THE GHOST OF YALTA

Charles Bohlen's 1953 confirmation hearings as ambassador to Moscow exercised some non-existent skeletons in his closet

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ECATORIAL CONFIRMATION of ambassadors is usually a routine procedure. But in early 1953, few matters in Washington followed a normal course. For the first time in two decades, Republicans claimed the White House, pledging to roll back the tide of communism in Eastern Europe and Asia. In the Senate, Joseph McCarthy (R.-Wisconsin) was at the height of his influence. The war in Korea lurched on as a newly troubling conflict in Indochina gained momentum. And then Stalin died in Russia, raising the prospect of power struggle in the Kremlin.

In the midst of all this, Charles Bohlen was nominated as ambassador to the Soviet Union.

From a professional perspective, Chip Bohlen was an ideal replacement for George Kennan, who had been sent packing several months before when he likened Stalin's Russia to Hitler's Germany. Like Kennan, Bohlen had been specially trained by the Foreign Service for a Russian post early in the 1930s, when the United States had normalized relations with Moscow. Subsequent tours in Tokyo, Washington, and Paris had broadened Bohlen's experience. It also broadened his contacts. These included most importantly Dwight Eisenhower, whom he first met near the end of the war and with whom he later golfed when Ike was commander of NATO. Eisenhower appreciated what he later called Bohlen's "tough, firm, but fair attitude" on the question of relations with the Soviets. His overall assessment was that Bohlen was one of the ablest Foreign Service officers he had ever met.

But the nomination had one serious drawback. Bohlen was closely associated in the minds of many Republicans with the foreign policy of the Democrats—the supposedly failed policies that the American people had presumably repudiated in the 1952 election. Bohlen made no apologies for the Truman administration's containment policy, which the Republicans had attacked as "defeatist." More damning still, he defended the actions of the Roosevelt administration at that most infamous—in Republican eyes—of wartime conferences, Yalta.

Eisenhower realized that Bohlen's nomination would raise some objections. But he wanted the best person available to fill the Moscow post, and on the assurance of Senator Robert Taft (R.-Ohio), a leading conservative in the upper house, that Bohlen's confirmation would not be a serious problem, he went ahead with the nomination. In fact, the appointment raised a tremendous controversy, as right-wing Republicans attempted by means fair and foul to block the nomination. The debate over Bohlen became a debate over Yalta, over containment, and over the general direction of U.S. foreign policy. The basic outlines of this debate are well known. In recent years, though, previously classified documents have been released that provide a clearer picture of the events that swirled around the Bohlen nomination than has been available hitherto.

That Yalta would be an issue in Bohlen's nomination hearings should have been obvious to anyone who knew the man, and who knew of his stubborn support of the decisions made at that conference. Bohlen had no illusions about the Soviet Union, but neither did he have any patience with people who wanted to blame the cold war on Yalta. During the late 1940s, Bohlen became increasingly irritated at the exaggerations, omissions, and downright falsifications that obscured what actually happened at that conference, and he enthusiastically seconded attempts to correct erroneous allegations. In 1949, he wrote to a former FDR aide who was working on an edition of the public papers of Roosevelt:

Having had the privilege of being an eyewitness at this conference, I of course feel very strongly about the distortions and deliberate misrepresentations which have been so current in regard to what the president did or did not do at Yalta and the reasons therefore, and I welcome heartily any account that helps put the record straight.

In March 1953, Bohlen got a chance of his own to set the record straight, at his nomination hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Chairman Alexander Wiley (R.-Wisconsin) indicated with his first questions what the committee was interested in: "What was your position at Yalta?" Bohlen earlier had been asked by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles whether he could not reply to such a query by saying that he had been merely an interpreter. Bohlen had refused at that meeting to minimize his role at Yalta, and he again declined before the committee. "I was primarily an interpreter," Bohlen acknowledged, "but at the time of Yalta, I was an assistant to the secretary of state and one of my duties was to serve as liaison with the White House."

