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## 'A matter that stirs strong feelings': Britain and the Soviet Wives Affair, 1945–54

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### ABSTRACT

Historians tend to ascribe the onset of the Anglo-Soviet Cold War in the aftermath of the German defeat in 1945 to matters such as clashes over the future of Eastern Europe, but other factors have not received much attention. This article draws on British Foreign Office records to explore the strains stemming from the marriage to local women during the Second World War and shortly after of thirty-four British military and diplomatic personnel serving in the Soviet Union. Upon marrying, the husbands were obliged to return to Britain but the Soviet government denied many of the wives the opportunity to join them. The issue exacerbated tensions between the British and the Soviet governments, captured public imaginations in Britain, and showed how Cold War decision-making could affect ordinary lives. The article therefore fills a gap in the literature to explore a topic that is of significant diplomatic and human interest.

Historians tend to ascribe the onset of the Anglo-Soviet Cold War in the wake of the Second World War to matters such as differences over the future of Eastern Europe, but certain other contributing factors have not received much attention. In particular, strains arose from how thirty-four Service and British Embassy personnel based in the Soviet Union during the Second World War and soon after married local women.<sup>1</sup> The British authorities warned the intending husbands that the wives might not be able to leave, because doing so required either an exit visa or permission to relinquish Soviet citizenship. The former depended on consent from the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the latter from no less than the Supreme Soviet of the Presidium.<sup>2</sup> A British regulation stipulated that, for security reasons, anyone marrying a Soviet citizen would be transferred home promptly,<sup>3</sup> which obliged the husbands to leave their wives behind in the belief that they would soon be reunited in Britain. By the end of 1945, when Anglo-Soviet relations were still relatively favourable in the light of the recent common struggle against Nazi Germany, the Soviet government had accommodated British appeals by

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permitting eighteen wives to leave but over the next few years, against the background of the developing Cold War, refused all except one of the other wives. Furthermore, unless the wives unable to leave the Soviet Union spurned their British husbands they faced hostility and persecution from the authorities there. Two wives who left for Britain decided to return, which the Soviet government exploited zealously to emphasise the iniquities of British social-democracy and to discourage Soviet citizens from thinking that life might be better abroad.

John Saville remarked that in this period ‘the Russians presented themselves as impossibly obdurate and intransigent’. Alongside what the Western powers saw as typical Soviet truculence and expansionism, such as the imposition of a ground transport blockade around west Berlin and the orchestration of a communist coup in Czechoslovakia (both in 1948), ‘populist issues such as the Russian wives’ captured public imaginations, toughened British official and public attitudes, and underscored the ideological gulf.<sup>4</sup> This article, which draws mainly on the records of the British Foreign Office, focuses on the period from the end of the war to 1954, when the Moscow government revealed that the last of the wives still in the Soviet Union had dissolved their marriages. The article explores a topic that is of significant diplomatic and human interest yet has received little attention from historians. The saga of the wives shows how Cold War decision-making – in this case the Soviet refusal to provide exit visas or allow the repudiation of citizenship – could influence everyday lives. The study also pertains to questions of migration and frontier regulation in the era of the ‘Iron Curtain’; the hostility of the Soviet government to *expatriation* of its citizens was consistent with that government’s vigorous efforts to *repatriate*, whatever their preferences, the millions of Soviet nationals who had been swept abroad after the German advance early in the war.

### From mutual suspicion to Cold War

Although difficulties were not inevitable, it is fair to say that after the collapse of the shared enemy the portents for a successful post-war Anglo-Soviet relationship were not especially promising. Britain had, for example, been among several states that had intervened in the Russian civil war in 1919–20 against the Bolsheviks, and in the 1930s a combination of ideological disdain and doubts about Soviet military capabilities meant that the British government showed little interest in working with Stalin against Hitler. There was ill-feeling in Britain over how the Moscow-Berlin pact of August 1939 enabled Germany to attack Poland and then to strike westward without fear of Soviet intervention. The Anglo-Soviet-American ‘Grand Alliance’ (invoked by Hitler’s assault on the Soviet Union and his declaration of war on the United States in 1941) contained important unifying elements such as an

Anglo-Soviet treaty of friendship and cooperation (1942), Britain's provision of supplies to the Soviet Union via the Arctic convoys, and the development of a near-friendship between Stalin and Winston Churchill.<sup>5</sup> Less constructively, as the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) in Whitehall reflected in October 1945, the 'Russians throughout the war showed the utmost suspicion in their dealings with us'.<sup>6</sup> This outlook was

rooted in the traditional suspicion of Russian Governments for all foreigners. There still exists a strong isolationist and anti-foreign clique inside the Political Bureau of the Communist Party. The Russians have not forgotten Britain's intervention in Russia after the last war, nor the general anti-Bolshevik propaganda and many Government statements over the last twenty years before Russia became our ally in this war.<sup>7</sup>

The JIC noted that the Soviets 'suspected the good faith of our intentions to open a second front; and when this suspicion was dispelled, a new suspicion was soon born, under the influence of German propaganda, that the Anglo-Americans would negotiate a separate peace with Germany in the West'. To add to the difficulty, according to the JIC, Soviet representatives harboured 'an exaggerated fear of the British Intelligence Service', and were 'aware of ... a good deal of anti-Russian talk and feeling in certain British circles and particularly among our Allies'.<sup>8</sup>

The JIC suggested that relations between Britain and the Soviet Union had 'recently deteriorated at all levels', for the following reasons:

- (a) Russian insistence, in the face of British and American opposition, on treating Eastern Europe as their exclusive sphere of influence regardless of the interests of their Allies.
- (b) Disagreement over the interpretation of the Crimea [Yalta] and Potsdam agreements [of February and July 1945 respectively].
- (c) Russian sense of inferiority engendered by the Anglo-American development of the atomic bomb.
- (d) Russian resentment at finding the British and Americans co-ordinating their policy in matters in dispute with the USSR.
- (e) Great Britain's refusal and American reluctance to afford on terms satisfactory to Russia large long-term credits to assist her rehabilitation, when she feels that they are still deeply indebted to her.<sup>9</sup>

The strain had been most evident 'in connection with the Polish question', given how the 'democratic' governance that the Soviet Union had established in Poland differed greatly to that envisioned by the British and Americans at Yalta. Generally, too, Moscow had initiated a 'tightening of party discipline and a greater intransigence in all negotiations'.<sup>10</sup>

Frank Roberts, the up-and-coming Minister and frequent *chargé d'affaires* at the Moscow Embassy, added to the sombre picture with a trio of lengthy

analyses the following year. On 14 March he outlined the various ‘manifestations of Soviet opposition’ towards the British position in Greece, Persia, Turkey, the Arab world, India, the Far Eastern colonies, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria, Italy, and France. The ‘Soviet diplomatic push’ was ‘partly an attempt to profit from the present fluid state of postwar Europe and the world . . . but partly also an almost desperate effort to seize advanced positions and to dig in before the inevitable reaction against high-handed Soviet actions sets in’. Three days later, Roberts explained that Soviet policies towards Britain drew on historic expansionist tendencies combined with the missionary zeal of communist ideology, and that the Soviet Union was engaged in ‘constant intrigue against and undermining of our established position’ in several theatres across the world. Finally, on 18 March he called for a tougher stance towards the Soviet Union. Roberts’ three letters furthered the perception in Whitehall that there was little chance of further cooperation with Moscow, and that a more realistic approach was needed.<sup>11</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Soviets had their own views. The Ambassador to the US, Nikolai Novikov, told Moscow in 1946 that Winston Churchill’s recent ‘Iron Curtain’ speech in Missouri was intended to bring about ‘the conclusion of an Anglo-American military alliance in order to establish joint world domination’, and that the United States was preparing for ‘a war against the Soviet Union, which in the eyes of American imperialists is the chief obstacle in the American path to world domination’.<sup>12</sup> Evidently, the American-Soviet hot war that US policymakers were alleged to have wanted did not materialise, but by 1949 the Cold War was firmly in place, after developments that included the establishment of the Committee of European Economic Co-operation (to administer US Marshall Aid in Western Europe), and the Soviet counter-response, Comecon; the creation of NATO; and the emergence of the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany in the eastern and western blocs respectively.

