In August 1948 a ferocious heat wave claimed scores of lives and provoked a rash of unusual behavior across the United States. As a mass of tropical air drifted up the Mississippi Valley—“like a soldering iron being run slowly up a dowager’s spine”—chickens dropped dead and asphalt sidewalks turned to molten taffy. Indianapolis experienced a “plague of Peeping Toms,” while in Washington, D.C., Tom Collinses were the order of the day. Desperate to escape the heat, twenty thousand autoworkers in Detroit boycotted the assembly line, just as baseball fans nationwide stayed away from big league games. Louder, hotter, and more crowded than anywhere else, New York City formed the center of this maelstrom. As the New York Telephone Company answered 190,000 calls from individuals inquiring, “Hey, Mac—how hot?” the city’s police were “driven wild by wrench-wielding gangs who turned on hundreds of hydrants,” reported Time. Photographers, meanwhile, were driven wild by the city’s fashion-conscious women, who were stripping down to nothing more than a sheet worn “toga-style” to have their hair set. But none of this hot weather drama was more peculiar, or more compelling, than the events played out on August 12 at 7 East Sixty-first Street.

A sultry Thursday afternoon found numerous reporters and cameramen milling outside the ornate mansion that housed the Soviet consulate, smoking, chatting, or resting on car fenders. Their presence attracted a growing throng of curious loiterers. All were anxious for news of the woman being held captive inside, Oksana Kasenkina—a schoolteacher who had fled Manhattan some days earlier in a bid to avoid repatriation to the USSR by the diplomats whose children she had spent two
years tutoring. Removed from her upstate sanctuary by the consul on August 7, Kasenkina had been confined in the consulate ever since. Her entrapment prompted the anticommunist organization Common Cause, Inc., to seek a habeas corpus writ that required Consul Lomakin to produce her in court on August 12. When Lomakin blithely ignored the summons he left the press braced for fresh developments in this baffling consular melodrama. A showdown seemed imminent. Yet its precise form surely caught even the most seasoned hacks off guard, for who could have anticipated that the suspense would be punctured not by further bluster from the consul but by the appearance of Kasenkina herself—plunging from a third-floor window?

This news broke at about 4:00 p.m., when a liveried employee of the private club next door to the consulate dashed out to alert the press pack to what he’d just seen. His cry—“Hey fellows! A woman just jumped out the back window!”—triggered a rush by reporters to clamber across the fence for a better view of the action in the adjacent courtyard. Through the railings, they observed a woman on her back with telephone wires tangled around her legs, her body blocking a doorway from which Soviet staff members were trying to emerge. A skein of cables—ripped loose from the masonry by the impact of her descent—had broken the teacher’s fall. “There was an instant of silence,” related Time. “Then the whole neighborhood was in uproar.”

Police officers raced to reach the injured woman, while a trio of consular attachés struggled to push the door open from the inside. The latter succeeded after a couple of minutes, and as they started dragging Kasenkina across the threshold, she could be heard crying “Ostavte, ostavte!”—“Leave me alone, leave me alone.” Meanwhile, a police officer managed to “hoist his 170 pounds over a 8 foot wall” with “the skill healthy young men have for such occasions.” Shouldering his way into the consulate, he breached the “Red Iron Curtain,” the Chicago Daily Tribune approvingly noted. By the time an ambulance arrived at 4:35 p.m., a crowd of three hundred had amassed on the street outside. Within a few minutes, it had grown “considerably larger.” Scuffles broke out between reporters and police patrolmen before an unconscious Kasenkina was stretchered out at 5:00 p.m. and whisked across town to the Roosevelt Hospital. Thus the summer’s most mysterious saga reached its cliff-hanging “Perils of Pauline” climax, as Newsweek put it, invoking the silent movie heroine who invariably managed to extricate herself from the jaws of disaster.

A “first class diplomatic incident,” the Kasenkina affair became an instant cause célèbre. For several days, her vertiginous “leap for freedom” was indisputably the story, lavishly illustrated with photographic spreads and breathlessly narrated by the newsreels. Americans—seemingly unmoved by distant wrangling over Berlin and the creeping Stalinization of eastern Europe—thrilled to a drama that brought the opposition between two antithetical ways of life into sharp relief,
underscoring “the gulf between the philosophy of the ant heap and the philosophy of a free person in a free society.”

But the story resonated far beyond U.S. borders. “The crash of her body on the pavement was heard around the world,” one columnist remarked with little exaggeration. Voice of America broadcasters amplified the thud, boasting that they’d taken just forty-one minutes to beam news of Kasenkina’s “leap for freedom” to audiences behind the Iron Curtain. “This is what we have been waiting for in our war of words,” one official remarked. “This is something that can be easily understood by people all over the world.”

Many opinion formers were just as eager for the anti-Soviet ammunition that Kasenkina’s story supplied, though it required some ingenuity to marshal meaning from events as hazy in circumstantial detail as they were rich in symbolic significance. Yet despite journalists’ enthusiastic flame fanning, the actions of an obscure chemistry teacher need not have sparked a major international incident. Why, then, did Washington and Moscow choose to escalate what might otherwise have been an inconsequential episode? What was at stake in the fate of Oksana Kasenkina that so many parties rushed to wrangle over her?

Contemporary observers understood the larger significance of this episode in different ways. For some, most notably the influential columnists Joseph and Stewart Alsop, the tussle over Kasenkina was rooted in the conflicted postwar politics of repatriation. Viewed in this way, the chemistry teacher represented one among thousands of Soviet citizens who had resisted return to the USSR since 1945,
her desperation mirroring the distress—or suicidal despair—of innumerable displaced persons (DPs). If the events on East Sixty-first Street shed oblique light on conditions in refugee camps across Europe, they also constituted an argument for a new U.S. policy to accommodate and employ this growing legion of “free world” recruits.  

Others interpreted the Kasenkina affair as a uniquely consular crisis, one that signaled the dangers of trying to conduct diplomacy as normal under increasingly abnormal conditions. Consul Lomakin’s attempt to exercise “police power” over an exclusive portion of the Upper East Side called into question the desirability of permitting a Soviet presence on U.S. soil—or of sending American representatives to the USSR only to be harassed and surveilled. With the two states curtailing movement and association within and between their territories, U.S. diplomats in Moscow soon concluded that they too had become cold war captives.

If the “case of the defenestrated schoolteacher,” as the Alsops called it, lowered the temperature of U.S.-Soviet relations by several degrees, it also quickened the pulse of domestic anticommunism, pumping oxygen through the capillaries that connect high politics and popular culture. A diplomatic crisis, the incident on Sixty-first Street was in rapid succession a media event and a cultural phenomenon. Soon after her fateful leap, Kasenkina announced that she had been emboldened by a biopic on the Soviet defector Igor Gouzenko, William Wellman’s The Iron Curtain. Roused to action by Hollywood’s fictional version of a real-life defection, she in turn inspired both cultural producers and consumers. While she may have been no Ethel Barrymore or Bette Davis, the “little Russian schoolteacher” agitated popular feeling in unexpected ways, catalyzing a string of copycat escapes and kindling a variety of rescue fantasies that were charged with both ideological and emotional significance.

