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The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

WILLIS ARMSTRONG

Interviewed by: Dr. Sally Irvine
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"The Road to War"

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INTERVIEW

[NOTE: The BBC has made this interview available to the Oral History Program and credit should be given the BBC in any citation as well as the Program. The recording of the interview is not available for radio broadcasting.]

Q: Perhaps you'd like me to refresh your memory about our series. It's called "The Road to War," and it consists of eight separate documentary films on the origins of the Second World War. The first one is on Poland, and it sets the stage for the rest to come. It starts roughly at the time of Munich and goes up to the British and French declarations of war.

Then we look at Britain from Versailles to '39, France from roughly the same period, America from Versailles to Pearl Harbor, Japan from '18 to '41, Germany, Italy, the Soviet Union, and so on. So we cover all the countries which were the major belligerents.

What we want to do is look at the background, with all its political, diplomatic, military, and economic circumstances, which prompted each government during this period to take the decisions they did take.

So this is where you come in during the American film, because we're particularly interested in what you can tell us about Soviet-American relations during the crucial period in the late Thirties up to Pearl Harbor. So perhaps I should ask you how you came to be in Moscow in 1939.

ARMSTRONG: I was a graduate student of Columbia University, teaching in a girls' high school run by the University. It was a progressive school, and they wanted a program taught in Russian history. I didn't know any Russian history, but the principal said, "You can learn." So I started taking courses in Russian history in the graduate faculty, and finally became persuaded that this was a good major field, because there was an endless amount of research material that wasn't being worked on, on hand in the Columbia library. I had a very persuasive professor of Russian history, a great man called Geroid Robinson, who is, unfortunately, gone now. He was later the head of the Russian section of the OSS in the research side here in town.

I studied Russian at the University of California at Berkeley in the summers of 1936-37, and took seminar work in New York. Then about 1938-39, the professor thought it would be a good idea if I went to Moscow to start working on my dissertation. My dissertation was "The Petrograd Soviet, 1917." (That was the right term for that city then.)

So he arranged with the Russian desk of the State Department for me to get a clerk translator's job, which was a temporary short-term assignment, and I went over in July of 1939. The European war started in September 1939, and I never got any research done, and I never finished my dissertation. I stayed in the government for 28 years without interruption. I guess I was one of the early Kremlinologists or Sovietologists in the United States, but I gave it up after the war.

I came back in 1941, and spent the next five years dealing with the USSR on Lend-Lease shipments and also UNNRA shipments. Then I peeled off from that in 1946, and I went into the economic side of the State Department, where on various occasions in the State Department, I had to do with Soviet relations, mostly in the context of keeping things away from them in the COCOM structure. So I've been on the supply side and the withholding side.

I got out of the Russian field at the end of the war, because I looked it over and considered that we were in for a long stretch of Cold War and diplomatic trench warfare, which didn't interest me. I got into things where I dealt more actively with potential friends and allies.

Q: You arrived at a very dramatic time, just before the war.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. You can check the dates, but the British-French military n1ission had gone there, I think a little before I was there, or maybe it happened while I was there. That was late spring, early summer. I was there when the German rapprochement with the Russians came, and I was there, of course, when the war began.

You wanted to know about American relations with the USSR. I'd say they were formal, not particularly friendly. The Stalin regime was never friendly with anybody. Being a foreigner in Moscow meant being ostracized by the local population, not because of anything that might happen to the foreigner, but because the local population was frightened. The Russians had just gone through their major purges in 1937-38, and a very substantial chunk of the elite had disappeared. If you ever did meet any Russians, you could tell that times were very strained. The Russians were kept pretty much in ignorance about what was going on in the world, if you could judge by what was available in the press. My job in the embassy was to read the press.

My first job was being night duty clerk. I did that from about August '39 until about the following March. I did some reading and research, but mostly I was on duty in the office from 6:30 at night until 9:00 in the morning. I had a bed in the office, in the code room. We had a rather primitive code room and rather primitive communication facilities. So throughout the first stage of hostilities in Europe and throughout the Russian-Finnish war, I didn't get a great deal of sleep.

Q: No, I imagine not.

ARMSTRONG: But if you're young, you can stand these things. It was fascinating. Of course, I read the telegram traffic, which didn't amount to much. American relations with the Russians was formal, nothing very noteworthy. There was hardly any business transacted. We had a new ambassador who came in the summer of 1939.

Q: Who was that?

ARMSTRONG: Laurence Steinhardt. His daughter was high school age, and the ambassador knew from friends in New York about me. Several of his friends had daughters who had gone to the school where I taught. So I fetched up putting her through two years of high school while I was there, in my so-called spare time. She, incidentally, lives in Chevy Chase if you want to talk to her. Her name is Mrs. Sherwood. She lives on Connecticut Avenue just above Chevy Chase Circle. We see her once in a while.

Steinhardt was a lawyer from New York who had served as ambassador to Sweden and Peru, who later served as ambassador to Turkey, Czechoslovakia, and Canada.

Q: What was his approach?

ARMSTRONG: Steinhardt was always interested in all sorts of specific human stories, and some people said he was the best consul we ever had. He'd go to any length to help individuals who were caught in the trap of Soviet bureaucracy. He was a good loyal supporter of President Roosevelt, a campaign contributor, a very bright and interesting man. Paradoxically, my wife served under him when he was ambassador in Czechoslovakia, because she was then in the embassy there. She wasn't my wife then; I didn't even know her.

Q: What was his reaction to the Soviet-German agreement?

ARMSTRONG: Well, we weren't at all surprised. We knew it was going to happen.

Q: How did you receive the news?

ARMSTRONG: The Germans told us.

Q: The German diplomats?

ARMSTRONG: We were very friendly with the German Embassy. The Germans told us, in effect, that a deal was being worked out, and therefore, our chief political officer, who kept close contact with the Germans, had the story. That was Chip Bohlen, who was later ambassador, a well-trained Russian expert. I worked for him for a while as his translator. That was before I got the night duty. (I got the night duty because I was the lowest ranking worm they could find.) But I had a lot of personal contact with Bohlen and other officers in the embassy. We had Norris Chipman, who was a very good Sovietologist, and we had a man called Ward, who was administrative officer, who was also very competent, knowledgeable man about Eastern Europe. His wife was Finnish. Our counselor was Mr. Thurston, who had no experience on Russia, but who had a lot of experience on Latin America, and who was a good and sensible man, who handled things well.