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As Bohlen’s examiners bored in on the Yalta issue, one of their first concerns was to determine whether Bohlen believed that the Chinese Nationalists had been betrayed by settlements worked out behind their backs. Bohlen admitted that it was “distasteful, to put it mildly,” that Chiang Kai-shek had been excluded from a conference at which the future of his country hung in the balance, but he cited considerations of security and secrecy in defense of the exclusion. As to the charges of betrayal, Bohlen denied that China’s interests had suffered as a result of Yalta. In fact, as Bohlen reminded the committee, the Far Eastern aspects of the Yalta accord had been highly praised when they became public. Bohlen conceded that the Russians had later violated that treaty; however, that was hardly the fault of the U.S. delegation. He added that if the Chinese had not had the Yalta agreements to fall back on—if they had had to negotiate alone with the Soviets—the ultimate result probably would have been worse.

Bohlen insisted that regardless of Yalta’s impact on China, it was necessary to remember the military imperatives as they were understood at the time. He labeled “hindmynopia” the tendency to forget the pressures American leaders felt in 1945. “The terrific compulsions of the war are absent when you look at it 10 years afterward,” he said. In any event, the overriding concern of Roosevelt and his advisers had been to get a firm Soviet commitment to enter the Pacific war. Bohlen readily acknowledged that the atomic bomb had rendered Soviet participation in the Pacific war unnecessary, but to hold that against Roosevelt was, he believed, uncalled for. Indeed, for Roosevelt not to have made the decisions he made would have been nearly inconceivable.

In the Republican brief against Yalta, China filled one half. The other half was Eastern Europe, especially Poland. Bohlen was not a specialist on the Far East, and his defense of Yalta’s arrangements for Asia was that of an informed amateur, as he was the first to admit. Europe, however, was his field of expertise, and there he spoke with an authority that his interlocutors had to respect, even if they did not concur in his conclusions.

Bohlen’s chief antagonist on the Foreign Relations Committee was Homer Ferguson of Michigan. This Republican senator seemed convinced that Roosevelt had hoped to buy the Kremlin’s postwar friendship by granting it effective control over Eastern Europe. That was the point of the Yalta agreements on Poland, he claimed. “Well, looking at the agreements, do you not think that is exactly what they were doing?” demanded Ferguson. “Were they not treating Russia as being the dominant figure after the war, and were not these concessions being made to her for the purpose of allowing her to become the dominant figure?” Bohlen dismissed the idea that the U.S.S.R. had wanted the Soviet Union to dominate Eastern Europe. The point he stressed, however, was that the U.S.S.R. was almost certain to control the region regardless of what the United States wanted, or what its delegation did at Yalta. At the time of the conference, Bohlen reminded the committee, the Soviets occupied almost all of Poland, Russian troops were well into Hungary, and they were nearing the outskirts of Vienna. U.S. forces, still shaken from the Battle of the Bulge and trying to establish a bridgehead across the Rhine, were in no position to challenge Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe. The purpose of the Yalta declarations regarding Poland, Bohlen asserted, was to loosen, as far as could be managed by diplomacy, the grip that the Red Army already had on the Poles.

Bohlen’s defense of Yalta was a defense of the intentions of Roosevelt and his advisers, including, by implication, Bohlen himself. Bohlen did not pretend that affairs had worked out in practice the way the negotiators at Yalta had hoped. He fully admitted that the Soviets had broken the agreements, but he felt that this was no valid argument against making agreements in the first place. In fact, it was in some ways a justification of Yalta, in that Soviet violations...
put the West on notice regarding Moscow’s designs in the postwar period. To Ferguson’s partly rhetorical questions whether Bohlen did not know at the time of Yalta that one could not do business with the Soviets, Bohlen replied:

Yes, sir, I did, but I felt for a number of reasons that you could not afford not to make an attempt. I believe very strongly, and I believe to this day, that Yalta in effect was the test which demonstrated to the world the value of agreements with the Soviet Union. Had you no agreements, there would have been a great difference of opinion on this subject.

No discussion of Yalta would have been complete without questions regarding the most notorious U.S. diplomat of the period, Alger Hiss. The convicted perjurer and presumed spy had been at Yalta as an adviser on U.N. affairs. Ferguson did his best to find evidence that Hiss had been behind some of the conference’s agreements. Failing this, he sought to demonstrate at least that Hiss was a conduit to Stalin from the inner councils of U.S. diplomacy. He had a point, as Bohlen acknowledged, but at times the questioning bordered on the ridiculous. The discussion turned to meetings at which Hiss had been present.

