Hunt for American Archives in the Soviet Union

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HISTORIANS interested in the development of the Foreign Service of the United States, or in special aspects of American diplomatic history during the 19th and early 20th centuries, will often find the records kept at the various diplomatic posts an intriguing source of information. One such body of records are those that were kept by the American Embassy at St. Petersburg, the old capital city of Russia known later as Petrograd and subsequently as Leningrad. It is true, of course, that the despatches sent to the Department of State contain much important data and that they are the most frequently used sources for diplomatic history. But it is also true that such despatches represent a refinement of much information collected by diplomatic representatives. To see working diplomats and their problems on a day-to-day basis and to discover the ingredients that made up the final despatches, one must often go to the post records. Those kept by the Legation and Embassy at St. Petersburg reflect something of the living and working conditions of our diplomats at the Court of the Tsar, as well as many glimpses of Americans and their plans for commercial or cultural enterprises in Russia.[1]

Fascinating as many of these items are, their value is enhanced when one realizes that the very survival of these records is almost a miracle. Furthermore, the story of their recovery from the Soviet Union in the early 1930's is largely a chronicle of the imagination, persistence, and zeal of one man, Angus Ward, an American Foreign Service officer.

Angus Ward was born in Canada in 1893, and he became an

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[1] A random sampling of the records shows letters and documents indicating some of the problems faced by American merchants and captains in attempting to carry on neutral trade during the Napoleonic Wars; hints of plans by Robert Fulton for using the steamboat in the Russian dominions; comments of prominent Russians concerning the American War of 1812; the interest of an American lawyer in the Russian legal system of 1898; the interest of the Library of Congress in exchanging publications with Russia; and many other diverse items. American Legation, St. Petersburg, "Various Documents Received," 1808–15, "Miscellaneous Received," 1898, in Record Group 84, Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, National Archives. Hereafter cited as RG 84.

American citizen through naturalization. During World War I he served in the United States Army. After the war he worked with the American Relief Administration in Finland and Russia. Returning home, he was active in business and Government work before entering the Foreign Service of the United States in 1925. His first assignment was as a Vice Consul at Mukden, China. Later he was transferred to Tientsin. In February 1934 he was assigned to Moscow and in July he was promoted to the rank of Foreign Service Officer, Class Seven. The following February he was appointed Second Secretary and Consul of the American Embassy at Moscow.[2] Ward and his colleagues were the first American diplomatic representatives to be accredited to the Soviet Union since the Russian Revolution of 1917. Now that the policy of nonrecognition had been reversed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Foreign Service officers assigned to Moscow went about their task of interpreting the Soviet Union to the United States, and *vice versa*. A long-pending question that intrigued Ward was what had become of the diplomatic records of the American Legation and Embassy at the old Tsarist capital city of St. Petersburg, now called Leningrad. To appreciate his problem, we must go back to the early months of the Revolution in 1917.

When the revolutionaries overthrew the Tsar and established a Government under Alexander Kerensky, the United States recognized it. David R. Francis, the American Ambassador to Russia, continued to represent his country at St. Petersburg, now renamed Petrograd. After the Bolsheviks ousted Kerensky in the revolution of 1917, the United States declined to recognize the new Government established by Lenin and Trotsky. Ambassador Francis remained at his post observing the progress of the war and the revolution. In view of his Government's nonrecognition stand he was in a peculiar and potentially dangerous situation. At length the advance of the German armies on Petrograd led Francis and the diplomatic colony in February 1918 to move 350 miles to the east to Vologda, midway between Moscow and Archangel. In July he moved to Archangel. While here a stomach ailment eventually forced Francis to go to Great Britain for medical treatment. The Ambassador thought that his absence from Russia would be temporary. But the United States persisted in its refusal to recognize the Bolshevik government, and Francis was ordered home.[3]

[2] *Register of the Department of State, July 1, 1935,* p. 273 (Washington, 1935).

[3] Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany on March 3, 1918, ending the war on the Eastern front. While Francis was at Vologda the Russians urged him

What happened to the Embassy and to the official records that were left behind? When Francis left for Vologda the Embassy was placed under the protection of the Norwegian Minister. Caring for the records was initially the responsibility of Vice Consul Robert W. Imbrie, who was left in charge of the Embassy and Consulate. When Imbrie escaped from Russia he carried with him a bundle of papers containing some record copies of the Ambassador's correspondence. These he turned over to the State Department in 1926 with the suggestion that they be kept until such time as the Embassy or Consulate at St. Petersburg was reestablished. It was generally believed that the rest of the records of the Embassy and Consulate had been destroyed, so the small group of "Imbrie documents" were stored in the State Department as all that remained of the records of the post at St. Petersburg.[4]

Another small group of records, including some copies of those that Imbrie had, were brought out of Russia by Norweigan diplomats and sent to the Department of State by the American Consul at Christiana, Norway.[5]

While American Foreign Service officers were hearing stories that the archives had been destroyed, there were also rumors that the furnishings of the old Embassy were still in existence in Leningrad. Vice Consul Ward heard such rumors in China as early as 1926, and he remembered them. It was not until after his own assignment to Russia early in 1934 that he was able to do anything about tracking down such rumors.