The embassy was effectively functioning as eyes and ears of the U.S. Government during that time, but we were mostly spectators. We were spectators as far as what the Germans and the Russians did with each other. One reason we weren't surprised was that we were aware of how weak the Soviet Union was following the purges. Of course, it had a weak economy; it always has. But the whole command structure of the military had been pretty much obliterated, and it didn't look to our military people as if the Russians could fight their way out of a paper bag. Therefore, it was not at all surprising that they would try to get some kind of a cease-fire or standoff with the Germans. Obviously, if their intelligence was working at all, they knew the Germans were going to move in on Poland.

I have a comment on Poland. I went through Poland on my way to Moscow by train in July, from Berlin, woke in the night when we stopped in Frankfurt an der Oder, now, I guess, part of Poland. You could look out over the railroad yard, and you could see, as far as the eye could carry, flatcars loaded with military equipment. This was the middle of

July of 1939. It was perfectly obvious that you don't put weapons on flatcars unless you're going to move them somewhere. You don't use your flatcars for storage. I observed that.

Then a chap, an American newspaperman, got on the train in Warsaw to go on to Moscow.

Q: Who was that?

ARMSTRONG: I think his name was Wolf. I'm not sure. He'd been in Warsaw for a couple of weeks. Somebody said, "There's an American up there." So I went up and said hello. This was my first visit to Europe. He said he'd been in Warsaw for two weeks, and he said, "The Poles are unbelievable. They think they're going to beat the Germans."

Q: Oh, no.

ARMSTRONG: "They think one good cavalry charge will carry them right into Berlin."

Q: Oh, dear.

ARMSTRONG: Well, you know, it's perfectly true that the Poles have an international reputation for having far more courage than brains. They have a marvelous spirit. They'll fight anybody. Anyway, he said that was the mood in Warsaw: "Let 'em come. We'll beat the hell out of them." Of course, it lasted about 20 minutes, which, of course, the Russians presumably expected.

Q: That must have been clear to you, coming from Berlin, that war was definitely in the offing.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, yes, sure. I didn't stay in Berlin. I just changed trains.

When the Russians moved their troops into eastern Poland, it was obviously by arrangement with the Germans. They had the demarcation line all worked out beforehand. It was an interesting experience to observe. I used to wander around markets and do a little eavesdropping, and I remember a couple of women talking to each other. The minute anything sounded like military activity, the Russians all got out and got into a line for whatever was being sold, because everybody knew that military activity meant shortages. A hundred years of that, and you get used to it. The lines were forming for kerosene. People were buying kerosene, taking it home and storing it in their bathtubs. They didn't wash much, but they kept kerosene in the bathtubs. They'd line up for potatoes, they'd line up for anything. I listened to a couple of women in the line.

One said, "Well, what do you think about the situation?"

"Oh, I don't know. We don't have war, but we seem to have military activities." "Voyenniye dyeis Toiga." Then later in that same period, I was over in the barbershop at

the International Hotel, and I heard a couple of Russians talking. One said, "What is this? Why are we being chummy with our enemies, the Nazis?" The Russian people had been strongly conditioned by anti-Nazi propaganda. He said, "I find this very peculiar, very strange."

The other one said, "Oh, don't worry. "On znayeth chto on delayat," which means, "He knows what he's doing," was the answer. The "he" had a capital H. He was pointing toward the Kremlin, across the street. The Russian people, in general, had confidence that in external matters, the government had done and was doing what was best for the country.

Q: How did the diplomatic community, the people who dealt with you as diplomats, present this?

ARMSTRONG: I didn't have enough rank to be very active in the diplomatic community. I had a couple of friends, mostly clerical staff in the German, Swedish, British, Norwegian embassies. That was about it. The German girl seemed never to be able to understand why the Americans should have any objection to what the Germans were doing because, as she would try to explain to us, "This is a matter for the Europeans and should not be a matter of any concern for the United States." We would say gently that we thought we believed in Europe for the Europeans, but to us that meant all Europeans, not just one country. She was also astonished because she found that the Norwegian girl wouldn't come to the parties if she was coming. They were both called Hilda. This was after the German invasion of Norway.

Q: Well, I'm not surprised at that.

ARMSTRONG: But she didn't seem to understand. She said, "We went in there for friendly purposes, to help out the Norwegians." In other words, she believed all her own government's stuff. She was a nice kid. I always wondered what happened to her with the cataclysm of the war. She came from East Prussia.

The Swedish girl was interesting. She was the most negative about the Russians of anybody in the community. This goes back to the Swedes having known the Russians longer and better than anybody else. She eventually married the clerk in our military attaché's office, and presumably has lived in the United States in the American service.

Q: Shortly after that, the war broke out.

ARMSTRONG: This was after the war had broken out. This German-Norwegian and other reaction was in the early days of the war.

Q: I see. When the war did break out, how did you receive the news? You were in Moscow at this time.

ARMSTRONG: Nobody was surprised. This was the first stage of the war.

Q: September 1939.

ARMSTRONG: September 1939. Nobody was surprised. We got a little busier, and there were a few little new touches, but mostly life went on in the normal fashion. After all, Russia had declared itself neutral, and it was a neutral country. We were a neutral country. It was spectator sports.

Then during the period of September to spring was what a lot of people called the phony war, because the Germans were not very active against the West. They were consolidating in Poland and regrouping. The West wasn't up to fighting anybody, anyway, and presumably was pouring ·a little more concrete on the Maginot Line, which did them no good.

