapbook that covers the years 1935 through 1939. Both Post and Davies contributed to the scrapbook, sometimes using it as a sort of diary, and other times pasting in articles, photographs, calling cards, and invitations as a record of their time in Moscow. Comparing the handwriting to Post and Davies's other correspondence, it is possible to determine which notes in the scrapbook are from whom, even when they are not signed. This source provides insight into Post's view of Moscow and the people she considered friends.

Post's personal papers also include draft transcripts of an oral history project Post participated in in the early 1960s. Nettie Major, a genealogical historian who first met Post while she was conducting research for a monograph on C.W. Post, conducted the interviews. Columbia University commissioned these interviews and offered to send their own interviewer for the project, but it appears that Post was more comfortable speaking with Major, who had become both an employee at Hillwood and a close personal friend. In a letter to Post, a representative of Columbia University's Oral History Research Office wrote that, "Your life has been a vastly interesting one which has always kept you in touch with social and economic life of our country

and with many of the leaders in all fields of endeavor.”⁴⁰ The bulk of the interviews focus on Post’s childhood and her parents. It seems that Post was less interested in discussing her own life, than in immortalizing her father’s memory. Still, there are sections of the transcripts devoted to Post’s time in Moscow, and they serve to supplement the notes in her scrapbook from nearly thirty years earlier. In both the scrapbook and the oral history interviews, Post claims not to be interested in politics, and rarely discusses Davies’s interactions with Soviet officials. Instead, her focus is on her role in hosting diplomatic functions, visiting cultural institutions, and collecting. Although Post clearly views these activities as apolitical, they are instructive when we examine them in the context of her husband’s stated goals in Moscow, and the context of Soviet-American relations. Post’s personal papers, including this scrapbook and the oral history transcripts have primarily only been used in Hillwood publications; those publications have used these sources to determine the scope of Post’s collecting. This thesis is unique in using these sources to examine the issue of Soviet-American relations and cultural diplomacy.

Unfortunately, this thesis primarily employs English-language sources, and few Russian-language sources. Part of this is due to travel limitations; my research was conducted solely in the United States, and I was not able to conduct research in any Russian archives. In examining Russian-language sources available in the United States, very few addressed the themes in this thesis. For instance, while Davies was a frequent topic in *Pravda* during his time in Moscow, the bulk of references were simply reports on his activities offered without commentary (and which were consistent with reporting in the United States and with Davies’s own notes). The collection I found most useful was *ЭРМИТАЖ, который мы потеряли*, a published collection of archival

⁴⁰ Columbia University Oral History Research Office to Marjorie Merriweather Post, February 4, 1964, Box 16, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

documents from 1920-1930 regarding the Hermitage.⁴¹ The documents are fascinating for the insight they provide into how the Hermitage inventoried its collections, including what features they considered worth noting. These documents provided terrific background information for my research, but unfortunately they did not directly address Post's collecting or the question of Soviet-American relations more generally. In view of my lack of Russian-language sources, I have tried to incorporate the Soviet view by consulting translated memoirs, collections of speeches, and autobiographies. In the conclusion to this thesis, I will discuss possibilities for future research that incorporate more Russian-language sources.

⁴¹ N.M Serapina, *ЭРМИТАЖ, который мы потеряли: Документы 1920-1930 годов* (Sankt Peterburg: Zhurnal Neva, 2002).

Chapter 1

Marjorie Post was not the first, nor the only, American collector engaged in the Soviet art trade. Far from it. This chapter will examine the Soviet art trade from 1917 through 1933. It will also discuss Americans' involvement in this market, and argues that this involvement is evidence that American-Soviet cultural exchange existed even before the United States government officially recognized the Soviet Union. Finally, this chapter will provide context as to the state of American-Soviet political relations prior to when Davies's appointment.

Nationalization and Soviet Art Sales

The government seizure of private property (primarily property belonging to members of the Romanov family and the aristocracy) in Russia began prior to the establishment of the Soviet Union, with the creation of the Provisional Government in February 1917. Seizures during this time were largely unorganized, the result of individual initiative rather than a planned policy. This changed when the Bolsheviks came to power in late 1917. In 1918, Lenin implemented the "loot the looters" campaign, which encouraged the "proletariat" to forcibly seize property from the church and "bourgeoisie."⁴² This policy led (unsurprisingly) to violence and both intentional and accidental destruction of cultural artifacts, including art, antiques, and icons. The Soviet government legitimized this theft and violence with a single word: nationalization. The nationalization policy legally entitled the government to confiscate art and other private property. It is perhaps better to speak of nationalization "policies" rather than a single policy; the move from violent raids to legal seizures was achieved through a series of decrees, rather than a single order.

⁴² Sean McMeekin, *History's Greatest Heist: The Looting of Russia by the Bolsheviks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 40.

The principle behind these orders remained consistent: the government could legally confiscate any private property they deemed necessary.⁴³

The decision to formalize the seizure of property from fleeing aristocrats was informed by both ideological and pragmatic concerns. The abolishment of private property, a central tenet of socialism as espoused by Marx, provided ideological justification for seizing emigres' property. In this view, the Bolsheviks were not acting unjustly; instead, they were simply giving the bourgeoisie their just desserts.⁴⁴ Rather than hoarding this property out of sight, it would now be at the disposal of the people, as managed by the government. The desire to rid the bourgeoisie of their cultural property was matched by an equal desire to divest the Orthodox Church of its religious artifacts, fueled by the the Bolsheviks' militant atheism. The pragmatic need to come up with fast cash also provided an incentive for the government to support seizure of property. While seizure of bank holdings provided the government with hard currency, art could also bring in funds through sales or by melting/disassembling it down to raw materials.

The Soviet government established separate departments to inventory and assess the value of these nationalized objects, and to facilitate the sale of nationalized objects to foreigners. In theory these departments were meant to operate independently, but it appears that there was much confusion over which departments were responsible for what when it came to preserving and selling cultural heritage in the Soviet Union, which opened the door to possible theft, corruption, and mistaken sales.⁴⁵ Infighting within departments also led to inconsistent policies and power struggles that overshadowed the actual purpose of the departments.

⁴³ McMeekin, *History's Greatest Heist*, 56.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 36.

⁴⁵ See Elena Osokina, "Operation Duveen," *Canadian American Slavic Studies* vol. 43 (2009) and Rifat Gafifullin, "Sales of Works of Art from the Leningrad Palace-Museums, 1926-1934," *Canadian American Slavic Studies* Vol. 43, Nos. 1-4 (2009).

The department primarily responsible for the evaluation of nationalized collections (including objects seized from private estates as well as objects already in museums) in the 1920s was Gosmuzeifond. It was responsible for surveying “government buildings, noble estates of historical and cultural interest, the imperial summer palaces, the churches and monasteries of North-Western Russia, the mansions and palaces of the nobility, and the abandoned apartments of the bourgeoisie.”⁴⁶ The title of Gosmuzeifond’s predecessor, the Winter Palace Art Historical Commission for Receiving and Registering Contents of the Petrograd Palaces (formed in 1917), reveals the close ties between Gosmuzeifond and the Hermitage. In fact, the Winter Palace (the home of the Hermitage) served as the main storage facility for Gosmuzeifond. Collections and individual objects that were evaluated as especially valuable (in terms of artistic quality and historical importance) were given to the Hermitage to integrate into its own collection.⁴⁷

Organizing the sale of nationalized objects abroad fell to Vneshtorg (the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Trade, established in 1918) and later Antikvariat (the Main Office for Acquiring and Realizing Antiques, established in 1928). Members of these departments were responsible for identifying possible buyers abroad and facilitating sales. Economic pressures and the launch of the first Five-Year Plan led to the creation of Antikvariat, which was charged with expanding the small scale sales that the Soviet Union had so far engaged in.⁴⁸

In theory, all nationalized art objects would first be assessed by Gosmuzeifond before being made available to Vneshtorg or Antikvariat to put up for sale abroad. This would ensure that Soviet museums retained the most valuable (in terms of historical and artistic merit, as well as in terms of economic value) objects for their own collections. However, the organization of the departments

⁴⁶ Elena Solomakha, “The Hermitage, Gosmuzeifond, and Antikvariat,” *Canadian American Slavic Studies* vol. 43 (2009): 133.

⁴⁷ Solomakha, “The Hermitage, Gosmuzeifond, and Antikvariat,” 134.

⁴⁸ Elena Osokina, “Operation Duveen,” *Canadian American Slavic Studies* vol. 43 (2009): 111.

and their leadership meant that this theoretical approach didn't always pan out. The Hermitage, though it was allowed relative freedom to handle its own sales, by the late 1920s was no longer run by art experts. Instead, it was run by “prominent Party members and economic figures, none of whom had ever worked in museums.”⁴⁹ In the early years of sales, Hermitage curators had been successful in protecting their collections from being sold abroad. This changed in 1927, when Sergei Troinitskii, the Director of the Hermitage, was replaced with a non-expert Party member. With this new leadership in place, a 1928 decree from Sovnarkom, the Council of People's Commissars, was successful in forcing the remaining curators to begin processing Hermitage collections for sale abroad.⁵⁰ A similar situation played out in Antikvariat; with Party members rather than curators at the helm, the department valued speed and profit over careful examination of art objects.

M.J. Larsons, (the pseudonym of Moisei Iakolevich Lazerson)⁵¹ a non-Party member who worked as a bank manager prior to the October Revolution, published a 1929 memoir recounting his experiences working as *An Expert in the Service of the Soviets*. In 1923 he was working as Deputy-Chief of the Currency Administration, a position which afforded him an opportunity to examine the inner workings of the Gokhran (State Treasury) that served as a Moscow repository of nationalized objects, including church property.⁵² Larsons, though not an expert in art or antiquities, recognized that some of the objects being sold or destroyed for their materials were not worth the expense of the labor required to process them. He was particularly pained after

⁴⁹ Solomakha, “The Hermitage, Gosmuzeifond, and Antikvariat,” 138.

⁵⁰ Solomakha, “The Hermitage, Gosmuzeifond, and Antikvariat,” 138.

⁵¹ Robert H. Davis, Jr., and Edward Kasinec. “Witness to the Crime.” *Journal of the History of Collections* Vol. 3, No. 1 (1991): 53. Davis, Jr. and Kasinec note that it is difficult to trace Larson's exact movements, but it appears that he left the Soviet Union for London by the late 1920s, and eventually became a professor at Columbia University from 1940-1951 (57-58).

