

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related **BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS**

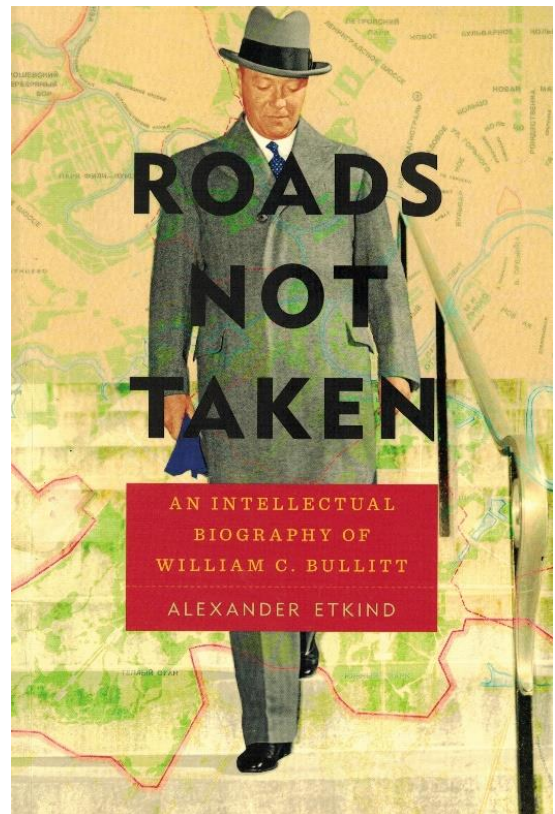
46 – *Roads not Taken*
(25 January 2020)

ROADS NOT TAKEN: **An Intellectual Biography of** **William C. Bullitt**

Author: Alexander Etkind

Publisher: [University of Pittsburgh Press](#), 2017
(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

Descriptor: Life of the controversial first US
Ambassador to the Soviet Union, 1933-6



RusRoL relevance: *Considerable – especially in relation to the clash between the young, CONTRACTish character in early life and the warily, almost ruefully, STATUSish approach to the Soviet Union of Bullitt's mature years.*

Reason to read: William Bullitt was a very interesting man. He was in Moscow on holiday with his mother on the day the First World War broke out. He first came into contact with official Russia when he went, during the Versailles peace conference, to see Lenin to try to get the Bolsheviks involved in the Paris negotiations. In 1924, he married **Louise Bryant**, the communist widow of John “Reds” Reed (after she had had an affair with Enver Pasha, the Turkish organiser of the Armenian genocide). Bullitt divorced Bryant in 1930. He was appointed first US Ambassador to the Soviet Union when **Roosevelt** opened diplomatic relations in 1933. Of the many creative and constructive things he did there, one of the most important in the longer term was his selection of **George (“Long Telegram”) Kennan** for his Embassy staff. Also it was he who was responsible for selecting **Spaso House** as the US Ambassador’s Residence.

Bullitt quickly turned from admiration to wariness and contempt for the Soviet system. He was appointed Ambassador to France instead. (He spoke French fluently, but had no Russian.) Though he had a bantering, “social equal” sort of relationship with the President, he despaired of Roosevelt’s attempt to co-opt **Stalin** by “trusting” him. He was in Paris when the Germans arrived in 1940, and was so well thought of by his hosts that he was appointed acting-mayor of Paris after the French government fled. (As a citizen of a neutral country, he could negotiate with the invader.) Bullitt displayed

considerable physical courage in, amongst other things, helping his staff and the French gold reserves evade capture. Back in the US, he was involved in the “destroyers for bases” deal of September 1940 which, Etkind says, “was prepared largely by Bullitt”. (p. 199) He wanted a much bigger job, but Roosevelt disappointed him, offering the Embassy in London, which Bullitt declined, characteristically overvaluing his own political usefulness. (He was also rather Anglophobic.)

The rest of his life was lived at a lower key until, shortly before he died in 1967, he published a fascinating psychoanalytic study of the personality of **Woodrow Wilson**, on whose behalf he had set out to Russia in 1919. Bullitt had co-written it with Sigmund Freud in the late 1930s. But they refrained from publishing their text while any of the people mentioned in it were still alive. It puts the famous Fourteen Points, the US declaration of war in 1917 and Wilson’s performance at Versailles into new perspective. “It was the first psychobiography of a modern man and also the first book-length psychoanalytical study of politics.” (p. 79)

Though out of print, it is highly recommended (see [review 40](#)). However, A.J.P. Taylor thought it one of the silliest books of all time. Though it certainly exaggerates, I respectfully disagree. It seems to me that the more we know about democratic politicians, the more we need to understand their inner motivation for what they do. What is the mix of public service and private psychosis? Asking such questions helped Bullitt take the measure, usually correctly, of some powerful people. Throughout his life, he had the reputation of being “right” about most of the important issues in European political life. He was considered so “wise” that the President used to refer to him joshingly as “Bill Buddha” (p. 167)

Main talking points:

1. Prof. Etkind’s opening paragraph is relevant: “This is a book about a man who knew how the world worked and how it was changing throughout the twentieth century. He wished to save it and shared the most important insights with the most powerful people of his time. But they preferred his company to his advice. Usually, his foresights proved to be true when it was already too late to follow them. Time and again, he was on the right side of history.” (p. xi)