Ward began his investigation with a visit to Leningrad on July 4, 1934. Further research took place during several subsequent visits to the city. At some point in these proceedings Ward was assisted in his labors by three non-American residents of Leningrad. The old Embassy building was located at 34 Furshtatskaya Street. Ward discovered that it was now known as Ulitsa Petra Laurova.

to come to the new capital at Moscow, but he refused. Francis left Vologda for Archangel on July 24, 1918, and in the following month the Allies took over that port. On November 8 Ambassador Francis was carried aboard the cruiser *Olympia* on a stretcher. George F. Kennan, *Soviet-American Relations, 1917–1920,* 1:16–17, 80–84, 430–440, 486–489, 2:438–452 (Princeton, 1956–58); David R. Francis, *Russia From the American Embassy* p. 234, 236, 238, 246, 290–291, 306, 310, 334, 337, 342, 345 (New York, 1921); Mrs. Clinton A. Bliss, ed., "Philip Jordan's Letters From Russia, 1917–1918," in *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society,* 14:145–155 (1958).

[4] Memorandum of H. C. Hengstler to Robert F. Kelley, Chief of the Division of European Affairs, and to D. Salmon, Mar. 18, 1926; memorandum of R. F. Kelley to Salmon, Apr. 2, 1926. "Correspondence and Records and Property of the American Embassy in Petrograd, 1918–1948," RG 84.

[5] ? to Sec. of State, desp. #1144, Jan. 9, 1919 (file 703.5761/18); copy of memorandum of ? to Salmon, June 1, 1921, in "Correspondence re Records and Property of Embassy & Consulate in Petrograd, 1918–1948." RG 84.

Finding the old Embassy building was relatively easy, but visiting it was another problem.

With the permission of the American Embassy officials at Moscow, Ward went to see Grigori I. Weinstein, the Leningrad Diplomatic Agent of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, and asked him for permission to visit the old Embassy building.[6]

Weinstein assured Ward that the visit was unnecessary, as the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs had searched the premises some years before and had ascertained that its contents had disappeared during the Russian Revolution. The building was now occupied by a Soviet industrial organization. Weinstein told Ward that he had never met such impractical people as the Americans: they left the city without placing their property in the hands of any individual or organization for safekeeping. Now, after a long lapse of time, they believed that somehow the records had been saved miraculously. During their conversation Weinstein on several occasions said: "It is useless to go there, Mr. Ward. Seventeen years! Revolutionary days. You know what happens in the time of revolution!"[7]

Yet Ward persisted. He told Weinstein that he had a personal curiosity to visit the old Embassy, for he would like to compare it with the new Embassy quarters being built in Moscow.

Weinstein said that the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs had no control over the company now using the building and that the company objected to having foreigners visit its offices. Nevertheless, Weinstein said that he would try to arrange a visit, but that it would take a great deal of time to overcome the objections. Ward told Weinstein that he would return to Leningrad on November 11, 1934. If arrangements for the visit were not completed by then, Ward would remain in Leningrad until they were ready.

In the course of a visit to Leningrad in November, Ward heard that there was a doorman at the old Embassy building who had begun his service there during the time of Ambassador Francis' mission. Ward hoped to question him, but he learned that the doorman had disappeared mysteriously sometime after Ward made his first inquiries of Weinstein.

There was also on the property a gateman who had served there since 1919. When Ward attempted to talk with him the old man was uncommunicative. It appeared to Ward that the gateman had

[6] A. Ward to Sec. of State, desp. #477, Mar. 29, 1935 (file 124.612/375), Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives. Except as noted elsewhere, this study is based on Ward's report.