⁵² M.J. Larsons, *An Expert in the Service of the Soviets*, trans. Angelo S. Rappoport (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1929), 58.

watching workers chipping pearls off of Orthodox icons' oklad covers. Larsons wrote that, "The destruction of these ikons was, from every point of view, absolutely unjustified. On the one hand, the sale of the cheap river pearls, after deducting the expense incurred by the work, would yield only ridiculous sums for the Budget, while, on the other hand, objects of value from the religious, the antiquarian, and sometimes the artistic standpoint were thus being hopelessly and irretrievably destroyed."⁵³ Larsons was not alone in his frustrations. Thanks to infighting and disorganization among the departments, there was tremendous waste in terms of both labor and material, and the payoff was often not worth the effort.

Larsons's memoir also speaks to the ideological aspects of the Soviet art trade. He was accused of being "counter-revolutionary" after issuing an order to stop the destruction of Church property (arguing that the materials being extracted weren't worth the effort). In response, Larsons made an impassioned plea for Church objects as being indicative of the development of Russian art and culture, arguing, "It was therefore the desire or, more correctly, the duty to preserve whatever possible of the Russian art that prompted me to issue the order."⁵⁴ His pleas fell on deaf ears. Despite his protests, Larsons ultimately felt that "There is no doubt that everything has been done to save from the crucible objects either interesting on account of their age or artistically valuable; and it may be safely asserted that such objects have not been lost."⁵⁵ Larsons's memoir speaks to the confusion and disorganization that hampered the Soviet government's efforts to make a profit off of nationalized art. Larsons's own wavering between viewing the process as wasteful and as effective, suggests that even those on the ground and intimately involved in these departments never had a clear picture of the success of their efforts.

⁵³ Ibid, 68.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 71.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 80.

On top of the challenge of inventorying and assessing nationalized objects, was the challenge of finding interested buyers willing to pay the Soviets' price. From 1917 through the early years of the 1920s, sales of nationalized art were covert and carried out on a small scale. Maxim Litvinov was the primary facilitator of these deals; his position at that point as the trade representative in Estonia allowed him to take advantage of Revel's reputation as a breeding ground for black market deals. The main reason for these covert sales was that at this point, few European countries had recognized the Soviet Union. Sales increased (and became more open, allowing for large-scale auction house deals) as the Soviet Union gained recognition from other countries, most notably Germany in 1922.⁵⁶ Even with the issue of recognition resolved, a question remained: could European dealers and collectors legally purchase goods from the Soviet government, considering the government had seized those goods from their original owners?

The question was a loaded one, and left the Soviet government with two options: it could conduct sales under the guise of a semi-private company (thus suggesting that the sales were not officially connected with the government), or it could openly conduct sales through Antikvariat. Ultimately, they decided to conduct sales openly, a move that Elena Osokina argues was because the Soviets realized that "in every lawsuit brought by the former owners of valuables, it would be necessary to prove the identity of Antikvariat with the state, since the sole legal basis for the sales was the decree nationalizing art treasures."⁵⁷ While the Soviet government obviously deemed the nationalization process legal, it remained to be seen whether other countries would accept this as well. Luckily for the Soviets, German courts did recognize the nationalization decrees,⁵⁸ making the country an ideal spot for hosting large-scale auctions of nationalized goods.

⁵⁶ Bayer, "Soviet Art Sales to Europe, 1919-1936," 213.

⁵⁷ Osokina, "Operation Duveen," 112.

⁵⁸ Bayer, "Soviet Art Sales to Europe, 1919-1936," 213.

Russian émigrés living in Germany did not accept the Soviet government's claims that the sales were legal. A widely publicized 1928 auction planned in Berlin drew the attention of Russian émigrés, "who recognized part of their nationalized possessions among the lots."⁵⁹ A group of émigrés filed a collective suit, which was settled in their favor. Their victory was short-lived, however: According to Waltraud Bayer, "The Soviet government protested the ruling and demanded immediate compensation from the Germans amounting to two million marks. As a result, a higher court ruled in favor of Moscow."⁶⁰ Bayer quotes the Berlin court's ruling, writing that "'interference in the sovereignty of a foreign government recognized by Germany was not admissible."⁶¹ Other European courts followed Germany's lead, declaring that émigrés did not have a legal claim to property seized as a result of the nationalization decrees. So, the decision was made: European courts would turn a blind eye to Soviet sales of nationalized art, despite the protests of emigres. But what about other Soviet policies? Would Western governments turn a blind eye towards those, too?

Soviet-American Exchange Prior to 1933

During the peak years of the Soviet art trade (approximately 1929-1933), the United States government did not officially recognize the Soviet Union. But that does not mean that all exchange between the two states ceased during this period. Although politically the two states had reached an impasse, the interwar period saw a period of sustained cultural exchange in the form of trade, travel, and business deals. While the State Department had vacated the American Embassy in Leningrad, Americans were not prohibited from traveling to the Soviet Union, by either the Soviet or American governments. Americans from all walks of life were enticed to travel to the Soviet

⁵⁹ Bayer, "Soviet Art Sales to Europe, 1919-1936," 220.

⁶⁰ Bayer, "Soviet Art Sales to Europe, 1919-1936," 220.

⁶¹ Bayer, "Soviet Art Sales to Europe, 1919-1936," 220.

Union to see the “Soviet experiment” unfolding with their own eyes. Some were “fellow travelers,” intellectuals who identified as communist or socialist, or who were intrigued by those ideologies. Others were attracted by the Soviets’ promise of racial and gender equality, a stark difference from the segregation that marred American society. Journalists were also eager to be on the ground in the Soviet Union, eager to report back on new developments on the Soviet experiment. Michael David-Fox’s work *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union 1921-1941* primarily focuses on European travelers to the Soviet Union, but also addresses American “friends” of the Soviet Union as well. These individuals, though many were not able to physically travel to the Soviet Union, still engaged intellectually with Soviet thought and culture. David-Fox writes that in spite of political pressures from the right, American socialists and other left-leaning thinkers participated in “friendship societies,” including the New York-based American Russian Society for Cultural Relations with Russia.⁶² David-Fox’s work also confronts a troubling pattern: he writes that, “Profound and troubling questions are raised by the central fact that the height of Western admiration, including among some of the leading minds of the epoch, coincided with the most repressive phase of Soviet Communism—the Stalinist 1930s.”⁶³

Some of the strongest Soviet-American partnerships during the non-recognition period were in the areas of industry and trade. Soviet industrialists traveled to the US to learn about new technologies and production systems, and American businessmen traveled to the USSR both to advise and to strike deals with the Soviets. Kendall Bailes details Soviet-American transfers of

⁶² Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 87.

⁶³ David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 2.

technology in the interwar period, a period and partnership which he argues is relatively understudied.⁶⁴

Trade exchanges were not just limited to industry; art also played a huge role in Soviet-American exchanges prior to the United States' recognition of the Soviet Union. Condemnation in the press and from émigré groups hardly stopped American dealers and collectors from taking advantage of the deals offered by the Soviets. The United States government did not issue any prohibitions against purchasing Soviet art, either directly or through European dealers, despite the fact that the government still had not yet formally recognized the Soviet Union. In essence, this gave American dealers and collectors carte blanche to purchase these objects, and essentially admitted the legality of the sales even in the face of continued litigation and protests from the émigrés community in the US.

Two of the most active Americans in the Soviet art trade were Armand Hammer and Andrew Mellon. Hammer, who owned several pencil factories in the Soviet Union, was able to parlay his Soviet connections into a new business dealing in confiscated Russian art. An entrepreneur who always had his eye on the next deal, Hammer and his brother, Victor, began collecting Russian art (starting with Fabergé) in the early 1920s. From 1928 through 1929, they began "selling for the Soviet government on a commission basis,"⁶⁵ according to historian Robert Williams, who interviewed Hammer during his research for *Russian Art and American Money*. By 1933, the Hammers had opened up a Russian department at Lord and Taylor in New York City, where they sold items from their own collection as well as items obtained from an unknown "supplier in the Soviet government."⁶⁶ Armand Hammer wasn't just selling paintings and

⁶⁴ Kendall Bailes, "The American Connection: Ideology and the Transfer of American Technology to the Soviet Union, 1917-1941" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1981): 421.

⁶⁵ Williams, *Russian Art and American Money*, 195.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 220.

jewelry—he was selling the romance and the tragedy of the Romanovs. In catalogs distributed by his department store, he presented his wares as artifacts of a long lost world, making allusions to the Imperial family and their opulent lives and tragic end at the hands of the Bolsheviks.⁶⁷ In reality, Hammer only had access to relatively low quality objects, certainly nothing near the “crown jewels” he advertised. Thanks to his marketing strategy, however, Hammer’s business was extremely successful. Nearly every American collector of Russian art purchased at least a few objects from Hammer’s store, including Lillian Pratt, Matilda Geddings Gray, India Early Minshall, and even Marjorie Merriweather Post.⁶⁸

Unlike Hammer, Mellon was only interested in purchasing objects for his own collection. Mellon was far more interested in the European art that had been confiscated by the Soviet government, than in art by Russian artists. Mellon conducted his dealings with the Soviet governments through intermediaries, never traveling to the Soviet Union to conduct his deals in person. Despite previous assurances to the contrary, by 1928 the Soviet government was backtracking on its promise not to sell any objects from the Hermitage’s collection. Mellon seized upon this opportunity to build up a private collection of Old Masters paintings. He was anxious to keep his purchases secret—at the time, he was serving as the United States Secretary of the Treasury. Mellon’s public and private interests were directly in conflict: while Mellon’s own collecting benefited from what Williams describes as “Soviet dumping of its art on the Western market,” American businessmen were adamantly opposed to Soviet “dumping.”⁶⁹ Mellon ultimately disregarded the conflict, and continued his collecting, eventually netting masterpieces from Van Eyck, Raphael, Botticelli, and others.⁷⁰ Mellon’s collection eventually formed the

⁶⁷ Ibid, 221.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 221.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 168.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 184.

nucleus of the National Gallery of Art's collection. Hammer and Mellon's stories reveal several points that are relevant to Post's story: first, their collecting reveals that American-Soviet cultural relations existed even without official United States recognition of the Soviet Union, suggesting that cultural exchange is an important aspect of international relations (especially when direct political exchange has ground to a halt). Second, the ethically ambiguous nature of their dealings (Hammer's secret government supplier, Mellon's conflict of interest as a public servant) foreshadow the ethical dimensions of Post's collecting as ambassador.