FERGUSON: Well, now, do you say that nothing was discussed of a secret nature?
BOHLEN: No, I wouldn’t say that at all, sir.
FERGUSON: Well, if you wanted Stalin in, you would have had him in these meetings, wouldn’t you?
BOHLEN: Yes, sir; that is correct.
FERGUSON: You didn’t anticipate at that moment that Hiss was a Soviet agent?
BOHLEN: I certainly did not, sir.
FERGUSON: Would you have discussed the things that you did discuss at these meetings if you had known that Hiss was a Soviet agent?
BOHLEN: Senator, if I had known anybody was a Soviet agent or even seriously suspected of such, I wouldn’t have discussed anything with him. He wouldn’t have been in the conference if the subsequent information which is now known was known then.

To Republicans in the early part of 1953, Yalta was a symbol of the allegedly failed policies of Franklin Roosevelt. In attempting to persuade Bohlen to repudiate Yalta, the conservatives on the committee were trying to get him to denounce Roosevelt’s diplomacy. What Yalta was to memories of FDR in right-wing demonology, “containment” was to fresher recollections of the Truman administration. Bohlen’s examiners wanted to know where he stood on containment—especially with respect to its perceived antithesis, the dynamic new philosophy of the Republicans: “liberation.”

Again Bohlen was a refractory witness, insisting on analyzing decisions and policies in their historical context. At the time containment was adopted, he argued, the choice was not between containment and liberation, but between containment and non-containment—the latter being indifference to communist expansion. Bohlen admitted that the term containment unfortunately had negative connotations that implied that nothing could be done about Soviet domination of the satellite nations. But the term, he believed, reflected some unfortunately stubborn facts. “You come down to the means that are open to you short of war as to what you can do to bring about a recession or a retraction of Soviet power.” Bohlen denied that the Democrats had been excessively timid in challenging Soviet control. Citing in general terms various overt and clandestine efforts to penetrate the Iron Curtain, Bohlen said, “There are no limitations I have known that have been placed on what you do in those fields except the limits of what you can do effectively.”

Bohlen thought liberation a political red herring; he was skeptical of the possibility of forcing the Soviet Union to retreat because he recognized the seriousness of the challenge that it presented. In the firmness of his anti-communist beliefs, Bohlen yielded to no one. But Bohlen’s was a hardheaded anti-communism based on years of experience studying and dealing with Soviet leaders, in contrast to what he considered the armchair alarmism of many latter-day discoverers.
of the Red threat. One of Bohlen’s questioners, Republican Bourke Hickenlooper of Iowa, had been impressed by a recent book on communism and what ought to be done about it. Part of the book’s thesis, as Hickenlooper paraphrased it, was that containment was doomed to failure because it did not recognize the insidious nature and universalist aspirations of communism, treating it instead as “solely and only a Russian nationalistic operation.” Bohlen objected:

I would not say, sir, that that has ever been the opinion of anybody who has ever had any experience in the field, because I think the first thing you learn about the Soviet Union is precisely its dual nature, which makes it the menace that it is, that is to say, the same group of men, on the one hand control a great country with great resources, human and all that, and are at the same time the general staff of a world conspiracy, and in the evolution of this whole matter, this same group of men who run the Soviet Union have virtually total obedience and control over fifth columnists in other countries all over the world.

With statements like this, Bohlen denied to even the conservatives on the committee the opportunity to question his anti-communist convictions. Nor did it appear that they would make any progress trying to persuade him to reconsider his position on other matters, especially Yalta. Once this was clearly established—which, through the persistence of committee members like Ferguson, took several hours—the confrontation was brought to an end.

HOURS BEFORE Bohlen spoke to the Foreign Relations Committee, Stalin suffered a severe stroke. Two days later the news was released to the world, followed soon after by official reports of the dictator's death. This development made speedy approval of Bohlen's nomination seem imperative to the Eisenhower administration, as Under Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith told the committee a short while later. The Republican conservatives, however, were not willing to let him go so quickly. At a closed-door session on March 10, the committee decided, at the request of Ferguson, to postpone action on the Bohlen nomination for a week.