## Interventions

Nationals from countries other than Britain had also married Soviet wives; there were as many as 350 American cases, for example.<sup>13</sup> The wives question was an exception to a general picture of Anglo-American collaboration in this period because the US position was still weaker than that of Britain; women marrying Americans did not acquire US nationality automatically, in contrast to how those marrying Britons became British citizens. This meant that, as Roberts told London in 1947, ‘we do not . . . strengthen our case by associating the Americans with us’. Moreover, conveying any impression of ‘an Anglo-American bloc’ only made ‘the Russians . . . even more obstructive than usual’.<sup>14</sup> Acting, then, independently of their American (and other) allies

and at the behest of the husbands, British representatives appealed regularly to the Soviet government to 'release' the remaining wives. There were several interventions at the Prime Ministerial and Foreign Secretary level in 1943–45.<sup>15</sup> Ambassador Archibald Clark-Kerr raised the question several times as well,<sup>16</sup> including telling the Soviet Foreign Minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, in 1945 that if Britain was willing to 'surrender ... 25,000 brides' in marriages to American servicemen in Britain 'it seemed to me that the Anglo-Soviet alliance warranted a strong claim by us upon the ... young Soviet citizens now waiting eagerly to join their British husbands'.<sup>17</sup> The Moscow Embassy appealed almost routinely on behalf of the husbands and wives; Roberts was responsible, as he described it, for 'innumerable and often unrecorded interventions'.<sup>18</sup> His efforts included encouraging the Dean of Canterbury, Hewlett Johnson (who was noted for his sympathy with the Soviet Union), to address the question with Stalin and Molotov on a visit to Moscow in the summer of 1945.<sup>19</sup> Stalin responded to the Dean with

considerable surprise and, turning to Molotov, asked if the Dean's story was true. Molotov confessed with some slight embarrassment that it was. Stalin said that there was clearly something wrong that he would be able to put right. He then corrected himself, saying that he would 'probably' be able to put it right.<sup>20</sup>

It is not possible to say which British intervention was the most decisive, but by the end of 1945, the Soviet government had authorised a total of eighteen releases.<sup>21</sup> The fact that, even though lacking a *locus standi* in law, the British had succeeded in these cases showed that Soviet representatives, however tough-minded, still felt a certain amount of goodwill towards Britain at this stage.

The wives who were able to leave the Soviet Union obtained foreign passports/exit visas (enabling a stay abroad of two years) rather than being allowed to renounce their citizenship. British officials were keen to see that the regulations were respected, with T.C. Sharman at the Moscow Embassy worrying that the wives 'leaving this country as Soviet citizens' might '*en masse* disregard their obligations' by 'throwing their Soviet passports, as it were, in the fire'. This 'would make a disagreeable impression on the Soviet authorities and perhaps lead eventually to a new hardening of their attitude to this problem'. The women, if seeking permanent residence in Britain, should apply to the Soviet Embassy with 'a renewed application for release from Soviet citizenship'. This would ensure that 'the Soviet government cannot accuse us later of conniving in an attempt on the part of these women to ignore their obligations under Soviet law'.<sup>22</sup> As it turned out, the legal status of the women who settled in Britain did not raise any difficulties in Anglo-Soviet relations.

Although by the end of 1945 the exit of eighteen wives (or at least agreement that they would soon be allocated visas if they had not been already) was for

the British a cause for celebration, there were still sixteen wives left behind. Sharman could 'detect no system' in Soviet decision-making about who should be permitted to leave,<sup>23</sup> while Roberts pointed out that four of the wives given exit visas were simply those at the top of an alphabetical list.<sup>24</sup> British representations continued but now to no avail, reflecting the emerging Cold War. Clark-Kerr's successor, Maurice Peterson, raised the case of the remaining wives with Molotov in December 1946, only to find him 'annoyed with me for bothering him with a matter which he clearly regarded as of small importance'.<sup>25</sup> Early in 1947, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field-Marshal Bernard Montgomery, visited Moscow, when he appealed to Stalin on behalf of the wives of service personnel; the Soviet government took action but only to forbid Soviet citizens from marrying foreigners.<sup>26</sup> By extending the prohibitions on Soviet citizens to the choice of spouse as well as to the opportunity to live abroad, the decree at least prevented the grief associated with any further marriages between Soviet and foreign nationals. In March Bevin appealed to Stalin at the Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in Moscow, receiving the response that 'he had twice been [harshly] dealt with in the Supreme Soviet for raising the subject' of the wives and 'did not think that anything could be done'.<sup>27</sup> It was doubtful, of course, that functionaries in any branch of the Soviet state would oppose the dictator; by presenting the Supreme Soviet as an obstacle, Stalin was only rejecting British pressure. Even if the Presidium was genuinely an obstruction, it is reasonable to assume that he could simply have circumvented the citizenship question by ordering the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to issue exit visas.

## Publicity

Although it was not clear why some but not all of the Soviet wives of British husbands had been permitted to leave, Soviet policy towards its citizens marrying foreign nationals was consistent whichever other state was involved; as Roberts explained in 1948, 'the Russians have taken a stand on principle . . . There are many Satellite wives, including the wife of Marshal Tito's son, who are being treated the same way'.<sup>28</sup> The question, of course, for Roberts and his colleagues was how to achieve the release of the wives of British husbands. Early in 1947 Peterson had argued that, after the recent failure of diplomatic action, it was time to launch a publicity campaign

both through the Press and on the BBC, and through . . . Parliamentary questions by the Members of Parliament who represent the husbands concerned. This would provide the opportunity to mention the harm which a comparatively small matter of this kind may cause to Anglo-Soviet relations in British public opinion, and to press Generalissimo Stalin once more to use his good offices to secure an early and satisfactory settlement of this question.<sup>29</sup>



A statement by Roberts about the wives in April 1947 to British press correspondents in Moscow prompted extensive newspaper coverage; as one official noted, the story 'aroused more interest and . . . more attention in the British press than any other single Anglo-Soviet issue'.<sup>30</sup> *The Daily Herald*, for example, argued that the fate of the wives showed that 'Russia is ruled by a harsh bureaucracy, indifferent to the rights and feelings of the individual'.<sup>31</sup> *The Daily Mail* maintained that 'in their desire to have possession, body and soul, of every single Russian', the Soviets 'seem to stop at nothing'. This was 'easy when the luckless subjects are still on Russian soil. They can simply be prevented from leaving – as the British husbands of Russian wives will confirm'.<sup>32</sup> The press highlighted the efforts of the husbands to be reunited with their wives. *The Bradford Observer* reported that they had urged Stalin via telegram that the wives should 'not be allowed to become the helpless victims of international politics'.<sup>33</sup> *The Evening Standard* pointed out that the husbands had orchestrated a letter-writing campaign, with over a hundred letters from MPs and bishops to Molotov.<sup>34</sup> *The Rugby Advertiser* noted that one husband dedicated his leave from the RAF to visit various towns to encourage local dignitaries to sign 'a printed appeal to be sent to Mr. Molotov'.<sup>35</sup> A minority of newspapers criticised the British position. *The News Chronicle* argued that the publicity only made matters worse for the wives, while *The Daily Worker* presented the public agitation as an element of a broader anti-Soviet stance.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, D.N. Pritt MP (Labour, North Hammersmith), wrote in *The West London Observer* that the wives 'would probably have been allowed to come to this country long ago if their cases had not been made the topic of such fierce propaganda as to make it impossible to give permission without appearing to give way to abuse'.<sup>37</sup>