1933: The United States Recognizes the Soviet Union

Following Nicholas II's abdication and the subsequent rise to power of the Provisional Government headed by Kerensky in winter of 1917, the United States decided to recognize the new Russian leadership. Hopeful that the Provisional Government would prove more democratic than the tsarist regime, the United States seemed pleased to continue their alliance with Russia. The United States was much less eager to support the Bolshevik regime that came to power later that year in October. Although Americans in the Foreign Service remained in Russia until 1919, the United States still had yet to recognize the Bolshevik government. Once American diplomats left Russia, it became clear that the United States had no intention of recognizing the Soviet Union. Part of the United States' resistance was based upon opposition to the Soviets' nationalization policy, which enabled the wholesale seizure of private property (including art and antiques) that we discussed above.⁷¹

It was not until Franklin Roosevelt's election to the presidency in 1932 that the question of recognition received serious attention once again. The president argued that improved diplomatic relations between the two countries would offer new markets for American businesses and would

⁷¹ Dunn, *Between Roosevelt and Stalin*, 20.

present a check to Japanese and German aggression.⁷² His position was not a popular one within the State Department; Robert Kelley, head of the East European Division, was extremely critical of the Soviet Union, a view shared by many of his men. Kelley and others on the recognition committee urged Roosevelt to take a hard line with the Soviet Union, arguing that he should insist that all outstanding issues (including debt repayment and property confiscated from American citizens in Russia) be resolved before the United States would grant recognition.⁷³ Roosevelt forged ahead with negotiations over recognition in consultation with Litvinov, by now the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union, failing to take up any of the issues his committee had recommended to him. Roosevelt's failure to broach the subject of the Ukrainian famine, of which he was well-informed through the State Department, is the worst of the omissions he made in negotiations. Historians argue that the State Department felt Roosevelt was far too amiable in these negotiations, allowing Litvinov the prize of American recognition without having to make any real concessions in return. For instance, David Mayers notes that Cordell Hull, Secretary of State, thought that "the Soviets were so eager for recognition that Washington could name any price."⁷⁴ Mayers acknowledges that Hull's attitude on this front was overly optimistic, but points out that historians today agree that Roosevelt was not vigorous enough in supporting American concerns in the recognition negotiations.⁷⁵ Roosevelt's rejection of State Department concerns became a hallmark of his administration's Soviet foreign policy.

Despite the State Department's attempts to persuade him to the contrary, Roosevelt was eager to re-establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. In 1933, he appointed William Bullitt as the first American Ambassador to the Soviet Union. Bullitt had previous experience with

⁷² Dunn, *Caught Between Roosevelt & Stalin*, 7.

⁷³ Mayers, *The Ambassadors and America's Soviet Policy*, 102.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 105.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 105.

the Soviet Union, having facilitated talks with Lenin on behalf of Woodrow Wilson in 1919, when the question of recognition was still being debated the first time around. At the time of his appointment, Bullitt was serving as Special Assistant to the Secretary of State. Like Roosevelt, Bullitt felt that it was essential to resume relations with the Soviet Union (and had argued that point to Wilson following his talks with Lenin in 1919).⁷⁶ Despite his enthusiasm over the prospect of renewed diplomatic relations, Bullitt also thought it was important for the United States to first settle some of the concerns raised by the State Department. Roosevelt and Litvinov exchanged a series of letters, in which Litvinov agreed that the Soviet Union would make it a policy “To refrain... from any act tending to incite or encourage armed intervention, or any agitation or propaganda having as an aim, the violation of the territorial integrity of the United States, its territories or possessions, or the bringing about by force of a change in the political or social order of the whole or any part of the United States, its territories or possessions.”⁷⁷ The Soviet Union also agreed to respect the rights of Americans in the Soviet Union to “free exercise of liberty of conscience and religious worship.”⁷⁸

Despite his early optimism, Bullitt quickly became disenchanted with the Soviet Union after reporting to his post in Moscow in March of 1934. He was frustrated by the lack of progress regarding the debt negotiations, and absolutely infuriated by the participation of Americans in the Seventh Comintern Congress, which he interpreted as a violation of the Roosevelt-Litvinov Agreements (specifically the Soviets’ agreement to cease propaganda efforts in the United

⁷⁶ Mary E. Glantz, *FDR and the Soviet Union: The President’s Battles over the Soviet Union* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 19.

⁷⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt to Maxim Litvinov, November 16, 1933, National Security Archive, The George Washington University.

⁷⁸ Maxim Litvinov to Franklin D. Roosevelt, November 16, 1933, National Security Archive, The George Washington University.

States).⁷⁹ Bullitt was not shy about expressing his displeasure to Litvinov and other Soviet officials (a trait that was apparently detrimental to his efforts as Ambassador), and even went so far as to advise Roosevelt to issue an official protest against Soviet violation of the Roosevelt-Litvinov Agreements; MacLean writes that Bullitt wanted Roosevelt to “cu[t] Soviet representation in Washington, [and] reduc[e] the number of visas for Soviet citizens.”⁸⁰ Bullitt grew increasingly frustrated with both the hostility of the Soviets and with Roosevelt’s refusal to accept his recommendations. In early 1936, he submitted his resignation to Roosevelt, who willingly accepted, and even granted Bullitt a position as American Ambassador to France.

Roosevelt did not have to look far to find a replacement for Bullitt. He called upon his old friend and colleague, Joseph Davies, to take up the mantle. Davies was a Wisconsin lawyer whose political ambitions stretched back to his law school graduation around the turn of the century. Campaigning for Woodrow Wilson in the 1912 campaign thrust Davies into the national political arena, netting him a position on the Democratic National Convention’s steering committee.⁸¹ In exchange for his support, Wilson awarded Davies a position on the Bureau of Corporations, which allowed him to contribute to the creation of the Federal Trade Commission.⁸² A failed bid for election to the Senate in 1918 prompted Davies to return to his legal practice (where he developed a reputation for his expertise in antitrust law), but he still did not give up his political ambitions. With Roosevelt’s presidential campaign in 1932, Davies saw another opportunity to expand his role in Washington. Davies contributed financially to Roosevelt’s campaign, and also drew upon his extensive social and political networks to campaign for the Democratic candidate. Davies had met Roosevelt decades earlier when the two were both campaigning for Wilson. Both men

⁷⁹ Dunn, *Between Roosevelt and Stalin*, 49-50.

⁸⁰ Dunn, *Between Roosevelt and Stalin*, 51.

⁸¹ MacLean, *Joseph E. Davies*, 10.

⁸² *Ibid*, 11.

identified as progressive democrats, and Davies enthusiastically supported Roosevelt's New Deal policies. While Davies did not immediately join Roosevelt's administration (he was still recouping the financial loss he suffered in 1929, and his legal practice paid better than a government position would have),⁸³ he did inform Roosevelt that his long-term goals included an ambassadorship.

After supporting Roosevelt once again in the 1936 campaign, Davies was ready to re-enter the political arena as a major player himself, not just as a supporter on the sidelines. Davies had expressed interest in the Berlin and London posts; the London post looked unlikely (according to MacLean, this was because "rumor had it that the British were not keen on ambassadors who had been divorced"),⁸⁴ but Davies held out hope that the Berlin post was possible. To his surprise, Roosevelt offered him the Moscow post instead. While it was not his first choice, Davies was grateful for Roosevelt's offer, and was eager to serve the president abroad. As we shall see in the next chapter, Davies's understanding of his role as ambassador was informed by Roosevelt's expectations for American-Soviet relations. Despite Bullitt's negative experience, Roosevelt was still convinced that positive American-Soviet relations were essential for American and European security. And although Post did not occupy an official diplomatic position, her role as the ambassador's wife would prove vital to fostering friendships with Soviet officials.

⁸³ Ibid, 18.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 23.

Chapter 2

Preparations for Moscow

In this chapter, I will examine Post's preparations for her role as ambassadress, and look at how her personal relationships and work organizing formal social events contributed to her husband's goals as ambassador. I argue that Post took her role seriously, preparing for her move to Moscow with research into the political and cultural climate in the Soviet Union. Post channeled her business and social skills into fostering friendly relations with Soviet officials.

While Davies's appointment was certainly a tremendous honor for the couple, Post was less than thrilled at the prospect of accompanying her husband to Moscow. In fact, she considered refusing to join him at all. As she later recalled, "Of course, when the word came in August that Mr. Davies was to be appointed Ambassador to Russia, I was terribly concerned because I had been living in the semi-tropics in the winters for at least 30 years and while I was raised in a country of heavy snows and long periods of snow it had been a long time since I had experienced anything like that and I was wondering how I could cope with it. In fact, I said to Mr. Davies at one point, "well, it's been awfully nice knowing you, have a good time in Russia, I can't go."⁸⁵ This wasn't an empty threat: Post had been fiercely independent her whole life, and throughout her two previous marriages she had demonstrated that she was perfectly willing to go against her husbands' wishes and pursue her own interests.

Hearing tales from other visitors to Moscow didn't assuage Post's concerns. In a scrapbook chronicling Post and Davies's marriage and travels, she wrote about an occasion where their friends Kit and Arthur Chase joined the couple for dinner in the summer of 1936--by this point

⁸⁵ Transcript, Marjorie Merriweather Post interview, August 31, 1962, Topridge Estate, conducted by Nettie Major: 2.

Davies knew about his forthcoming appointment, but it wasn't yet public knowledge. The Chases had recently returned from their own trip to the Soviet Union, and Post took the opportunity to get a firsthand account of her future home. Post wrote, "We were fascinated hearing the many tales from the Chases – some of it not too good. Kit said the whole country reminded her of a very beautiful woman who had died and the maggots were eating her – and how often this came to mind – horrible thought that is!"⁸⁶ With stories like that, it's little wonder that Post was not too excited about her upcoming role.

Post recollected that Davies did not initially attempt to persuade her to change her mind about Moscow. In a few days, however, she learned that he had invited William Bullitt over for lunch. She recalled, "Well he didn't make much of a comment but I noticed that in a few days following that Mr. Bullett [sic] who had been appointed the first Ambassador after Russia had been recognized by the United States, was asked to come and have lunch with us which he did. He answered a great many questions that we asked him about Moscow, about the Embassy, about what life was like in Moscow and so forth."⁸⁷ Despite Bullitt's disenchantment with the Soviet Union and with the possibility of cordial relations with that country, his words must have provided the reassurance Post was looking for, since she began to feel that "I was going to be extremely stupid if I didn't make the effort to go and to have this thrilling experience."⁸⁸

And so it was that Post began to make plans to transport herself and her household to Moscow. Davies and Post planned to make the trip to Russia aboard her yacht *The Sea Cloud*, so Post was tasked with both supplying the yacht and ordering supplies to reach the embassy before

⁸⁶ Marjorie Merriweather Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁸⁷ Transcript, Marjorie Merriweather Post interview, August 31, 1962, Topridge Estate, conducted by Nettie Major: 2.

