



**Jenny Thompson, Sherry Thompson.** *The Kremlinologist: Llewellyn E. Thompson, America's Man in Cold War Moscow.* Johns Hopkins Nuclear History and Contemporary Affairs Series. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2018. Illustrations. 600 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4214-2454-5; \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4214-2409-5.

**Reviewed by** David S. Foglesong (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey)

**Published on** H-Diplo (November, 2018)

**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

## Old School Wise Men

This magnificent book, handsomely produced by the publisher, is a pleasure to read. Jenny Thompson and Sherry Thompson have skillfully interwoven memories from their childhood experiences in Russia, their mother's unpublished memoirs, other family papers, interviews with American diplomats, extensive research in published and unpublished documents, and wide range of scholarly studies to create a thorough and insightful examination of the long diplomatic career of their extraordinarily discreet and self-effacing father.

Although Llewellyn ("Tommy") Thompson is much less well known than his contemporaries George F. Kennan and Charles Bohlen, he played important roles in American-Soviet relations from January 1941, when he first traveled to the Soviet Union as second secretary of the US Embassy, to his participation in the negotiation of the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) before his death in 1972. When German forces threatened to capture Moscow in the fall of 1941, Thompson bravely volunteered to stay in the capital to manage the US Embassy after most of the staff evacuated to Kuybyshev on the Volga River. Engagement with Soviet citizens in the relatively relaxed years of the wartime alliance led Thompson to see the potential importance of cultural diplomacy and people-to-people contacts, which he would champion in subsequent decades as ways for Americans and Soviets to dispel misconceptions about

each other.

Lacking Kennan's gift for vivid, imaginative writing, Thompson did not exert as much influence through his dispatches and memoranda. However, Thompson had significant impacts on several major events after Joseph Stalin's death, particularly through quiet, persistent diplomatic negotiation and calm, thoughtful advising during crises. His patience and disciplined confidentiality contributed to the resolution in 1954 of the long Italian-Yugoslavian dispute over the boundaries of Trieste. As ambassador to Austria, Thompson's creativity and firmness helped to produce the Soviet-American agreement for the emergence of a neutral independent Austria in 1955. Thompson's close, bantering relationship with Nikita Khrushchev as ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1957 to 1962 helped him to have a clear understanding of the volatile Soviet leader's views and goals. That enabled Thompson to provide sound advice to Washington through the crises over Berlin from 1958 to 1961, over the shooting down of an American U-2 spy plane in 1960, and during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. Unfortunately, Thompson's recommendations—for example, to acknowledge the impropriety of the U-2 flight across Soviet territory—were not always accepted. Yet some of his most important advice—especially responding initially to Soviet missiles in Cuba with a legal blockade rather than air strikes—did

guide US actions.

Following British correspondent Henry Brandon, Thompson's daughters describe him as neither a hawk nor a dove but "the Cold War Owl" (p. 1). The moniker is apt: Thompson embodied and conveyed much wisdom in his long government service. Like Kennan, Thompson believed in the importance of firmness, resolve, restraint, and patience in dealing with the Soviet Union. Being less emotional than the moody Kennan, Thompson more consistently exemplified those traits. For example, while Kennan, as head of the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department, rashly launched covert action and propaganda programs to roll back Communism from Eastern Europe—a move he later regretted—Thompson opposed State Department involvement in such efforts, arguing that they would undermine traditional diplomatic work and would fail to overthrow the Communist regimes.[1] Instead of trying to provoke revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Thompson wisely focused on encouraging the evolution of the Soviet government away from an ideological agenda toward a pragmatic focus on national interests. He therefore advocated efforts to engage, rather than isolate, the USSR. Expanding trade with the Soviet Union would, he thought, promote the moderation of Soviet policies. In contacts with American politicians, including Vice President Richard Nixon, Thompson counseled against flamboyant and beligerent rhetoric. When Soviet officials subjected him to harangues, Thompson listened calmly and then re-focused discussions on the achievement of objectives. When crises erupted Thompson repeatedly urged empathy for the adversary and recommended courses of action that allowed Soviet leaders to retreat without losing face. Through all the turmoil in American-Soviet relations across three decades Thompson steadily believed in the possibility of cooperation based on careful listening, clear expression of positions, and mutual understanding. As he put it in one paper written in 1944, "Cooperation at the top level for the achievement of broad major objectives is possible if each side will take account of the limitations and peculiarities of the other" (p. 47).