[7] Desp. #477.

been instructed to avoid talking. The Consul then got someone else to talk with the gatekeeper. His intermediary learned from the gatekeeper that after Ambassador Francis left the country the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs took over the building and sealed the doors and windows. Later, in the early part of 1919, the Commissariat began to put members of its staff in the building. These people made it a practice to remove articles of furniture as they liked. From another informant in Leningrad Ward learned that some of the furniture was lent to people living elsewhere in the city. Some attempt was made to keep records of such loans in the form of memorandum receipts, but the receipts were usually no more specific than a notation of the number of items taken. As a result, some of the persons who borrowed Embassy furniture were able to clear their receipts by returning secondhand furniture and keeping the Embassy's. Ward deduced that the Commissariat either had the furniture, fixtures, and archives of the old Embassy in its possession or had knowledge of their location or disposal. He also had had enough experience with the Commissariat to know that it had no intention of giving information about them.[8]

Faithful to his promise, Ward returned to Leningrad on November 11 and called on Weinstein. No cordial reception awaited him. For half an hour the Soviet official tried to convince Ward that his quest was useless and that he should abandon his plans for a visit to the old Embassy. Ward was persistent in his desire to see the building. Finally and reluctantly Weinstein said that arrangements had been made for Ward to visit the premises that very day. Summoning his assistant, one V. F. Orlov-Ermak, and a junior member of the staff named Zubkovski, Weinstein led Ward and the others to the old building.[9]

When they arrived at the old Embassy, Ward discovered that it was now occupied by Rosat,[10] a Soviet Government organization that manufactured parts for dynamos and generators. The group was met by a member of the Rosat staff, who led them through the various rooms of the building. As the group went into each room, Orlov-Ermak would say: "You see, Mr. Ward, there is nothing here of yours." Before his visit Ward had ascertained that Rosat was using some pre-Revolutionary office furniture of American design that had been made by a Swedish firm in the city. Ward saw

[8] Desp. #477.
[9] Desp. #477.
[10] The official title of the firm was Gosundarstvenny Trest Armaturnoi Promyshlennosti. It moved into the old Embassy building in 1929.

furniture of a design similar to that used in the Embassy, but he did not have a chance to examine it.[11]

The tour continued through three floors on the west wing of the building. The lower two floors held little or nothing of interest to Ward. The walls of the third-floor room that once held pictures of former American Presidents and Ambassadors now showed only the niches used to support the picture frames.

During the tour of the east wing Ward sensed that Weinstein's assistant, Orlov-Ermak, seemed anxious to get him out of there as quickly as possible. Ward would not be hurried. He had information that the archives were in a large room on the third floor of the east wing. The east and west wings were almost symmetrical. While on the second floor of the east wing he noted a door. Ward tried it and found it locked. Orlov-Ermak said that it was not open, that it led to a stairway to the first floor that had formerly been used by servants. Ward noted that it corresponded to the foot of the stairway leading to the third floor in the west wing.

It was evident to Ward, as the group returned to the main stairway, that he was not going to be shown the third floor of the east wing. Something had to be done. Ward mentioned to his hosts his desire to examine a mirror fixed to the wall of the corridor on the second floor of the east wing. He explained that it looked like an old Embassy fixture and might have an inventory number on it. Orlov-Ermak asked Ward to wait while he and a member of the Rosat staff examined the mirror. The Russians hurried down the second-floor corridor of the east wing. Ward followed them a few seconds later and found them standing in a corner talking in low tones. He examined the mirror for a few moments, and then he walked across the corridor and again tried the door to the third floor. This time it opened! Ward started up the stairway. Orlov-Ermak rushed after him, uttering assurances that there was nothing on the third floor but an office similar to those already visited.

When he reached the third floor Ward noted that the walls were lined with cupboards. The upper half of each cupboard was enclosed by two glass doors; the lower half had two wooden doors. Behind the glass on the upper doors Ward saw thousands of books. (His later estimate was 13,000[12] volumes.) As he glanced along

[11] Ward to Sec. of State, desp. #477.

[12] This may possibly be a telegraphic error for 1,300. The final inventory of American-owned books put the total at about 1,034, but there are no estimates of the number of volumes left behind. On the other hand, the amount of time it took two men to sort the books and documents makes the larger figure plausible.

the first 8 or 10 of these cupboards Ward saw that they contained Russian books dealing, for the most part, with art and travel.

About two-thirds of the way down the room his eye caught the Great Seal of the United States in gold on the spine of a volume of *Foreign Relations of the United States*. The next two of the cupboards contained a considerable number of United States Government publications. Since the cupboard bore the wax seals of the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, Ward asked Orlov-Ermak to open a cupboard in order that he might verify whether the publications bore any indication of ownership. The crestfallen Orlov-Ermak instructed Zubkovski to open the cupboard. Zubkovski extracted, from a portfolio that he carried under his arm, a handful of keys, broke the wax seals, and opened the cupboard doors. Ward picked out books at random and examined them. Bookplates and date stamps on the volumes indicated that they belonged to the old Embassy.

