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How “Uncle Joe” Bugged FDR

The Lessons of History

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In recent years, the statesmanship of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in particular his handling of Soviet affairs, has come under attack in historical studies. The situation has reached such a pass that even a psychiatrist who examined FDR’s medical records has opined that toward the end of World War II the US President ceded the better part of Eastern Europe to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin because he was “gripped by clinical depression.[1]”

Certainly the President’s moves can be questioned, but questionable policy can be founded on factors other than low spirits—which, in point of fact, were not generally observed in FDR at the time. Rather, the operant factors were: the President’s supreme confidence in his own powers of persuasion, his profound ignorance of the Bolshevik dictatorship, his projection of humane motives onto his Soviet counterpart, his determined resistance to contradictory evidence and advice, and his wishful thinking based on geopolitical designs—mindsets supported and reinforced by his appointed advisors. Taken together, these factors produced a false view of US-Soviet relations and inspired policy that had only superficial contact with reality. As an instance in point, they induced the President of the United States to do the unthinkable: walk into a surveillance trap, not once, but twice, and willingly.

Normally, in order to avoid the possibility of intelligence leaks and personal

Normally e p y o ellig d p embarrassment, as well as to ensure physical safety, traveling US presidents stay in their own country's embassies or other diplomatic buildings, whose tables and walls have been swept by instruments able to discover listening devices. But when Roosevelt went abroad to meet Stalin, he wanted very badly to please him, holding him to be a key figure in the postwar division of powers, and so did not insist on such accommodations. Consequently, at the conference in Teheran (November 1943) and again at Yalta (February 1945), he stayed in Soviet quarters and was bugged like no other American president in history.

FDR's Acquaintance With Bugs

Roosevelt was no stranger to technical surveillance. In 1939, piqued by an incident in which he believed that the press had deliberately misquoted him, he had a secret recording system installed in the White House as a means of self-protection. Since German tape-recording technology had not yet found its way to America, something had to be invented. FDR's assistants took the problem to David Sarnoff of the Radio Corporation of America. In June 1940, Sarnoff personally presented the President with a "continuous-film recording machine" that made use of motion-picture sound film. Set in a wire cage in a room beneath the Oval Office, the device was activated either by the President using a switch inside his desk drawer or by his technician down below throwing a switch on the machine itself. A single microphone poked out through a lamp on FDR's desk.

Between 23 August and 8 November, 1939, during his campaign for an unprecedented third term, the President recorded fourteen of twenty-one press conferences held in his office, plus a number of private conversations, the latter possibly by mistake. It seems that he never used the system to entrap anyone, and no one knows why he stopped it. Relatively innocent by today's standards of invasion, it nevertheless demonstrates that the President was acquainted with listening devices before his conferences with Stalin.[2]

In the very year of the Teheran conference, he was reminded of hidden microphones when watching Mission to Moscow, a movie based on a book of that title by Joseph E. Davies, America's second Ambassador to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. [3] Produced in 1943 with the President's blessing, possibly even at his explicit request, this blatant piece of propaganda was designed to drum up public enthusiasm for a political

shotgun wedding: It colored Stalin as a simple, practical man with whom one could do business; rhapsodized about Soviet construction, government, and politics; and justified the Soviet blood purges, the Moscow show trials, and Stalin's two-year pact with Hitler, which had ended when Hitler turned the tables on Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941.

Attempting to forestall any criticism of the Soviet system, Davies even contrived to make a brief for bugging. In one scene, set in the American Embassy in Moscow, the Ambassador's assistants warn him of listening devices, but he rebukes them severely:

I say nothing outside the Kremlin that I wouldn't say to Stalin's face. Do you? . . . We're here in a sense as guests of the Soviet government, and I'm going to believe they trust the United States as a friend until they prove otherwise. Is that clear?

When the assistant persists that still, after all, there may be microphones, Davies, played with aplomb by FDR's favorite actor, Walter Huston, cuts him off: "Then let 'em hear! We'll be friends that much faster!"4

This cinematic scene was based on an actual incident. In 1937, when a bug was discovered directly over the Ambassador's desk at the US Embassy in Moscow, the real Davies laughed it off. If the Soviets wanted to listen in, he told his incredulous staff—which included George Kennan, Charles Bohlen, and other skilled State Department diplomats—they would only obtain proof of America's sincere desire to cooperate with them.5

FDR strongly approved of the film. In his assessment of Soviet politics, he was much closer to Davies, his second Ambassador, than to his first, William C. Bullitt.6 Contrary to Davies, Bullitt never missed an opportunity to warn FDR of Stalin's treachery. In a typical exchange, Roosevelt responded:

*Bill, I don't dispute your facts; they are accurate. I don't dispute the logic of your reasoning. I just have a hunch that Stalin is not that kind of man. Harry [Hopkins] says he's not and that he doesn't want anything but security for his country, and I think if I give him everything I possibly can and ask for nothing in return, noblesse oblige, he won't try to annex anything and will work with me for a world of democracy and peace.*7

FDR's hunch, Hopkins' glowing reports on Stalin, and Davies' boundless trust in the Soviet regime were the President's counters to the admitted facts about Hitler's recent ally, history's greatest mass-murderer, and the

sole ruler of a party and state dedicated to worldwide communism.8

Missions to Moscow

Certain that he had the correct line on Stalin, FDR desired to meet him, turn his famous charisma on him, and decide world affairs with him on a personal basis. As early as March 1942, he wrote British Prime Minister Winston Churchill:

I think I can personally handle Stalin better than either your Foreign Office or my State Department. Stalin hates the guts of all your top people. He thinks he likes me better, and I hope he will continue to do so.9

Guided by this conviction, FDR steered a straight-line policy on "Russia," as he unfailingly and mistakenly called the Soviet Union: unswerving conciliation of Stalin, capped off with a face-to-face meeting.