THE MYSTERY OF THE KIDNAPPED RUSSIAN

For a clarifying moment, the Kasenkina story was remarkably muddled. Even columnists who hailed its capacity to crystallize the cold war’s terms of engagement acknowledged that readers had to negotiate no less than three competing versions of the schoolteacher’s “three-story jump”—a conservative estimate, given the sizable array of parties vying to stamp their authority over a convoluted sequence of events and the woman at its center. “At first,” wrote Life magazine, “only one fact was clear. When the Russian steamship Pobeda sailed from New York harbor on July 31 . . . Mrs. Kosenkina, a 52-year old woman who dressed carelessly but liked to use large amounts of US cosmetics, was not on board.”

American newspaper readers received their first introduction to this ungainly character on August 8, 1948. Under front-page headlines, reporters recounted a “bizarre tug-of-war between White and Red Russians.” At a press conference con-
vened in the Soviet consulate on August 7, Jakov Lomakin, the Soviet consul general, related a gripping cloak-and-dagger tale that cast the FBI and “white Russian bandits” as malign conspirators in an abduction plot. His story went as follows. On July 31, three teachers, colleagues at the school for Soviet diplomats’ children in Manhattan, vanished shortly before they were due to board a ship bound for home. Two members of this trio, Mikhail and Klavdia Samarin, remained at large, spirited away by the FBI. The third, Oksana Kasenkina, had fallen foul of the machinations of anticommunist émigrés—“white Russian bandits” in Lomakin’s terminology—determined to prevent her return to the USSR. Intent on spreading vicious calumnies about the Soviet Union to disoriented Russians in America, Kasenkina’s shadowy pursuers had latched onto the impassive woman who now sat before the press corps. Dressed in a black skirt, white blouse, turquoise-colored bobby socks, and red moccasins, with eyes lowered and legs demurely crossed at the ankle, Kasenkina did indeed appear adrift between generations and cultures—a fifty-two-year-old widow approximating the attire of an American adolescent.

White Russian gangsters had thrown this helpless woman into turmoil, Lomakin announced. They had bamboozled her with repeated assertions that she would be sent to Siberia on return to the USSR; that her soldier son was dead; that her husband, missing since 1937, had been “liquidated.” Not content with poisoning her mind, one of these “bandits” had lured the teacher to a shady spot on Riverside Drive, where he had plunged a hypodermic needle into her arm. (Kasenkina, almost mute throughout, obligingly rolled up her sleeve to reveal a blotchy rash.) Whatever mind-altering substance the syringe contained had left the poor creature quite devoid of will. “Everything went black,” Lomakin theatrically intoned. Insensible, Kasenkina had permitted her abductors to drive her some thirty miles north of New York City to Reed Farm, a hostel for “reactionaries” run by Alexandra Tolstoy, the author’s youngest daughter.

When Kasenkina had regained her senses, Lomakin continued, she had immediately written him—a letter smuggled out of the White Russian vipers’ nest by a passing stranger with a vegetable cart. She had implored the consul to fetch her at once, terrified lest her captors prevent her return to the beloved Soviet homeland. At his point, Lomakin brandished a two-page letter and read a couple of impassioned sentences: “Once more I beg you not to let me perish here. . . . I have been deprived of my freedom.” He and his staff had duly responded to her cry for help, arriving at Reed Farm to find the poor woman at the kitchen sink, subjected to “slave labor.” Despite the best efforts of Tolstoy’s reactionaries to prevent their departure, the consular motorcade had managed to get away under a hail of sticks and stones.

Not surprisingly, reporters greeted this “lurid” tale with much skepticism. Dismissing Lomakin’s story as a “lot of baloney,” Alexandra Tolstoy offered an alternative version that reversed the identities of rescuer and kidnapper, assigning the
virtuous role to Russian émigrés and attributing an abduction (or something akin to it) to the consul and his staff. In Tolstoy’s telling, Kasenkina had come to Reed Farm willingly, after making contact with various anti-Soviet Russians in Manhattan. Tolstoy confessed initial doubt as to whether Kasenkina was a plant who was posing as a defector to glean intelligence for the Soviets on the “underground railway” for fugitive Russians that she helped operate. But Tolstoy’s suspicions had been allayed by the teacher’s agitated demeanor: the woman had been so fearful for her life that she refused to sleep in a room alone at night. Had she wished to leave, she could have done so at any time. Reed Farm, its proprietor pointedly remarked, was not a prison camp. Since no one policed its perimeter, Kasenkina had only to summon a taxi or walk to a bus stop if she wished to leave. She did not, and when consular staff suddenly appeared six days later, the hysterical teacher accompanied them in a state of suicidal resignation, having abandoned herself to the prospect of imminent liquidation. Kasenkina’s parting words—“If they shoot me
maybe it’s the best way out”—did not suggest tremendous eagerness for return either to the consulate or to the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{19}

Clearly, these two accounts were incompatible, yet neither one added up to a coherent whole. In Lomakin’s narrative, the influence of mind-altering drugs was required to explain the oddity of Kasenkina placing herself in the hands of her alleged abductors. As Tolstoy recounted events, it was unclear why the schoolteacher—if she were eager to evade return to the USSR—would write a letter alerting the consul to her whereabouts, possibly even inviting him to come and fetch her from a place of sanctuary. (Or had she, perhaps, written no such letter at all?) In both stories, Kasenkina appeared perplexingly acquiescent to her own captivity, whether at the hands of White Russians or Soviet officials.

Something curious was going on. However, the predicament of a discombobulated Soviet schoolteacher—once again in the custody of her consulate—was not necessarily dry tinder for a major diplomatic conflagration. Conceivably, the affair might have ended after this initial flurry of accusations had various protagonists not wished to bring matters to a head by enlisting the law to substantiate their version of events. The Soviets attempted to initiate a criminal investigation into Kasenkina’s “kidnapping,” the illicit activities of White Russian “gangster” organizations, and the FBI’s role in the disappearance of three teachers.\textsuperscript{20} From Foreign Minister Molotov downwards, Soviet officials furiously repudiated the State Department’s claim that Lomakin had imprisoned Kasenkina against her will in the consulate. The very suggestion that he had detained “a citizeness” was “incompatible with the dignity of a Soviet Consul.”\textsuperscript{21} Tolstoy, meanwhile, filed a report with the New York State Police regarding the seizure of Kasenkina from Reed Farm by consular personnel.

Into this melee stepped Representative Karl Mundt, acting chair of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), determined to bring the runaway teachers into the committee’s ambit—and sensing, no doubt, an opportunity to attract further media attention to its activities.\textsuperscript{22} Not that publicity was lacking. In August 1948, HUAC was very visibly investigating allegations of a communist espionage ring within the U.S. government in hearings that introduced audiences to Elizabeth Bentley, the so-called red spy queen, and produced the first airing of Whittaker Chambers’s explosive claims regarding the subversive activities of Alger Hiss.\textsuperscript{23} With their inside knowledge of the consulate, the Samarins and Kasenkina might be able to shed further light on Soviet spying operations, Mundt asserted.