In the course of his investigations Ward had received information that at least some of the early records were in the old Embassy building. With this in mind, he now asked Orlov-Ermak whether the cupboards enclosed by the wooden doors contained other property of the United States. Both Orlov-Ermak and a member of the Rosat staff replied that the cupboards contained only Rosat records. But Ward's information was that at least one of the wooden-door cupboards contained papers belonging to the old Embassy. Strung along the wall and at the end of the room, the cupboards formed an L-shaped pattern. The records he sought were supposed to be in one of the corner cupboards, but Ward did not know whether the cupboard he sought was on the side or at the end of the room. Ward told Orlov-Ermak that finding the books had aroused his curiosity and that he would like to look at the wooden-door cupboard in the corner at the end of the room. This was opened. The choice was excellent, for here he found unbound official correspondence of the Embassy and records of war prisoners from World War I. (Later, when the records were being packed for shipment, the other cupboards were opened, and eight or nine of them were found to be filled with old Embassy archives and with bound and unbound reference books.)

Having achieved his purpose in regard to the building, Ward now wanted to explore the grounds. The group went to the courtyard, where Ward was shown several small storerooms that were being used by the Rosat company and a former stable or carriage room in the northwest corner of the yard, now being used as a

garage. Adjoining the garage was a hostler's room; this room contained boxes, broken furniture, odds and ends, and a pig. None of this seemed to be United States Government property, so the group went on to inspect a few more storerooms. These proved to be without interest to Ward. At this point Orlov-Ermak began to conduct Ward to the archway leading to the street.

Once again, Ward's powers of observation saved the day. The Consul had no knowledge of any Government property in the rooms adjoining the courtyard, but he had observed that the building and the storerooms in the courtyard were symmetrical. He therefore asked to see the other stable. Much to Ward's surprise, Orlov-Ermak made no objection.

The doors to the second stable were obscured by boxes and firewood. A passage was cleared through this accumulation, and the examination of the stable began. On the door of the stable Ward observed the wax seal of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. When the door was opened, Ward stepped into the darkened interior. There were no windows in the stable and his only source of light was from the doorway. As his eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness, he saw the coat of arms of the American Embassy perched above two harness hooks. Gradually he detected the boxes, books, and pictures strewn about the floor and walls. In one corner there was a huge pile of books, which Ward estimated to measure about 8 × 8 ft. Picking up a book from the pile, he moved to the doorway to examine it. It turned out to be a volume of bound correspondence from the old Legation at St. Petersburg. The label read: "Various Documents Received, 1810–1816, Adams, Harris." By striking a few matches, Ward was able to ascertain that there were similar volumes in the big pile. With the permission of Orlov-Ermak, Ward took down the old coat of arms and carried it with him.

That evening Ward left for Moscow. Soon after his arrival there he telegraphed the results of his search to Washington. The Department of State replied on November 20, 1934, directing the Embassy to have Ward return to Leningrad and assume custody of such archives and property as could be recovered.[13]

The Embassy informed the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of the Department's desire and requested that Weinstein be instructed to transfer the property and archives to Ward when he

[13] Ward to Sec. of State, tel. #384, Nov. 14, 1934; Sec. of State to Ward, tel. #297, Nov. 20, 1934. These documents are no longer preserved in the Department of State records at the National Archives. Citations to these documents are in Ward to Sec. of State, desp. #477.

arrived at Leningrad. In a conversation with Mr. Stolyar of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, Ward suggested that the records of the Commissariat in Moscow might have more complete information on the whereabouts of the Embassy's archives and property than the Leningrad office had. This overture gave the Commissariat an opportunity to surrender without embarrassment all known American property and archives.

A severe cold prevented Ward from returning to Leningrad until December 5, 1934. Then, despite two notices from the Embassy to the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs concerning the date of Ward's arrival, Weinstein expressed surprise at Ward's "unannounced" visit. But Weinstein's surprise was apparently genuine. It developed that he had received no word from the Foreign Office concerning the plans of the Americans to remove their property and archives. Weinstein told Ward that he would try to make arrangements with the Rosat company for packing the items, but this would take a considerable amount of time.

Ward was finally authorized to begin work on December 7. On the third floor of the east wing he began the examination of an estimated 13,000 books. Ward was sure that some of the books probably belonged to the old Legation, or to former members of its staff, but rather than take the chance of being accused of removing the property of others he set aside for packing only those volumes about whose ownership he was reasonably sure. Zubkovski helped Ward to make an examination of the loose records of the Embassy. The books and archives of American ownership were placed in empty cupboards on the third floor; the cupboards were then sealed by both Ward and Zubkovski.