To advance this policy, he relied heavily on Davies. In March 1943, when the Ambassador to the USSR at the time, Adm. William H. Standley, complained in Moscow that the Soviet authorities had concealed the extent of American Lend-Lease aid from the Soviet people, FDR feared that Stalin would take offense. Chastising Standley, he informed him that his sole purpose in Moscow was "full and friendly cooperation" with the Soviet Union.

Soon afterward, the President entrusted former envoy Davies with a new mission: flying to Moscow and telling Stalin in private how much the American President respected him and how much he wanted to build their special relationship. To prove it, Davies was to tell the tyrant that FDR wanted to meet him face-to-face.

Prior to his departure in May 1943, Davies brought a fresh print of Mission to Moscow to the White House for a sneak preview. After its viewing, he secured FDR's permission to take a copy with him to Moscow, along with a sealed envelope that the President had prepared for Stalin.

When Davies arrived in Moscow, Amb. Standley, not informed of the mission in advance, resigned in disgust. Davies met Stalin in the Kremlin and read him the letter. He emphasized the US government's disapproval of British imperialism and broadly hinted that the USA and the USSR,

without the British, could rule the world together. Having betrayed British allies and destroyed the incumbent Ambassador, Davies then retired with Stalin to the Kremlin screening room to watch Mission to Moscow, where his cinematic glorification of the dictator, to his disappointment, did not win a rave review, but only a grunt or two. However, Davies got what he came for: Stalin agreed to meet FDR in Alaska. Davies' biographer, Elizabeth Kimball MacLean, calls it "the coup of his diplomatic career."10

The coup proved ephemeral, as did all of the other coups in Davies' career. Stalin had no intention of roving far from home. He kept putting off the meeting, frustrating and reducing FDR to pleading. Where once he had made a concession to FDR's physical handicap, Stalin now began to insist on the capital of Iran as a venue, despite its extra hardship for the President. On 25 October 1943, Roosevelt pointed out that "I would have to travel 6,000 miles and you would have to travel 600 miles from Russian [sic] territory." He implored Stalin not to fail him "in this crisis," and stooped to the words: "I am begging you."11

Then, thinking that yet another "mission to Moscow" might do the trick, he sent his aged and aching Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, to deliver this letter to the Kremlin and tell the tyrant once again what a great leader he was. But Stalin was used to servile praise and would not relent. He said he could go no farther from the front, indicating that his duties as Marshal of the Red Army were weightier than FDR's as Commander-in-Chief of the US Armed Forces. Finally convinced of Stalin's inflexibility, FDR caved in. On 8 November, he wired his approval to Moscow. He could break his tight schedule in Washington and arrange for the signing of Congressional bills while abroad in order to meet Stalin in Teheran.

W. Averell Harriman, Standley's replacement as Ambassador to the Soviet Union, hand-carried this capitulation to the Kremlin, where he met with Vyacheslav Molotov, Commissar for Foreign Affairs, since Stalin was said to be sick. Molotov toyed with the Ambassador, suggesting that the site was still not certain and that Stalin might have to stay on Soviet soil, prompting Harriman to send an alarmed report to the White House. The next day, however, Stalin confirmed the arrangement through the Soviet Embassy in Washington, so Roosevelt felt that he had achieved something. The following day, 11 November, he urged Churchill to accept the site and rejected the idea of meeting alone with the Prime Minister in advance, fearing that Stalin would think that they had "ganged up" against him. Stalin had FDR acting in his best interests.12

Stalin's Acquaintance With Bugs

For Stalin, bugging friend and foe was an essential part of politics. Since the early 1920s, he had kept a special telephone beneath his desk in the Kremlin for listening in on the private conversations of other Politburo members speaking on an exclusive line.13 Thus, all through the inner-Party struggle for succession, while leader Vladimir Lenin lay dying and for years after he died in 1924, Stalin was able to eavesdrop on all of his comrades, who spoke openly on the line, believing that, since there was no operator (as on the other Kremlin lines), the new "vertushka" (dial) phone was safe. It was not: Stalin magically knew all of their nighttime thoughts the next morning, outmaneuvered them every day, and eventually had most of them shot.14

Stalin's intelligence arm, the NKVD, or People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, extended all manner of mechanical eyes and ears throughout the nation to reinforce the Bolshevik party's totalitarian control. Closed borders, internal passports, censored presses, political purges, and forced-labor camps—all of these features of the Soviet system were common knowledge in the 1930s and 1940s, as even Mission to Moscow acknowledged, but FDR, like Davies, brushed them aside. He wanted no criticisms from Bullitt, Standley, or anyone worried about the Soviet massacre of Polish officers in Katyn Forest, for example. To keep the war effort united and to work for postwar democracy, he wanted to please Iosif ("Joseph") Stalin, whom he liked to call "Uncle Joe." His primary purpose was to makes friends with a man widely believed to have murdered his wife, liquidated his closest political comrades, and ordered the assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico in August 1940. As Thomas Fleming notes in The New Dealers' War: FDR and the War Within World War II, Churchill once said that making an alliance with Stalin would be the same as "shaking hands with murder." But that was before he, too, warmed up to Uncle Joe.15

Security Alarms

And so President Roosevelt made the trip to Teheran, flying eight hours from Cairo in the Presidential DC-4, jokingly called “the Sacred Cow.” He had come to Cairo for a five-day conference with Chiang Kaishek, leader of the Nationalist Chinese, and Winston Churchill, his closest ally, whom he snubbed. While in Cairo, he communicated with Stalin in order to finalize their meeting in Teheran. Naturally, each government had already made plans for its head of state—the President, the Marshal, and the Prime Minister—to stay in his own diplomatic residence. Such matters are settled before leaving home.16

Iran was an occupied country during the war. Soviet and British troops divided the territory, while American forces facilitated the transport of Lend-Lease materials through the country to the USSR. The Iranians were restless because they were practically starving, but the Allies kept the situation in hand, and there was little risk from this quarter. In the capital, the occupation forces maintained tight security, obliging vehicles and pedestrians to show documents at frequent checkpoints. Back-to-back Soviet and British embassies stood inside a walled park in the center of town; the American Legation was only one mile away, inside a smaller walled compound. All three missions were fortified by armed guards. The site of the conference was secure.