In this interval, resistance to Bohlen mounted among right-wing Republicans beyond the committee. A tempting target like Bohlen was too much for Joseph McCarthy to resist. On March 13, McCarthy announced that he would oppose the appointment; the reason, as he explained several days later, was that Bohlen was one of the same “Acheson-Hiss gang” that had been repudiated in the 1952 election. McCarthy's opposition was abetted by the Wisconsin senator’s contacts with Scott McLeod, a recently appointed security officer at the State Department and a man who seemed to believe McCarthy's claims that the department was infested with subversives.

While objection to Bohlen's association with past policies provided the motivation for the McCarthy-McLeod attack, the attack itself centered on Bohlen’s personal affairs. thinly veiled allegations were made regarding the moral fiber of the nominee, with the implication that deviations from commonly accepted standards would create a security risk by opening the ambassador-designate to blackmail. On their face, the charges—which were not made public until more than 20 years later—were ludicrous. They ranged from statements that Bohlen had associated with “confessed” or suspected homosexuals, including his brother-in-law; to one informant’s blanket declaration that anyone who had served at the Moscow mission in 1934 was a homosexual, to claims by a woman who said that Bohlen's voice and expression were effeminate, except, for some unexplained reason, when he spoke French; to testimony by a man who asserted that he had a “sixth sense” for detecting homosexuals.

Absurd or not, these charges were taken seriously—not least by the Eisenhower administration. At a time when such innuendo often carried the presumption of guilt, or at least the presumption of risk to the nation's security, Eisenhower did not want to open himself to charges of laxity. The president asked Dulles to check out all the rumors, which the secretary did. State Department Counselor Douglas MacArthur II found the allegations incredible, declaring that he had known Bohlen for many years, and that he was confident that the latter had a "normal" family life. Henry Cabot Lodge, a friend of Bohlen since childhood, characterized the charges as "utterly fantastic."

Despite these reassurances, Dulles was not one to take chances. On the second day of Bohlen's hearings, when both Dulles and Bohlen were scheduled to testify, Dulles insisted that the two ride in separate cars to the Capitol, and he told Bohlen that it would be best if they were not photographed together. Even after Bohlen was finally approved by the Senate, Dulles continued to worry. On hearing that the new ambassador intended to leave for Moscow a few days ahead of his wife, with a stopover in Paris, the secretary suggested that the couple travel together. "Why do you think Mrs. Eisenhower traveled with the president during the election campaign?" Dulles asked. The ambassador said that he was not going to change his plans.

Though worried by the furor that Bohlen was arousing, Eisenhower believed that he could not withdraw the nomination without jeopardizing presidential prerogative in making appointments. At the same time, however, he was determined not to let himself get into such a predicament again. In the middle of the Bohlen debate, the president told Dulles that in the future they would have to do a better job clearing such potentially damaging appointments in advance.

In the meantime, both Ike and Dulles worried that Bohlen would find the whole affair so distasteful that he would decide to follow Kennan and leave the State Department. After the political trouble the nomination had already caused, the president and the secretary did not want to see the administration's efforts wasted. Ike suggested that Dulles talk to Bohlen. The secretary complied, telling Bohlen that he must not resign in the middle of the controversy, because such a move would put the president in an embarrassing position. Bohlen assured Dulles that he was not about to quit.

On March 18, Bohlen returned to the hearing room.
of the Foreign Relations Committee. Dulles, in another car, also drove from Foggy Bottom to Capitol Hill. The secretary testified first.

On his own initiative, and in response to queries, Dulles described the reasons why Bohlen had been chosen ambassador to the Kremlin, and how this choice fitted into administration plans for U.S. foreign policy. Dulles minced few words in telling the committee that Moscow was not a promotion for Bohlen. Bohlen had been a designer of the policies of the Truman administration, explained the secretary, and in a Republican State Department, there was no place for him—at least not in a policy position. Referring to Bohlen's previous duties, Dulles said, "I did not desire that Mr. Bohlen should continue as counselor." The reason was clear enough. "He has been loyal to the policies of the then administration, with which I differ rather sharply in a number of respects." Sending Bohlen to Moscow would both make use of his "unique capacity to understand Soviet communism" and remove him from a position where he could markedly affect policy. On the latter point, Dulles was explicit. In reply to a question whether Bohlen's new post would leave him in the policy mainstream, Dulles declared, "There is no policy that is made in Moscow at all."