Claiming to know that Kasenkina wished to make herself a “stateless person” and eager to appraise HUAC of “the whole Soviet system of world controls,” Mundt planned to subpoena her: an unorthodox means of extending U.S. state protection over a woman he cast as the consulate’s unwilling captive. “To have what amounts to a branch of the NKVD [Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs), the Russian secret police] pick up a person in a pri-
vate American home and put them in virtual seclusion—in what amounts to house arrest—seems to us unprecedented," he announced. His point was clear, if not eloquently expressed: "We feel that that kind of goings-on cannot be tolerated." But rescuing Kasenkina required adjudication of the extraterritoriality of consular property, which in Mundt’s words occupied a “twilight zone”—claiming the same immunities as embassies, though possibly without equivalent entitlement.24

Was the Soviets’ elegant Upper East Side mansion beyond the reach of U.S. police officers as they investigated competing criminal allegations made about Kasenkina’s removal to and then from Reed Farm? Could HUAC subpoena a woman now apparently immured within the consulate if she wasn’t allowed out and they weren’t allowed in?25 By this stage, the initially tight-lipped State Department was also embroiled in the affair. Consul Lomakin and Ambassador Panyushkin had leveled serious allegations of criminal malfeasance against U.S. state agencies, taking their lead from the Soviet foreign minister, who delivered a “vigorously worded protest” to U.S. ambassador Walter Bedell Smith in Moscow. Summoning the American at midnight, the “usually coldly self-possessed” Molotov appeared incoherent with rage—the only time Smith ever saw him “really flustered,” stuttering over a messily drafted protest note, his entire office in disarray.26 Meanwhile in New York, a Supreme Court judge approved a habeas corpus writ sought by Common Cause, Inc., requiring Lomakin to produce Kasenkina in court.27 The teacher would then have “the chance to be free if she really wants to be,” explained Christopher Emmet, its chairman.28

Thus was the scene set for the climactic events of August 12 that left Kasenkina suffering fractures to her femur, patella, and lumbar vertebrae, a broken pelvis, multiple contusions, and traumatic shock.29 While she recovered in hospital—every fluctuation of her temperature, blood transfusions, and surgical procedures attentively monitored by the press—U.S. and Soviet officials waged war over her future, simultaneously disputing the motives behind, and meaning of, her leap.

Had Kasenkina leapt rather than tumbled? Did her action represent a bid for freedom or for death? Having gained entry to the consulate, New York police officers searched for “a suicide note or any other evidence that she had intended to destroy herself.”30 Or had she, perhaps, been pushed? Six months earlier, the ousted Czech foreign minister Jan Masaryk had fallen to his death from an open window in Prague. U.S. news media reported his death “in mysterious circumstances” as a wake-up call to Americans who still harbored fraternal sentiments toward “Uncle Joe.” Whether Czech (or Soviet) communists had actually delivered the coup de grâce or whether their coup d’état had simply extinguished Masaryk’s will to live, his fatal fall struck many observers as the result of Soviet propulsion. “It was the communists who killed him,” the popular travel writer John Gunther pronounced, “for his death was murder—even if a suicide.”31 In Kasenkina’s case, while foul play could not be ruled out, it seemed unlikely that consular staff would
choose such an unreliable method of ridding themselves of so very public a prob-
lem as the errant schoolteacher.

Over the next few days, Soviet sources produced several explanations for the
teacher’s misadventure. According to Pravda, Kasenkina had fallen by accident
through an open window, disoriented by her traumatic weeklong abduction at Reed
Farm.32 Lomakin’s version, however, held that she had jumped in suicidal despair—
terrified of the gathering crowd outside the consulate, whom she took to be a mob
of White Russians. (“It looks as if they are coming to get me,” Kasenkina cried be-
fore “losing control of herself,” Vice-Consul Chepurnykh related.) In a precarious
emotional state, she had heard a radio broadcast announce HUAC’s intention to
serve her a subpoena and had assumed her enemies were now determined to brand
her a spy. No wonder the poor woman decided to put an end to her miseries rather
than face framed-up charges.33

These explanations—unintentional accident, intended suicide, or bungled as-
sassination—found little favor among American commentators, especially since
Kasenkina herself was quickly reported as confirming that her aim had been to es-
cape Soviet control. A few hours after her leap, when consular personnel demanded
access to her hospital bedside, the patient emphatically protested. She would see
no one from the consulate. Accepting only anticommunist visitors, Kasenkina ap-
parently told one such confidante, Vladimir Zenzinov: “I was like a bird in a cage.
I had to get out.”34 A gift for less inventive cartoonists, this cliché seemed to clinch
the matter. “As soon as she was able to talk, Oksana Kasenkina knocked all the So-
viet protests into a cocked hat,” declared Time magazine.35 “Even in the most fan-
ciful tales of crime and adventure there is no example of a person jumping out of
a window and breaking his bones in order to get free from his rescuers,” a sardonic
columnist noted in the liberal Catholic weekly Commonweal. Whatever confusion
surrounded Kasenkina’s abortive flight to Reed Farm, “no sane person could be-
lieve” the Russian version any longer.36

Only the Soviets refused to accept Kasenkina’s word as final. How could any-
one determine the true sentiments of a critically injured woman, still barely con-
scious and in great pain, with White Russians and Russian-speaking police officers
serving round-the-clock duty as the invalid’s mouthpiece, minder, and puppet mas-
ter? consular officials inquired. They emphatically denied press reports that Kasen-
kina had dispatched Vice-Consul Chepurnykh from her hospital bed with the
decisive rejoinder, “You kept me a prisoner. You would not let me go.”37 On this
occasion, as on others, her Russian had been maliciously mistranslated into En-
glish by Detective William Dyczko, whose deceptions formed part of a larger plot
to deny Soviet consular personnel their right to extend protection over a fellow cit-
izen. With a full-fledged intergovernmental crisis now well advanced, Soviet
protests proliferated: against FBI connivance in criminal acts; police violations of
consular extraterritoriality; and obstruction of consular access to a “citizenship” who,
they insisted, enjoyed no right to repudiate her state’s “protection.” In short order, Kasenkina must be returned to Soviet custody, along with the Samarins.  

In response, the State Department let it be known that the New York Police Department was investigating criminal charges against consular personnel for detaining Kasenkina. No charges were in fact pressed, but Washington’s response to Soviet protests was categorical. President Truman himself intimated that Kasenkina would be granted asylum. A decisive rebuke to the Soviets, this announcement did not, however, bring the saga to an end. With all the righteous indignation of the unjustly accused, the State Department lambasted Lomakin for having “deliberately designed to mislead the American public in regard to a serious charge involving the United States Government,” namely, the preposterous accusation of FBI participation in Kasenkina’s “kidnapping.” On August 19, Undersecretary of State Lovett requested that Truman revoke the exequatur issued to Lomakin. The consul general would be obliged to leave the United States “within a reasonable time.”