Nevertheless, on the day of his arrival in Cairo (22 November 1943), FDR began to suggest a change in his plans for Teheran. He wrote Stalin in Moscow:

*I am advised that all three of us would be taking unnecessary risks by driving to and from our meeting if we were staying so far apart from each other. Where do you think we should live?*17

Who advised FDR is not certain, possibly Churchill, who at some point invited Roosevelt to stay in the British Embassy. In any event, the next day Andrei Vyshinsky, the infamous prosecutor in the Moscow show trials of the 1930s and now the USSR Assistant Commissar for Foreign Affairs, called on FDR at the villa of Alexander C. Kirk, the American Ambassador to Egypt. After paying his respects, Vyshinsky, accompanied by Harriman and Bohlen (who translated), invited the President to stay in the Soviet Embassy while in Teheran. FDR declined. After the visit, he told his security man, Mike Reilly, that he preferred to stay at the American Legation and remain “more independent than a guest could hope to be.”18

Then he dispatched Reilly to Teheran to check out the security and a possible train route to the city, which his doctor thought would be better

for his health than a high-altitude flight.

Reilly tested a low-flying route to Iran and landed at Gale Morghe Airport, a Soviet airstrip, where he was met by Soviet Security. In his later memoir, he recalls the man in charge as “General Artikov,” but it was more likely Gen. Dmitry Arkadiev, a forty-three-year-old functionary who headed the NKVD department of transportation. Reilly never saw the real head of the NKVD, Lavrenty Beria, who was present but kept to the shadows. Arkadiev took Reilly forthwith on a tour of the Soviet Embassy and told him in passing that the NKVD had learned that Nazi “parachutists” had jumped in the area the previous day, but so far had not been apprehended. Their intentions could only be terrible: kidnapping and/or assassination of the world leaders, and possibly sabotage of key installations.

Although the exact date for the Teheran conference had not yet been fixed, the Nazis were aware of the prospect. On 22 November, New York Times correspondent James Reston reported from London that a German radio broadcast had announced a Big Three meeting in Teheran at the end of the month. It is difficult to understand why the Nazis would disclose the secret meeting if they planned to assassinate its participants. They may have learned about the conference from FDR and Churchill’s intercontinental telephone calls, all of which were intercepted after a technical breakthrough by German intelligence in March 1942.19

Reilly proceeded to inspect the British and American premises, and on his own turf extended the protected area and doubled the guard. A hundred American soldiers pitched tents on the legation grounds to be ready for any contingency. Soviet, British, and American security dragged a net through the city for Nazi agents, while Reilly flew off to Basra, Iraq, to evaluate the train route. Upon his return, he learned that a Nazi spy in custody, “Fritz Meier,” had admitted, after a bit of persuasion, that he expected to be contacted by the “paratroopers.” But, again, this information appears faulty, because the British had rolled up Franz Mayer and his non-functional Teheran network in August. Nevertheless, Reilly took the plot seriously. He flew back to the President in Cairo, leaving instructions with his subordinates to work with the NKVD in his absence.

Since he had demonstrated that the plane to Teheran could steer low through the mountains, Reilly advised the President to fly direct to the capital. The train route, he reported, was not only a security risk, but also a miasma of filth and parasites. As for the city, said Reilly, the American premises were adequate and the drive between the embassies presented

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no security problems.20

Changing Places

Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill, at the Teheran Conference, 1943.

Meanwhile, on 25 November, Stalin replied to FDR's query—"Where do you think we should live?"—with the terse but cordial offer: "I shall be at your service in Teheran the evening of November twenty-eighth." When he learned that the President planned to arrive on 27 November, Stalin changed his plans and flew in on the preceding day. In this way, he not only gained time to get settled, but also could appear as the host.21

On the day of Stalin's arrival, the Soviet Chargé d'Affaires came to see Patrick J. Hurley, one of FDR's roving envoys, and conveyed yet another invitation for the American leader to stay at the Soviet Embassy. Hurley, following FDR's orders, politely but firmly refused, stating that the President had decided to stay in his own legation. Nevertheless, he went off to inspect the suite of six rooms that were offered. Afterward, he wrote FDR that they would be more commodious, comfortable, and secure than the housing at his own place.22

The elaborate maneuvers were beginning to approach the stylized steps of a dance. Both FDR and Uncle Joe wanted badly for the American President to stay in the Soviet Embassy, each for his own reasons, but neither wanted to appear too eager. FDR needed to be courted; Uncle Joe needed to be cool. Both needed an objective reason to change the President's accommodations, and the Nazi threat of assassination filled the bill. Yet the dance was not done; it was time for bold stamps and a swirl.

Roosevelt arrived in Iran at 3:00 p.m. and drove under armed escort to the American Legation. With barely a moment's rest, he sent word to the Soviet Embassy that he would be honored to have Marshal Stalin to supper. Although well rested, Stalin was determined not to ride through the streets of a foreign city, no matter how heavy his protection. He replied that he was too tired. FDR then invited Churchill, but the Prime Minister had a sore throat from talking so long at the closing ceremonies of the Cairo conference and planned to retire to bed early with a volume of Dickens. He had the consolation of Scotch whiskey, for which the Americans sorely envied him, since their cellar supply had been closed off by a ramp built for Roosevelt's wheelchair. Lacking suitably high-level company, FDR conceived a new stratagem.

At 6:00 p.m., Harriman called on Molotov and presented the President's reply to Stalin's written invitation of 25 November. The President, said Harriman, was obliged to say no, because he did not want to upset the British, who had also made the offer. Molotov replied that the place of residence was naturally the President's choice, but the rooms would

remain available “if difficulties should arise.” Harriman next proposed that the first meeting of the conference take place the next afternoon in the American Legation, and Molotov, after consulting with Stalin in the next room, agreed.23

FDR was playing hard to get, testing his own theory that Stalin was “get-at-able.” He turned down an offer from the Persian Shah to stay in the Golistan Palace, stating that his own place was fully adequate. He did not need to complicate matters by honoring the local head of state.