⁸⁸ Transcript, Marjorie Merriweather Post interview, August 31, 1962, Topridge Estate, conducted by Nettie Major: 2.

their arrival. As was the case following their wedding, Post's preparations for Moscow were dissected in the press. Most notable, perhaps, was the coverage of what Post's friends later referred to as "the cream incident." Post had arranged to have frozen food shipped to the Moscow Embassy, concerned by rumors about food shortages in the capital. Considering that she was in the business of frozen food, this move does not seem too unusual. Somehow the press got wind of Post's plans to ship cream overseas. In December 1936 *The Washington Post* ran the headline, "Cream, 2,000 Pints, Is Sent to Russia for Envoy's Wife." In it, John Hamilton, manager of a local creamery, confirmed that "Mrs. Davies had enough cream to last about two winters 'if she was careful'He refused to give the cost except to acknowledge it was 'a pretty big milk bill.'"⁸⁹ *The Chicago Daily Tribune* also ran an article on the topic, including a quote from a secretary who quipped, "There are cows in Russia."⁹⁰ *The New York Times* also chimed in, adding that Post had also shipped twenty-five refrigerators. They concluded with the observation that "Refrigerators are a new product in Russia, but cream is not. There were 42,400,000 cows in 1934, or one for every four persons. In the United States in 1935 there were 25,100,000 milk cows, or one for every five persons."⁹¹

Post was indignant about the attention her food preparations received, recounting how she icily responded to a comment made at a White House reception she and Davies attended during a visit to Washington partway through their assignment in Moscow: "One of the women there said, 'Is it true that you took 2,000 jars of cold cream to Russia?' I knew exactly that she was thinking of the frozen cream but I couldn't get into that so I merely looked at her and said, 'does my face look as if I needed 2,000 jars of cold cream?' So I didn't have to go into whether the cream was

⁸⁹ "Cream, 2,000 Pints, is Sent to Russia for Envoy's Wife, *The Washington Post*, December 17, 1936.

⁹⁰ "Milk for Moscow," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 20, 1936.

⁹¹ "Cream to Moscow," *New York Times*, December 20, 1936.

useful or it wasn't."⁹² Even thirty some years later when she discussed the issue with her oral history interviewer, Post complained that, "We were being most frightfully discussed because we'd brought in a lot of frozen cream, which we always had done for many years on board the Sea Cloud."⁹³ While the press painted Post as out of touch or impractical for her cream shipment, her decision to send the cream ahead was grounded in part on her extensive experience managing multiple households: she estimated the amount of cream the Embassy would need based on numbers she had recorded ordering on previous occasions, recalling that "I went through all my lists of food and supplies that we had used so many different years when we were going to far off lands in the beautiful sailing ship, and made my lists for the embassy along this line bearing in mind that it was going to be a very cold country for a good part of the year."⁹⁴

After extolling the virtues of frozen cream ("It could be used for anything"),⁹⁵ Post also criticized the press's snide observations about the availability of cream in Moscow:

Well actually, it was terribly needed because they were just finishing with that dreadful famine they had had where all of the herds had been eaten up and they had to rebuild their cow herds and their horse herds. At that time Stalin was having trouble about the taxes that he was taking from the farmers in the form of different foods. He took the amount of the tax regardless of what they had raised, and he left them with no food for their herds and they just plain died in the winter, some 7 or 8 million of them. This was only a few years after this dreadful crisis.⁹⁶

Clearly Post had taken time to research the current political situation in Russia as she made her preparations. While the press painted her as frivolous socialite, Post actually seems to have taken her role as ambassador's wife quite seriously, and spent considerable time preparing for her new role.

⁹² Post, "Memos to Mrs. Major," August, 1962: 15.

⁹³ Post, "Memos to Mrs. Major," August, 1962: 14.

⁹⁴ Post, "Memos to Mrs. Major," August, 1962: 3.

⁹⁵ Post, "Memos to Mrs. Major," August, 1962: 14.

⁹⁶ Post, "Memos to Mrs. Major," August, 1962: 15.

Post went so far as to commission a report on Russian history and culture from Marieli G. Benziger, a researcher who had been conducting genealogical research for Post on both her family and the Huttons. Benziger (who, it should be noted, did not read Russian, nor did her research specialize in Russia) noted in her introduction that “Libraries have material that is really out of date for this kind of work,” and complained that there were few resources on contemporary Russia. Benziger concluded her introduction by observing that, “A study of Russia and the books that are to be had leaves one bewildered. No cross-word puzzle could be more fascinating nor take more time than does the study of a former map of one of Russia’s cities and one of that same city as seen today. Yet after much patient searching some of the facts have been traced--and the student of history is left wondering at it all. Russia of the past-- Russia of the present--such a contrast.”⁹⁷

Benziger observed that she saw connections between her research on C.W. Post and Russia. “The dreams he [C.W.] dreamed were radical and revolutionizing for his age. He approved of trusting the worker, of giving the worker the best there was, of putting opportunity in his path. From the very start of their coming to this country the Posts put aside all claim to aristocracy and mingled with the workers. Thus I feel that the land to which his daughter is going would have been one that would have interested him.”⁹⁸ C.W. was a capitalist through and through, and it seems unlikely that he would have embraced the Soviet Union’s particular brand of “radicalization and revolution.” And while C.W. may have been a salt of the earth man, Post’s own lifestyle was far more aristocratic. But Benziger’s observation here is interesting, since it reads as very similar to Davies’s own observations on the Soviet Union. While Davies identified as a staunch capitalist, he also praised the Soviet Union’s support of the working class.⁹⁹ Considering that Post personally

⁹⁷ Marieli G. Benziger, “Notes on Russia,” 1936.

⁹⁸ Benziger, “Notes on Russia.”

⁹⁹ MacLean, *Joseph E. Davies*, 29.

commissioned this report from Benziger (and considering Benziger had worked with Post before, and therefore knew her fairly well), it is interesting to consider the ways that Benziger tried to “customize” the report to align with Post and Davies’s views.

In her report, Benziger outlined a history of medieval Russia through the 1930s. Her history included a timeline of the Bolshevik seizure of power. Benziger also included chapters on Russian art, literature and architecture. Chapters on Leningrad and Moscow discussed the cities’ history, architecture, and cultural highlights, including museums and landmarks. Benziger also highlights changes to the cities since the Bolshevik takeover, pointing out name changes and new uses for imperial buildings. The focus of her report was primarily on cultural landmarks, although her notes hint at the political climate, especially in regards to changes in Leningrad and Moscow.

Tucked within the “Notes on Russia” bound report were two other reports, of a distinctly different tone. The first, titled “Notes on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” was written in November 4, 1931.¹⁰⁰ Whereas Benziger’s report was largely apolitical, this report looks at the politics of the Soviet Union, and is far more critical. This report is so detailed, and so explicit in its analysis of the Soviet Union, that I think it is worth outlining its contents here. It characterizes the Soviet government as “admittedly of a dictatorial character, brooking no opposition. It has resulted in the suppression and to a larger extent, the destruction of the culture and refinement of the Czarist days.”¹⁰¹ It continued, “The present regime is a dictatorship by a small, well organized group over a large and inarticulate mass of humanity and probably is more complete and exacting than anything of its kind seen since the French Revolution.”¹⁰² The report goes on to outline the

¹⁰⁰ There is no indication of who authored this particular report. It is interesting to note that it was compiled in 1931, two years before the United States officially recognized the Soviet Union. Based on the language in the document and its similarities to reports that Davies references in *Mission to Moscow*, I feel comfortable in assuming that this report emanated from the U.S. government, most likely the State Department. It could be a copy of a report presented to Davies upon his appointment.

¹⁰¹ “Notes on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” 1931, 1.

¹⁰² “Notes on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” 1.

local and state-level government structure, linking it to the Communist Party system, and discussing the role of the military, OGPU, and other departments/councils. While extremely critical of the regime, the report also notes that, “They have created a stable government that is probably more effective and certainly more honest in its administration than any government the Russian people have had for many years, if not for all time. This government has established order throughout the land and has created an effective machine for self-defense. It has finally procured recognition and has established diplomatic relations with most of the governments of Europe.”¹⁰³

Interestingly, the report praises the people of the Soviet Union, even while criticizing the government. The report is particularly critical of the Five Year Plan, writing that it “was not adequately thought out or well balanced--how could it be otherwise considering the little actual knowledge possessed by the planners as to the needs of the country or its resources.”¹⁰⁴ The report acknowledges the Soviet government’s replacement of experts with Party members, a trend that we discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to the Soviet art trade. The report also notes that despite the fact that at the time of writing the United States had officially suspended diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, there was still plenty of contact and exchange occurring between the two nations. The report focuses on exchanges in industry, noting that “Hundreds of Soviet representatives have visited America and have spent a great deal of time on the inside of American enterprises.”¹⁰⁵ The report criticizes these representatives for focusing on technology rather than the management practices employed by American firms, concluding that the Soviets’ adoption of American technology will be hindered by their reliance on “socialistic” management practices.

¹⁰³ “Notes on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” 7.

¹⁰⁴ “Notes on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” 8.

¹⁰⁵ “Notes on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” 9.

The report offers predications for the future of the Soviet Union, writing that “First, in the absence of foreign war or invasion by a great power the present regime is here to stay.” Despite criticizing the government for its authoritarian rule and abandonment of capitalism, the report still admiringly notes that “Its present activities and future progress constitute the greatest experiment in human relations that the world has seen and is worthy of our continued and intimate study.”¹⁰⁶ The report also suggests that the Soviet Union has a vested interest in maintaining friendly relations with the United States, which it attributes in part to the country’s need to avoid conflict in order to focus on domestic issues. The report concludes by observing that the Soviet Union “would welcome a closer relationship with the United States more than with any other nation, and for the present at least it would make every effort to maintain such a relationship in a manner satisfactory to the American people.”¹⁰⁷ Post’s possession of this report suggests that she would have had a fairly good primer on Soviet politics and Soviet-American relations prior to arriving in Moscow. In other words, Post was not just interested in reading over travel guides; she also took the time to read reports that starkly stated the nature of the Soviet government.

The third report contained in the bound “Notes on Russia” volume was published on November 15, 1936 by The American Russian Institute for Cultural Relations with the Soviet Union, Inc. “The general purpose...is ‘the promotion of cultural intercourse between the peoples of the United States of America and the Soviet Union in an endeavor to forward their intellectual and technical progress; and to foster understanding and good will between the peoples of said countries, particularly by making available accurate information concerning cultural, scientific, and educational activities in both countries.’”¹⁰⁸ This brief report focused on cultural exchanges

¹⁰⁶ “Notes on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” 12.