The interesting thing about Russian policy during that period, throughout 1939 to 1941, was that they never lost touch with anybody who might potentially be their ally. In other words, they kept their options open diplomatically. They were perfectly correct with us and quite polite. We had no serious problems in the embassy or otherwise. They maintained correct relations with the British. Sir Stafford Cripps, who was a very important man in the Labour party, was the British ambassador there. He couldn't always get in to see anybody in the Kremlin, but he was there. The French Government in exile, the Petain government, did maintain its post, and everybody else was there.

The war was background, but what everybody focused on, beginning in the autumn of 1939, was the Russian protective measures on the borders. Having taken the eastern half of Poland, they then moved in on the Baltic Straits, as you well recall. They told Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that they'd like an alliance with them, mutual assistance or whatever. By the following summer of 1940, they had consolidated their control over those three countries.

That first winter, though, 1939-40, they did not intervene in local affairs in Latvia, Lithuania, and so on. I went out to Latvia in January on a courier trip. In those days, our courier would go to Stockholm, Helsinki, the three Baltic capitals, and to Berlin. We ran a shuttle courier from the embassy in Moscow who would go out to Latvia and deliver our pouches, and bring the new pouches in. We all took turns doing this, and we were always delighted to do it, because it gave me a chance to get out of the USSR for a couple of days.

So I was in Latvia in January for a few days, a perfectly normal train trip out, except for the weather and getting stuck on a siding, because of the deep snow. But going around doing business in Latvia, you were still in an independent country and doing business in Latvian currency, doing a lot of shopping for the colleagues and their girlfriends. I came back with 45 pairs of silk stockings. The Russians didn't have silk stockings. Almost everybody had a girlfriend. Not everybody. Some of the clerks were homosexuals.

On that trip I had luck. When I got on the train from Riga to Moscow, I found in the next door compartment Walter Durant, the famous correspondent of The New York Times. Of course, as a student of Russia, I had always been following him in the Times, so I went and got acquainted. I spent the evening with him, sharing sandwiches and brandy and so forth, and found him fascinating. He maintained two families. He had a Russian family and a Western family. He was going in to see his Russian family. I saw him a couple of times after that in Moscow, and I also got to know other American or British correspondents. As a matter of fact, since one of my colleagues and I at the clerical level did all the newspaper reading and daily reporting on the press, the newspaper correspondents in town, the Westerners, frequently would talk to us about our interpretation of what was in the press, and we'd compare notes with them as to their interpretation. That was an external contact that I did have.

Q: Who were some of the American journalists?

ARMSTRONG: Henry Shapiro was one, a very bright and able guy. Jack Scott was another one. He's gone now. I guess Henry's probably gone now. Jack was for years with Time magazine, Time-Life Publications, a very good Russian expert. He had a Russian wife. He got thrown out by the Soviets in about 1940 for reporting that was probably too accurate. There was a great discussion over whether his Russian wife and children would be allowed to go with him. They were. We all went down to the train to see them off.

The Western group of people in Moscow was a very small group, and you tended to know most of them who spoke English, even if you were at a very low diplomatic level. All the foreigners huddled together, all the embassies huddled together, even if their countries may have had great differences of opinion with each other. There's nothing like a Russian environment to bring everybody else together. They were all suffering under the same yoke, as they say.

To go back, I started on the Baltic states. Everybody looked at that and said, "The Russians are protecting themselves and they will eventually gobble up the state." The U.S. took a firm view of this, and the U.S. still has the same view. We do not recognize the Russian acquisition of those three states, and we still have shadow governments in exile representing Estonia, and possibly Latvia, I think, floating around in the United States.

Q: How was this response manifested at the time?

ARMSTRONG: The early stage, technically the sovereignty of those countries was not violated, because the Russians made a mutual defense treaty, which they theoretically fully accepted. But later, of course, when they actually moved and took them over, the way they did it was to organize their own fifth column and have it take over the government. Then having taken over the government, it would petition for admission of the country to the Soviet Union. So, as far as the Russians were concerned, this was all done quite legally. Their reaction was, "This is perfectly legitimate. This is what the

people in these countries wanted." Believe that and you can believe anything, but that's what most Russian people believed.

Then, of course, after they got in there, they've had a program of decreasing the indigenous population and increasing the Russian component, so that by now, the Estonians are a minority in their own country. I think the Latvians are, too. The Lithuanians are more numerous with a higher birth rate. Lithuanians have shown more resistance because they have the Catholic Church. I think it was perfectly transparent, but again, the Russians convinced themselves they were doing it legally. They always liked to convince themselves they were right.

Q: Yes, that sounds rather like the invasion of Finland.

ARMSTRONG: I'm going to come to that next. What happened in about December, I think it was, was that they presented the same set of demands, in effect, on Finland, asking for a piece of territory near Leningrad, asking for bases and so forth, and a change in the Petsamo area so as to cut off the Finnish access to the Arctic Ocean, but really to get hold of the nickel mines. The Finns said no, they weren't interested.

We, of course, were very close to the Finns, diplomatically, and totally sympathetic. So we had an active cable traffic reporting on what the Firms told us about what the Russians had told them. The Finns had a remarkable ambassador there, Paasikivi. Was he there then or later? I think he was there later after they restored relations. He later became president of Finland.

We obviously took a very negative view. Therefore, our relations with the USSR deteriorated, beginning with the Finnish war, primarily, just because of American popular opinion about the Russian invasion of Finland.

Q: I've been watching newsreel reports, and they're not, to say the least, very favorable towards the Russians.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, Lord, no. I wasn't here. I was over there. But we had a lot of fun in the press reading section, because we'd take the Russian communiqués every day, and I had some fun one time. They'd given an account of how many kilometers the Soviet troops had advanced, and I did a cumulative analysis of that, and it brought them out somewhere a little west of Norway, out in the North Sea after you'd added it all up.

Q: A little optimistic, perhaps.

ARMSTRONG: It was the coldest winter in the history of the Moscow Weather Bureau. There were bread riots in Moscow which had no political connotation whatsoever; they simply arose out of the fact that the weather was so bad that it froze the bread delivery trucks. I was out in it several times when it was 40 below and 45 below, and it's an experience. The town was frozen solid. They could hardly get the streetcars to run. Cars wouldn't start. Of course, cars in those days were pretty primitive, and Russian cars are

more primitive than other cars. Their basic car was a Ford model that they got somewhere in the 1920s. Everything came to a grinding halt, including their offensive with Finland.