This step caused quite a stir. “More extraordinary than the brusqueness of the note’s language was its request—tantamount to an expulsion order—that Lomakin be recalled by his government,” editorialized Newsweek. Since recognizing the USSR in 1933, Washington had never expelled a Soviet representative. Moscow responded by upping the ante, announcing the imminent closure of its two consulates in New York and San Francisco because “circumstances in the United States [did] not permit proper carrying out of consular functions.” Diplomatic convention dictated that American representatives in turn quit the U.S. consulate in Vladivostok, while negotiations over a proposed second facility at Leningrad came to an abrupt halt. By the time State Department officials declared the case shut on September 19, consular relations between the two states had been completely severed—a development that press commentators greeted with enthusiasm if not outright exultation. Kasenkina would stay, and Lomakin had to go. “Good Reddance,” crowed Jack Tarver in the Atlanta Constitution. Alone the New Republic rued the “enormous harm to Soviet-American relations” wrought by l’affaire Kasenkina.

UNHAPPY RETURNS: THE POLITICS OF FORCED REPATRIATION

The Kasenkina episode gave every appearance of uniqueness, with a plot “so lurid that a good professional cloak and dagger writer would be obliged to tone it down to make it even faintly credible.” Yet as several contemporaries pointed out, this drama was less novel than its idiosyncratic elements implied. Although the schoolteacher drew Americans’ attention to communist “captive taking”—their furious reluctance to let even a single subject go—she was scarcely the first Soviet citizen to balk at the prospect of returning home. Viewed from a wider angle, Kasenkina
was one among thousands of *nyevozvrashchentzi* (nonreturners). According to the influential columnists Joseph and Stewart Alsop, the story in August 1948 was Soviet citizens’ wholesale rejection of their state, not Kasenkina’s singular exit strategy. That there existed “in the western zones of Germany and Austria alone, some hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens who have obeyed precisely the same impulse as moved Mme. Kosenkina to her desperate expedient” formed the consular melodrama’s “real meaning.” Choosing the “half-life of fugitives or displaced persons,” these individuals were united by “one desire—to stay out of the Soviet Union.” Their desperation and their number suggested something far more significant about the “deep inner weakness of the Soviet state”—exposed by this mass exodus as a “ghastly and tragic failure”—than one cause célèbre possibly could.44

Of these nonreturners, the majority were Soviet citizens displaced during the war, or nationals of the Baltic states—in invaded by the Red Army in 1939—over whom Moscow contentiously claimed sovereignty.45 Some *nyevozvrashchentzi* had been shunted west during the war as forced labor for Germany and its new eastern empire. (By January 1945, the Third Reich alone contained an estimated 2.75 million involuntary *Ostarbeiter*.)46 Others had been German prisoners of war, Red Army personnel reluctant to return home following Hitler’s collapse.47 A third sizable group comprised soldiers captured in German uniforms by British and U.S. forces but subsequently revealed as Soviet citizens—whether willing volunteers for the “Russian Liberation Army” loosely grouped around General Andrei Vlasov or coerced conscripts for the Wehrmacht, prepared to take up arms on their captors’ behalf rather than enter German POW camps from which a high proportion never returned.48 Then there were those who had fled west as German troops retreated from Soviet soil, fearing punishment for collaboration or simply seizing an opportunity to escape. Altogether, displaced Soviet citizens in mid-1945 numbered approximately five and a half million, of whom between two hundred thousand and one million resisted repatriation.49

This mass of Soviet DPs had been supplemented by a smaller, but nevertheless sizable, number of postwar refugees. Primarily these comprised Soviet military and civilian personnel stationed in the occupation zones of Germany and Austria—dispatched west to oversee the “Sovietization” of east/central Europe. How many had managed to escape wasn’t easy to tally, given the covert circumstances under which such individuals fled and then struggled to reinvent their identities, but the Alsops estimated the total somewhere between five thousand and twenty thousand.

By 1948, displacement, repatriation, and defection had become thoroughly vexed issues in the relationship between Washington and Moscow—both a symptom and a source of the wartime alliance’s disintegration. That the politics of mobility would come to be so divisive was not obvious during the war itself. Anticipating a massive postwar refugee problem, the Allies agreed to deal with it by the simplest expedient possible: returning the displaced home. The western allies’ concurrence on
this principle was to be expected. Ever since an international refugee regime emerged in the wake of World War I, the principle of repatriation has underpinned the operations of international relief organizations—a reflection of states’ tendency to regard population in proprietary terms. When the Allies established the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in 1943, repatriation duly formed its core responsibility. Similarly, wartime discussions between Wash-
ington, London, and Moscow over future arrangements for POWs released from German captivity, while fraught with evasions, rested on an understanding that all parties would expedite the return of one another’s prisoners and refugees.

These ad hoc agreements took more solid shape at the Yalta conference of February 1945, where U.S. and Soviet military representatives signed a bilateral agreement on the reciprocal repatriation of personnel. Throughout the cold war, detractors of FDR and Truman strove to make “Yalta” a dirty word akin to “Munich”—shorthand for appeasement, if not a synonym for treason. But however repugnant these critics found the forced return of reluctant Soviet citizens, the “pawns of Yalta” in Mark Elliott’s phrase, the principle of involuntary repatriation did not represent a departure from precedent. The Geneva Conventions of 1929 contained no provision for former prisoners of war to choose their postwar destinations or to repudiate their citizenship while encamped. When hostilities ceased, prisoners were to be exchanged—returned, as it were, to sender.

What looked straightforward on paper proved extremely difficult to effect in practice. Not only was the sheer scale of displacement overwhelming, but the meaning and location of “home” had become moot for hundreds of thousands of mobile individuals as borders shifted, regimes were reconstituted, and people moved and resettled in unprecedented numbers. Under these conditions, the idea of returning home carried a hollow ring of irony. For many, the slim possibility of finding a house still standing, property intact, a familiar community, and a welcoming state was outweighed by the probability of discovering everything destroyed, looted, or appropriated, an alien set of neighbors, and scant chance of redress from an unsympathetic regime. No wonder, then, that many DP’s preferred the “half-life” of refugees, irrespective of dismal camp conditions and dim prospects for resettlement. For Soviet troops who had fallen into German hands repatriation assumed an even bleaker aspect, since the Stalinist state treated prisoners of war as traitors—the fact of capture proving a soldier’s insufficient dedication to the motherland. Decree Number 270 of 1942 declared “a prisoner captured alive by the enemy ipso facto a traitor.” “Liberation” from captivity was likely to mean the rapid exchange of one camp regime for another, with most Red Army returnees “now either dead or in the slave camps in Central Asia or Siberia or . . . the dread Kolyma gold mines,” as the Alsops noted in 1948. Vividly aware of these lethal possibilities, former prisoners were among the most obdurate nonreturners.