Meanwhile, the NKVD got hold of Reilly and elaborated on the Nazi plot. Thirty-eight paratroopers had landed, Arkadiev now told him, and Soviet Security had captured all but six. Reilly saw none of the prisoners, but all the same began to worry that even the best security might not stop a fanatical assassin from making an assault on one or all of the Big Three as they rode back and forth through the streets.

At midnight, Molotov sent an urgent summons to Harriman and Archibald Clark Kerr, the British Ambassador to the USSR, in order to reverse Stalin’s consent on the meeting place. When the two ambassadors arrived, he gave his version of the Nazi plot, saying that there might be “a demonstration” in which there would be “shooting” and innocent bystanders would be hurt. The bloodbath would cause an international scandal. He refused to give details, but, just in case, took Harriman on another tour of the quarters prepared for the President. By this time, practically everyone but the President had seen them. The location of the next day’s meeting was left in doubt.

The next morning, Harriman convened a staff meeting and presented FDR with information on the plot. The details were sketchy, but scary; if they contained any truth, the lives of all three leaders would be put at risk by the necessity of having to travel to and from the American site. Reilly, who had the last word in the matter, agreed. Either of the two other embassies, he said, would be better than their own. But since the British living quarters had also been inspected and deemed inferior to the Soviet accommodations, FDR at last had the face-saving reason he needed to move in with the dictator and to spend time alone with him without the inconvenience of having to share his thoughts with “Winnie” Churchill. Now he could get at Stalin.24

Uncle Joe's Guest

To effect the move, the US Secret Service staged a great charade on the afternoon of 28 November, driving a convoy of cars, jeeps, and motorcycles to the Soviet Embassy with agent Robert Holmes dressed up as Roosevelt, while the President gleefully traveled the back roads, entered the compound furtively, and was carried into the Soviet Embassy by a side door. Within fifteen minutes of his arrival, before he had time to straighten up, Stalin, like a conquering suitor, appeared at his entranceway, and the first of their three private sessions ensued. Appropriately, it took place under portraits of Lenin and Stalin.
Part of FDR's staff, including Harry Hopkins, Adm. William D. Leahy, and Adm. Ross T. McIntyre, stayed in the embassy with him, some remained in town with the American Minister, Louis G. Dreyfus, who had been displaced from the legation, while others stayed at Camp Amirabad, outside the city. The soldiers at the legation stayed in their tents to maintain the appearance that they were guarding something. Churchill stayed in his own embassy, closed out of the private parlays.25

The Americans inside the Soviet Embassy noticed right away that the personnel attending them had big bulges at their hips under their aprons and white coats. They even saw NKVD uniforms poking out from under the sleeves and the tails of their throwovers. They winked at each other and congratulated themselves for detecting the clumsy disguises, not guessing that they were meant to detect them so as to feel a level of intimidation. In his account, Reilly notes with some concern that 3000 NKVD officers were on hand for the conference, far outnumbering both his and the British guard. He must have understood that there was no way he could protect the President, if need be, against the Soviet forces, both in uniform and in apron. He, like the President, was compelled to put his trust in them. They owned the territory.

Having spared FDR the horror of riding one mile each day through the Persian streets, having appropriated his space and nullified his Secret Service, Uncle Joe drew him into a warm embrace. He told him that after the war he would grant freedom of religion, private ownership, and greater democracy in the Soviet Union, the name of which he would change back to Russia. Roosevelt, delighted with these unbelievable concessions, let Joe know that he could draw the postwar borders of Poland and reassume control of the Baltic republics with perhaps "some expression of the will of the people, perhaps not immediately after their re-occupation by Soviet

forces, but some day." Uncle Joe's word—Stalin said he "understood"—was good enough for FDR.

Harriman never quite believed in the existence of a plot against the President. Back in Moscow after the conference, he asked Molotov whether the Nazis had cooked it up, or whether Molotov and he himself had conjured it. Molotov, who had no sense of humor, replied that, in point of fact, he had no details of an actual plot, yet knew that there were Nazi agents in Teheran. Harriman realized that he could not draw blood from a stone and assumed that Stalin simply did not want to risk his own neck driving through the city. He did not suspect that surveillance was part of the picture and years later told historian Paul Mayle that "the Russians" had no reason to eavesdrop. His perspective on the matter was the same as that of Davies.26

Reilly relates in his book that three months after the conference the "Russians" caught the six missing paratroopers living with a Bedouin tribe in the mountains, and executed them. Such information could have originated only with the NKVD. He filed no report on the alleged plot with the Secret Service, and the report on the conference that the Secret Service did produce makes no mention of a plot. The British record likewise lacks any such reference. The Joint Intelligence Committee of the War Cabinet considered the matter afterward in London and concluded that the so-called Nazi plot against the Big Three was "complete baloney."27

The Illusive "Plot" Resurfaces

In contrast to the West, the NKVD retained the story of the plot and, twenty years later during a publicity campaign, its successor, the KGB, began to promote it in the press. In its new guise, the purported plot against FDR acquired a wealth of details and a sterling cast of characters, most notably SS Capt. Otto Skorzeny, one of the legendary figures of World War II.28 In the literature generated by the KGB, Skorzeny was the man designated by Hitler to lead the attack on the Big Three in Teheran and, in one stroke, turn the war around. But—the story went—the Nazis did not count on NKVD ace Nikolai Kuznetsov, who, posing as a Wehrmacht lieutenant in occupied Ukraine, befriended a hard-drinking and talkative

SS officer named von Ortel, who blurted out revealing tidbits of the plan. Consequently, all three nations—the United States, the United Kingdom, and the USSR—owed the survival of their leaders to the vigilance of the Soviet Secret Police. As might be expected, Skorzeny's memoirs mention no such plan and the various Soviet accounts differ among themselves in names, places, and other specifics.29