¹⁰⁷ “Notes on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” 12.

¹⁰⁸ The American Russian Institute for Cultural Relations with the Soviet Union, Inc., 1936, 1.

between the United States and Soviet Union, with a primary focus on events held in New York that were meant to foster positive relations. Like Benziger's report, this report was largely apolitical. It seems that reading these reports improved Post's view of Moscow, leading her to recall that after this preparation, "I was in a lather of excitement and looking forward to the experience with the greatest amount of interest."¹⁰⁹

The Davies' trip to Moscow was turbulent--the couple noted in their scrapbook that they were faced with rough seas and chilling temperatures. Despite the rough passage, Davies at least was filled with excitement upon seeing Moscow at last, writing that "Moscow was utterly unlike what we had been led to expect. 'Stop + Go' Lights, autos + new modernistic buildings. Construction every where and a feel of 'action' every where."¹¹⁰

For her part, Post's arrival in Moscow vindicated her concerns about supplying their own provisions after receiving a note from a Dr. Rumreich outlining the "Don'ts" of embassy life:

Don't drink unboiled tap water. /Don't drink milk or cream. /Don't eat any milk products (ice cream, butter, custards [sic], etc.) of local origin. /Don't eat raw vegetables. /Don't eat canned vegetables unless you know they are from the USA. /Avoid rare and under-done meats. /Avoid all sausages./Be very careful about fish. (For two reasons; fish may not be very fresh and also the fish tapeworm is very prevalent in Europe)/Don't eat gefullte fish./British Embassy is safest./French next./All the rest questionable as they depend on local products.¹¹¹

As part of her preparations for their residency in Spaso House, Post had sent ahead servants to prepare the embassy according to her specifications. Although Moscow was half a world away, Post's experience managing multiple households remotely had prepared her well for the types of things one would need to consider when preparing the embassy. Thanks to her preparations, the couple was able to hit the ground running. She recalled that, "the very first night we were there we had a dinner for 125 who were Embassy staff and people connected with the Chancery. The next

¹⁰⁹ Post, "Memos to Mrs. Major," August, 1962: 3.

¹¹⁰ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹¹¹ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

night we had 175. This time they were Americans who were working in Russia, most of them engineers and their families, and following these two initial dinners, we settled down quietly to our regular diplomatic life which was not too strenuous.”¹¹² From the very beginning, Post signaled that she was prepared to undertake her role with an energy and enthusiasm that had been missing during the previous ambassador’s tenure.

Post as Ambassador

Davies’s notes in the scrapbook are focused on people--both the politicians he interacted with in an official capacity, and the people he observed on the street. Next to an article pasted in the scrapbook titled, “Davies Lauds Soviet Industry and People,” Davies elaborates: “As a matter of fact, this is a conservative statement of my impressions. These are a strong people. Their leaders are indefatigable. Their imagination is tremendous. Their courage is superlative. They ‘paint on a ten league canvas with a brush of camel’s hair.’”¹¹³

Davies was inclined to view the Soviet people (and their government) in a positive light. His views on the country were informed by Roosevelt’s own position. Roosevelt believed that positive American-Soviet relations were essential for both U.S. security and world peace.¹¹⁴ He was, therefore, willing to turn a blind eye towards certain practices of the Soviet government if it meant continuing positive relations. According to MacLean, Roosevelt’s original charge to Bullitt when diplomatic relations were restored in 1933 was to address the issue of pre-revolutionary debt repayments and to direct the Comintern to “suspend propaganda activities in the United States.”¹¹⁵ By the time of Davies’s appointment, the debt remained unpaid, and there was no evidence that

¹¹² Post, “Memos to Mrs. Major,” August, 1962: 5.

¹¹³ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹¹⁴ MacLean, *Joseph E. Davie*, 23.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 23.

the Soviets had ceased propaganda efforts in the US. Despite this, Roosevelt still instructed Davies that his goal as ambassador was to be one of cooperation.¹¹⁶ Both Davies and Roosevelt understood that the appointment would be a short one--Davies had expressed interest in an appointment to Berlin, which Roosevelt assured him would be forthcoming. It appears that, knowing the brief duration of this appointment, both Roosevelt and Davies thought maintaining the status quo was the best course of action. As Davies recalled, "After dinner, the President and I retired to his study, the Oval Room, on the second floor for last instructions in connection with my mission...he thought my position should be one of dignified friendliness, so long as diplomatic relations existed between the two countries...The position, he said, should be that we would not seek further negotiations; that it was up to the Soviet government to make the next move."¹¹⁷ For his part, Litvinov was pleased with the choice of Davies to replace Bullitt. Litvinov wrote, "I am glad that Washington decided to send us Davies. Troyanovsky has supplied a full account of his talk with Davies at a lunch of our Embassy...he affirms that Davies understands nothing about our affairs but that he is full of the most sincere desire to work with us in complete co-operation and to carry out strictly Roosevelt's instructions."¹¹⁸

Based on Davies's official correspondence as well as his private notes, it appears that his primary goal during his tenure as ambassador was to foster cordial relations with the Soviet government and to encourage cooperation between the two countries. This focus on personal relationships, rather than on policy debates or trade agreements, suggests that Post played a far more significant role in the mission than was perhaps traditional for ambassador's wives. In both

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 24.

¹¹⁷ Davies, *Mission to Moscow*, 6.

¹¹⁸ M.M. Litvinov, *Notes for a Journal*, (London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1955), 214.

her individual relationships and her arrangements for larger social occasions, Post assisted Davies in his mission to promote positive American-Soviet relations.

Post had a reputation as a gracious hostess, who could be at ease in any crowd.¹¹⁹ Post had years of experience socializing with political and social elites. These traits allowed Post to develop friendly relations with several important Soviet women. This was especially true in the case of Polina Zhemchuzhina, director of the cosmetics trust TeZhe and the wife of Vyacheslav Molotov, Chairman of Sovnarkom and Stalin's right-hand man. Zhemchuzhina and Post, though they had to communicate via a translator, actually had quite a few things in common. Both were successful businesswomen, who were essential in transforming their respective companies. In Post's case, she pushed to incorporate Birdseye frozen foods into the Postum Cereal Company, transforming it into the hugely successful General Foods Company. In Zhemchuzhina's case, she successfully persuaded Stalin himself that TeZhe should expand its offerings to include essential oils and alter its management structure, which ultimately led to the trust becoming an independent unit.¹²⁰ According to scholars Olga Kravets and Özlem Sandıkçı, it was Zhemchuzhina's "personal connections and organizational skills"¹²¹ that contributed to her success in the business, traits that Post shared and also capitalized on as a businesswoman and as an ambassador. Post wrote about Zhemchuzhina in glowing terms in her scrapbook: "Mme. Molotov is a fascinating + brilliant woman—she is head of the cosmetic trust"¹²²

Post also had good things to say about the TeZhe factories supervised by Zhemchuzhina. After a personal tour of one of the factories, she wrote that Zhemchuzhina, "would stop here and

¹¹⁹ Rubin, *American Empress*, 76.

¹²⁰ Olga Kravets and Özlem Sandıkçı, "Marketing for Socialism: Soviet Cosmetics in the 1930s," *Business History Review* 87 (2013): 468.

¹²¹ Kravets and Sandıkçı, "Marketing for Socialism: Soviet Cosmetics in the 1930s," 468.

¹²² Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

there at the different benches, calling the worker by name and visit with her for a minute, sometimes running a machine for a few moments herself. This was all so much like what I had always seen my father doing in our factories”¹²³ Following this personal tour, Post was invited to a luncheon in her honor at the Molotovs’ personal dacha. Post wrote approvingly of the dacha, describing it as “very like what we would see perhaps in one of our suburbs.”¹²⁴ She was less pleased with the food on offer, as it went against Dr. Rumreich’s orders (she apparently went home and immediately took Castor oil, just in case).¹²⁵ Despite the food, Post wrote that “The whole atmosphere was very cordial—very anxious to have us have a good time—and we did, but Oh! If only one could speak the language. Through an interpreter it is difficult, to say the least.”¹²⁶

Despite the language barrier, it appears that Post established a friendly relationship with Zhemchuzhina. She returned the honor of the luncheon by inviting Zhemchuzhina and several other Soviet women to dine at Spaso House. The guests included Zhemchuzhina (“very smartly and simply dressed, had a handsome broadtail coat and hat; both looked as if Paris or New York had produced them”); Madame Stomonyakov, whose husband, Boris Stomonyakov served as the Deputy People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs until his arrest and execution during the Stalinist purges (“always very plainly but neatly and tastefully dressed”); Madame Krestinsky, whose husband, Politburo member Nikolai Krestinsky was also executed during the purges (“the Doctor”); and Madame Cubar¹²⁷ (“quite the embodiment of what a Commissar’s wife should be, dour, too heavy, etc.”).¹²⁸ Post wrote that luncheon was “gay and chatty in spite of the difficulties

¹²³ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹²⁴ Post, “Memos to Mrs. Major,” August, 1962: 10.

¹²⁵ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹²⁶ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹²⁷ I was not able to track down “Madame Cubar’s” identity; one of the difficulties in working with Post’s personal papers was that she frequently misspelled the names of people and places (particularly Russian names, but not limited to that), so it is possible that “Cubar” was an approximation of a name that Post only heard, but never saw written down. From Post’s note we do know at least that Madame Cubar was married to a commissar.

¹²⁸ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

of language”¹²⁹ She was especially pleased that her guests expressed interest in frozen foods and the logistics of preserving them, and even gave them a tour of her freezers. After the tour, the group watched a movie (for which Post had had a translation of the synopsis prepared).

Post’s experience as a businesswoman also proved to be an asset. Davies wrote of the group at the luncheon at the Molotovs’ dacha, “It was quite extraordinary—a group of wives of commissars all of whom are actively engaged as engineers, doctors, and factory managers.”¹³⁰ In the Soviet Union, being the wife of a politician did not mean that you yourself were not also engaged in a successful career—Post’s dual role as businesswoman and hostess did not appear so strange here, and even provided common ground for her to connect with her Soviet counterparts. Davies wrote that Zhemchuzhina “and the rest of these serious-minded women who are engineers, physicians, etc., found great interest in Marjorie particularly in the fact that a woman of her type should be so much interested in serious business matters and should herself be ‘a workingwoman’”¹³¹

Post’s scrapbook is filled with invitations and calling cards from other foreign service members, as well as Soviet officials. She seemed especially fond of Ivy Litvinov, pasting several photographs of her in the scrapbook. A note next to one of the photographs reads, “A lovely day at Litvinoff’s dacha—long tramp in country—large lunch + agreeable company”¹³² Ivy Litvinov, born Ivy Low, was a British woman who had met her husband in 1915 in London, where he was working for a publishing house.¹³³ Ivy Litvinov’s Western upbringing and ability to converse with

¹²⁹ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹³⁰ Davies, *Mission to Moscow*, 113.