Why hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens would resist repatriation is readily understood; and resist they strenuously did. In September 1945, Robert Murphy (U.S. political advisor for Germany) cabled Secretary of State Byrnes to alert him to what respecting the Yalta agreement entailed in practice: “In applying the policy of forcible repatriation there has been a number of unpleasant incidents involving violence such as the forcible seizure by our troops of 100 Russians at a church service resulting in serious injuries on both sides. A considerable number
of suicides by Russians . . . apparently are also taking place.” In view of cold war Washington’s subsequent encouragement of flight from the eastern bloc, what is puzzling is the degree and duration of U.S. cooperation with Soviet authorities in facilitating the return of its fugitive population—at gunpoint if necessary.

During the Kasenkina episode, Washington’s role in repatriating reluctant Soviet citizens was rarely mentioned, and certainly not by government officials. In August 1948 the president represented the right of asylum as a fixed point in U.S. policy. Asked if “the same right of asylum in the United States, promised to the teachers, would apply to other Soviet citizens in similar circumstances,” Truman replied that “this right has always applied in such cases.” His assertion was disingenuous. Asylum—a right of states to adjudicate, not an automatic entitlement of stateless refugees—had figured nowhere in wartime intergovernmental agreements on repatriation. Indeed, the State Department treated with considerable wariness individuals such as Victor Kravchenko, a member of the Soviet Purchasing Commission in Washington, D.C., who defected in 1944. Some U.S. officials even urged that he be returned to Moscow to face court-martial as a deserter. While a powerful set of allies lobbied hard on Kravchenko’s behalf to ensure that he was granted leave to remain, other disaffected Soviet citizens were less fortunate.

“Unpleasant incidents” pitting suicidal Soviets against American enforcers were not confined to Europe. One such episode occurred at Fort Dix, New Jersey, where a group of Soviet prisoners—men captured in German uniform—had been temporarily housed. In June 1945, they were scheduled to set sail from New York City, bound for the Soviet Union. But they had no intention of following their repatriation orders; on the eve of embarkation, the group of 154 men staged an insurrection in their barracks with the aim of provoking their guards to retaliate with lethal force. The plan failed. Three men hanged themselves from barracks’ rafters during the disturbance. Seven others sustained gunshot wounds from the American enlisted men under attack, who responded in the anticipated fashion with tear gas and bullets but not on the scale that an assisted mass suicide bid required. Two days later, the prisoners’ embarkation—presided over by two hundred armed soldiers and eighty military police with submachine guns—was abruptly halted at Pier 51 in lower Manhattan, while a crowd of three hundred looked on. But this dockside volte-face proved only a temporary suspension, not a reprieve. On August 9, Secretary of State Byrnes confirmed that “under commitments made at the Crimea Conference [Yalta], the United States Government undertakes to return to the Soviet Union all Soviet citizens.” On August 31, the group was again marched on board—or, if some reports are to be believed, herded aboard under heavy sedation.

This episode failed to attract more than glancing press attention. Perhaps empathy for these reluctant repatriates required more effort than most newspaper editors wished to make or believed their readers willing to expend. The men had, after
all, been captured in German uniforms. Was Washington beholden to dispatch them to the Soviet Union, honoring Moscow’s right to punish its own war criminals and collaborators? Needless to say, this represented the Kremlin’s position. International prisoner-of-war conventions pointed in a different direction, however. Since the Geneva Convention of 1929 takes citizenship to correspond with the uniform worn at the moment of capture, the Fort Dix prisoners argued that Washington was obliged to treat the men as German POWs. Critics of U.S. repatriation policy argued that Truman’s administration should have respected the 1929 convention. But in mid-1945, although the Fort Dix case divided opinion in Washington, the dilemmas were resolved in favor of conciliating the Soviets.

As the discrepancy between the events of June 1945 and August 1948 makes clear, Washington’s position on matters of repatriation shifted considerably over the course of three years. No one moment marks a decisive reversal. Nor, as chapter 2 details, did the extension of asylum to Kasenkina and the Samarins herald a new era in which all Soviet nonreturners, defectors, and DPs were warmly embraced by the United States. Even as Truman made this announcement, Congress rejected a Displaced Persons Act that would have admitted more eastern bloc refugees into the United States.

If Washington’s reorientation was fitful, repatriation nevertheless played a significant role in souring relations between Moscow and Washington after the initial incentive for cooperation dissolved. In 1945, U.S. authorities wanted to expedite the return of perhaps as many as twenty-eight thousand American POWs from areas under Red Army control, fearing that the Soviets would use these men as bargaining chips if Washington challenged Moscow’s dilatory pace and prevarications with any vigor or if U.S. officials reneged on their own commitment to reciprocity undertaken at Yalta. To prolong the ordeal of U.S. former prisoners—under conditions believed to be barbaric—was not something the administration could countenance lightly. “The Soviet attitude toward liberated American prisoners is the same as the Soviet attitude toward the countries they have liberated,” noted an aide to General John R. Deane (the Pentagon’s liaison to the Red Army). “Prisoners are spoils of war won by Soviet arms. They may be robbed, starved, and abused—and no one has the right to question such treatment.”

Once the majority of U.S. prisoners had come home, however, Washington showed less inclination to let Soviet behavior go unchallenged. By late 1945 it was evident that Moscow had no intention of relinquishing thousands of Axis POWs in the near future—or perhaps at all—though it continued to press for the immediate repatriation of Soviet citizens from western occupation zones. In addition, the USSR was replenishing this reservoir of expendable labor by forced population movements from various areas of eastern/central Europe and the Baltic states. U.S.-Soviet differences received an acrimonious airing at the foreign ministers’ conference of February 1947, where Generals Mark Clark and Fedov Gusev vehemently
disagreed over the “disposal” of four hundred thousand DPs and former POWs in Europe who continued to resist repatriation. Clark made public the U.S. military’s opposition to involuntary repatriation, claiming that force had never been mandated at Yalta. For their part, Soviet officials insisted that western Europe’s DP camps had become, with U.S. connivance, sites of anticommunist coercion. In squalid and disorienting conditions, “quislings and war criminals” psychologically browbeat camp inmates into resisting repatriation, spreading vicious lies about the treatment that would await them on return home and resorting to physical force when less crude forms of persuasion failed—charges that anticipate those made by Lomakin about the “White Russians’” abuse of Kasenkina.

For Moscow, the mass resistance of citizens to repatriation after the war, coupled with the attempt of thousands more to flee west after 1945, constituted a stain that no amount of patriotic propaganda could bleach. In the Alsops’ heightened language, “Defection is the most unthinkable of all the crimes that their slave-peoples can commit.” For Washington, opposition to forced repatriation became (however belatedly) an emblem of the free world’s commitment to individual rights—a position staked definitively by Truman during the Korean War armistice talks. But to burnish America’s image as a place of asylum required the effacement of its history of collaboration with Red Army repatriation teams. “If the American people and their representatives were agents of the Kremlin, they could scarcely have done more to deliver those refugees to the assassin and the slave master,” chided Life, noting that “quite a few went back tied up in ropes, delivered like African slaves in the blackbirding days.” If many Americans remained oblivious to their state’s role in pursuing fugitive Soviets, U.S. participation in forced repatriation was painfully apparent to discontented residents of Soviet-dominated Europe and the USSR. Granting asylum to Kasenkina offered an opportunity to make public, if very partial, amends: a signal that Washington now wished to encourage and reward defection.