In fact, a Georgian defector who claims to have heard the inside story from sources close to Stalin and Beria (both Georgians), debunks the idea of a Nazi plot. In order to impress Roosevelt and impose a feeling of indebtedness on him, writes Yuri Krotkov (a pseudonym), Stalin conceived a bogus assassination attempt and ordered Beria to set it up, with the provision that "assassins" should actually be arrested. Roosevelt, informed of his salvation by Soviet counterintelligence, asked to see the man who had busted the plot. He was presented with a colonel from Saratov named Kravchenko.30 When FDR mistakenly called Col. Kravchenko "General," Stalin jovially promoted him in rank. Krotkov does not say what happened to the men who filled the role of the arrested.31

Although the evidence remains insubstantial, it is not altogether impossible that the Nazis did plan an attack on the Allied leaders, perhaps even at the Teheran conference and even with only a week to prepare (following the radio broadcast of 21 November). It is completely impossible, however, that such a Nazi plan could have been the one that Stalin warned FDR about. If Stalin thought that Otto Skorzeny, who had whisked Mussolini off a mountain top as if he were a feather, were planning to assassinate him, or to try any action in Teheran, he would have postponed the conference and left. He would not have remained in the city even if the story that his own men were spreading were true, that a half-dozen assassins possibly capable of shelling the Soviet Embassy were in the vicinity. He was not a man to take such a risk. On this score Harriman's instincts were correct. Stalwart Good Humor

At the formal meetings in Teheran, FDR continued to woo Stalin. According to a journal article appearing afterward: "Throughout the sessions, he [FDR] was to make every endeavor to meet Stalin's mind, to understand his point of view and to assure the Russian [sic] of his own complete good faith. It seemed to him that the creation of a reciprocal spirit of confidence among the Big Three was more desirable than specific compacts . . . . The core of his policy has been the reassurance of Stalin."32

Returning to America on 17 December, the President told reporters that he

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did not wholly believe Stalin's warning about the assassination plot, but followed his advice anyway, and "everything went well from then on."33 FDR saved his full report on the conference for Christmas Eve. In the most extensive nationwide radio broadcast up to that time, he assured the country that peace was at hand and that no indissoluble problems would arise between the Big Three after the war. Regarding Stalin, he said:

*To use an American and somewhat ungrammatical colloquialism, I may say that "I got along fine" with Marshal Stalin. He is a man who combines a tremendous, relentless determination with a stalwart good humor. I believe he is truly representative of the heart and soul of Russia; and I believe that we are going to get along very well with him and the Russian people—very well indeed.*34

The press did not ask what Stalin might have wanted if his warning of an assassination attempt was not true. But the possibility of bugging was not lost on insiders. In his memoirs, the British general, Sir Hastings Ismay, wondered "if the microphones had already been installed."35

At the Tsar's Palace

The Yalta conference in February 1945 afforded FDR a second opportunity to prove his good faith to Stalin. It was held on Soviet ground, in the Crimea, where a suite was specially prepared for FDR in the Livadia Palace, the spacious summer residence of the former tsar. The building was old, but the new furnishings throughout should have raised suspicions that every word of the American delegation would be transmitted to a listening station. An FBI sweep of the American Embassy in Moscow the previous year had detected 120 concealed microphones, and from time to time afterward, new devices were found in furniture, wall plaster, and other inconspicuous places.36 One would assume that the President, or someone close to him, had been informed, so that the Americans would question their privacy at Livadia. But, in the spirit of Joseph E. Davies, that is where FDR stayed.

The British delegation settled down in the Vorontsov Palace, twenty miles distant, where accommodations were equally attentive. In a story with two versions—either Churchill said that lemon juice would go nicely with his gin and tonic, or his daughter, Sarah, said that lemon juice would go nicely with the caviar—the British woke up the next day to find a lemon tree

growing on the grounds.37

Stalin was taking no chances that either Washington or London would outwit him. Not content with FDR's and Churchill's numerous and profuse demonstrations of good will, he had spies in the American State Department and the British Foreign Service. He had Alger Hiss, a recruited agent, working on the American delegation—Bullitt had warned FDR that Hiss and his brother Donald were spies, but the President did nothing. Stalin also could count on Harry Hopkins, advisor to the President, a man so positive toward "Russia" that the NKVD is said to have regarded him as a voluntary agent. Moreover, Stalin had a seriously ailing, inconvenienced, and ill-prepared President, possibly clinically depressed, on unfamiliar turf, plus a disgruntled British Prime Minister, keenly conscious of being regarded as the least of the three. Still, it wasn't enough (he wanted an extra edge), so Stalin had bugs.38

Eyewitness

Stalin's interpreter at both Teheran and Yalta was Valentin Berezhkov, a trim and proper young man from Leningrad with flowing chestnut hair. In March 1998, still lean and erect, but with flowing white hair, Berezhkov came to the University of California in Riverside to give the keynote address at a conference on Stalin. Sitting in the audience, I recognized a golden opportunity to settle the question about Stalin's bugging FDR. A few years previously, I had read an account about surveillance at Teheran in a New York Russian-language newspaper. The author, Sergo Beria, claimed to be the son of Lavrenty Beria, the infamous head of Soviet Security; however, conflicting reports about Beria's son left me unsure whether I should put stock in the article.39 If anyone should know, I reasoned, it was Berezhkov, whose image appears in numerous snapshots and much of the film footage of the two conferences of the Big Three. After Berezhkov's talk, delivered in nearly flawless English, I went up and asked him: "Was President Roosevelt bugged at Teheran and Yalta?" Berezhkov paused a moment, thought, and then broke into a broad grin as an old scene came back to mind: "Yes, he was," he laughed, "and the names of the speakers were written in by hand."

Further questioning over the next two days, both in English and Russian,

er que tioning o y th in English a brought out the details. Each morning, both in Teheran and Yalta, Berezhkov received from an intelligence unit transcripts of the American delegation's conversations from the previous evening. He then shared them with Stalin as the leader made his preparations for the day's session. In Teheran, the transcript was typed in English, so that Berezhkov had to translate it verbally to Stalin. As he recalled it, each section had a blank line inserted at the beginning with the name of the speaker filled in by hand in Russian.40

"Ear-witness"

Berezhkov, who supported the preparation of this article, underwent heart surgery in September 1998 and died in November of that year. Just at that time, his secret knowledge received unexpected confirmation from a colleague.