¹³¹ Ibid, 113.

¹³² Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹³³ Hugh D. Phillips, *Between the Revolution and the West: A Political Biography of Maxim M. Litvinov* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 12.

Post in English probably contributed to their friendliness, although Post never mentions this specifically in her scrapbook.

Post celebrated her 50th birthday in Moscow, and received dozens of gifts. She recorded who gave her what, and also had pasted in calling cards with witty little rhymes accompanying each. One card read “This may be an egg of czarist times/But Kalinin wishes to say in rhymes/The birthday wishes of his snowy climes” (Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin, who at the time was serving as the Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, gave Post an enameled Easter egg, but it was not a Faberge). Another read, “Before such Beauty Timidly, the bold Voroshilov /Sends his gift, his wishes + his ‘lof’!” Kliment Voroshilov was at the time the People’s Commissar for Defense of the Soviet Union. A note pasted next to Zhemchuzhina’s card reads, “With this little gift Stalin sends his best wishes/With the Red Army salute and Communistic swishes!”¹³⁴ Post never actually met Stalin herself (and Davies only had one two-hour meeting with him), but based on the gifts she received from officials including Kalinin, Molotov, and Litvinov, she was at least fairly well-respected among the upper ranks of the Soviet government.

Post’s biggest social coup as ambassadress came in the form of her widely publicized dinner thrown in honor of the Red Army. Such a gathering had been a goal of the American mission since its inception in 1933, but, as Post casually remarked “It seemed to take quite a little reconnoitering”¹³⁵ Unsurprisingly, given her extensive experience hosting such events, Post succeeded where others had failed and pulled off the dinner on March 23, 1937. The guests of honor included Kliment Yefremovich Voroshilov, Marshal of the Soviet Union and one of the main executioners in the Stalinist purges; Semyon Mikhailovich Budyonny, Marshal of the Soviet

¹³⁴ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹³⁵ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Union; and Mikhail Nikolayevich Tukhachevsky, also a Marshal of the Soviet Union and one of the victims of the Stalinist purges. Post considered the dinner a success. She wrote that, “The dinner was very gay; many speeches and toasts, etc. . . . Joe made a speech and Marshall Voroshilov responded most ably, speaking in Russian with a translator.”¹³⁶ Post’s scrapbook included an article from the *New York Herald-Tribune*, which noted that it was “extremely rare” for the three Marshals to “ma[k]e an appearance together at a foreign diplomatic function.” Another article pasted in her scrapbook echoed this sentiment, claiming that “such an incident has hardly been recorded before in Russia.”¹³⁷

While arranging the events themselves came easily to Post, her biggest frustration was the hoops she had to jump through to invite her guests. As she wrote in her scrapbook,

As usual, everything is in reverse in Russia. When we wish to include any members of the Russian Government in a dinner, reception, etc., the invitations were never sent directly to the individual. This was not permitted. You contacted the Chef de Protocol, Mr. Barkov, to say you would be happy to entertain some members of the Russian Government. . . and he then, apparently, selected who was to come and sent you the list of names. The only two exceptions to this rule during the time we were there was the luncheon for Mme. Molotov and the Red Army Dinner.¹³⁸

But the frustrations were worthwhile. Post’s diplomatic dinners met with positive responses from guests, including other members of the diplomatic corps. Post recalled one dinner where, “As we approached the door I was with the British Ambassador; he stopped and looked at the tables, bowed ceremoniously to me and said, ‘Madame, for the first time, when I enter the dining room in the American Embassy I see tables that are really worthy of your country. While Mr. Bullett [sic] was here I was never impressed with the American elegance that I knew existed.’ Well, I was overcome but I was very pleased.”¹³⁹ That same ambassador, Lord Chilton, was

¹³⁶ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹³⁷ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹³⁸ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹³⁹ Post, “Memos to Mrs. Major,” August, 1962: 13.

amazed when he later heard that Post had spent the day at the Molotovs' personal dacha. Post wrote that he responded, "You Americans are remarkable! I've been here seven years and haven't been able to so much as get a toe in that house—and you come after only a few weeks you have a luncheon given there in your honor. I don't understand it!"¹⁴⁰ Roosevelt was also pleased with Davies and Post's success, comparing their efforts favorably with Bullitt's; MacLean quotes Roosevelt as noting that in contrast with Bullitt, "Joe got around...and seemed to find out what [the] Russians were doing."¹⁴¹

Based on Chilton and Roosevelt's responses, it appears that Post really was able to create relationships with the Soviets that were unique among members of the diplomatic corps. Davies himself was tremendously proud of Post's diplomatic efforts. In a letter to one of Post's daughters, Davies praised Post, writing, "And with it all, of course, "Mumsie" never hauled down the flag of her Americanism and her devotion to our government system. I needn't tell you, but she was always the tolerant gentlewoman who never needlessly offended, but gave to others the right which she herself required—the right to their own opinions... That is real diplomacy."¹⁴² Post's personal friendships with Ivy Litvinov and Polina Zhemchuzhina seem to be unique in diplomatic circles at that point in Soviet-American relations; neither Davies nor Bullitt appear to have had personal friendships with Soviets at that level of government (let alone at the level their husbands' occupied). Through her Red Army Dinner, Post accomplished the feat of bringing together more high-ranking Soviets than had ever gathered at an event hosted by a foreign diplomat. In this sense, Post played an integral role in Davies's mission to create positive relations with the Soviets.

¹⁴⁰ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁴¹ MacLean, *Joseph E. Davies*, 37.

¹⁴² Joseph Davies to Nedenia Hutton, June 10, 1938, Box 10, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Chapter 3

Post's role as hostess held political implications, and reflected Roosevelt's and Davies's approach to American-Soviet relations. Likewise, Post's collecting also is a direct reflection of American foreign policy in the Soviet Union. This chapter will examine Post's collecting in Moscow, and will compare her approach with Davies's approach to the purge trials. Both accepted Soviet law, even when it contradicted American democratic values, and both chose to ignore violent aspects of Soviet policy in favor of maintaining positive relations. While imperial art may sound completely separate from the purges, they can both contribute to our understanding of Soviet-American relations during Davies's tenure as ambassador.

Post's Collecting

Post would accumulate the bulk of her Russian collection after her return to the United States; in fact, her collecting during her time in Moscow accounted for only 20% of her total collection.¹⁴³ Because Post did not keep any invoices from her Russian purchases (or, just as likely, she never even received any in the first place), it is difficult to know what pieces in her collection were actually purchased in Russia.¹⁴⁴ But these objects formed the seed of her collection, and sparked in her an interest that followed her throughout her life.

Post's collecting habits differed significantly from those high-profile collectors, like Mellon and Hammer, who had dominated the market prior to 1933. First and foremost, Post had the opportunity to purchase objects in-person from commission shops, storerooms open exclusively to foreign buyers. Collectors like Mellon worked with dealers to acquire specific works, and did not view the storerooms in-person themselves. While sorting through the

¹⁴³ Anne Odom, "American Collectors of Russian Decorative Art," *Canadian American Slavic Studies* 43 (2009): 307.

¹⁴⁴ Odom, "American Collectors of Russian Decorative Art," 311.

storerooms meant sorting through quite a bit of junk, it still gave Post the opportunity to discover treasures (sometimes discovering things that the Soviets themselves did not realize were valuable). Most Americans who had become fascinated with the tragedy of the Romanovs did their collecting through department stores like Hammer's Russian Department at Lord and Taylor, or at auction houses. While Post did do some shopping at Hammer's store before traveling to Moscow, and while she frequently purchased from auction houses after her return to the United States, she was unique among American women collectors in that she had traveled to the Soviet Union and had the chance to negotiate for better prices.

The types of objects Post was interested in were also unique. She was interested primarily in decorative arts, whereas previous collectors were interested in fine arts. Post wanted objects created by Russian artists, whereas collectors like Mellon wanted the European art that had been confiscated from Russian aristocrats. Finally, Post was also unique in her interest in Orthodox objects, like linens, vestments, and icons. Other collectors had largely ignored religious artifacts, despite the fact that these objects were one of the main targets of nationalization efforts. This meant that Post essentially had her pick of icons and other Orthodox art. While Post does not appear to have had any spiritual connection to Orthodoxy, the abundance of Orthodox textiles, icons, and chalices in the Soviet storerooms made those objects the focus of her early collecting.¹⁴⁵ After her time as ambassadress, Post's Russian collection would focus on porcelain, Faberge eggs, and objects belonging to the Romanov family, including a wedding crown and smaller items like snuff boxes.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Odom, "American Collectors of Russian Decorative Art," 308.

¹⁴⁶ For a full catalog of Hillwood's collection (including the objects listed here), please see Anne Odom and Liana Paredes Arend, *A Taste for Splendor* (Alexandria: Art Service International, 1998)

Post did the majority of her collecting in commission shops, storerooms that were open to foreign diplomats. Post described the purpose of the commission shops to her oral history interviewer, saying, “When they opened the storerooms, they did it for the purpose of creating new museums or adding to the ones that they had and the result was that when they would go into a storeroom and take whatever they wanted for the particular purpose that they were working on, then that storeroom would be opened to the diplomats.”¹⁴⁷ Post was correct in thinking that what was left in the storerooms were objects that had not been deemed valuable enough to display in Soviet museums or to sell abroad. By the time she arrived in Moscow, the storerooms had been pretty well picked over.

But that didn’t dampen Post’s excitement over getting to pick through the storerooms on her own. Her description of the commission shops has an air of breathless excitement:

Shopping in Russia is of course in all State Stores—Commission Shops—only about 4 or 5—where the ones where the diplomats had their full! Antiques—of all kinds—furs etc. etc.—The famous Treasure Shops ended 2 yrs before our arrival. They were the \$ shops--+ those were indeed the fabulous shopping days in Russia. During the early days of our stay in Russia—they were clearing State store rooms to create new museums + further augment the old ones. So! One day we were taken by Bender to a State Store Room—Fairy Tales of robber caves—had nothing on this place. Room after room with rough board shelves each one loaded—great boxes on the floor with lovely silver things. Tea—coffee pots, tankards, vodka cups etc. Shelves of china and glass—priest robes + church embroideries. It was here that we found the chalices---looking like pewter—filthy dirty all pushed under a kitchen table. We were allowed to poke + dig + pile what we wanted together + the commissioner would sit (they were in full outside attire cape + muffler complete) drink tea—smoke—yell at each other + eventually we would have a price. Chalices—old—new—jeweled or not—were a ruble a gram—weighed on a feed store scale.¹⁴⁸

Post had a good eye for quality; combined with her head for business and willingness to negotiate, she was able to score quite a few good deals. The chalices she referenced in the above passage actually turned out to be silver (the dust and dirt had made them appear to be made of pewter). On

¹⁴⁷ Transcript of interview with Marjorie Post, conducted by Nettie Major, August 31, 1962, Topridge Estate: 3-4.