DIPLOMATIC IMMUNITY
AND COMMUNIST CONTAGION

For opinion formers like the Alsops and the Time/Life group, the Kasenkina affair underscored the need for a more generous attitude toward the thousands of refugees in Europe who had escaped Soviet control and continued to risk death in order to flee west. Others extracted a quite different lesson, however, focusing not on what the schoolteacher represented but on what the presence of the Soviet consulate on East Sixty-first Street meant for U.S. security. Their response to this consular crisis draws attention to the constriction of diplomatic channels that occurred during the late 1940s: a strangulation symptomatic of the condition of persistent estrangement dubbed “cold war.”
As Anders Stephanson has noted, while use of that term became ubiquitous soon after Walter Lippmann popularized it in 1947, few paused—either then or later—to elucidate what constitutes a cold war. Were one to codify a definition, the cessation of “diplomatic dialogue, normal relations, probing negotiation, and resolution of issues of mutual interest” would loom large. “This is what made the cold war a cold war,” Stephanson asserts. But since a cold war was also, by definition, not a war proper, diplomatic relations between the antagonists were formally maintained. Even during the most fractious phases of this protracted confrontation, Washington continued to dispatch diplomats to Moscow and to receive the Soviet Union’s representatives. Embassies remained open, if not exactly for business as normal. As “contact zones” in and around which Soviets and Americans encountered one another more or less directly, embassies and consulates formed the staging ground for intimate and invasive cold war maneuvers. Diplomats—surveilled, restricted, and vilified by hostile host states and populations—also came to regard themselves as cold war captives, and the Kasenkina episode played an instrumental role in sharpening such perceptions.

Diplomacy doesn’t often excite high feeling. So long as relations remain cordial, the implications of assigning small portions of “national space” to foreign powers generally pass unremarked. But during the early cold war long-standing conventions governing diplomatic exchange suddenly appeared as unnatural as they were unwelcome to many Americans, with the Kasenkina affair focusing attention on processes—and persons—usually invisible to popular scrutiny. In particular, the imbroglio on East Sixty-first Street prompted a heated debate over the principle of extraterritoriality.

To many U.S. press commentators it now seemed remarkable, unconscionable even, that Washington would willingly surrender territory to Soviet control during what increasingly resembled a time of war. The “basic issue” under dispute in the Kasenkina case, editorialized the Washington Post, was “American sovereignty in America itself.” Soviet diplomats had abused extraterritoriality to transform small pockets of America into miniature police states (though the opulence of consular life in a thirty-three-room mansion rented from a niece of John D. Rockefeller did not pass unnoted either). From these impregnable centers, Moscow spun its web of espionage and subversion, infiltrating even the most sensitive inner sanctums of American government.

Conjuring Soviet subversion in unmistakably sexualized terms, conservative columnists played on fears of violation and contamination. To them it was all of a piece that Lomakin and his aides would imprison a helpless woman in the consulate while spies who masqueraded as diplomats surreptitiously penetrated American institutions. Both activities hinted at rape, a common metaphor for Soviet expansionism made literal by the Red Army’s marauding rampage across Europe. Kennan’s Long Telegram famously depicted the Kremlin exerting “insistent, un-
ceasing pressure for penetration” of foreign countries, while also “ravishing its own supine population.”74 And what the Soviets did to their own citizens they certainly wouldn’t hesitate to do to Americans. Soviet agents were thus understood as exploiting the convention of diplomatic immunity to spread the “contagion” of communism—a venereal condition whose unobserved symptoms threatened to ravage the American body politic. Yet far from engaging in precautionary prophylaxis, the U.S. government sanctioned an obvious deficiency in its quarantine arrangements, permitting the Soviet consulate to remain terra incognita. Such recklessness left America’s vital organs exposed. To these anticommunist opinion formers, the niceties of diplomatic reciprocity belonged to a vanished era of gentlemanly statecraft. From the Kasenkina episode they derived confirmation that accommodating Soviet diplomats was not just naive but dangerous—suicidal, even.

Press commentary on Lomakin reflected this hardening attitude. A trim, forty-four-year-old father of two with a playfully bantering manner, Lomakin appeared to defy the familiar Soviet stereotype—an oversized, vodka-soused buffoon of the kind invariably personified by Oscar Homolka on screen.75 But in assailing the “bandit-like morals of the American intelligence service,” he had overplayed his hand and “made an ass of himself.” In the characterization of the New York Daily Mirror, Lomakin was a “rough-and-tumble skullbuster” who should be sent packing. “If the State Department had any courage, it would have ruled promptly and emphatically that America will NOT countenance any cossack goon squads,” the Mirror editorialized. When Secretary of State Marshall moved to expel Lomakin, many columnists envisaged the bleak future that awaited a returning Soviet representative careless enough to have “misplaced” no less than three citizens in the United States. Few sympathized with the consul’s predicament, however. “If Comrade Lomakin should leap from a window I would not be greatly surprised,” observed Ralph McGill dryly in the Atlanta Constitution.76

That the Kremlin had badly bungled the case of the errant schoolteachers and would suffer the boomerang effects of this misjudgment was a theme repeated in press evaluations of the consular shutdowns. Since diplomatic representation functioned as cover for Soviet espionage activities, Moscow’s peevish announcement that it would not simply recall Lomakin but vacate its consular facilities in New York City and San Francisco amounted to a self-denying ordinance. In shutting these “two excellent listening posts,” the Soviets were curtailing their opportunities for spying, while the U.S. lost nothing but “an isolated consular outpost in Vladivostock.”77 Conservative columnists cheered the Soviets’ departure but pressed for more stringent quarantine measures. Approximately two thousand citizens of the USSR remained in America as holders of diplomatic passports. The United Nations’ location in Manhattan—a source of deep chagrin to many—furnished Moscow a permanent reason to maintain a large staff there, irrespective of the consular expulsions. For the Chicago Daily Tribune, the Kasenkina debacle
demonstrated the “utter folly of allowing the United Nations to set up its headquarters in the largest city and principal port of the United States.”

It would be bad enough if UN headquarters were in the Nevada desert, where it would be relatively difficult for a foreign power to set up an effective spy headquarters. UN is in New York City, where people can come and go relatively unnoticed.