Of course, then they also made a terrible mistake. They must have ignored any intelligence that they might have had about whether the Finns would fight. Of course, the Finns fought like wildcats. The Russians had gone in with what we would call a National Guard out here. The reservists in the Leningrad military district were the ones who went. They weren't ready for what they got, and they didn't have the right equipment. They got stopped dead. Later, of course, the Russians realized what they were up against, and they regrouped and put in a new troop structure. Then eventually, their manpower was so much greater than the Finns, there could have been no argument. You don't mind an anecdote?

Q: Oh, please, go right ahead.

ARMSTRONG: One night in about February or March of 1940, as the Finnish war was beginning to grind down, the Finns wanted to sue for peace, and the Russians didn't want to take over all of Finland, anyhow, they realized it would be an impossibility, they were negotiating privately. I went out to dinner at Henry Shapiro's. This is one of the unusual occasions when I actually met Soviet citizens socially, Soviet citizens of some status. I've forgotten the man and wife. They were somewhere in the artistic world, but they were representative of Russian intelligentsia, very nice people. Henry started to tell them, "Peace is being negotiated." They were astonished. Then he asked me for confirmation, and I didn't know where he got his information. I mean, I knew about it because I read the cables, but I wasn't supposed to talk about it. So I got caught on this.

The thing that was interesting was the reaction of this Russian couple, who could not understand why the Finns had fought them. They said, "We're nice people. We don't have any hard feelings. We're just trying to help protect the Finns. We offered them a defensive alliance. Why is that an occasion for them to fight us?" Sort of, "We can do no wrong. We're nice people." And this is essentially a major Russian self-justificatory view that you find, and it goes right on. It's still there. You read it in Mr. Gorbachev. "We're nice. Nobody's nicer than we are. Why don't you just recognize us? Nobody's more legitimate than we are." You know, all that. "We have civil liberties and we have a Constitution." You know. They tell themselves everything is all right.

There's another thing, too. They can be unspeakably crude, rude, and just plain filthy in their actions, but they always want to have the language be good. Euphemism is a Russian art in terms of describing things that happen in society. "All is for the best"--Dr. Pangloss. "All is for the best. We're all right. Everybody is out of step but us."

Q: Not very many people outside of the Soviet Union are fooled by this.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, nobody outside is fooled, really, unless he wants to be. But they fool themselves. This is an insight into dealing with them. It makes it that much more difficult

to deal with them, because they believe their own hypocrisy, and the public believes the government's hypocrisy.

Q: That does make things rather difficult.

ARMSTRONG: That's a side note about "why we're always right." Anyway, Soviet-American relations were not improved by the Russian attack on Finland.

Q: What was the American response? Did they make protests?

ARMSTRONG: There was a lot of money raised here for Finland, war relief, that sort of thing. Never overlook what the Swedes did for the Finns during that time; they turned out everything they could think of to help the Finns. Through Finnish and Swedish channels, we did a lot of volunteer stuff.

Q: But the American Government didn't do very much other than that?

ARMSTRONG: There were a few debts the Finns owed, and I think the American Government probably offered to forget and forgive interest payments and things like that. The Finns said, "Never mind. We'll pay it." They always pay.

Q: Yes, they always pay their debts.

ARMSTRONG: I visited Finland in the summer of 1940 for a holiday. I traveled all around in the lake steamers and went near the new Soviet border. I went there by flying to Stockholm and then flying over to Helsinki, then came back the same way.

Then in the spring of 1941, I took the train from Moscow to Leningrad, did sightseeing in Leningrad, and then went on to Helsinki by train and back, and stopped in Viborg. By that time it had become a Russian town. The Finns were not giving up. There wasn't much of anything to eat in Finland by the spring of 1941.

I was in the border areas in the summer of '40, near Savonlinna. I said, "I don't see any war damage."

They said, "We don't have any."

I said, "How come? You're only a short distance from the war zone."

"Oh, every so often a Soviet bomber will come over, obviously under instructions to bomb us, and he would fly over the town, then he'd go out over the lake and drop all the bombs in the lake, then fly away." This is a reflection of an early naive Russian teaching of its own military, which was, "We do not bomb civilian populations. It is wrong to bomb a civilian population." There was a certain amount of pacifist idealism in the early Bolshevik view of things. Of course, they got into some real problems and it disappeared.

Q: When they were bombing German cities, they probably took rather a different view.

ARMSTRONG: They didn't bomb any German cities. They didn't have an offensive bomber force.

Q: Oh, that's right.

ARMSTRONG: Moscow didn't get more than one or two air raids. The Germans didn't bomb Moscow. I guess they figured it would be too expensive to use the air arm, and they were going to take it by the infantry. Of course, they never did take it by the infantry.

Anyway, the Finnish war was a major event, and it made the Americans officially quite cool toward the USSR. That carries you over to the spring of 1940. The summer of 1940 sees the German offensive in France, rolling over A Belgium, Holland, and everything, and demolishing the French forces and imposing the Vichy regime.

My observation then was that the Soviets were astonished and worried, because they had had, obviously, a better evaluation of the Anglo-French military strength than was warranted by the facts. You could see them. They had vivid accounts in the press every day of what was going on in France, much more vivid than was usual on any activity outside the country. You could tell it bothered them, because: "if they can do that to the British or French, look what they can do to us." That's when they first really began, I think, to get scared and more watchful of the Germans.

Q: That was a very dramatic example of what one had to fear from the Germans, non-aggression pact or no.

ARMSTRONG: The Germans are very efficient military people. There's no arguing about it. I think that was our opinion then, that this kind of scared the daylights out of the Russians. - [End Tape I, Side A. Begin Tape I, Side B]

From then on, really, until the following summer, they became more apprehensive. They didn't convey this to the people, though; everything was bland. German-Russian relations were presumably cordial. Their press would be critical of the British and French, and critical of us, and they were obviously in various ways trying to see whether it was possible to please the Germans enough to keep them off their backs. I think it was probably the spring of 1941 by the time they realized this wasn't going to work.