Pritt made similar criticisms in Parliament, although the support there for the husbands and wives was overwhelming. In 1947, Alice Bacon (Labour, Leeds Southeast) mocked the Soviet position, explaining that when she had visited Moscow as part of a delegation the previous year a representative of the Soviet government had argued that the 'new idea' was that 'only the best' Soviet women were 'fit for export', but the husbands had not chosen 'the best type'.<sup>38</sup> In the House of Lords the following year, Robert Vansittart (who in the 1930s had been the Foreign Office's most vocal anti-appeaser) condemned the Soviet 'combination of sadism and nationalism run mad', and demanded retaliation in the form of denying funds to the Soviet Union from the Aid for Russia Fund, and of reducing the size of Soviet missions in Britain. He won the support of Lord Patrick Moynihan, and the Bishop of Chichester, George Bell; the latter condemned the 'dishonour to the marriage bond that the State ought not to tolerate' whatever nationalities were involved, and argued that 'appeasement is futile; action is called for'.<sup>39</sup>

Some officials favoured retaliation. Writing early in 1948, in Robert Hankey in the Foreign Office saw merit in reducing staff numbers at the Soviet



Embassy, 'the size of which worries our Intelligence authorities'.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Peterson advocated reducing the Soviet staff in England 'to make it numerically identical' with the Moscow Embassy. He also recommended declining further visa applications for 'wives of non-diplomatic or consular Soviet citizens in the United Kingdom'.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, Britain did not retaliate. An official suggested that by 'expelling a number of the wives and families of non-diplomatic Soviet representatives in this country, we might succeed in causing a good deal of personal distress', perhaps even 'some difficulty and vexation to the Soviet Government', but it was 'most unlikely that by doing so we should obtain exit permits for the wives'; the Soviet government would instead become 'even more obdurate in their refusal to allow these women to join their husbands'. There was the further problem that 'when two states begin to take retaliatory action against each other, there is no saying where the trouble will end'.<sup>42</sup> As much as Hankey found the thought of retaliation tempting, he was more concerned that the Soviet government might force cuts to staff numbers at the Moscow Embassy; this was best avoided because the Embassy was 'almost the only source of information we have' about the Soviet Union.<sup>43</sup> For his part, Ernest Bevin feared a cycle of mutual retaliation; he was 'not going to be bullied' into retaliating by Vansittart or anyone else.<sup>44</sup>

In September 1947 the Soviet government alleged that there were still some 130,000 Soviet citizens, including orphans, among the many Displaced Persons in the British zone in Germany. The charge was intended to convey the impression of hypocrisy, but the Foreign Office was having none of it: 'we do not hinder the repatriation of any displaced persons who wish to return to their homes. We have repatriated over 1,140,000 Soviet citizens from zones under our command'. As for the orphans, 'we have gladly handed over those whose parents were shown to be in the Soviet Union . . . Our principle is that families must be reunited'.<sup>45</sup> It was not quite so straightforward,<sup>46</sup> but it is clear that the Soviet and the British governments did not see eye-to-eye.

## Evil-living

Although British officials did all they reasonably could to help the husbands and wives (including providing several wives with work and accommodation at the Embassy),<sup>47</sup> there was not always much affection for the couples themselves. Peterson, for example, had 'little sympathy' with the husbands, given that they had 'violated the terms of their engagement' by marrying Soviet women.<sup>48</sup> One had 'married . . . only three days before leaving the Soviet Union. Possibly he meant to get her to follow him to England; possibly his object was to do what he could for her before leaving her. But whatever he meant, the effect has been to lay his "girlfriend" on the Embassy doorstep', which now had to support her.<sup>49</sup> By 1949 the behaviour of two wives whom the Embassy had given accommodation raised concerns. David Kelly, the new

Ambassador, commented that the two were ‘notorious evil-livers and the quarters they occupy in our Press Department are little better than a brothel frequented by a number of the junior members of foreign Missions in Moscow’.<sup>50</sup> A.N. Noble in the Foreign Office was concerned that the ‘Soviet propaganda machine’ would ‘claim that these famous Soviet wives were in fact a gang of prostitutes, that their marriages were spiritually void’, and therefore that it was ‘the grossest hypocrisy for us to pillory the Soviet Government for cruelly separating the women from their husbands’.<sup>51</sup> The women did not change their behaviour; in 1950 Kelly wrote that one wife in particular had become ‘a source of serious embarrassment’. The way she used ‘her room in the Embassy premises must be perfectly well-known to the Soviet authorities’.<sup>52</sup>

Security concerns featured alongside the moral ones. A 1944 analysis suggested that the ‘Soviet Secret Police [the NKVD] are quick to take advantage of the marriage of a Soviet citizen to a foreign official in order to attempt to obtain information from inside the Embassy’.<sup>53</sup> Peterson strongly suspected that a particular Soviet wife who operated the switch-board ‘reports the telephone conversations of the Press Department ... I consider her presence within the Embassy a menace to security’.<sup>54</sup> The Foreign Office’s Permanent Under-Secretary, Orme Sargent, believed that ‘the women who were attached to the Embassy and service officials were agents of the NKVD’ who had been ‘allowed to marry in Russia in order to get more information’. They would not be allowed to leave because ‘Russia is not going to lose its trained personnel ... the Russians were almost certainly frightened of letting them go abroad in case they should blab’.<sup>55</sup>

## Persecution

Even if Soviet intelligence exploited some of the wives, it did not protect them from persecution by the Soviet machine. In 1947, Iraida Ricketts, who worked at the Embassy, was interrogated

and pressed to get a divorce. Her mother was previously interrogated and had read to her a diary allegedly written by Mrs Ricketts in which it was made out that Mrs Ricketts now loved another man. Mrs Ricketts denies that she has ever kept a diary (or has any reason to contemplate divorce).<sup>56</sup>

The following year the Embassy reported that the Soviet Office of Visas and Registration (part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs) was pressing Ricketts ‘to put an end to her marriage’.<sup>57</sup> According to the Foreign Office, unless the wives in the Soviet Union complied they had to endure

constant police interrogations and threats of imprisonment and punishment ... The general pattern is one of direct intimidation of the wife herself including assurances that

she will never get an exit visa, combined with advice to obtain a divorce and find a new husband, and pressure on or through her family.<sup>58</sup>

The 'unfortunate victim' found herself 'in a perpetual state of unhappiness and nervous tension, to which it is hoped that she will eventually succumb by agreeing to a divorce'.<sup>59</sup> One wife was arrested (and later imprisoned) in connection with her attempts to secure accommodation in Moscow.<sup>60</sup> The arrest chilled the other wives. Olga Burke lamented: 'They are treating us thus because they want to make our numbers smaller and smaller . . . the situation is very bad and we are all of us in great distress'.<sup>61</sup> Two of the Soviet wives based at the Embassy went so far as to attempt suicide.<sup>62</sup> One felt anguish over how 'somebody' had been writing to her husband about her 'behaviour with certain Americans'; she had threatened 'suicide if he pursued a divorce'.<sup>63</sup> How far Soviet official harassment exacerbated her despair (and that of the other suicidal wife) cannot be known, but the 'somebody' writing to the husband may well have been acting for some branch or other of the Soviet apparatus.

The wives faced obstruction and surveillance. The Embassy reported in 1948 that a call from her husband to Klara Hall – who worked at the Embassy – on their son's birthday was interrupted and cut short 'on the alleged grounds of bad reception . . . There can be little doubt that the interruptions, which all took place at the Moscow end, were deliberate'.<sup>64</sup> The Halls communicated by letter using the Embassy's diplomatic bag, but the Foreign Office counselled discretion, telling the husband, Alfred, that 'it would be a wise precaution for you and your wife to exchange occasional letters by ordinary mail while continuing to use the bag for the major part of your correspondence'. In the expectation that letters 'sent by ordinary post' would be opened, 'you should . . . be careful to make no reference whatever to letters (or the contents thereof) sent by bag and you should maintain the fiction that postal communication is the only means available to you'.<sup>65</sup> Any Soviet suspicions that the diplomatic bag was used other than for 'proper and official purposes' would only enflame matters.<sup>66</sup>