With his strong sense of decency, integrity, and propriety, Thompson was at times shocked or at least discomfited by the statements and actions of other US officials. In 1960, for example, he was outraged by having been lied to about the U-2 reconnaissance program—an incident that left him with a lasting sense of betrayal and resentment. In 1964, after becoming acting deputy undersecretary of state for political affairs and joining the Special Group that oversaw US covert activities, Thomp-

son had what his daughters call "a rude awakening" about what the US government was doing around the world (p. 361).

Historians may find the treatment of some episodes in this massive study unconvincing. The authors describe journalist William L. White's *Report on the Russians* (1945), based on his six-week trip to the USSR in 1944, as presenting "the truth" about America's murderous and dissembling wartime ally—a characterization that neglects White's anti-Soviet prejudice and his propagation of stereotypes about the "oriental" inmates of the Soviet prison (p. 42). Perhaps influenced by Thompson's view that the American public remained smitten with the Soviet ally through the summer of 1945, his daughters assert that "any hint of criticism of the Soviet Union was simply not acceptable to the press" in the spring of 1945 (p. 51). In fact, however, as Ralph B. Levering and other scholars have shown, conservative newspapers had resumed attacks on the Soviet Union already in the fall of 1944, Soviet conduct in Poland after the Yalta Conference of February 1945 spurred a surge in suspicion of the USSR, and by the summer papers like the *Chicago Tribune* expressed such sharp hostility that more moderate and liberal papers worried about a "hate Russia" campaign.[2] The Thompsons argue that the Cuban missile crisis stemmed from Khrushchev's seeing "an irresistible opportunity to use missiles to solve all his problems"—including Chinese criticism, Soviet military complaints, and East German instability, as well as Cuban vulnerability—even though they acknowledge that there is very little documentary evidence to support that thesis (p. 272).

Though scholars can disagree with such interpretations, this is still a thoroughly researched and beautifully written book. The book offers details about the Thompson family history coupled with new insights into many developments, such as the complex Soviet-American interaction surrounding the Nixon-Khrushchev "kitchen debate" in July 1959 and the Soviet euphoria about improved relations with the United States that lasted for many months after Khrushchev's visit to America in September 1959. While the authors highlight the many times when their father was wise and right, they also acknowledge that occasionally his predictions were wrong. For example, they note that he did not vigorously oppose the disastrous deepening of US involvement in Vietnam even though he realized how it obstructed the development of détente with the Soviet Union. *The Kremlinologist* is thus balanced and judicious as well as revealing and illuminating.

When Thompson left Moscow for the last time in January 1969 and journalists asked him to name his most important accomplishment, he replied: “Not having done anything to make matters worse” (p. 465). That modest statement disregarded the many positive contributions the career diplomat made by fostering trust, helping to resolve conflicts peacefully, and promoting mutual understanding between Soviet and American leaders and peoples. The story of the life and work of Thompson—a diplomat who did not leak, lie, shout, gloat, or tweet—offers an inspiring model for foreign service officers and advocates of cooperative American-Russian relations in the twenty-first century.

#### Notes

[1]. On Kennan and the psychological warfare and “liberation” campaigns, see the following studies not included in the bibliography of *The Kremlinologist*: Scott

Lucas, *Freedom’s War: The American Crusade against the Soviet Union* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America’s Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1956* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); and David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”: The Crusade for a “Free Russia” since 1881* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chap. 5.

[2]. Ralph B. Levering, *American Opinion and the Russian Alliance, 1939-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 176, 5, 195, 292; George Sirgiiovanni, *An Undercurrent of Suspicion: Anti-Communism in America during World War II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990); “Time for Straight Talk,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1945; “A U.S.-Russian War?” *Collier’s*, July 28, 1945; and “Trying to Fan a Spark into a Conflagration,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 6, 1945.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

**Citation:** David S. Foglesong. Review of Thompson, Jenny; Thompson, Sherry, *The Kremlinologist: Llewellyn E. Thompson, America’s Man in Cold War Moscow*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. November, 2018.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=52286>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.