During the spring of 1941 was when you had the great German walk down through the Balkans, and again the Soviet press was full of lively reports on the German armies rolling into Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia. They made a brief and flickering effort to support the independence of the Yugoslavs, and the Yugoslav military mission came to Moscow to seek support somewhere about spring of 1941.

We got one interesting piece of intelligence. One of the Yugoslav generals who came had gone to the Russian military academy before the revolution, and he was entertained by a couple of his Russian classmates, who were then senior officers in the Red Army. We got a readout on that which is fascinating. The Soviet general who had a fine, formal house, and the servants were in livery.

Q: Oh, my heavens.

ARMSTRONG: To a bunch of peasants like the Yugoslavs, this was something. Who's democratic, you know?

Q: Yes, indeed. In livery, nonetheless.

ARMSTRONG: In livery, yes. So the Russians kind of let the Germans know, "Look, we don't like all these things you're doing," but they didn't do anything more than just make motions. I am sure that from the time the Germans rolled into the Balkans, the Russians were then convinced that somebody in Berlin had their name on a card somewhere, and in due course, they would be presented with a bill.

Our general observation in the embassy was that the Russians really were surprised by the German attack in June of 1941. We had tried to warn them.

Q: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: We and the British tried to warn them with perfectly good intelligence, which we gave them.

Q: Where did this intelligence come from?

ARMSTRONG: Agents in Germany and just general open news in Germany, plus knowing what's going on, good hunches and good agents and so forth.

Q: The Russians didn't want to listen?

ARMSTRONG: British intelligence was damned good in those days and still is. Ours was kind of rudimentary, but it was functioning. So this was convincing. The Russians rejected it -- that is, Stalin rejected it. Our theory was that Stalin felt he was a big enough and important enough actor in the world stage so that even Hitler wouldn't dare treat him with contempt, that what he was going to get somewhere along the line was a set of demands -- economic, for supplies, because Germany was hurting, they needed grain, they needed oil, they needed other things, and assurance of non-belligerency, all that.

I think they thought they were going to be presented with a list. They never were. They just got hit on a Sunday morning with the full fire power of the German Army. They were so unsuspecting that they had, on their front airfields, all their fighter squadrons lined up for Sunday morning inspection. The Germans came down and washed them right out.

They didn't have any significant defense in depth from the Polish border, and they simply were not prepared, in the military sense, for what hit them. I think probably their front line troops did a heroic job with what they had, but because there was not enough, they moved very rapidly and began to do the thing that they did in France.

Q: It's very similar to Pearl Harbor, don't you think, where the country that gets hit doesn't expect anything nice from their attacker, expects them to make some aggressive move, but not at that time and not in that way.

ARMSTRONG: Not that way. I mean, the German Embassy was still in Moscow and so forth. The Germans told us what they were going to do.

Q: They did? How did this come about?

ARMSTRONG: We were friendly with the German Embassy.

Q: You must have been very much.

ARMSTRONG: This is intelligence. This is an intelligence in an amateur way without having a Central Intelligence Agency or anything. The U.S. Foreign Service is not a bad source of intelligence, and they worked hard at it. Our contacts were good.

Q: How much notice did you get when they told you?

ARMSTRONG: Enough so that we got our women and children out before the war started.

Q: And you went to the Soviets, and they refused to listen?

ARMSTRONG: We didn't go. The embassy didn't go. We'd made the official approach earlier through intelligence channels, and they said, "Ba1oney."

There were several little things in the press that spring which I recall. Every so often there would be a funny little story in the press which would be hard to fathom. There was one report in some newspaper somewhere in Europe to the effect that the Germans were going to force on the Russians a deal whereby they would take over the Ukraine and have access to the oil and grain.

The Russians ran in Pravda a little humorous article which referred to this and said, "What nonsense." It quoted and said, "We're supposed to be renting Kiev to the Germans. This makes just as much sense as the nursery rhyme." I translated it at the time, but I can't remember it exactly. I quote in Russian a nursery rhyme which sounds good in Russian and translates very awkwardly, which is, "The lobsters are cutting hay in the meadow with hammers." That's the literal translation. They said it makes just as much sense as that. They put this out and kind of let the Germans know that they noticed something and expected to get some kind of reaction, and never got anything.

There were a few minor good relations efforts during the first year of the 1939 Agreement. I remember the Bolshoi Opera decided to do Die Walküre. It was one of the funniest experiences you can imagine. Some of us in the American Embassy went. In the first two rows, there was the German Embassy solid. The stage machinery was excellent, the tenors and the bassos were fine, and the spirit of the thing was quite all right. It was good presentation, but the Russians simply did not have any Wagnerian sopranos. They didn't have any women in their cadre who could sing like a German soprano.

Q: Yes, you do rather need that.

ARMSTRONG: In connection with it, they put out a booklet in Russian, explaining the Ring. I think I've probably got it in my souvenirs somewhere. I didn't know much about it either. Wagnerian music had not been my bag, or at least I wasn't interested in the theology of it. We were kind of anti-Nazi around New York, anyway, so who bothered to listen to Wagner? I was fascinated by this pamphlet they put out. The Russians solemnly read it and tried hard to understand it. The Russians love songs and opera and all kinds of shows.

Another point. The Germans, when they did go in, made the grossest of political mistakes because they treated everybody like pigs. If they had gone in with the right kind of political propaganda, if they'd understood what they were dealing with, or if they'd wanted to understand what they were dealing with, they would have gone into the Ukraine as liberators, with Ukrainian-speaking soldiers. "We're not fighting you. We are Ukrainians." You know. Friends and all that. They could have had the whole Ukraine in about 20 minutes.

Q: Just like they wanted.

ARMSTRONG: Which is what they really wanted economically. But instead of that, they shot everybody. Any sentiments of anti-Moscow disappeared in about three minutes and the Ukrainians went out and fought like tigers, too.