Meanwhile, in Britain, most of the husbands appreciated any help, with Roberts commenting in 1947 that 'individually and as a body they were really grateful'.<sup>67</sup> One was not so impressed, though. The Moscow Embassy had provided her with work but she had been evicted from her living quarters there because she did not have a Moscow residence permit. The husband complained that the Embassy's attitude was 'scandalous, detestable and absolutely un-British',<sup>68</sup> and that it paid his wife too little: she was forced to live on a 'miserable 500 roubles a month'.<sup>69</sup> In turn, the Embassy found the husband 'ungrateful . . . spiteful and . . . offensive'.<sup>70</sup> Although the husbands did not suffer the same distress as did the wives, it was a trying time for them all the same. As Alfred Hall told an MP on behalf of several husbands, 'we are very rapidly reaching desperation'.<sup>71</sup> One husband, whose wife the Soviets had

prevented from corresponding with him,<sup>72</sup> had concluded reluctantly by early 1948 that 'the game is lost and that . . . the best thing that could happen would be that the past is written off and the knot untied'.<sup>73</sup>

## Back in the USSR

To Soviet satisfaction, two of the wives who had obtained exit visas returned to the Soviet Union. One of them, Alexeevna Brand, explained her actions in a letter ('Why I Returned to the USSR') in the Soviet newspaper, *Pravda*, on 15 June 1948. She complained that in her two and a half years in London she had 'experienced only privations, poverty, and absence of rights', and was 'struck by the restricted slave's position of women in the family'. Most 'Englishmen think that women should be concerned simply with children and the kitchen. Women are brought up in a spirit of servile obedience to men'. Eventually, she could stand no more. Her husband could now 'rejoice that his son would live in a country which would give him opportunity of receiving an education and living without the anxiety for the morrow so well known to his father'. She added that 'the British reactionaries who are using the so-called "question of the Russian wives" for an anti-Soviet campaign, would do better to relate how Russian women who have come to England have to live'.<sup>74</sup> The husband saw things differently; he told a member of the Foreign Office that his wife had disliked the idea of their son 'growing up a working-class boy',<sup>75</sup> and that she had (in the words of the official) been

depressed by their surroundings in Hackney . . . a squalid badly-blitzed area. They had not suffered any particular financial stress and their flat had been quite adequate as regards living space but it had lacked water and adequate lighting . . . Mrs Brand had failed to make any friends or to get on with Brand's family or to occupy herself contentedly and this was the crux of the matter.<sup>76</sup>

Upon Mrs Brand's homecoming, a band played in celebration and she was presented with bouquets of flowers,<sup>77</sup> showing how much the Soviet authorities relished her change of heart. A letter from another wife (Natalia Clarke) who had also left for Britain only to return, also appeared in *Pravda*. In line with Brand, she emphasised the hardship and injustice of British life, and bemoaned the subservience of British women. She asserted that 'all Soviet women who have left for England' should 'come home! . . . you will all your life be thankful . . . for the day that you decided to return to your motherland'.<sup>78</sup> She failed to mention the brevity of her stay in Britain: just two weeks in 1945. According to the husband, she had within a few days of arrival made it plain that she 'intended to return to Moscow . . . She came in an RAF plane and went back in a Soviet machine in which a seat had obviously been booked beforehand'.<sup>79</sup> In September 1948, *Izvestia*, another Soviet newspaper, published a letter from Maria Aish declaring that she would never leave the Soviet

Union for Britain, where she and her children would face ‘the privation of which we are free in our native land’.<sup>80</sup> *Pravda* and *Izvestia*’s exploitation of Brands, Clarke and Aish was consistent with how, according to Frank Roberts, Soviet thinking had since the election of the Labour government of Clement Attlee in July 1945 regarded Britain as the main ideological enemy, as ‘the home of capitalism, imperialism and now of social democracy’, and as ‘the centre of opposition to the progressive ideas and forces of which the Soviet Union claims to be the chief patron’.<sup>81</sup> As well as denigrating British life in particular, *Pravda* and *Izvestia* sought to make the broader point that Soviet grass was the greenest.

### The end of the affair

Ernest Bevin had concluded by 1948 that pursuing minor disputes with Moscow would weaken Britain’s general position *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union and that in any case ‘there is nothing more that can be done’ for the wives.<sup>82</sup> He opposed, contrary to Vansittart and others, addressing the wives question in the United Nations (UN), because, aside from an emergent concern with human rights, there was ‘nothing in international law to go on’ and because the Soviets might raise the question of how certain American states prohibited interracial marriages.<sup>83</sup> Britain did not therefore initiate the matter. However, the matter of Soviet wives of husbands of other nationalities arose in the UN’s Economic and Social Council in Geneva in August 1948 during discussions about a report on the Status of Women, and it also arose in the General Assembly in December at the behest of Chile.<sup>84</sup> In April 1949, the Soviet delegate responded that the Chilean pursuit of the issue in the UN was part of ‘an Anglo-American plot to stir up hatred against the USSR’. He maintained that the

Soviet wives who had been allowed to go abroad were persecuted and humiliated and wanted to return home, that the Soviet Government was under an obligation to protect its women from the terrible conditions of the outside world, and that in any case the whole affair was entirely a matter of domestic jurisdiction.<sup>85</sup>

The British delegates intervened with ‘forceful speeches’ presenting ‘many concrete instances of Russian policy as evidenced in the treatment of the Soviet wives of United Kingdom citizens’.<sup>86</sup> The Assembly adopted a resolution ‘recommending the Government of the Soviet Union to discontinue’ denying exit visas to Soviet wives of foreign citizens.<sup>87</sup> The resolution highlighted the fate of the wives but showed once again that adverse publicity had little impact on the Soviet government.

A 1951 report noted that of the eighteen wives who had been able to leave the Soviet Union, two (as we have seen) had returned there; another found her husband living with another woman; and the rest, it might be supposed,

enjoyed satisfactory lives.<sup>88</sup> One, Violetta Elvin, won great acclaim as a ballet dancer; her talent was said to rival that of Margot Fonteyn.<sup>89</sup> Of the sixteen wives who remained in the Soviet Union, four, perhaps having turned their backs on their marriages or ending up in a labour camp for failing to do so, had simply disappeared.<sup>90</sup> Another, Iraida Ricketts, had been abducted. In October 1951 she attended a performance at the Bolshoi Theatre with a friend. Henry Hohler in the Foreign Office noted that 'just as she stepped into the taxi' after leaving the theatre 'and her friend was about to follow, he was prevented by force from entering by two or three men who boarded the taxi which at once drove off followed by two other cars of the type normally used by the secret police'.<sup>91</sup> There was evidence of 'the most elaborate arrangements . . . for shadowing' Mrs Ricketts,<sup>92</sup> and that during her abduction there were 'at least five cars packed with sleuths in attendance', along with seven other 'sleuths' on the pavement.<sup>93</sup> The latest Ambassador, Alvary Gascoigne, complained that the abduction was 'an open affront to the Embassy and to His Majesty's Government'.<sup>94</sup> Later, Mrs Ricketts managed to convey to a British official that 'she had not left the Embassy of her own volition and that she would have liked to return if it had been possible'.<sup>95</sup>

The Ricketts case belied any impression that the wives in the Soviet Union were free agents. By the beginning of 1953 only one wife, Klara Hall, remained in close touch with the Embassy (she lived and worked there). Taking advantage of how the Soviet government presented a more liberal face in the wake of Stalin's death (March 1953), Gascoigne took up her case in April. He was at first unsuccessful but finally in August Molotov indicated that she would be given an exit visa.<sup>96</sup> She soon arrived in England. Mr Hall was of course delighted that she and their child, Nicholas, had joined him, and he reported that she had settled in well to her 'new life'. He was also 'bitterly sorry for the other husbands whose hopes have failed. I have a sense of humility as I realise how fortunate I am'.<sup>97</sup> In November 1953, Gascoigne's successor, William Hayter, pursued the question of the wives who had disappeared, and a few months later Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden did so with Molotov at a conference in Berlin.<sup>98</sup> The Soviet Foreign Ministry responded in March 1954 with documentation indicating that Mrs Ricketts and the wives who were still unaccounted for had dissolved their marriages.<sup>99</sup> The Soviet wives affair was over, with nearly half of them never even setting foot in Britain.