It isn’t pleasant to think of what a well organized spy service might do to poison the New York City water supply, damage the docks, or wreck the bridges and tunnels, but those are dangers which were invited when UN was invited to set up housekeeping on Manhattan Island.78

Diplomat, spy, and “terrorist,” the Soviet official appeared insidiously protean. Yet to emphasize the danger posed to Americans by Soviet representatives was to minimize the vulnerability of diplomats—whether Soviets in the United States or Americans in the USSR—to spontaneous and orchestrated forms of retaliation. As relations between Washington and Moscow soured and human traffic between East and West stalled, diplomats on both sides were left increasingly exposed to reprisal. Visible symbols of a suspect alien presence, subject to malign construction as enemy spies, they acted as magnets for popular protest. After June 1946, the New York Police Department stepped up its watch over the Soviet consulate in Manhattan—not because of the possible harm consular officials might do to unsuspecting New Yorkers but because an unknown American had marched into the lobby and assaulted the receptionist on duty. In the wake of the Kasenkina episode, a more vocal but less violent protester—a “full-blooded Sioux Indian and a war veteran living in Ridgewood, Queens”—appeared outside the consulate with a placard “informing Mr Lomakin that he would not be missed if he left the country,” as the New York Times euphemistically paraphrased the message.79

Bearing the brunt of popular frustrations and animosities, foreign representatives presented an easy target for official retaliatory moves. Insulted, ostracized, curbed, and harassed, diplomats found conditions more and more onerous during the early cold war. In Moscow, U.S. diplomats were certain that their premises were bugged and that local ancillary staff supplied further details that audio surveillance failed to pick up.80 Under these impossible conditions, diplomats took to conducting more sensitive conversations outdoors, though never without the shadowy accompaniment of Soviet minders. Between 1945 and Stalin’s death in 1953, “daily life in the embassy proceeded in an atmosphere of sullen isolation,” notes the historian David Mayers.81

It wasn’t ever thus, however. For a brief honeymoon period after the embassy opened in 1933, American diplomats were neither isolated nor sullen. The men who worked under Ambassador Bullitt, including Chip Bohlen, Charles Thayer, and George Kennan, relished their pioneering role on the eastern front of foreign affairs, embraced by surprisingly effusive Soviet hosts. “These Russians—they know how
to treat one like royalty even if they once forgot how to treat royalty itself,” quipped Thayer in a letter to his mother, “Muzzy.” During these halcyon days, champagne and vodka flowed freely, street urchins hailed “Comrade Bullitt” as he sped through Moscow’s streets, and Stalin had been known to kiss the new ambassador “full on the mouth.” A ballerina, “by far the greatest advertisement for Communism we have seen,” was locked in an embassy closet—with Bullitt, Bohlen, and Thayer fighting over the key. The diplomatic corps recognized that their pas de deux (or trois) with the corps de ballet provided the NKVD with an opportunity to practice undercover surveillance at its most literal. But since this form of espionage was so pleasurable, the intentions behind it so transparent, American diplomats continued to tangle with these lithe Mata Haris. When everyone tacitly acknowledged the terms of engagement, being spied on merely imparted an additional frisson to the fun and games. “What an Embassy!” Thayer exclaimed—with good reason.

Such exuberant high jinks could not, and did not, persist. After Sergei Kirov’s murder in December 1934, Stalin’s purges claimed several former embassy guests such as Nikolai Bukharin and Karl Radek. U.S. representatives confronted heavy-handed surveillance, coupled with tight limitations on their travel around and beyond Moscow—the radius narrowing still further in the immediate aftermath of the Kasenkina affair. Worse yet, the Kremlin drastically curtailed Americans’ interaction with Soviet citizens. According to Kennan, vestigial contact was relegated to a “furtive no man’s land of personal relations between the Soviet world and ours”—a formulation that implied closeted couplings of a very particular type. Men who had delighted in holding ballerinas hostage now conceived of themselves as prisoners of the Kremlin. It was a crushing reversal, starkly contrasting with the heady days of 1933–34 that Kennan recollected as the “highpoint of life . . . in comradeship, in gaiety, in intensity of experience.” Asked in September 1952 how he found life in Moscow, Kennan (then ambassador to the USSR) replied that it closely approximated his incarceration by the Nazis following Hitler’s declaration of war against the United States. “Had the Nazis permitted us to walk the streets without having the right to talk to any Germans,” Kennan informed the Berlin-based journalist, “that would be exactly how we have to live in Moscow today.”

ENTANGLING ALLIANCES: AFFAIRS OF STATE AND AFFAIRS OF THE HEART

Kennan’s impolitic outburst gave voice to mounting frustration over restrictions aimed at Americans in the Soviet Union, diplomats and “civilians” alike. The State Secrets Act of 1947 limited “even the possibility of spoken or written communications between Soviet citizens and foreign diplomats.” Social contact having been criminalized, U.S. diplomats’ circle shrank to approximately four hundred non-communist foreigners also resident in the USSR—and if social mingling was radia-
cally circumscribed, marriage became utterly taboo. On February 15, 1947, Moscow outlawed unions between foreigners and Soviet citizens. Preexisting marriages could scarcely be rescinded by an act of state, but the Soviet government did what it could to disrupt them, especially when couples attempted to depart the USSR. Exit visas became almost impossible to obtain. Although foreigners were generally permitted to leave, their Soviet spouses were often forced to remain behind.

During the late 1940s and 1950s, hundreds of husbands, wives, and children were separated in this way. One American journalist explained this “grotesque attempt to legislate affairs of the heart” as a move to “liquidate” actually existing marriages by “forcing husband and wife to live in different parts of the world,” between which movement was near impossible. Having sundered couples geographically, Soviet officials then sought to engineer their emotional estrangement. Separated spouses, waiting for endlessly deferred visas, were encouraged to reconsider the wisdom of their life choices: Did Soviet women really expect to find connubial bliss under capitalist conditions? Was it worth squandering prime years—and other matrimonial opportunities—in pursuit of a foreign husband who would surely prove himself unworthy before all the bureaucratic hurdles had been traversed?

In the West, the plight of these “Russian brides” animated much outrage, taking most pointed expression in April 1949 when Chile brought the Soviets’ “feudal conception of sovereignty” before the United Nations. By a margin of 39 to 6, the General Assembly deemed that the USSR had violated both the UN Charter and the recently proclaimed Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article II of which stated that “everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to that country.” But despite this condemnatory resolution, Eleanor Roosevelt cautioned against premature optimism on behalf of the 65 Russian husbands and 350 wives of U.S. citizens trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Her pessimism proved warranted. Moscow deflected UN criticism—the charge that it was, in effect, keeping its citizens captive—with counteraccusations of slavery. The Soviet representative Alexei Pavlov claimed that his state sought only to protect Russian women who had recklessly married foreigners from reduction to “slave status,” the condition of many Soviet wives with “dishpan hands” in Britain, France, and the United States. Inverting Washington’s cold war idiom, Moscow sought to expose the “free world,” the United States in particular, as the past and present locus of slavery—a rhetorical strategy that it deployed repeatedly, on this issue and others.