¹⁴⁸ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

a trip to Leningrad, Post recorded, “Commission shops full + fascinating—found 2 sets lovely Louis XVI chairs really fine + very cheap.”¹⁴⁹ On another occasion in Leningrad, Post was poking around a cellar storeroom when she noticed something: “My eye lit on a perfectly beautiful small oval picture which I knew was by Greuze and it evidently was a presketch of the “woman with the broken water pitcher” which is in the Louvre. The painting was marvelous, had no frame.”¹⁵⁰ Post turned the painting over and realized it had been mislabeled. Rather than pointing out the error to the man running the shop, she instead took a different approach. For lack of a better phrase, Post played dumb, innocently telling the man that “I thought she was so pretty and would like to buy her.”¹⁵¹ The man must have been suspicious, because he told Post she would have to return the next day so he could check on the price of the painting. When she returned, they had the following exchange:

So when I returned the next day, he said, ‘oh we find out that it is not a Boucher it’s a Greuze,’ and I said ‘yes, I knew that,’ and he looked and said, ‘you couldn’t possibly know that. There are no Greuze outside Russia.’ Well I didn’t say anything but I thought oh, the poor thing, the way they’re misinformed, it’s terrible. So he didn’t have the price and I asked again the next day and they said, ‘no we’re going to put it in one of our museums, it’s not for sale,’ so I didn’t get my beautiful little presketch of the ‘woman with the broken water pitcher.’¹⁵²

Post was no fool, although she wasn’t above playing one to make a deal. Despite her reputation as a superficial socialite, Post was intelligent, and she did her research. And just as Post had researched Russian history and Soviet politics prior to assuming her role as ambassador, her papers make it clear that she also was well aware of the context of nationalization and how all of these objects came to be available for foreign buyers to sift through. Post’s dismissive comment about the commission shop employee being “misinformed” is less a sign of her dislike of Russians,

¹⁴⁹ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁵⁰ Post, “Memos to Mrs. Major,” August, 1962: 8-9.

¹⁵¹ Post, “Memos to Mrs. Major,” August, 1962: 9.

¹⁵² Post, “Memos to Mrs. Major,” August, 1962: 9.

and more symptomatic of her general attitude towards those she perceived as beneath her socioeconomic status. Though Post engaged in philanthropic efforts, she also exhibited condescension towards those of lower status, not surprising given her aristocratic upbringing.

In regards to the origins of the commission shops, Post explained to her interviewer, “Kerensky [leader of the Provisional Government] would take the contents of the building and store them and therefore protect them, so that it wouldn’t be looted or be destroyed and the result was that there was very little looting and destruction connected with their revolution which is quite amazing because Kerensky in the very beginning, being an educated and cultured person, realized the great treasures in Russia must not be destroyed, they must be preserved and of course Lenin stressed that, that the revolution was not individual gain.”¹⁵³ This statement is interesting, since it reveals that while Post does understand that Kerensky and Lenin were involved in confiscating private property, she is either unaware or in denial about the actual level of violence and destruction that accompanied these seizures.

On another occasion, Post visited Kuskovo, the former Sheremetev estate, which had been converted to a museum. While there, she noted, “According to the gossip of Moscow, Prince Sheremetief [sic] went to the Bolshevik leaders in the early days of the Revolution giving them the keys to his two palaces—Kuskovo and Ostankino—and as a result of this, he had a certain protection and is now, I understand, living in a room in a cellar with his wife. The son, however, is leader of the orchestra at the Hotel Metropole and as such, is doing well, but how their hearts must ache if they ever go to the palaces and see the down-at-the-heel look that the grounds, etc., have.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Transcript of interview with Marjorie Post, conducted by Nettie Major, August 31, 1962, Topridge Estate: 3.

¹⁵⁴ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

This passage, nestled in a much longer essay praising the museum's collection, is very revealing. Post clearly understands that the previous owners were coerced into handing over their property to the Bolsheviks, and also understands that, had they not done so, their lives would have been in danger. And yet, her comment about the Sheremetevs' hearts aching at state of the gardens comes off as out of touch at best. Post does not seem to understand the real human toll of nationalization—she does not understand that the condition of the estate is the least of the Sheremetevs' worries.

On that same visit, Post recalled peeking into some of the outbuildings to see that even more treasures were hidden inside. She complained, "I again tried, through Bender, to have a look into the little chapel where, through the window, one could see such beautiful things stored but it seems that the curator, who was purged some time ago, left such confusion as to the records, etc., that no one had yet been able or willing to resume the responsibility of opening that particular storeroom. I found out later that the cellar is likewise packed and jammed with magnificent things (somehow or other, Charlie, the chauffeur, managed to get an eye and a foot in it!). How I would have enjoyed that experience!"¹⁵⁵ Again, Post's comments here seem to disregard the human toll of Soviet policies. Rather than expressing sympathy for the curator's fate, she almost seems to blame him for preventing her from accessing the storeroom. Post mentions this so casually, it makes one wonder: did she not understand the full implications of the purges? Had she become desensitized to the purges, having lived in Moscow during the height of the Moscow show trials?

The answer to this is complicated. Post was very much aware of the purge trials, even though it does not appear that she actually attended any of them herself. She was keenly aware of the effect of the trials upon those around her. She recalled, "We arrived during the second purge

¹⁵⁵ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

trials and it was certainly a very grim time to be in Russia. There was so much fear and you had evidences of the tension the populace was living under. Adjoining the gardens of the American Embassy were a number of apartment houses and night after night we would hear the old black morias clanging their bells, stopping near one of the apartments, and then the screams of individuals and their friends and their families. Then in a very short time we would hear the bells clanging again on the old moria and off they would go to jail and probably to death.”¹⁵⁶

The Russians working at Spaso House were not immune to the threat of the purges, either. Post recalled that “They [Russian Embassy Staff] were all so tense and so nervous and so scared for themselves, for their families and so forth, and it really is quite a terrifying thing. Many nights I had wakened by some awful noise and I began to listen and I was sure it was the firing of guns. I said to the Ambassador any number of times ‘I know perfectly well they are executing a lot of those people,’ and he said ‘oh no I think it’s blasting in the new part of the subway,’ which I don’t think it was at all.”¹⁵⁷ This passage is from Post’s 1960s oral history interviews; it’s possible that by that time she had learned more about the purges, and sought to distinguish herself from Davies, who by then had a reputation as a Stalin apologist. Post may have been trying to portray herself as being more knowledgeable about the purges than she actually was during her time in Moscow. Yet her scrapbook notes from 1937 about the Sheremetev Estate suggests that Post at least had some knowledge of the purges during her time in Moscow, even if she did not understand the full context or scope of them.

Perhaps the starkest illustration of Post’s experience of the purges comes in her scrapbook notes on the aftermath of her celebrated Red Army dinner. Pasted next to newspaper articles

¹⁵⁶ Transcript, Marjorie Merriweather Post interview, August 31, 1962, Topridge Estate, conducted by Nettie Major: 1.

¹⁵⁷ Transcript, Marjorie Merriweather Post interview, August 31, 1962, Topridge Estate, conducted by Nettie Major: 1.

praising her success in coordinating the dinner, is a list of all the guests that evening, along with a brief biography. Next to nearly every entry is an additional annotation: “Shot,” “Arrested,” “Reported Murdered,” “??”. Of the twenty-five guests listed, sixteen have these annotations next to their names. Although she expresses sympathy for her guests’ fates, Post does not seem to think they were entirely innocent. Post, like Davies, seems to have believed the Soviet government’s claim that there was a genuine threat to the regime. Her notes on the affair read, “Tukhachersky, poor soul, was arrested about two months after this dinner and was one of the many officers in the Red Army to be purged. There was a coup d’etat, very well advanced, which only barely missed being successful that May in Russia. Tukhachereky, however, was stupid enough to divulge some of the plans to his lady love, and true to the Lenin teachings—trust no on, watch your wife, watch your children, watch your husband, report to the Government on their activities; she reported to the Gay-Pay-Oo and the revolution was broken up.”¹⁵⁸ In 1937, Post clearly believed the Soviet government’s defense of the purges, at least to some extent. In this, she seems to have agreed with Davies’s assessment of the trials: although they were conducted in a manner that would have been unacceptable in the United States, there was at least some element of truth in the prosecutor’s argument.¹⁵⁹

As mentioned in the introduction, Davies is a controversial figure in the history of Soviet-American relations, in large part thank to his response to the purges. Embassy staffers were extremely critical of Davies’s response to the Moscow show trials, believing that Davies’s refusal to confront the Soviet government revealed an unacceptable level of naiveté, or even downright complicity in government-sponsored violence.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Post Scrapbook, Box 37, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁵⁹ Davies, *Mission to Moscow*, 32-46.

¹⁶⁰ Dunn, *Caught Between Roosevelt and Stalin*, 79-81.

Davies and his staff issued separate reports to the State Department regarding the trials. The embassy's reports indicate that Russian experts there were convinced that the defendants were not guilty of the charges against them. In a 1937 memorandum, George Kennan, Second Secretary of the Embassy, noted that because the defendants' testimony was so conflicting yet seemingly genuinely expressed that "The question which presents itself, therefore, to the experienced observer is not one of whether the trial was bona fide; it is a question of to what extent it was bona fide and of what actually did lie behind it."¹⁶¹ Kennan concluded, as did others in the embassy's reports, that the confessions were scripted by the secret police.¹⁶² Loy W. Henderson, chargé in the embassy, wrote to Secretary of State Cordell Hull that while it was difficult for observers to understand why the defendants would so readily implicate themselves, "It is also the belief of the Embassy that the prisoners testified as they did with the hope of escaping torture or obtaining commutation of sentence or from fear that failure to testify would result in harm to members of their families or friends."¹⁶³ Historians such as James Dunn claim that the embassy's conclusions are perfectly in line with current scholarship on the purges, describing Kennan and his fellows as "astute observers" who saw through the rhetoric of the trials to the political motivations behind them.¹⁶⁴

Through their own observation and by monitoring Soviet and American press accounts of the trials, the American Embassy clearly had ample opportunity to develop their opinion on the

¹⁶¹ George F. Kennan, Second Secretary of the Embassy, to Joseph E. Davies, American Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Moscow, February 13, 1937; Memorandum forwarded by Joseph E. Davies to Cordell Hull, Secretary of State, Moscow, February 18, 1937. Roll 2 File 861.00/11652-11710. Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union, 1930-1939. T1249. Department of State Central Files, Record Group 59. National Archives, College Park.