Late in 1998, CNN aired the first installment of a $12 million series on the Cold War.41 The first episode included an interview with Sergo Beria, the author of the 1993 article referencing the bugging in Teheran. Beria, born in 1924, turned out indeed to be the son of the dreaded Secret Police chief, who had been executed by Stalin's successors at the end of 1953. For the next 40 years, Sergo lived under the false name of Sergei Gegechkori. Only in the post-Soviet period did he dare to restore his true name. In addition to the CNN interview, he authored a book that appeared in 2001 in English under the title: Beria, My Father: Inside Stalin's Kremlin.42

Beria's account of the bugging is consistent with Berezhkov's. Like Berezhkov, Beria knew both English and German, in addition to Russian—he also knew Georgian, like his father and Stalin. As a young man, he had worked in Teheran as a code clerk for the NKVD, transmitting messages from agents in Germany back to the center in Moscow. Before the Teheran conference, Stalin, whose memory for people was phenomenal, added Sergo Beria to an intelligence team assembled in Moscow and sent out to Teheran by way of Baku. Stalin apparently chose the city over sites proposed by FDR and Churchill because he had a well-established spy network there. At the Soviet Embassy, he privately met each man involved in the surveillance of his guests and gave him his special orders. He told Beria that he had to know everything that FDR was thinking, because he

wanted American support on his choice of a second front against Germany and he knew that Churchill had different ideas. He assigned Beria to listen to the President's living quarters at all times and write down whatever was said. The devices were already planted, Beria writes in his book, but he does not say how many, nor whether he listened directly or to recordings.

Getting up at 6:00 a.m. each morning, Beria prepared summaries of the overheard conversations; then he met with Stalin at 8:00 a.m. Stalin was interested not only in what was said, but also in how it was said: He wanted to know the intonation, the length of pauses, and the tone of voice of the American speakers. According to Beria, Stalin prepared very carefully for each day's session, assembling all the reports from his intelligence team. Beria noticed that his desk was always filled with confidential papers, archival records, lists of questions, and so on. Yet at the conferences, Stalin appeared bored, indifferent, and occasionally inattentive.43

Putting the accounts of Berezhkov and Beria together, one can see that the two men performed different functions. The first read verbatim translations of what was transcribed; the second gave summaries and personal impressions of what he heard. No doubt others of the intelligence team reported on other particulars, perhaps on different members of FDR's team, or on particular sections of the transcript, or on particular times of day. In this way, Stalin covered the conversations, many of which almost certainly were candid and confidential, from all angles. He had the American President pinned, examined, and analyzed like a specimen under a magnifying glass.

Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin, at Yalta, 1945.

In his book, Beria remarks with pride that the American delegation failed to discover the bugging devices at Teheran. No wonder: They could hardly have probed the walls in the Soviet Embassy. FDR's staff, however, did warn him that he was probably being listened to, so he could not have been unaware of the problem. Sometimes Beria thought that FDR was trying to talk directly to Uncle Joe through the microphones, but that manner succeeded only in arousing Stalin's suspicions. "What do you think," he asked Beria, "do they know that we are listening to them?" Sergo hesitated to draw a conclusion. "It's bizarre," Stalin went on, "They say everything, in the fullest detail." After the conference, on 20 December,

Stalin wrote Roosevelt with consummate irony that he was glad “that fate has given me an opportunity to render you a service in Teheran.”44

Yalta Refinements

According to Berezhkov, with the Yalta conference on Soviet soil and greater manpower available, the Soviets were able to improve their technical operation at the second meeting. Here the transcripts were prepared in Russian, so that Stalin could take them and read them himself at breakfast time. One can imagine the huge overnight and/or early morning effort on the part of the NKVD, translating and perhaps abstracting the diplomats’ conversations while the overworked, overfed, and over-liquored diplomats snoozed. The surveillance team was rewarded with leftovers from the lavish banquets, which were much better than their usual fare. To be sure, they did not take their tasks lightly; failure could cause heads to roll: Stalin wanted nothing to get by him.

Beria’s CNN interview reveals that at Yalta FDR was not free from bugging even when he went outdoors. While an attendant pushed his wheelchair and Churchill tagged alongside, the NKVD listened from afar. “As we already had a system for directing the microphones to a distance of 50 to 100 meters to listen, [and] as there was no background noise, everything was quiet,” Beria recounted, “all these conversations recorded very well, and later on were translated and processed.”45

At Yalta, Beria himself plied the microphones, which were more advanced than at Teheran. He recalled that FDR cut Churchill off when they met in private and refused to discuss issues with him, saying that they had already been decided. Stalin, Beria added, was no longer worried about the tone of voice and inflections of his bugged guests. He was confident that he had the upper hand and could dictate postwar terms to the lesser two of the Big Three.

Berezhkov, thinking back on the affair, could not recall that the transcripts he saw contained anything sensational: They were filled with standard diplomatic discussions. He did remember that they contained a lot of flattering words about the Soviet host. “Maybe,” he suggested while strolling through Riverside’s historic Mission Inn, “the Americans suspected the microphones in their rooms and said things they wanted

susp oph d said thing y w
Stalin to hear." Berezhkov did not believe that the bugging gave the dictator much of an advantage: "To know a couple of hours before each day's session what they were thinking—how much difference could it make?" Beria, in contrast, thought it a distinct advantage to know in advance what the Allies were thinking and saying privately or even semi-privately.