## Conclusions

The Soviet government not only resisted the expatriation of many of the wives of British nationals, but tried to coax back those who had settled in Britain. In 1948 the Soviet Embassy offered the wives 'holiday' visas. One wife explained that she was 'told by letter I could get a visa to travel home to Moscow to see

my people this summer or the next', but she had her suspicions: 'I am not sure I would be able to return again'.<sup>100</sup> On a grander scale, the Soviet Union pressed fervently for the repatriation, through the efforts of its missions in Germany and elsewhere, of all of the many Soviet displaced persons. John Galsworthy in the Foreign Office suspected that 'the insistent Soviet demand that every single Soviet citizen be returned home, regardless of his wishes' rested not just on a desire to augment the labour force (the Soviet Union had lost millions of lives during the war) for reconstruction but also on 'considerations of prestige . . . it is axiomatic that every Soviet citizen . . . wishes to return to the fold, and no exceptions which would tend to weaken the force of this assertion can be tolerated'.<sup>101</sup> Notwithstanding the release of some wives, it was also axiomatic in Soviet thinking that marrying a foreigner did not justify expatriation. A British commentator suggested that the Soviet state felt 'obliged', for reasons of security and prestige, to deny its 'citizens the right of emigration and . . . to come and go as they please over the frontiers of the USSR'. If those frontiers were 'thrown open . . . the result would be an immediate increase in what Soviet representatives term "the forces of counter-revolution"; for the loophole thus offered would be exploited by "elements unfriendly to the USSR"'.<sup>102</sup>

According to Peterson, Moscow's obduracy about the wives reflected a concern about the prospect of troublesome *émigrés*. Molotov's deputy, Andrei Vyshinsky, had told the US *chargé d'affaires* in 1944 that

at the time of the Russian Revolution many of the Russian upper classes and a large part of the aristocracy had succeeded in fleeing abroad from the Soviet Union. The same process had obtained during and after the French revolution. As a result – both at the beginning of the nineteenth century and following the Russian revolution – emigrant circles had grown up in neighbouring countries which were inimical to revolutionary France and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the Soviet Union.<sup>103</sup>

Concern about *émigré* groups engaging in anti-Soviet agitation had in the 1930s led the Moscow government to legislate against emigration.<sup>104</sup> The concern about *émigrés* meant that, as Peterson pointed out in 1948, the Soviets were 'not in their present mood going to take any chances of a Soviet wife "stirring up hatred" against the Soviet Union by giving interviews to the British press'.<sup>105</sup>

Moscow's efforts to restrict emigration from the communist sphere expressed itself with the fortification from 1952 of the frontier around the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and 1961 with the construction of the infamous Wall surrounding West Berlin. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev had complained more than once to Frank Roberts – now Ambassador in Moscow – about 'the best people pouring out' of the GDR like 'blood' into the west through Berlin.<sup>106</sup> NATO countries welcomed hundreds of thousands of migrants who fled Hungary in 1956 after



Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest to crush liberalisation efforts, and also embraced those who departed the GDR. Since 2022 NATO states have welcomed migrants fleeing the Ukraine after the Russian incursion, although some of these governments tend to lean more towards keeping people out than bringing them in, given how anti-immigration policies can win votes in national elections.<sup>107</sup>

The Soviet wives affair highlights how diplomacy and citizenship could be entwined in the early Cold War, and how top-level decisions (in this case, the Soviet denial of exit visas) can have a demonstrable effect on the everyday lives of ordinary people. Ideological differences were starkly apparent. Peterson maintained that in the Soviet Union ‘the liberties of the individual, including the marriage contract and all questions of personal status, are regarded as undeserving of the slightest respect’.<sup>108</sup> In 1947 the US Ambassador in Moscow, Walter Bedell Smith, maintained that the Soviet decree prohibiting Soviet citizens from marrying foreigners, and Stalin’s statement to Bevin there was little chance that the remaining wives would be allowed to leave, revealed ‘an attitude on part of [the] Soviet state towards its citizens reminiscent of [the] relation[ship] between [a] feudal lord and serfs’.<sup>109</sup> The

new decree and Stalin’s statement now expose for all who care to read [the] falseness of Soviet pretensions that Soviet system exists for [the] common man and make it clear that the individual in even his most personal relations is subject to [the] will of the state.<sup>110</sup>

Smith’s assessment, however polemical, reflected the liberal assumption that the state existed for the benefit of its citizens, and not the other way around.

The British government’s adoption of a Cold War ‘containment’ stance towards the Soviet Union developed largely in response to security concerns of a type that the JIC and Frank Roberts had aired in 1945–46. The Soviet wives affair – a clash of culture and ideology – was also influential on British attitudes; it was, according to the Foreign Office, ‘a matter that stirs strong feelings’.<sup>111</sup> Peterson, for example, took up his post as Ambassador in 1946 in a relatively optimistic mood, looking to the renewal of the 1942 Anglo-Soviet treaty of friendship and cooperation, but by 1948 he had become pessimistic about the future of relations with the Soviet Union.<sup>112</sup> Even if he had little respect for the couples concerned, the Soviet attitude left him embittered, and, one might speculate, influenced his thinking towards the Soviet Union more broadly. As far as general opinion in Britain was concerned, Roberts had suggested in 1946 that in the light of deteriorating Anglo-Soviet relations it was necessary to ‘educate’ the public to accept that the Soviet Union was no longer an ally.<sup>113</sup> The Soviet wives dispute furthered that ‘education’, given how, as the Foreign Office noted, it helped ‘in awakening the public to a realisation of the vices of the Soviet regime’.<sup>114</sup> It generated a good deal of

antipathy towards the Soviet Union despite being an inherently minor concern. Without wholehearted public support, the British government was unlikely, for example, to have participated extensively in the costly and dangerous Anglo-American airlift of supplies to West Berlin during the Soviet-imposed ground blockade of 1948–49. The controversy over the wives was both an expression and a cause of the early Anglo-Soviet Cold War, and it demonstrates that non-security issues could influence a contest that was largely about security.

After 1954 the Soviet wives no longer featured on the diplomatic agenda but they were not forgotten. Forty years later, a long-retired Roberts gave an interview for a British television documentary about the wives. After the programme was broadcast, he complained to the producer that the editing of the interview made him seem ‘rather heartless’, and, responding to how the documentary presented the British government as duplicitous, he pointed out in a letter to *The Times* that the idea of Ernest Bevin ‘choosing Stalin and Molotov, whom he distrusted and abhorred, as partners in any double game – still less to keep “the Soviet wives” out of Britain – is ridiculous’. Only Stalin, not the British government, could release the wives from the Soviet Union because they were Soviet citizens.<sup>115</sup> The arguments of the documentary did not hold water, but it is clear that the Soviet wives affair could still capture public attention decades later.

## Notes

1. The records say little about the occupations of the husbands but it is apparent that most were low-ranking servicemen; the only senior figure was Brigadier Gordon Redvers Way. There were also some ‘minor employees of the Embassy’ who married Soviet women (Maurice Peterson, *Both Sides of the Curtain* (London: Constable, 1950), 281). I have included a 1934 marriage (Aish-Rutkis) among the thirty-four ‘wartime’ ones because it became bound up with the general controversy when in 1948 the wife stated in *Izvestia* that she had no desire to leave the Soviet Union for Britain (see p. 11). Note that the marriages involved two British *subjects* (one South African, one Canadian) as well as thirty-two British *citizens*. Information about the individual marriages is patchy, reflecting the difficulty for officials of keeping track of them all. The fullest individual source is ‘Memorandum: The Soviet Wives,’ October 31, 1951, FO 369/4773; from this and from other information, I have created the tables provided in the Appendix (pp. 23–24). Other than the tendentious letters published in *Izvestia* and *Pravda* in 1948 from three wives who returned to the Soviet Union or declined to leave, little or no testimony from the wives is available.
2. Soviet representatives tended to emphasise the difficulties, but there was an easier method available for relinquishing citizenship; see Backhouse minute, November 19, 1945, FO (Foreign Office) 369/3300. Unless noted otherwise, all documents cited are from the National Archives, Kew, England.
3. Fish, ‘The Soviet Wives,’ March 16, 1954, FO 369/5044. The regulation was established in January 1942 (‘Marriages between British Subjects and Soviet Citizens,’ January 1942, FO 369/3829). British officials may well have recognised even at that

early stage in the Anglo-Soviet alliance that ‘Stalin assigned a greater priority to espionage against his Western Allies than he did Nazi Germany’ (Calder Walton, *Spies: The Epic Intelligence War between East and West* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023), 95).