¹⁶² Kennan to Davies, Roll 2, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union, 1930-1939. T1249. Department of State Central Files, RG 59. NACP.

¹⁶³ Loy Henderson, Chargé in the Soviet Union, to Cordell Hull, Secretary of State, Moscow, August 27, 1936. *Foreign Relations of the United States, The Soviet Union 1933-1939*. Washington: United States Government Printing Office (1952), 301.

¹⁶⁴ Dunn, *Caught Between Roosevelt & Stalin*, 81.

proceedings. Although they accused him of being either clueless or indifferent to the purge trials, Davies's letters to Roosevelt and to Secretary of State Cordell Hull suggest that he did carefully study the trials (although his conclusions differed from those presented by his department). In a letter to Hull in February of 1937, Davies delivered an assessment of the trials in the context of "the immediate political situation" and "the criminal code"—he included detailed observations of the trials themselves, including descriptions of the courtroom, defendants, and prosecutor. While Davies seemed inclined to believe that the defendants genuinely were involved in a "Trotskyite" conspiracy against the Soviet government, he also admitted "that the occasion was dramatized for propaganda purposes."¹⁶⁵ He concluded his report by writing that "this whole trial and surrounding circumstances shock our mentality"¹⁶⁶ Drawing on his own legal background, Davies analyzed the trial like a lawyer, and concluded that the Soviets were following their own rules, no matter how deplorable Davies may have personally found them to be. We see here a connection to European and American courts' responses to Russian émigrés' suits against the Soviet government for selling nationalized art: in order to recognize the Soviet government, other governments had to accept its laws, including the nationalization decree. While they may have personally sympathized with the émigrés, from a legal standpoint, they were obligated to defer to the Soviet government's laws. MacLean notes that because Davies's assessment aligned with Roosevelt's "policy of cooperation"¹⁶⁷ it was better received by the President than were the State Department reports. Perhaps that is why Roosevelt chose not to act on the State Department reports, accepting Davies's report instead. While this added fuel to the fire in the conflict between Davies and his staff, Roosevelt's decision also illustrates that he had, in the words of Dunn, "a penchant for misleading

¹⁶⁵ Davies, *Mission to Moscow*, 42.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁶⁷ MacLean, *Joseph E. Davies*, 29.

public opinion and hamstringing the State Department,” traits which Dunn says were “emblematic of [Roosevelt’s] policy toward Stalin for the duration of his tenure as president”.¹⁶⁸ Given this, it is little surprise that Davies was focused on fulfilling Roosevelt’s expectations for his post, rather than on his staff’s expectations for him. Post also adopted this attitude with regards to her collecting, and choose to ignore the ethically problematic aspects of the Soviet nationalization policies in favor of maintaining the status quo (and gaining something for herself in the meantime).

¹⁶⁸ Dunn, *Caught Between Roosevelt and Stalin*, 8.

Conclusion

In July 1938, Davies left Moscow to take up the ambassadorial post in Brussels. After a largely uneventful tenure there, Davies resigned from the State Department and returned to Washington in 1940. While this was the end of his and Post's official diplomatic roles, it was far from the end of their relationships to Moscow. Davies spent World War II serving as an unofficial liaison to the Soviet Union, a position he earned in part thanks to his friendly relations with Litvinov (whose wife had become friendly with Post while in Moscow). Davies also worked to improve Americans' perception of the Soviet Union, an important task given Roosevelt's push to establish an alliance with the Soviet Union. With Roosevelt's encouragement, Davies published *Mission to Moscow* in 1941, a collection of his personal and official correspondence during his time as ambassador. According to MacLean, the book served as "an ideal propaganda tool to garner support for the Soviet cause."¹⁶⁹ The book was well-received (although the subsequent film adaptation was not as successful), but it also became another point of contention for critics of Davies's role as ambassador, who argued that the book whitewashed the Soviet regime.

Post continued collecting Russian art, and even maintained correspondence with some of her Moscow friends. Her papers include a 1948 letter to the Molotovs thanking them for "The charming and beautiful mementos of Russia." She doesn't specify what the gift was, but writes that "The magnificent quality and color of these lovely things could be produced only in Russia... They will always be happy reminders of you both." Post ended her letter by writing, "We, with many others, are praying that peace shall continue between our two peoples, who should always be friends."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ MacLean, *Joseph E. Davies*, 76.

¹⁷⁰ Marjorie Merriweather Post to Mr. and Mrs. V.M. Molotov, July 19, 1948, Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens Archives.

Although Post continued her interest in Russian culture, she seemed far less interested in Soviet politics, either of the Cold War era or during her tenure as ambassadress. In January of 1968, Post received a letter from Thomas A. Julian, an assistant professor of history at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado and a major in the United States Air Force. He wrote to Post requesting her assistance with his research on Philip R. Faymonville, who had served as the military attaché at the United States Embassy in Moscow during Davies's tenure as ambassador. Julian wrote that he was interested in learning about Davies and Faymonville's relationship, particularly because of a dissertation he had read by Keith Eagles that argued "the relationship...was a close one because of their commonality of views about developing better relations" with the Soviet Union.¹⁷¹

Post's response probably was not what Julian was hoping to hear: "Naturally, as a member of the 'Embassy Family' I knew General Faymonville and to the best of my knowledge probably Keith Eagles was correct. Ambassador Davies was very eager to have friendly relations with the Soviets but of course I would not have been present at any of their conferences and, in any event, it is now thirty years ago, and difficult to recall."¹⁷² Post maintained her disinterest in politics, and turned her attentions to philanthropic efforts. Yet despite her stated disinterest, it is clear that Post's collecting continued to be tied up in foreign relations. As Hillwood curator Anne Odom notes, the bulk of Post's Russian collection was acquired after her time in Moscow, requiring her to work with overseas art dealers and auction houses to build her collection.¹⁷³ While she may not have directly worked with Soviet dealers, the middlemen Post worked with would have had some

¹⁷¹ Thomas A. Julian to Marjorie Merriweather Post, January 10, 1968, Box 18, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁷² Marjorie Merriweather Post to Thomas A. Julian, February 16, 1968, Box 18, Post Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁷³ Odom, "American Collectors of Russian Decorative Art," 307.

connection back to the Soviet Union, suggesting that Post's collecting was far more dependent upon foreign relations than her own statements would suggest.

Given the controversial circumstances under which Post accumulated her collection, it is rather surprising that Hillwood has not come under more pressure to enter into negotiations to repatriate some of its collection back to Russia. Part of this is thanks to Hillwood's vigorous documentation of the provenance of all of the objects in its collection. It appears that all of Post's collection was either acquired as a gift, or purchased under completely legal circumstances. Unlike the situation with art stolen by the Nazis, where descendants of the original owners are still actively pursuing legal action to take back possession of their family's property, it seems that there are no descendants of Russian emigres petitioning Hillwood to return their family's property. The Russian government has not expressed any interest in pursuing legal action to repatriate Russian art held in American museums. A 2004 *Washington Post* article quotes the cultural attaché at the Russian Embassy as saying that the government will only attempt to acquire art that has returned to the market, saying "If we can pay, we pay. If not, we can't do anything."¹⁷⁴ That same article discusses how individual Eastern European collectors, such as Ukrainian Victor Vekselberg, are attempting to purchase any Russian art (from the nationalization period) that comes on the market. While these collectors claim that they are purchasing the art to give Russia back its cultural heritage, it appears that the objects are going back into private collections rather into public museums. These new sales are eerily similar to the covert sales of the 1920s and 1930s—last-minute secret dealings announced quickly before public auctions take place, purchases made through non-profits and intermediaries. It will be interesting to see how this market progresses, and what will become of these cultural artifacts.

¹⁷⁴ Linda Hales, "Old Russia's Art Retrieved with New Russian Wealth," *The Washington Post*, February 7, 2004.

In this thesis, I have tried to demonstrate that Marjorie Merriweather Post played a unique role in early Soviet-American relations. As first ambassadress she assisted Joseph Davies's mission to foster positive relations with the Soviet government. As a collector, she contributed to Soviet-American cultural exchanges that had been ongoing since the inception of the Soviet Union. Her perspective on collecting and Soviet nationalization policy mirrored Davies's view of the Stalinist purges; in both instances, Post and Davies deferred to Soviet law, even when the law went against American democratic ideals regarding fair trials and the right to private property. Both chose to overlook violent Soviet policies in favor of maintaining a positive relationship with the government. Post's story demonstrates that historians can use cultural texts to examine larger political questions.

This thesis only scratches the surface of the themes of the Soviet art trade and its role in Soviet-American relations. Post's story, her archival materials, and the themes raised in this thesis present multiple avenues for future research. First, Post's papers have largely only been used in Hillwood publications centered on the museum's collections. I think that Soviet historians and political historians could both benefit from reviewing her materials. For Soviet historians, Post's materials present a unique view of Moscow during the purges. For political historians, especially those interested in Joseph Davies or American foreign policy more generally, Post's papers can offer further insight into Davies's and Roosevelt's understanding of the goals of Soviet-American relations.

For my own research interests, further research will require a much greater use of Russian-language sources. I am particularly interested in viewing internal documents from Antikvariat; because Gosmuzeifond was associated with the Hermitage, and because so many historians have

focused on the Hermitage's role in the art sales, there are several English-language secondary works on Gosmuzeifond. There is very little in English on Antikvariat, let alone the dozens of other satellite organizations dealing with the Soviet art trade. In order to have a better sense of how these departments operated and how they worked with American collectors, I would someday like to visit Russian archives to consult those materials. It would also be extremely interesting to examine institutional archives of museums that were active during the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union, particularly rural museums (since the literature as of now focuses primarily on the Hermitage and urban museums).

Another avenue of research would be to investigate the lives of the Russian émigrés who did pursue legal action against the Soviet Union in an attempt to recover confiscated property. In researching this thesis I realized that their story is still largely untold, and represents a lacuna in the literature on cultural repatriation. To do this research, one would likely need to conduct research in German and French archives, since those countries had large émigré communities. I imagine that this research would also require tracking down descendants of those émigrés and trying to discover if the family retains any of their personal records, since it is likely that many of these materials never made their way into a state archive.

I hope that this thesis demonstrates the value in applying a cultural lens to questions of political diplomatic relations, and that future researchers will continue to examine how Soviet-American relations were shaped by cultural exchange.

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