Potsdam

Berezhkov was not present at the 1945 conference at Potsdam and so could not comment on the possibility that Roosevelt's immediate successor was also bugged. But how else can we understand the arrangements? Stalin chose the city, and before Harry S. Truman moved into his lodging, as David McCullough recounts in his detailed biography of the President, Soviet soldiers occupied the premises, ejected everyone living there, beat the owner, and removed all of his belongings, including rare books and manuscripts, replacing them with a grand piano and gloomy, incongruous furniture. Truman and others thought the place looked like a "nightmare." Such a dreadful remodeling job argues that the microphones were as carefully placed in Number 2, Kaiserstrasse, as in FDR's quarters at the Soviet Embassy in Teheran and his suite at the Livadia Palace in Yalta.46

Sergo Beria did go to Potsdam, but was not involved in eavesdropping. He writes, however, that "it was on the program." So Truman, though more wary than his predecessor, fell into the same trap.

Hindsight and History

Through his elaborate surveillance operation, Stalin learned the moods, intentions, and attitudes of his diplomatic counterparts; perceived their wants and concessions; gauged their strengths and weaknesses; and planned his strategy accordingly. They could not do the same in regard to him, since they never understood him, let alone controlled the meeting sites or put him under surveillance. Perhaps the transcripts still exist in

the vaults of Russian intelligence and someday will appear in print so that we, too, historically speaking, can spy on the trusting President and hear his words of endearment to Uncle Joe.47

Diplomacy is often compared to poker, even when conducted between professed friends. And in poker, who has the better chance of winning—the one who holds his cards close to his vest or the one who holds them up in front of a mirror, believing that by so doing he is making a show of good faith? FDR, like his gullible emissaries Hopkins and Davies, insisted on showing his cards, hoping to win over the man who liked to torture and destroy his friends, just as he liked to torment and humiliate his foreign allies before accepting their gifts of land and humanity. The stakes were not friendship and world harmony, as FDR fondly hoped, but the boundaries for the coming Cold War.

An earlier version of this article on this site contained an incorrect bio for this author. We apologize for the misattribution. His corrected bio appears below:

Gary Kern is a translator and researcher. His book, *A Death in Washington: Walter G. Krivitsky and the Stalin Terror*, is scheduled for publication by Enigma Books in 2003.

1. John Harlow, "Depressed FDR Handed Stalin Victory at Yalta," *The Sunday Times* (UK), 24 February 2002.

2. The FDR Tapes," *American Heritage*, No. 2, 1982.

3. Joseph Edward Davies, *Mission to Moscow* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1941).

4. David Culbert, ed., *Mission to Moscow* [Warner Brothers Screenplay] (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1980), pp. 109-110. When the film was shown to the Soviet public, all the scenes about bugging were cut.

5. Elizabeth Kimball MacLean, *Joseph E. Davies: Envoy to the Soviets*

(Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), p. 40.

6. Bullitt served as US Ambassador to the USSR from 1933-1936, Davies from 1936-1938.

7. William C. Bullitt, "How We Won the War and Lost the Peace," *Life*, 30 August 1948, p. 94.

8. Hopkins described the 5' 3" Stalin as "an austere, rugged, determined figure in boots . . . built close to the ground, like a football coach's dream of a tackle"—see his article, "The Inside Story of My Meeting with Stalin," in *American Magazine* (Springfield, Ohio), No. 132, December 1941, pp. 14-15; Davies once said that the Bolshevik word of honor was "as safe as the Bible," according to William C. Bullitt, citing the *Daily Worker* of 25 and 28 February 1942, in *The Great Globe Itself* (New York, NY: Scribner's Sons, 1946), pp. 22, 255, 256.

9. Quoted by Frederick W. Marks III, *Wind Over Sand: The Diplomacy of Franklin Roosevelt* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 172; also p. 176 (on Standley).

10. MacLean, p. 105.

11. Marks, p. 178.

12. The relevant documents are in *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers: The Conferences at Cairo and Tehran 1943* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1961), pp. 71-80. Hereafter *FRUS.*

13. Stalin's secretary, Boris Bazhanov, defected to the West in 1928 and told in his memoirs how a Czech technician had been instructed to install the "control point," supposedly to regulate mechanical failures. When the work was done, the technician was arrested and never seen again. Boris Bazhanov, *Vospominaniya byvshego sekretarya Stalina [Memoirs of Stalin's Former Secretary]* (Paris: Tret'ya Volna, 1980), pp. 56-60.

14. *Ibid*.

15. Thomas Fleming, *The New Dealers' War: FDR and the War Within World War II* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2001), p. 308.

16. Sources for the account of the Teheran conference include: John R. Deane, *The Strange Alliance: The Story of Our Efforts at Wartime Cooperation with Russia* (New York, NY: Viking, 1947), pp. 39-45; John T. Flynn, *The*

Roosevelt Myth (New York, NY: Devin-Adair, 1948), pp. 351-360; George N. Crocker, *Roosevelt's Road to Russia* (Washington, DC: Regnery Books, 1959, 1986), pp. 209-227; W. Averell Harriman and Elie Abel, *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin 1941-1946* (New York, NY: Random House, 1975), pp. 262-274; Keith Eubank, *Summit at Teheran* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 1985), pp. 161-197; Paul D. Mayle, *Eureka Summit: Agreement in Principle and the Big Three at Tehran*, *1943* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1987), pp. 40-59; Robert Nisbet, *Roosevelt and Stalin: The Failed Courtship* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1988), pp. 44-51; Marks, pp. 170, 177-179; Fleming, pp. 305-336; Joseph E. Persico, *Roosevelt's Secret War: FDR and World War II Espionage* (New York, NY: Random House, 2001), pp. 274-276.

17. *FRUS*, p. 373-374.

18. Vyshinsky visit—*FRUS*, pp. 310-311; FDR quotation—Michael F. Reilly, as told to William J. Slocum, *Reilly of the White House* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1947), p. 171. Reilly's overall account is on pp. 168-188.

19. Mayle, p. 57; Edmund L. Blandford, *SS Intelligence: The Nazi Secret Service* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 2001), pp. 23-24.

20. Composite of Reilly's memoir (1947) and his written report from Teheran to Cairo, 24 November 1943, *FRUS*, p. 397.

21. *FRUS*, pp. 415, 438.