4. John Saville, *The Politics of Continuity: British Foreign Policy and the Labour Government, 1945–46* (London: Verso, 1993), 58. For other accounts of Anglo-Soviet relations in this period, see e.g. Jonathan Colman, *Britain’s ‘Mr X’: Sir Frank Roberts and the Making of British Foreign Policy, 1930–68* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2025), 74–110; Anne Deighton, *The Impossible Peace: Britain, the Division of Germany, and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Sean Greenwood, *Britain and the Cold War, 1945–91* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 6–101; Curtis Keeble, *Britain, the Soviet Union and Russia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 206–236; John Kent, *British Imperial Strategy and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944–49* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993); David Owen, *Riddle, Mystery and Enigma: Two Hundred Years of British-Russian Relations* (London: Haus, 2021), 121–60; D. Cameron Watt, ‘Britain, the United States and the Opening of the Cold War,’ in *The Foreign Policy of the British Labour Governments 1945–1951* ed. Ritchie Owendale (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984), 43–60; David Reynolds, ‘Great Britain,’ in *The Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspectives*, ed. David Reynolds (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 77–95.
5. On wartime Anglo-Soviet relations see e.g. David Carlton, *Churchill and the Soviet Union* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Martin Folly, *Churchill, Whitehall and the Soviet Union, 1940–45* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000); Martin Folly, Geoffrey Roberts, and Oleg Rzheshesky (eds), *Churchill and Stalin: Comrades in Arms During the Second World War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2019); Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Stafford Cripps’ Mission to Moscow, 1940–42* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Martin Kitchen, *British Policy Towards the Soviet Union During the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986); David Reynolds and Vladimir Pechatov, *The Kremlin Letters: Stalin’s Wartime Correspondence with Churchill and Roosevelt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Graham Ross (ed.), *The Foreign Office and the Kremlin: British Documents on Anglo-Soviet Relations 1941–45* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Colin Turbett, *The Anglo-Soviet Alliance* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2021).
6. ‘Report by the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee on Relations with the Russians,’ October 18, 1945, in *Documents on British Policy Overseas [DBPO], Series I, Vol. VI, Eastern Europe, August 1945–April 1946*, ed. K.A. Hamilton, Gillian Bennett, M.E. Pelly and H.J. Yasamee (London: HMSO, 1991), document 41.
7. ‘Report by the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee,’ October 18, 1945, *DBPO I, VI*, document 41.
8. ‘Report by the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee,’ October 18, 1945, *DBPO I, VI*.
9. *Ibid.*
10. ‘Report by the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee,’ October 18, 1945, *DBPO I, VI*. For the Soviet dimension, see e.g. Jonathan Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 29–76, 77–111; Sergey Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin’s Cold War Bid for Global Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 17–110; Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin’s Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939–1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), Chapter 12, 347–71. See also the Soviet documents in the LSE’s British-Soviet Relations Archive Project (online).
11. Colman, *Britain’s ‘Mr X’*, 84–87.

12. Kenneth M. Jensen, *Origins of the Cold War: The Novikov, Kennan, and Roberts 'Long Telegrams' of 1946* (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace, 1991), 12, 16.
13. Smith to Secretary of State, February 10, 1948, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS], 1948, Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union, Vol. IV* (Washington DC: USGPO, 1974), document 537. See also Durbow memorandum, March 22, 1946, *FRUS 1946, Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, VI* (1969), document 488.
14. Roberts to Davidson, May 9, 1947, FO 369/3830.
15. Lambert to Graham, March 11, 1948, FO 371/71692; Rankin, 'Brief: The Soviet Wives,' covering note of August 31, 1951, FO 369/4772.
16. Rankin, 'Brief: The Soviet Wives,' covering note of August 31, 1951, FO 369/4772. On Clark-Kerr, see Donald Gillies, *Radical Diplomat: The Life of Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, Lord Inverchapel, 1882–1951* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).
17. Moscow to FO, June 13, 1945, FO 181/1082.
18. Roberts to Bailey, February 28, 1944, Papers of Frank Roberts, Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge. Roberts dealt with the wives issue both while serving in Moscow, 1945–47, and then when serving in London as Ernest Bevin's Principal Private Secretary, 1947–49. He was therefore particularly well-versed in the issue.
19. Roberts minute, May 18, 1945, FO 181/1082. See also John Butler, *The Red Dean of Canterbury: The Public and Private Faces of Hewlett Johnson* (London: Scala, 2011), 157–63.
20. Moscow to FO, July 9, 1945, FO 181/1083.
21. Fish, 'The Soviet Wives,' March 16, 1954, FO 369/5044.
22. Sharman to Allchin, October 6, 1945, FO 369/3300.
23. Sharman to FO, September 5, 1945, FO 369/3300.
24. Roberts to FO, October 30, 1945, FO 369/3300.
25. Peterson, *Both Sides of the Curtain*, 281.
26. 'Memorandum: The Soviet Wives,' October 31, 1951, FO 369/4773.
27. Moscow to FO, March 26, 1947, FO 369/3828.
28. Roberts minute, February 4, 1948, FO 369/4031.
29. Peterson to Bevin, February 12, 1947, FO 369/3827.
30. FO to Moscow, April 28, 1947, FO 369/3828.
31. 'Our Visitors,' *The Daily Herald*, April 10, 1947.
32. 'Staying out,' *The Daily Mail*, August 20, 1948.
33. 'British Husbands Wire Stalin,' *The Bradford Observer*, May 1, 1947.
34. 'Soviet Wives,' *The Evening Standard*, November 27, 1947.
35. 'Soviet Wives: RAF Husband Visits Rugby,' *The Rugby Advertiser*, December 9, 1947.
36. 'Russian Wives Still Hope to Join Their Husbands,' *The News Chronicle*, April 11, 1947; 'Anti-Soviet Influence Here is Disturbing,' *The Daily Worker*, April 10, 1947), FO to Moscow Embassy, April 28, 1947, FO 369/3828.
37. 'Soviet wives: Mr Pritt on the Law,' *The West London Observer*, June 25, 1948. Pritt is said to have been among several MPs who were 'completely slavish to the Moscow line' (Darren G. Lilleker, *Against the Cold War: The History and Political Traditions of Pro-Sovietism in the British Labour Party, 1945–1989* (London: Tauris, 2017), 23).
38. *Hansard*, Vol. 441, 'Russian-Born Wives,' August 13, 1947.
39. *Hansard*, Vol. 156, 'Russian Wives of British Subjects,' June 2, 1948. The Aid to Russia Fund, with Clementine Churchill at its head, collected money from workers to help the Soviet Union cope with the war. It now stood at £1,363,923. Although active contributions ended in 1945, a few spontaneous contributions were accepted up to the end of 1947 ('Visa Offer to See Soviet Wife,' *The Daily Telegraph*, June 4, 1948).
40. Hankey minute, February 6, 1948, FO 371/71692.