Q: This was rather a dramatic time for American policy, as well. One of our historical advisors claims that it's the German invasion of the USSR and the fact that the Soviets were able to hold on throughout that autumn and winter that convinced FDR to continue to pursue the possibility, then, of helping the Allies. What do you think about that?

ARMSTRONG: He was already committed to helping the British.

Q: Yes, indeed.

ARMSTRONG: That was a firm commitment. There was no argument about that. It was a while later that Churchill took over. The British were kind of hard to help at that point. I'll tell you the reaction in the embassy when the war started. The night before the war was to begin, there were two parties, one of the clerical staff and one of the officers' staff.

Q: This is in September 1939?

ARMSTRONG: This is in June 1941. Of course, the officers were at the ambassador's house. We had ours at one of the apartments in the chancery. We had a clerical party, a clerks' party. Some of the officers came over to visit our party, quite a number of them, in fact. I think they wanted to get away from the ambassador. Our military attaché was at our party, an old friend of mine. I guess he was a major. I had known him as a captain, and we had both studied Russian together at Berkeley, California, a very, very nice guy and a good cavalryman, but not a great intelligence officer. He was satisfied the Russians would be rolled over by the Germans in very short order. I got into an argument with another clerk, in the presence of the military attaché. The clerk said, "The Germans will be in Moscow in three weeks."

I said, "I'll bet you on that."

He said, "How much?"

I said, "Fifty dollars," which was a lot of money for me at that point. I was the one who said, "The Russians will not lose." I don't know why I said that, except that I had a sense of the great strength of the Russian people, and I had a sense of their patriotism. I collected the $50, incidentally. The other guy and I were both in Japan at that point, waiting for a way to get home. But the military attaché turned to the other guy and said, "Your money's perfectly safe." But he was a dear friend and a good guy, and I always liked him. But his intellectual judgments were not great.

Q: You were right, though, in that the Russians did hold on.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, yes, no question about it. If you know Russian history, you know what happened to Napoleon.

Q: Indeed. Same thing happened.

ARMSTRONG: Same thing. Sure. The space and the numbers.

Q: And the winter.

ARMSTRONG: And the winter. So there was a division in the embassy, obviously, on what was going to happen. Ambassador Steinhardt was, I think, busy urging Washington that this was serious, that the Russians deserved some help, but that we ought not to give it to them without getting some political and other satisfaction on some of the things we thought were important.

Q: What did he have in mind?

ARMSTRONG: Some individual cases he was worried about. I know of one case where he told Molotov, "You know, I've got some passports here for exit visas." They were American. "And I've got one more passport," which was British, a local employee of the embassy who was really a Soviet citizen, also. He said, "I want a visa for her."

Molotov said, "But she's a Soviet citizen."

"I know that, but you know, you gave me a list of military supplies you needed. I haven't sent it home yet. I want the visa on that passport." He got it. She got out.

Q: Quite effective bargaining.

ARMSTRONG: He was a tough cookie in terms of specific bargaining. Another thing, they were very polite to us all leading up to this period, although they didn't give in on Finland or the Baltic states, but they were very polite. Somewhere in the spring of 1941, the ambassador called me and said, "I need you this evening. Would you meet me in the courtyard at 7:00 o'clock?"

I said, "Sure." I got in the car and said, "What are we doing?"

He said, "The Soviet police have picked up an American citizen, and they were decent enough to tell us that they had him on a gun charge and to give us an opportunity to see him."

So I said, "Where are we going?"

He said, "We're going to Lubyanka," the headquarters of the NKVD, now the KGB. So I have actually been inside the headquarters of the KGB, the same building, still there, a big square building. We got in there, and in a room full of steely eyed KGB agents, all of their uniform hats on, sitting around, looked like a sea of blue, you know, they brought in a kid who was about 15. I had to translate, only he didn't know any Russian or any English; he spoke Polish. He had been born in Fall River, Massachusetts, when his family was visiting from Poland, had gone back and grown up in Poland on a farm. He knew enough Russian so he could answer "yes" or "no," so we had the most tortured conversation. The ambassador realized what the problem was, and he tried to be helpful to me. I was doing the best I could. It was an experience, but we got him out. The charge was kind of trumped up, which became evident when he told his story, and we got him out. The Russians let him go. This was a signal, I thought: "Look, we aren't going to cause you any minor troubles."

We had another event that spring, where somebody broke into the Roman Catholic church in Moscow, where the priest was an American, and there was always a great struggle over having him in there, because they didn't like churches. One day somebody came and stole all the objects off the altar, the host, everything. The priest came screaming into the embassy at 9:00 o'clock in the morning, and I was on my way over to

the ambassador's to tutor his daughter. I said, "I'll give you a ride." I took him over, and he told me all about it.

We protested to the Soviet Government, and they sent a note back, which is a marvelous piece of casuistry, which I remember translating, which said that the appurtenances of a religious service are the property of the state and they're made available to the congregation for its use, provided they take good care of them. The fact that they've disappeared indicates that the congregation is not taking proper care, and therefore, it's your fault."

Q: Oh, my heavens!

ARMSTRONG: When I translated that, I thought, "When we get the ambassador on this, he'll go right up through the roof." (Laughs)

Q: Oh, I wouldn't blame him at all.

ARMSTRONG: He was Jewish, incidentally. He did go through the roof. He went over and saw Molotov, banged the table and so forth, and said, "I happen to have observed the church is across the street from a major police installation. I thought you had pretty good police in this country. Where is the stuff?" So eventually, they dragged in some bedraggled guy and two-thirds of the stuff or three-quarters of it. Probably melted down some of it. But it was an example. He was a combative man, but he always dealt in specific cases, the specific problems, rather than broad policies. A very effective representative of the United States, a tough guy and good.

Q: What about Lend-Lease at this time? When did that start?

ARMSTRONG: I'll tell you what the story is there. I was on my way home from Moscow during June, July, August, and September. It took me from June to October to get here, because the only way out was through the Trans-Siberian, and we did that, and then we sat in Vladivostok for two or three days, then we went to Japan and sat in the Imperial Hotel, a small group of us. We couldn't travel on a Japanese ship because of State Department regulations, and U.S. ships were not stopping in Japan because we'd frozen their money and they had frozen our money. So we sat. We'd trudge up to the embassy every day and see if anything had happened, and nothing had, and we'd trudge back to the hotel and go on eating sukiyaki and drinking Japanese gin, which is terrible.