22. *FRUS*, pp. 377, 440. Hurley, like Davies and Vice President Henry Wallace, was a self-made millionaire who understood business and thought that Uncle Joe appreciated a fair deal.

23. Harriman, pp. 262-263.

24. Charles Bohlen's minutes of the three meetings are found in *FRUS*, pp. 483-486, 529-533 and 594-596.

25. Former Amb. William Standley considered the Dreyfus residence so hospitable that he thought, in retrospect, that FDR's preference for the Soviet Embassy was perhaps "an early sign of the physical and mental deterioration which eventually led to his death." William H. Standley and Arthur A. Ageton, *Admiral Ambassador to Russia* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery, 1955), p. 303.

26. Harriman, pp. 264-265.

27. Eubank, p. 195.

28. In September 1943, two months before the heads-of-state meeting in Teheran, Skorzeny and a team of 107 commandos sailed gliders to the top of Gran Sasso, the highest peak in the Italian Appenines. They landed with machine guns ready and startled the Carabinieri soldiers holding the deposed Italian leader Benito Mussolini in an empty hotel. Effecting a prompt surrender of the guards without firing a shot, Skorzeny took the stunned, disheveled, and very grateful Duce to a small plane waiting in a meadow, while the other rescuers escaped by cable car. Skorzeny flew Mussolini to Vienna, then met with Hitler at his private retreat and received his personal commendation. After the war, Skorzeny escaped to Franco's Spain, where he wrote a book about his exploits and eventually died in Madrid in July 1975. See John Toland, *Adolf Hitler* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1976), Vol. 2, pp. 857-858; and Otto Skorzeny, *Skorzeny's Secret Missions: War Memoirs of the Most Dangerous Man in Europe* (New York, NY: Dutton, 1950), pp. 91-107.

29. The KGB literature: Aleksandr Lukin, "Operatsiya 'Dal'nyi prizhok'" ["Operation 'Long Jump'"], *Ogonek,* No. 33 (1990), 15 August 1965, p. 25, and No. 34 (1991), 22 August 1965, pp. 25-27; Kyril Tidmarsh, "How Russians foiled Nazi plot to kill Teheran Big Three," *The Times* (London), 20 December 1968, p. 8; Viktor Egorov, *Zagovor protiv "Evriki:" broshenny portfel'* [*The Plot Against "Eureka": The Lost Portfolio*] (Moscow: Sovetskaya Rossiya, 1968); and Pavel Sudoplatov and Anatoli Sudoplatov, with Jerrold L. and Leona P. Schecter, *Special Tasks: The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness—A Soviet Spymaster* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Company, 1994), pp. 130-131. Well researched, but dubious is Laslo Havas, *Hitler's Plot to Kill the Big Three*, translated from the Hungarian by Kathleen Szasz (London: Transworld, 1967, revised 1971). Havas claims to have sought out ex-Nazis in exile around the world, including Skorzeny, and forced them to talk, using psychological persuasion. He states that the NKVD planted eighty microphones in the walls of FDR's quarters in Teheran, but his sources as cited would not have been able to provide such information. He describes Hitler's plot as underway in September 1943, well before 8 November, when FDR finally accepted Stalin's proposal to meet in Teheran.

30. This common Ukrainian surname was not yet associated with the 1944 defector named Victor who would denounce Stalin in the *New York Times* and cause FDR reelection headaches.

31. Yuri Krotkov, *The Red Monarch: Scenes from the Life of Stalin*, translated by Tanya E. Mairs, ed. by Carol Houck Smith (New York, NY: Norton, 1979), pp. 29-34.

32. Forrest Davis, "What Really Happened at Teheran," *Life,* 13 and 20 May 1944. FDR read over the article and corrected it before publication, as noted by Bullitt, pp. 16-26. See also Amos Perlmutter, *FDR & Stalin: A Not So Grand Alliance, 1943-1945* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1993), p. 159.

33. "Stalin Bared Plot Against President," *New York Times*, 18 December 1943, p. 3.

34. "President's Address Dealing With Conferences Abroad," *New York Times*, 25 December 1943, p. 8.

35. Years later, a KGB defector from the 1980s, Oleg Gordievsky, cited Ismay's question and answered that indeed the microphones had already been installed: "Housed in Soviet property, attended by NKVD servants, their conversations constantly monitored by their hosts, the United States delegation to the first summit meeting with a Soviet leader was condemned to practice something akin to open diplomacy." Gordievsky offered no sources or details, however, so the matter remained unresolved. See Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 332.

36. Andrew and Gordievsky, p. 334.

37. Zoya Zarubina, in the first episode of CNN's "Cold War;" Andrew and Gordievsky, p. 335.

38. Bullitt's warning about Hiss: Ralph de Toledano, "The Last Word," *Insight*, 17 December 2001, on the web at: http://insight-mag.com/global_user_elements/printpage.cfm?storyid=150529). Hopkins as Soviet agent: Andrew and Gordievsky, pp. 287-289, 350.

39. Sergo Beriya, "Mne dali imya na Lubyanke" [They Gave Me a Name in the Lubyanka], *Novoye Russkoye Slovo* (New York, NY), 21-22 May 1994, p. 8.

40. Author's interviews with Valentin Berezhkov, 12-13 March 1998, and e-mail exchange of 2 April 1998.

41. See website: http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/

episodes/01/interviews/beria.

42. Sergo Beria, *Beria, My Father: Inside Stalin's Kremlin* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

43. Ibid., pp. 92-95, 103-105, 117-119. Paragraph also draws from newspaper and CNN interviews with Beria, listed previously.

44. *FRUS*, p. 849.

45. See information on the Cold War TV series on CNN's website.

46. David McCullough, *Truman* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pp. 407-408, 430-432, 442.

47. Vasili Mitrokhin, who ransacked the KGB files and brought hundreds of copies of documents to the West in 1992, indicates that intelligence records of the two conferences still exist, and says that most of the transcribers were women. Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 111, 598 (n.63), 133, 599 (n.78).