41. Peterson as summarised in Brimelow minute, February 13, 1948, FO 371/71692.
42. "Second Draft," February 28, 1948, FO 369/4032.
43. Hankey minute, February 6, 1948, FO 371/71692. On the Embassy's role in gathering information, see Colman, *Britain's 'Mr X'*, 75–76.
44. Roberts minute, March 25, 1948, FO 369/4034.
45. FO brief, 5 December 1947, FO 369/3833. It is notable that the 1948 play 'I want to go home' by Sergey Mikhalkov enjoyed great success in Moscow. The play is about Soviet children who ended up in Germany during the war, and then fell into British hands. The British were determined to prevent the children from returning to the Soviet Union, planning instead to use them for sinister purposes. The play was made into a film in 1949 (obituary of Sergei Mikhalkov, *The Economist*, September 12, 2009).
46. An anonymous British source, who was involved with repatriating Soviet prisoners of war, surrendered enemy personnel and displaced persons (DPs), suggested that 'there are many cases where, on the orders of a higher authority, DPs and others for whom the British authorities are responsible have been denied the right of rejoining their families and next of kin . . . For example, elderly Russians held in DP camps in Italy have been separated from their wives, husbands and children for two years, without the slightest prospect of obtaining the necessary authority to rejoin them, because the wives, husbands and children concerned were held in camps in other theatres (Germany and Austria)' ('Colonel X', 'Russian wives – and husbands,' *Tribune*, December 5, 1947, 11). Mark Elliott, 'The United States and Forced Repatriation of Soviet Citizens, 1944–47,' *Political Science Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (June 1973): 254–55, estimates the number of displaced Soviet nationals as between 5,115,709 to 5,326,445. There were at least 17 million DPs of all nationalities in Germany alone, according to Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (London: Penguin 2012), 27. The British role in repatriating Soviet nationals has generated controversy. See, for example, Nicholas Bethell, *The Last Secret: Forcible Repatriation to Russia, 1944–7* (London: Deutsch, 1974); Anthony Cowgill, Lord Brimelow and Christopher Booker, *The Repatriations from Austria in 1945: The Report of an Inquiry* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990); Anthony Cowgill, *The Repatriations from Austria in 1945: The Documentary Evidence* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990); Nikolai Tolstoy, *Victims of Yalta: The Secret Betrayal of the Allies, 1944–1947* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977).
47. In 1950, for example, four wives worked at the Embassy, in non-confidential roles such as telephonists and typists. 'Enclosure to Consular Section letter,' undated but with covering letter February 24, 1950, FO 369/4610.
48. Peterson, *Both Sides of the Curtain*, p.281.
49. Peterson to Bevin, June 1, 1948, FO 369/4036. In 1950, for example, four wives worked at the Embassy, in non-confidential roles as telephonists and typists ('Enclosure to Consular Section letter', undated but with covering letter February 24, 1950, FO 369/4610).
50. Kelly to Bateman, September 30, 1949, FO 369/4275.
51. Noble to Strang, October 15, 1949, FO 369/4274.
52. Kelly to Bevin, March 24, 1950, FO 369/4610.
53. Bohlen to Davis, September 29, 1944, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1944, Europe, Vol. IV* (Washington DC: USGPO, 1966), document 833.
54. Moscow to FO, June 12, 1948, FO 369/4036.
55. Kenneth Young (ed), *The Diaries of Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart, Vol. 2: 1939–1965* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 595–96, entry for April 9, 1947. There is evidence confirming the interest of Soviet intelligence in exploiting the Soviet wives of foreign

nationals (at least those in the Soviet Union); see CIA Information Report, 'Soviet Official Attitude Toward Marriages and Contacts of Soviets with Foreigners,' May 26, 1954, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00810A004200900001-5.pdf> (the document is redacted but the main points are evident). It is not apparent from the limited evidence available whether the Security Service in Britain kept tabs on the Soviet wives who settled there; the matter is not addressed in e.g. Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (London: Penguin, 2010).

56. Moscow to FO, July 16, 1947, FO 369/4037.
57. Moscow to FO, July 2, 1948, FO 369/4036.
58. 'Draft Brief: Soviet Wives,' March 16, 1949, FO 369/4274.
59. Ibid.
60. The charge of fraud appeared to be legitimate, and the wife was sentenced to two years in a correctional facility. Davidson to Greenhalgh, August 16, 1948, FO 369/4037.
61. Burke to Burke, May 12, 1948, FO 369/4035.
62. Moscow to FO, October 7, 1948, FO 369/4039; Moscow to London, April 26, 1949, FO 369/4274.
63. Francis to Cox, May 11, 1949, FO 369/4274.
64. Moscow to FO, November 22, 1948, FO 369/4039.
65. FO to Hall, April 2, 1949, FO 369/4273.
66. Minute by unknown official, May 13, 1949, FO 369/4273.
67. Roberts minute, November 28, 1947, FO 369/3833.
68. Greenhalgh letter, January 1, 1948, FO 369/4031.
69. Greenhalgh letter, January 25, 1948, FO 369/4031.
70. Embassy (Consular Section) to FO (Consular Department), February 5, 1948, FO 369/4031.
71. Hall to Zilliacus, September 11, 1947, FO 369/3833.
72. 'Soviet Wives of British Subjects,' undated draft, FO 369/3827.
73. Way to Roberts, March 5, 1948, FO 369/4033.
74. Translation of letter in *Pravda*, June 15, 1948, FO 371/71692. Brand's comments about the subordinate status of women in Britain were not far off the mark but any sense that Soviet society was greatly superior in terms of the standing of women should be taken with caution.
75. FO to Moscow, August 24, 1948, FO 369/4036.
76. Ibid.
77. New York to FO, April 25, 1949, FO 447/773.
78. Translation of letter in *Pravda*, June 18, 1948, FO 369/4036.
79. FO to Moscow, July 13, 1946, FO 369/4036.
80. Midday Bulletin, 'I have no desire to go to England – Russian wife,' letter to *Izvestia*, 17 September 1948, FO 369/4032.
81. Roberts to Bevin, March 14, 1946, FO 371/56763.
82. Hankey to Harrison, March 4, 1948, FO 371/71692.
83. 'Soviet Wives' meeting, February 23, 1948, FO 371/71691.
84. Fish, 'The Soviet Wives,' March 16, 1954, FO 369/5044.
85. Cmd. 7752, United Nations No. 4 (1949), *Report on the Proceedings of the Second Part of the Third Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations held in New York, 5th April-18 May 1949* (London: HMSO, 1949), 18.
86. Cmd. 7752, 18.
87. Ibid.
88. 'Memorandum: The Soviet Wives,' October 31 1951, FO 369/4773.



89. Obituary, 'Violetta Elvin: Russian dancer who joined the Sadler's Wells ballet and was hailed as a rival to Dame Margot Fonteyn,' *The Times*, June 5, 2021. Frank Roberts took the credit for her release. See his *Dealing with Dictators: The Destruction and Revival of Europe, 1930–70* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), 118–19.
90. 'Memorandum: The Soviet Wives,' October 31, 1951, FO 369/4773; see also the Appendix to this article.
91. Hohler minute, October 29, 1951, FO 369/4774.
92. Hohler minute, October 29, 1951, FO 369/4774.
93. Moscow to Hohler, October 18, 1951, FO 369/4773.
94. Gascoigne to FO, October 31, 1951, FO 369/4774.
95. Hohler minute, October 29, 1951, FO 369/4774.
96. Kemball minute, 'Missing Persons,' January 13, 1954, FO 369/5046. On the British response to the Soviet pursuit of *détente* in this period, see Colman, *Britain's 'Mr X'*, 113–16, 119; Klaus Larres, 'The Road to Geneva 1955: Churchill's Summit Diplomacy and Anglo-American Tension after Stalin's Death,' in *The Cold War after Stalin's Death: A Missed Opportunity for Peace?* ed. Klaus Larres and Kenneth Osgood (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 137–55; John W. Young, *Winston Churchill's Last Campaign: Britain and the Cold War, 1951–1955* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).
97. 'Russia shuts the door on war brides,' *Daily Mail*, March 15, 1954.
98. Kemball minute, March 3, 1954; Speight minute, 'Russian Wives,' March 5, 1954, FO 369/5044.
99. The wives were Nadezhda Bolton, Olga Burke and Rosa Henderson, 'Russian marriages to Britons dissolved,' *The Times*, March 15, 1954. This was not, however, the end of the matter for at least one of the husbands; John Burke, as a Roman Catholic, was likely to 'continue the argument.' Kemball minute, March 3, 1954, FO 369/5047.
100. "'Holiday" visas offered to Russian Wives,' *The Daily Telegraph*, June 17, 1948.
101. Galsworthy minute, November 28, 1945, *DBPO I, VI*, document 29.
102. 'Colonel X', 'Russian wives – and husbands,' *Tribune*, December 5, 1947, 11.
103. Conversation between Vyshinsky and Hamilton, May 15, 1944, FO 369/4034. France, with a Russian *émigré* population of 300,000 in 1930–31, was the most popular destination for the migrants. Georgievsky, 'Memorandum on Russian Emigration,' with covering note of September 5, 1941, FO 371/29531.
104. Conversation between Vyshinsky and Hamilton, May 15, 1944, FO 369/4034. On the legal developments, see Moscow to FO, February 10, 1948, FO 369/4031.
105. Peterson to Bateman, May 4, 1948, FO 369/4034.
106. Colman, *Britain's 'Mr X'*, 174.
107. UN International Organization for Migration, 'World Migration Report 2024' (Geneva, 2024), 3.
108. Peterson to Bevin, June 1, 1948, FO 369/4036.
109. Smith to Secretary of State, April 5, 1947, *FRUS 1947, Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union, IV* (1972), document 502.
110. Smith to Secretary of State, April 5, 1947, *FRUS 1947 IV*, document 502.
111. Memorandum, 'Soviet Wives,' June 29, 1945, FO 181/1083.
112. Peterson, *Both Sides of the Curtain*, 275; Victor Rothwell, 'Peterson, Sir Maurice Drummond (1889–1952),' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).
113. Roberts to Bevin, March 18, 1946, FO 371/56763. Attlee once emphasised the importance of 'an informed and insistent public opinion. In peace as in war, governments can only act with success when the people they represent want them