Senator Ferguson asked if Dulles was satisfied that Bohlen would be able to fill his new position without being unduly influenced by previous policies that he had had a hand in formulating. Dulles replied, "Yes, I believe that Bohlen will be loyal to the administration that he serves, and that he is not so emotionally dedicated to policies of his own invention that he cannot shift his allegiance to new policies." In defending the president's choice for an important post, Dulles could hardly have answered otherwise. His later actions, however, indicate that he was not really convinced about the nominee.

DULLES'S DOUBTS about Bohlen's loyalty to the administration surfaced four years later—after Bohlen had done little in the interim to cause the secretary concern. Early in 1957, Dulles decided to ease Bohlen out of the embassy in Moscow and reassign him to a more out-of-the-way post. In justifying what was clearly a demotion, Dulles claimed that he thought Bohlen wanted to retire after Ike's first term. Dulles told the ambassador that he had promised Moscow to someone else. At approximately the same time, Dulles described to White House aide Wilton Perows his suspicions about Bohlen. A transcript of a telephone conversation between Dulles and Persons records the exchange: "[Dulles] does not think he [Bohlen] is very loyal but can do less harm in the Philippines [to which Bohlen was reassigned] than if he kicked out." Dulles had to be careful where he placed Bohlen; if he tried to move him too far out of the way—Senator William Knowland (R.-California) suggested South America—Bohlen might indeed decide to resign, which would raise a "bad stink." Beyond the odor that such a situation would produce, Dulles worried about the possibility that Bohlen might take a position in a Washington research institute, whence he would proceed to attack administration policies. When Bohlen, after some further maneuvering by Dulles, accepted the assignment to Manila, the secretary was relieved. In Manila, Dulles told Persons, Bohlen would be "adequately insulated."

But after Dulles finished his testimony at Bohlen's 1953 hearings, the nominee was invited back into the hearing room. In the two weeks since his earlier appearance, some members of the committee had been investigating published documents relating to Yalta. Alexander Wiley had discovered a statement in the diaries of the late Navy and Defense Secretary James Forrestal that Bohlen had advocated delaying a peace settlement with Japan until the Soviet Union could enter the Pacific war. Wiley seemed willing to accept Bohlen's answer that Forrestal's recollection was an error based on a secondhand conversation, but Ferguson would not let the subject drop. When Bohlen stood firm, Ferguson suddenly shifted course and quoted a speech that Bohlen allegedly had made in 1947: "And I want to state now unequivocally we are tired of these people who criticize our conduct at Tehran and Yalta; in fact they are our most glorious diplomatic triumphs." Bohlen declared that he had never made such a statement. He did not deny expressing his opinion that he found criticism of Yalta tiresome, but the phrase "glorious diplomatic triumphs," he said, was not his style.

After Ferguson finished his examination, William Knowland—the "Senator from Formosa"—made an attempt to implicate Bohlen in the communist victory in China in 1949. When this tactic failed, the committee members decided they had heard enough. The nominee was asked to leave the room, and a vote was taken. Bohlen was approved—considering the atmosphere, one might almost say acquitted—by the surprising count of 15 to 0. Even Ferguson joined in, suggesting that there may have been some posturing involved in the attempts to wring a confession out of the witness.

After the unanimous vote of the Foreign Relations Committee, Bohlen's confirmation by the full Senate was never in doubt. A handful of conservative die-hards followed Everett Dirksen (R.-Illinois) in the opinion, "I reject Yalta, so I reject Yalta men," but their opposition was primarily for the record.

The Bohlen affair was not the Eisenhower administration's finest hour. Had Ike and Dulles realized the storm the nomination would raise, they undoubtedly would have chosen someone else. The president was forced to defend Bohlen or risk losing control of his foreign policy at the outset of his administration. The president preferred to avoid confrontations with Congress, and his later actions indicate that he took seriously Robert Taft's warning after the turmoil over the nomination subsided: "No more Bohlens."

The outcome of the fight over Bohlen's appointment did not quite put the ghost of Yalta to rest. Too many Republicans, and a few right-wing Democrats, had been frustrated for too long by the hard facts of the cold war to admit that their visions of Rooseveltian duplicity had been only hallucinations. By the end of the Bohlen affair, though, it was evident to objective observers that the apparition's spell-casting powers were fading fast.