Q: What was Japan like at that time, just before the attack on Pearl Harbor?

ARMSTRONG: It was obviously a well-functioning society. The trains ran on time, the people were well disciplined, they all seemed to be hard working. All you could see was a civilian society that was busy at work and well integrated, well organized, and personally not unfriendly, but certainly officially it was kind of stiff for an American. I got picked up by police more than once and asked a lot of questions in Japanese, which I couldn't answer. I eventually showed them my passport and eventually was released. I

never knew what it was about. The moment that the Japanese were moving into Indochina in July, August, so forth, you could see they were taking down the Latin letter signs on the railroad stations and putting up only Japanese ideograms. So when you traveled on trains, you didn't know where the hell you were.

I went over to Tsuruga, a port in Japan, because people had come through from Moscow and needed some help, and Tsuruga was where the steamship line to Vladivostok was based. I had a good connection there because I had come through Tsuruga earlier, and there was a Japanese waterfront policeman that was part of their intelligence service, who rode regularly on the ship between Vladivostok and Tsuruga. Tsuruga is on the north side of Japan. It's about a day and a half, two-day trip from the USSR across the Japan Sea. He got around to talking to everybody who took the ship. He was an intelligent guy, a very attractive person, and he interrogated me for a while in English. Finally, I said, "Do you speak Russian?"

"Oh, yes." His Russian was better than his English by a good deal. So we conversed a lot in Russian.

This is an aside which hasn't anything to do with Russia, but about every 15 minutes, he would say, "Now, what do you think would happen if there were a war between Japan and the United States?"

I'd always say, "We'd blow you out of the water." I thought I might as well start there, you know. This guy would try this on me, and I'd say, "We'd blow you out of the water."

He'd say, "Ah so," and write it down. Then about 20 minutes later, he'd come around with the same question. So after a while, I got him pretty well in the groove. When I left him the first time, he came to me and said, "I've got $16 in American money. I need some high socks to go with my Bermuda shorts and a pair of decent shoes. I can't get them in Japan. Our stuffs no good anymore; it's all made of papier-mache." They were economizing on raw materials. "Would you send me a pair of shoes? Here's a cut out of my foot."

I said, "I'll do the best I can." So I went back when these people came in from Moscow, and I found my Japanese intelligence friend, and said, "These people have got problems." He was very helpful. He couldn't have been nicer. We had families with babies and so forth, who really needed help. The embassy at Tokyo was so busy, they couldn't send anybody over. I knew some of the people, anyway. He was very helpful. When I parted with him that time, he said, "Now, if there is a war and if after the war you're still there and I'm still here, I hope you'll look me up, because I think I'll need the shoes more than ever." You'd get these marvelous human contacts every so often in life, under strange circumstances. I tried to find him in 1946, but he disappeared in the war. I had a friend in counterintelligence to look for him, but he couldn't find

Q: That's very interesting, though, that you were there just before the war began, the American participation in the war.

ARMSTRONG: As somebody said, you know, "You went around the world and a war broke out behind you all the way around. I don't know that I want to follow you."

If you don't mind another anecdote.

Q: Oh, please.

ARMSTRONG: The ship stopped at port in North Korea, which, of course, was Japanese-controlled. A bandy-legged, bug-eyed Japanese soldier, a uniformed guy, a soldier or official, came on board to interrogate everybody who was passing through. He didn't have anything else to do. He was probably a different intelligence service from the other guy. When I got to him, he looked at my passport and said, "Would you sit over there?" He got rid of everybody else. Then he came to me and said, "I hope you don't mind," he said in Russian, which was quite good. "I see you've been a translator at the American Embassy in Moscow, so you must know Russian. I was a student at the Imperial University in Russian Studies, and I joined the government service, and they sent me here to Korea. I couldn't be more miserable. Everybody here hates me because I'm Japanese, and I've got nobody with any intellect or any education to talk to. There's another hour before the ship leaves. Would you just sit down and have a conversation about the Soviet Union and a lot of other things in the world?" We had a nice time.

When the ship left, here was this little guy waving me off, you know. Just a pure chance like that. He was the same kind of a guy I was, a graduate student in Russian.

Q: Did you get around to talking about Japanese-American hostilities?

ARMSTRONG: A little bit, yes.

Q: What did he say?

ARMSTRONG: Everybody agreed we were on a collision course. The Japanese didn't argue that. These guys didn't. They said, "We hope nothing happens. There's our government."

Q: Do you think the Japanese at this time looked upon you, even this early, as one of the enemy because of the actions FDR was taking against the Japanese economically, the oil embargo and the abrogation of the trade treaty?

ARMSTRONG: Not really, no. I think officials were obligated to regard us as possible enemies because we were foreigners and foreign officials. That's all right. But perfectly civil. Nobody laid a glove on me. Perfectly civil, as the Nazi officials were when I went through Germany in 1939, couldn't have been more polite. They saw I had an official passport, and I was very well treated. Nobody looked through any baggage or anything. It was easy. So there was enough, shall we say, pre-war civility left over so that as a clerk in the American Embassy, I had no problems at all.

Q: So you finally got back to the States.

ARMSTRONG: I got back to the States, and I didn't know what I was going to do, so I looked around Washington for places where they might need people who spoke Russian. I ended up in the Office of Lend-Lease Administration, where a friend of mine was in charge. Professor Hazard of Columbia, who is still teaching at the age of 80, and who was a great Russian expert, was a Harvard law man who had gone to the Moscow Juridical Institute and had a Moscow Juridical Institute diploma in Soviet law. John was starting up the Office of Lend-Lease Affairs, and I was a natural for it, so I joined him. That was about October.