to do so' (Michael Blackwell, *Clinging to Grandeur: British Attitudes and Foreign Policy in the Aftermath of the Second World War* (Westport: Greenwood, 1993), 82). According to Blackwell, public opinion was of particular relevance 'in the face of incidents that could be personalized in some way; for example, soft treatment of German war criminals or the hanging [by terrorists] of two British sergeants in Palestine in 1947. Certainly, whenever mention is made of public opinion in Cabinet foreign policy discussions, it is in connection with the more emotive issues' (83).

114. FO to Washington Embassy, August 11, 1948, FO 369/4036.
115. Colman, *Britain's 'Mr X'*, 214. The documentary was 'The Soviet Wives Affair' (Channel 4, London, 1994). Roberts' letter to *The Times* prompted several responses. Douglas Dodds-Parker (of the wartime Special Operations Executive) offered his support for Roberts' arguments; R.C.H. Briggs found them 'plausible' but criticised how he 'defends the British Ambassador's shabby collaboration in this horrible episode' (letters published under the heading 'Soviet wives,' *The Times*, March 2, 1994). Soon after, Alfred Hall suggested that the Foreign Office had been unduly reticent, but not duplicitous (letter from Hall, 'Soviet Wives affair,' *The Times*, March 21, 1994).
116. This Appendix derives largely from the list in 'Memorandum: The Soviet Wives,' October 31, 1951, FO 369/4773. Omissions such as dates occur in the original source.

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## Appendix

### a) Marriages in which the wife was permitted to leave the Soviet Union<sup>116</sup>

|    | Husband                         | Wife                            | Year of Marriage | Details                                                                |
|----|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | John Alfred Brand               | Nina Alexeevna Makushina        | 1944             | She was issued an exit visa, 1945; returned to the Soviet Union, 1948. |
| 2  | Frederick William Bunn          | Salomena Vladislavovna Kon      | 1944             | She was issued an exit visa, 1945.                                     |
| 3  | Canadian subject                | Okulitch                        | Not known        | She was issued an exit visa, 1945.                                     |
| 4  | M.M. Chapman                    | Valentina Ivanova Naravaiva     | 1943             | 'She arrived in the United Kingdom', 1945.                             |
| 5  | Thomas Percival Clarke          | Natalia Valisievna Golovanova   | 1943             | She was issued an exit visa, 1945; she returned a few weeks after.     |
| 6  | Julius Caesar Benois Edwardes   | Antonia Alexandrovna Teitelbaum | 1942             | She was issued an exit visa, 1945.                                     |
| 7  | Harold Elvin                    | Violetta Vasilievna Prokhorova  | 1944             | She was issued an exit visa, 1945.                                     |
| 8  | Alfred Hall                     | Klara Georgievna Strunina       | 1946             | She was issued an exit visa, 1953.                                     |
| 9  | Robert William Holland          | Lubov Nikolaevna Sinykhina      | 1944             | She was issued an exit visa, 1946.                                     |
| 10 | Arthur Edward Inkpin            | Berta Walterovna Waliman        | 1941             | She was issued an exit visa, 1946.                                     |
| 11 | Albert Edward Johnson           | Fatima Seidovna Sharipova       | 1942             | She was issued an exit visa, 1946.                                     |
| 12 | George Lamb                     | Vera Ivanovna Toshcheva         | 1943             | She was issued an exit visa, 1945.                                     |
| 13 | George Kenneth Garrison Liddell | Zinaida Mikhailovna Scholchova  | 1943             | She was issued an exit visa, 1945.                                     |
| 14 | Ronald de Couves Matthews       | Tatyana Brisovna Paskevskaya    | 1942             | She was issued an exit visa, 1944.                                     |
| 15 | J. Murray                       | Nora Korzhenko                  | 1941             | 'She left the Soviet Union', 1942.                                     |
| 16 | Edgar Frederick Parr            | Stella Dolgun                   | 1942             | She was issued an exit visa, 1946.                                     |
| 17 | H.P. Seabourne (South African)  | Halina Lipareisa Lipaieva       | 1944             | She was issued an exit visa, 1945.                                     |
| 18 | Stephen Victor Smith            | Evgenia Alexandrovna            | 1942             | She was issued an exit visa, 1945.                                     |
| 19 | Joseph Francis York             | Lucille Williamovna Rautisinen  | 1942             | She was issued an exit visa, 1945.                                     |

### b) Marriages in which the wife remained in the Soviet Union

|   | Husband                   | Wife                              | Year of Marriage | Details                                                                                               |
|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Charles Aish              | Maria Rutkis                      | 1934             | She published a letter in <i>Izvestia</i> in 1948 saying she would never leave the Soviet Union.      |
| 2 | John Edwin Bolton         | Nadezhda Stanislavovna Gardovich  | 1946             | She disappeared in 1951.                                                                              |
| 3 | John Burke                | Olga Lyubimova                    | 1946             | She disappeared in 1950.                                                                              |
| 4 | John Evans                | Angelica Nikolaevna Sfaello       | 1943             | He divorced her.                                                                                      |
| 5 | William Trevor Greenhalgh | Aleksandra Aleksandrovna Pashieva | 1945             | She was sentenced to two years in a correctional facility for fraud, 1948; husband pursued a divorce. |
| 6 | Patrick Henderson         | Rosa Ivanovna Kugucheva           | 1946             | She disappeared in 1951.                                                                              |
| 7 | John Robert Irwin         | Nina Valentinovna Plastinina      | 1945             | She divorced him in 1948.                                                                             |

(Continued)

|    | Husband                  | Wife                             | Year of Marriage | Details                                                           |
|----|--------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 8  | Edward George Kenward    | Nina Nikolaevna Miklaeva         | 1945             | He obtained a decree on grounds of 'want of formality'.           |
| 9  | Walter Price             | Inna Grigorievna                 | 1945             | Marriage found to be bigamous.                                    |
| 10 | William Ricketts         | Iraida Evgenievna Orlova         | 1945             | She was abducted by Soviet secret police, 1951.                   |
| 11 | Clifford Rowley          | Inna Timofeevna Frolova          | 1945             | He divorced her for adultery, 1950.                               |
| 12 | Peter Stansfield Squire  | Ludmilla Mikhailovna Khochlina   | 1945             | She divorced him 'due to Soviet pressure'.                        |
| 13 | Leslie John Taylor       | Alexandrovna Tvanovna Shlapkin   | 1945             | She 'went off with another man. Doubtful whether marriage valid'. |
| 14 | Gordon Redvers Way       | Ketevana Melitonovna Nadeishvili | 1942             | He obtained a 'decree on grounds of nullity', 1949.               |
| 15 | Clifford Henry Whitehead | Nadezhda Vasilievna Vasbor       | 1945             | She disappeared in 1948.                                          |