The two men now turned their attention to the contents of the old stable. Patiently Ward went through the pile and separated 150 volumes of bound correspondence and records, 20 photographs, two oil paintings, an etching, alabaster busts of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, and miscellaneous books belonging to the Embassy or its former staff members. He also observed broken mahogany office chairs resembling those sent to U.S. offices abroad and the broken remains of bedsteads, a mahogany bookcase, several electric light fixtures, and a large glass chandelier.

While combing through this accumulation of material Ward found the bronze coat of arms of the former Legation of Rumania and a number of Rumanian paintings and photographs. Observing two unpainted wooden cases about 2 ft. wide and 3 ft. long, Ward was about to lift the lid of one when Zubkovski, in an excited tone,

announced that Ward could not examine these as the property was Polish, Rumanian, or something else—but not American.

The screening process finished, Ward faced the task of assembling all the materials so that he could estimate the size of the total shipment. To assist him in this work, the Embassy at Moscow lent him the services of Boleslaw Joroszkiewcz, an American clerk from the office of the Consulate General in Moscow. Working night and day, Ward and Joroszkiewcz brought the collection together by December 9, and that night the helper returned to Moscow by train.

The next day Ward talked with Orlov-Ermak about the dirty and tiring job of sorting and packing that now awaited him. The Soviet official asked him why he bothered with such details—the Commissariat would be glad to attend to them for several hundred dollars. The remark alerted Ward to the fact that any assistance provided by the Commissariat would be costly. For every paper ruble that the Soviet authorities spent, they would charge the Embassy the same amount in gold rubles, with the total cost converted into American dollars. Not wishing to see his Government exploited in such a way, Ward set about making other arrangements.

From Warren R. Harrow, an American living in Leningrad, he learned of several organizations that served as packers and freight forwarders. He entered into negotiations with one such group and arranged to have it pack and ship the archives and books. Begun on December 12, packing was completed 3 days later. Fifty-two cases were taken to the railroad station and shipped to Moscow. The total cost of packing, cartage, and the freight shipment to Moscow came to 1,513.48 rubles or $37.86! Quite different from the estimate given by Orlov-Ermak!

By the time the packing was completed, Ward had made arrangements for a complete inspection of the old Embassy building. In anticipation of this tour, the Embassy at Moscow had requested the Department of State to forward a copy of the old inventory of the Embassy at St. Petersburg. The Department complied, and Ward had the inventory in hand when he and Orlov-Ermak, accompanied by Warren R. Harrow and Zubkovski, entered the old building on December 15. Harrow had frequently visited the Embassy in the years before the Russian Revolution, and it was Ward's hope that between Harrow's recollection and the Department's inventory they might be able to identify any American furniture that remained in the building. He had heard rumors that the furniture was being used in the old servants' quarters—an area of the build-

ing that he had not seen during his previous inspection. But his request to visit these rooms was denied by the Soviet authorities on the grounds that neither the Commissariat nor the Rosat company had the right to enter private lodgings without due process of law. During the rest of the tour Harrow was unable to identify any piece of furniture as belonging to the old Embassy. Ward saw a mahogany chair that looked like the type the American Government sent to its embassies and consulates. The underside of the seat even had an old blurred chalk number. But a Rosat employee said the chair had belonged to them before they moved into the building. Ward let the matter drop.

With the inspection behind him, and the boxes containing the archives and books safely at the railroad station, Ward's work in Leningrad was finished. He returned to Moscow.

When the shipment arrived in Moscow, it was taken to the Embassy's offices, unpacked, examined, and repacked for shipment to the United States. Some of the books recovered by Ward were added to the Embassy's library in Moscow.[14] Word of the recovery of the manuscripts was announced to the American people.[15]

Information about the Rumanian property located by Ward was given to the Rumanian Minister at Moscow. Presumably his Government took steps to recover this material.

In March 1935 the bound correspondence of the old Embassy, consisting of 276 volumes, was delivered to the American Embassy at Helsingfors, Finland, for shipment to the United States. Another 347 bundles of unbound correspondence and other records were shipped to New York from Leningrad.[16] Not long after this the material reached the National Archives. The records are there today, ready for use by intellectually curious researchers.

[14] Desp. #477.

[15] Department of State Press Release, Nov. 16, 1934; *New York Times,* Jan. 11, 1935, p. 26.

[16] Harold Shantz, 2d Sec., to Sec. of State, Mar. 29, 1935 (attachment to Desp. #477).

Shaped Data

When using written records the researcher is partially dominated by the intentions, interests, and limitations of the person who created the records. Oral history enables the researcher to shape his data by his own questions and purposes.

—Cornell Program in Oral History, a leaflet being distributed by the Cornell University Libraries.