The Russians were not yet under Lend-Lease. What had happened was that they had given us a list of things they needed, said they'd pay for them. It was hard to procure any of them because we were not yet sufficiently in a mobilization stage to have much of anything going. We didn't have any current Army stocks or military supplies of any consequence, and everything had to start from scratch. So we didn't have much. Nevertheless, we did a good job, I think. Obviously, the requirements were so great that there wasn't any sense in expecting the Russians to pay for them out of their own money. The British couldn't pay for theirs either.

So we made them eligible for Lend-Lease sometime in the autumn of 1941. That was just before Pearl Harbor. Then, of course, when Pearl Harbor came and everybody went into a tailspin, the question was: How can we procure this stuff for the Russians, given the fact that we ourselves do not have enough of anything anywhere? Even our ships; we didn't know where they were. So I found myself coordinating the shipping and trying to get enough cargo to fill ships when I got them, and trying to find enough ships to carry the cargo when I had the cargo. It was the old business of, "If I had some ham, I'd have some ham and eggs if I had any eggs." We struggled along with that, because we had made commitments to the Russians, and they were important and formal commitments.

We had a terrible struggle, a bureaucratic struggle, from the time of Pearl Harbor through what was the first protocol. We had annual protocols with the Russians, and the first one was to be in July of 1940. What our argument had to be was, "Look, we made a commitment. The Russians are actively killing more Germans than anybody else in sight. If we don't live up to our commitments, there is a danger the Russians will then make a separate peace with the Germans, and where are we then?" We had to scare everybody with that.

We did get a lot of support from Roosevelt through Hopkins. I remember one time a friend of mine in the shipping agency called me up and said, "I just got a letter from you this morning."

I said, "I didn't write you a letter."

He said, "It's got Roosevelt's signature on it. I know damn well you wrote it." We'd get the White House to instruct other departments, because we were part of the executive part of the White House, so to speak. But we made it first in terms of getting the goods available. We didn't have enough ships to carry them, and we also ran into terrible problems of the North Sea convoys, so bad that we had to stop. One day we lost 22 out of 33 ships in one convoy, all in the course of one day.

Q: Were you in Washington at the time when the USS Carney was bombed and the Reuben James was torpedoed in convoy missions in October and November of 1941?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I was here, but I was too busy with the Russians to pay any attention to that. That wasn't a convoy to Russia.

Q: No, it was across the North Atlantic. When you were working on Lend-Lease before Pearl Harbor, when it was first starting, did you have anything to do with the British there?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, the British supply mission.

Q: Can you tell me a bit more about that?

ARMSTRONG: The British supply mission was, of course, engaged in getting American supplies for Britain, but there were certain things the British agreed to divert to the Russians as a result of Hopkins and other missions that had gone over to Moscow. It was a steady liaison I had in the British shipping mission, because I was concerned primarily with shipping. He came to be a very, very dear, personal friend. He was later on the London County Council, Sir William Hart, former Oxford don. He and his family and we have been friendly ever since then. He was the Britisher who kept an eye on the Russian connection in the supply area. Of course, the British had their own system, and the British were trying to run the convoys up there. After we were in the war, we could help with the convoys. We had an American representative in Murmansk, who was a U.S. Marine Corps colonel later. He's gone now.

We did our best to cooperate. You know, it's awfully hard to cooperate with the Russians, even when you're giving them things. But we did have a fair number of Russians here in their supply mission of distinct competence, sometimes of good linguist capacity, and we developed a good human relationship. I got to know quite a number of these fellows pretty well because I did speak Russian, and they were acting like normal human beings in the wartime situation. They weren't being stuffy and difficult, like the Soviets frequently are. You could deal with them straight out. I got quite chummy with quite a number of them. They're good people, hard working, efficient, competent, and cynical about their own government. Cynicism was expressed in little wry ways now and then. But good fellows. I happened to like Russians as people. I've always liked Russians I've known if they give me a chance. So we had a comfortable relationship.

For the first two years of the war, when we were in the war and the Russians were in the war, I'd say there was a good basic collaboration, given all the limitations on the Russian side, which you can imagine. But after that, we then got into a period in which people were beginning to mull over what was going to happen after the war, because it became evident after Stalingrad that the Allies were going to win and it was only a question of time. Several hundred thousand more bodies before you got there.

Then we had VE Day, and then there was the question of what do you do about the Far East. We had a commitment from the Russians that they would, within X months, attack the Far East, which they did. We had a special program of supplies to Russia, to help with the logistics of their Far Eastern Red Army. We had been sending things through Japanese waters throughout the war to Vladivostok on ships flying the Soviet flag. We Lend-Leased them 50 ships, 50 of our new ships. They put Russian flags and Russian crews on them, painted big red flags on both sides, and put on floodlights, and they'd sail out black from Portland, Oregon, get halfway across the Pacific, turn the lights on, and sail through Japanese waters. We thought that was pretty ingenious. I was part of the process that thought of that. This is all pretty well recorded. There are two good books on Lend-Lease to Russia which I can show you. So the story has been told and published. But we didn't say much about that because we usually sent only civilian items through Japanese waters. The last summer, though, we sent military items right through Japanese waters into the hands of the Soviet Far Eastern Army. By that time, the Japanese were too beat to stop it.

Q: I wonder if I could ask you a very big question that needs an answer that relates more to your experience as a Foreign Service officer than your experience as an American abroad. What did you think during the period when America was neutral in the war, and the time of 1939 and Pearl Harbor, FDR's policy of attempting to aid the Allies, but yet remain officially neutral?

ARMSTRONG: I was always an interventionist. They never had any argument with me about that.

Q: Did you think perhaps he was not doing enough, then?

ARMSTRONG: I wasn't here. I was in Russia, so I didn't know what was happening here. We didn't have very much news from home. We had a wireless bulletin, but we didn't have American newspapers until later. We didn't have any Western European papers, and had difficulty getting British papers. So I wasn't very well informed about the situation in the U.S. It always seemed to me from the beginning that it was only a matter of time before the U.S. was going to be involved. In retrospect, I'd say Roosevelt did the best he could to move us into this. I don't think he was dishonest to the American people, but I think he was a little slippery on occasions. Willkie's campaign was not really anti-interventionist.

End of interview