2. The pinnacle of Bullitt’s career in this respect was to predict the 1939 pact between the Soviets and the Nazis. “It was Bullitt from Paris – and not Davies [Bullitt’s pro-Stalin successor] from Moscow – who warned Washington about the preparations for the **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact**. Again, Roosevelt was not terribly interested in Bullitt’s analysis.” (p. 176) But that brought him no credit. “Later, during the war, the State Department purged the officials whose expertise sounded too anti-Soviet, and almost all these were members of Bullitt’s embassy.” (p. 125)

3. “During the war, Bullitt wrote later, Soviet fellow travellers worked in the State Department, the Treasury, and even in the Department of Defense. Conversely, the few experts on Soviet affairs that existed in the United States – most of them former employees of Bullitt – lost their jobs in Washington precisely because they spoke and wrote the truth about the Soviet Union.” (p. 177)
4. “The East European Division of the State Department was closed down when a distant cousin of Roosevelt’s, **Sumner Welles**, became deputy secretary of state... Bullitt protested Welles’s appointment... Welles purged the ‘Russian experts’ and other free-minded individuals in the state department... Welles also supported Roosevelt’s idea that the Soviet Union was a progressive state, and that personal friendship with Stalin would mitigate any difficulties.” Old Moscow hands could not accept this. “For the rest of their lives Bullitt’s and Kennan’s first-hand experiences of ‘Russia’s degradation’ under Stalin defined their political ideas.” (p. 202)

Incidental interest: I liked this little snippet: In 1935, Bullitt was sent to represent the USA at the funeral of Joseph Pilsudski, the Polish nationalist leader. There he made it his business to talk to **Hermann Goering**. (Bullitt also spoke German well.) He reported to Roosevelt as follows: “When he was 250 pounds lighter he must have been a blond beauty of the most unpleasant sort. He is really the most unpleasant representative of the nation that I have ever laid eyes on. He made me feel that the Germans will achieve nothing but a series of national disasters until they cease to take the *Nibelungenlied* seriously.” (p 167) In 1937, Bullitt visited him in Berlin. He wrote to Roosevelt comparing the Reichsmarschall to “the hind end of an elephant.” (p. 186)

Six months before that, Bullitt had made another of his prescient observations. “In May 1937, Bullitt warned Roosevelt that as long as Hitler was interested in a friendly understanding with Great Britain he would abstain from annexing Austria. However, the moment Hitler found out that ‘the British have been playing him for a sucker, I think he will act – probably via a revolt of the Nazis within Austria.’” (p. 186) That, of course, is exactly what happened ten months later.

In connection with **Woodrow Wilson**, Etkind juxtaposes his racism and liberalism in a way which explains much about the contradictions of Versailles. “For the first time since the American Civil War, southerners came to power in the United States. Woodrow Wilson and his closest adviser, Edward House, were both from the South. They saw the Civil War as having been caused by the imperialist ambitions of the North, which needed the South for its resources, and they viewed the European conflict in similar terms. They did not blame Germany for the war; it was no guiltier of unleashing an imperialist war than Britain was. Exporting the American Revolution to the European continent, this circle of liberal, post-imperial politicians conceived of the idea of ‘self-determination of nations’ as the solution to European problems.” (p. 9) The problem was that they applied this principle selectively, to the defeated empires only. It took Hitler, Roosevelt and the communist guerrillas of the 1950s to finish the job Wilson began.

Surprising points: Bullitt understood the fact that the aeroplane made European-style borders semi-irrelevant. He was therefore an early proponent of what we now call the European Union. He was close friends with the French financier, **Jean Monnet**, who was to become the “father” of European integration. Six years earlier, Bullitt had helped Monnet marry his Italian lover, by a fantastic diplomatic ruse, in Moscow. (see pp. 187-8) It was Monnet who proposed the Anglo-French Union two days after

the Germans marched into Paris. Churchill later took it up though, according to Etkind. (p. 197), not very enthusiastically. In this sense, Bullitt was like Roosevelt in his attitude to European imperialism. The difference was that the former Moscow person saw clearly that the Soviet Union was an empire, while the “former naval person” did not. Neither understood that the War and Cold War would turn the United States’ sphere of influence into a form of empire.

Style: Interesting material not always very effectively deployed due to a weak narrative and a curious sense of detachment which suggests either that the text has been over-edited or that writing the book was a job of work to the author, rather than a command of the soul. The upside is that Etkind refuses to discuss conspiracy theories which, as we all know, abound in this field.

Publishing quality: Fine. Good pictures.

Smile(s): The wife of the Deputy Ambassador in Moscow—Bullitt himself was divorced by then—spent hours teaching the Russian staff in the Embassy which glasses to use with which wines, etc. “One of them was heard to say to another, ‘Madam Wiley must be very superstitious, she wants us to do everything the same way all the time.’” (p. 141)

Author: A curious mix of Western academic and ex-Soviet “kitchen lecturer”, Alexander Etkind is Mikhail M. Bakhtin Professor of History of Russia-Europe Relations at the European University Institute in Florence.

Link(s): Prof. Etkind is one of four participants in an intermittently interesting discussion on Russian historical memory at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wum2FXmxulc> He talks at length in the early part and *passim* thereafter.

Overall recommendation level: INTERESTING

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including [Isles of the West](#) and [The Justice Factory](#). He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: ian@ianmitchellonline.co.uk.

For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell’s Book Recommendations](#).