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The cover of this handsomely produced book features a nattily dressed William C. Bullitt superimposed on a map of Moscow—the scene of the highpoint of his diplomatic career, as the first U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1933 to 1936. Inside, Alexander Etkind, a professor at the European University Institute in Florence, presents a fast-paced, fluidly written retelling of the story of Bullitt’s life from his aristocratic upbringing in Philadelphia through his participation in the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, his service as ambassador to Moscow and Paris in the 1930s, and his work as an anticommunist journalist in the 1940s. Although the subtitle promises a thorough examination of Bullitt’s ideas, this biography actually delivers more colorful detail about his personal relationships and his lavish entertaining than in-depth intellectual history. In part for that reason, many arguments and assertions in the book are underdeveloped or unpersuasive.

Etkind depicts Bullitt as a seer whose far-sighted ideas would have saved the world from much of its suffering in the twentieth century if only top leaders had heeded his advice. Two prophecies receive special attention: one in 1918-1919 about the desirability of containing Bolshevism in the heartland of Muscovy and one about the coming of a second world war.

Soon after the Armistice of November 1918, Bullitt predicted that Bolsheviks would come to power in the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine as soon as German forces retreated from the eastern front. That vision contributed to Bullitt’s advocacy of promoting peace between the Soviet regime, anti-Bolshevik White forces, and the foreign powers that supported the Whites. Backed by President Woodrow Wilson’s adviser Edward M. House, Bullitt led a fact-finding mission to Moscow in March 1919 and returned with a treaty proposal that called for Soviet recognition of neighboring states and payment of Russia’s debts in exchange for withdrawal of foreign troops from Russia and an end to foreign aid to the Whites. However, Wilson refused to meet with Bullitt and repudiated the idea of negotiating with the Bolsheviks. In an extended counterfactual discussion, Etkind argues that if Bullitt’s treaty with Lenin had been accepted “the entire course of the twentieth century would have been different. Perhaps the USSR would not have emerged and the Stalinist terror would not have happened; perhaps there would have been no Nazi Germany, no Second World War,
and no Holocaust” (47; see also 40 and 239). Although Etkind recognizes that a treaty between the implacably opposed Reds and Whites would not have lasted, he does not acknowledge how badly Bullitt exaggerated the impending expansion of Soviet power (which would not extend into the Baltic states and Poland for twenty years) and he does not fully acknowledge how badly Bullitt underestimated the White threat to Lenin’s regime in 1919. Thus, Bullitt’s powers of analysis seem less impressive than suggested, and the counterfactual scenario seems beside the point.

Throughout the interwar years, Bullitt “foresaw the next world war” (32; also 167-8). That keen foresight should have led the United States to take action to avert World War II, Etkind argues. If President Franklin Roosevelt had trusted Bullitt, “America would have acted in real time, arming France, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Finland.” As a result, “the war would not have happened, or it would have remained local” (240). This analysis disregards how strong “isolationist” sentiment constrained Roosevelt all the way through 1940. Since Bullitt predicted in 1936 that Nazi Germany would not attack Poland and the Soviet Union “for many years” (174), and he argued in December 1937 that the idea of a Japanese attack on the United States was nonsense, his ability to foresee the future should not be overstated.

Etkind faults previous biographers for largely ignoring Bullitt’s intellectual contributions – his novels, plays, and essays (xii). Yet much of Bullitt’s creative writing was not of high quality and was never published or performed. As Etkind notes, Bullitt’s un-staged play, “Tragedy of Wilson,” buckled “under the weight of its message” (32), while the plot of an unpublished novel “isn’t entirely believable” (78). Moreover, Bullitt’s essays tended to be journalistic pieces rather than weighty analyses or reflections. As a result, the case for taking Bullitt’s intellectual contributions more seriously does not seem very compelling.1

Roads Not Taken presents the results of much valuable research in primary sources, particularly the Bullitt Papers at Yale University and recently published volumes of Soviet documents.2 However, the book’s thin bibliography indicates that many books that would have enriched or strengthened its discussion of key issues were not consulted.

For example, Etkind discusses Bullitt’s view of the European Left after the Russian Revolution without reference to Arno Mayer’s foundational books. He discusses the interpretation of Wilson’s illness by Sigmund Freud and Bullitt without considering the careful discussion of Wilson’s medical condition by Edwin Weinstein. He notes Bullitt’s 1935 comparison of Bolshevik and Nazi tyrannies without setting it in the context of the wider popular analogy between “Red Fascism” and “Brown Bolshevism” that has been addressed by Thomas Maddux and other historians.3

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There is much to disagree with in this provocative biography. Three disagreements can be noted here. First, the author’s characterization of Bullitt as “the pioneering expert in Russian and European socialism” during and after the First World War is contradicted by his own acknowledgment that Bullitt’s “knowledge of Russian history and literature … always remained amateurish” (xiii, emphasis added). Etkind’s praise of Bullitt’s expertise also disregards much more knowledgeable figures like William English Walling, Arthur Bullard, Charles Edward Russell, and John Spargo (none of whom are mentioned and none of whose books are listed in the bibliography). Second, Etkind states that the Comintern Congress in 1935 “called for revolution in the United States” (166), yet the centerpiece of the Congress was the proclamation of a Popular Front policy that led to tacit American Communist support of the re-election of Roosevelt in 1936. Third, Etkind repeatedly refers to the “American victory” in World War II (226; also 233), disregarding the fact that Soviet armies did most of the bloody work of defeating Nazi Germany. The point is important because it reflects a lack of critical distance from Bullitt’s own assumption that the United States won the war and therefore had the right to shape the peace without regard for Soviet interests.

Roads Not Taken is inaccurate or imprecise on a number of points. Three examples suffice. First, Alexander Kerensky’s provisional government did not fall in November 1917 because of a lack of material and spiritual aid from the U.S.—a Bullitt assertion that the book does not question (27). In fact, the United States extended more than $300 million in loans to the provisional government and sent the Elihu Root and Red Cross missions to provide moral support. Second, it is not true that “Unlike the British government, which was actively developing intelligence in Russia, the Wilson administration had no agents there” (33). In reality, American diplomats and businessmen established important intelligence networks that gathered sensitive information about Red military forces on the eve of foreign military intervention in 1918. Third, the U.S. and the Allies did not stop giving Admiral Alexander Kolchak aid in 1919 because they were unhappy with his monarchic ideas (46-47). Instead, in June 1919 they promised continued “countenance and support” after receiving pledges from Kolchak to repay Russia’s debts and hold free elections once he captured Moscow.

Although Etkind paints his subject in a flattering light, the biography confirms many of Bullitt’s unattractive features, especially his extreme egotism and his volatility. While Roads Not Taken presents Bullitt as a prescient analyst of world affairs, in the end a comment by sculptor George Biddle seems apt: “Bill’s friends always discounted much of what he said” because much of it “could not be taken seriously” (70).

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4 See James G. Ryan, Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 82-7. On Bullitt’s overreaction to the Comintern Congress, see Maddux, Years of Estrangement, 40-41.


6 Foglesong, America’s Secret War Against Bolshevism, 181-182.
David Foglesong is the author of *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”: The Crusade for a “Free Russia” Since 1881* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and *America’s Secret War Against Bolshevism: U.S. Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1920* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1995). He is currently working with two Russian historians to complete a comprehensive history of American-Russian relations from the eighteenth century to the present.

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