It seems unlikely that Moscow’s “kitchen slaves” theme resonated widely in the United States. The late 1940s may have seen a concerted redomestication of American women after the wartime expansion of opportunities, but no matter how constrained postwar housewives felt, nothing in popular representations of the USSR presented Soviet women’s lot as more enviable than the stultification of suburbia.
Typically, American media portrayed women in the USSR as groaning under a double burden of manual labor and housework: hence Eleanor Roosevelt’s caustic riposte to Soviet invocations of female slavery in the United States: “We might ask, by the way, who does the housework in the Soviet Union—the men?” Stripped of femininity by their conscription into the industrial economy yet scarcely emancipated from domestic drudgery, they craved—like Ernst Lubitsch’s celebrated creation, Ninotchka—cosmetics, glamorous gowns, high heels, silk stockings. Oksana Kasenkina herself confirmed this picture of deprivation. During her first public appearance in March 1949 she told journalists that while career girls were “generally single” with “mannish haircuts,” clothing, and mannerisms, Russian women compelled to work as “blacksmiths, miners, stevedores, lumberjacks and railroad track tenders” typically “aged fast and died prematurely.”

Far from instigating a reappraisal of gender roles, Soviet intransigence over the “plight of the stranded wives” provided another rallying point for sentimental anticommunism. After President Truman decried Moscow’s stance again in August 1951, Charles Bohlen (Kennan’s successor as U.S. ambassador) pressed the issue more forcefully with Foreign Minister Molotov in May 1953 to achieve the first significant breakthrough: a clutch of exit visas. With American press correspondents in Moscow among those personally affected by the Soviet Union’s “inflexible rigidity,” the question received steady media attention, bolstering representations of Soviet communism as both godless and heartless. That Stalin, of all men, presumed to set asunder unions that God had joined together was a particularly galling affront to Christian America.

Popular cultural treatments of this vexed issue did not scruple to attribute the Kremlin’s jealous possessiveness over its female citizens to the sexual rapacity of Stalin himself—nowhere more explicitly than in Never Let Me Go, an MGM romance starring Clark Gable as an American newspaperman in Moscow and Gene Tierney as Marya Lamarkina, the Russian ballerina bride he is forced to leave behind. Released in June 1953, just days after Bohlen had secured visas on behalf of the wives of four British and American press representatives in Moscow, Never Let Me Go boasted what Variety called a “topical provocative theme.”

Early scenes find the ever-ebullient Gable optimistic that a visa will prove forthcoming for the young bride he has just married in the U.S. Embassy under Abraham Lincoln’s benignly approving gaze. “You know how it is with red tape,” he reassures Marya, “and naturally the Reds have more and redder tape.” But it soon becomes clear that the Kremlin’s intransigence owes less to bureaucratic bungling than to concupiscent calculation. The Russians may be inscrutable—“put two and two together, make nine, add seven, divide by four and give up,” Gable’s character quips—but Moscow’s motives in blocking the exit of his adoring wife are thoroughly transparent. “The Russian bear is the only creature that can eat his honey
and have it,” a savvy colleague warns the American. And so it would seem—for the
Kremlin’s grizzliest bear clearly wants Gable’s honey.

The troublesome reporter is duly ejected from the country, leaving Marya to the
predatory designs of the Kremlin. At Stalin’s behest, a special command perform-
ance of Swan Lake is arranged in Tallin. But the Baltic resort, susceptible to an
American amphibious assault, proves a careless choice of locale in which to exer-
cise droit de seigneur over the corps de ballet. After sailing a small dinghy through
the English Channel into the North Sea and across the Baltic, outdrinking a bunch
of Russian sailors en route, and stealing the uniform of a Red Army medical corps
colonel in order to sneak into Tallin’s closely guarded theater (where, incidentally,
the imposter must administer emergency medical assistance to an ailing Soviet
officer along the way), Gable forestalls whatever private performance Stalin planned
to command from the lead swan. Needless to say, he pulls all this off “with the cool-
ness of a big boy taking candy away from kids”—or honey from a grizzly.101

Reprising the plot of King Vidor’s 1940 comedy Comrade X (in which Gable
smuggles Hedy Lamarr out of Russia), Never Let Me Go reworked familiar elements
of the captivity genre: imperiled womanhood rescued by Euro-American ingenuity
and derring-do from sexual degradation at the mauling hands of barbarians. Despite its strong whiff of implausibility, the movie earned plaudits from contem-
porary critics. “It is cheering to have the reassurance that Clark Gable is one fel-
lower, at least, who can still make the Soviet Union tough guys look like absolute mon-
keys—and does,” nodded Bosley Crowther in the New York Times. Silliness aside,
Never Let Me Go delivered a gratifying romantic payoff. Gable “winds up caress-
ing Miss Tierney in the dinghy while the seas moan, which is exactly as it should
be,” noted the New Yorker. More than that, the movie afforded the satisfaction of
seeing a lone American “rip through the Iron Curtain with all the breeziness of a
demonstrator showing off the very latest can opener in Gimbel’s basement”—all
the more welcome given the movie’s appearance at a fragile moment in negotia-
tions over the release of POWs in Korea, two months before the final armistice was
signed.102

Hollywood was not alone in recognizing the potential of captivity as a rich seam
to be mined. So did American diplomats, while growing ever more frustrated by
their inability to protect the rights of U.S. citizens in the Soviet Union, including
their right to depart. “With the exception of the period preceding the War of 1812,
perhaps never have so many American citizens been subjected to comparable dis-
criminations, threats, police interrogations, and administrative punishments,”
complained one official to his State Department superiors. “Never, unfortunately,
has a United States Embassy been quite so powerless to protect American citizens.”103
But impotence could be turned to advantage. What clearer or more universally af-
festing demonstration of Soviet monstrosity than the Kremlin’s calculated efforts
to part husbands from wives and sever children from parents? By never letting go, Moscow had snarled itself into a bind from which there could be no disentanglement without further injury. Whether it let dissatisfied residents out or continued to detain them, the Politburo could only damage the facade it had assiduously erected of a society so perfect that no one would wish to leave. American diplomats appraised their antagonists’ predicament with some satisfaction: “Either they must present the West with further propaganda opportunities of the nature created by the wives question or they must accept the consequences of discharging a flood of new Kravchenkos and Kasenkinas upon the free world.”

But for all the dynamite that entrapped wives and escaped schoolteachers provided Washington in detonating the Soviet “big lie,” Moscow mustered a forceful retaliatory strike. In fact, the Kremlin already possessed a Kasenkina figure of its own: thirty-three-year-old Annabelle Bucar, a former U.S. Embassy employee. In February 1948, she had resigned her post as an information officer with the U.S. Information Service, informing Ambassador Bedell Smith that she had no truck with America’s virulent anti-Sovietism, preferring to live among the Russian people, for whom she had developed a warm admiration. Naturally, the Soviet state was happy to assist in this aspiration; a defection from the U.S. Embassy represented a premium asset. Moreover, this particular turncoat was (in the estimation of her own scorned ambassador) “rather attractive.” With luminous eyes and blonde hair plaited around her crown, Bucar made an appealing advertisement for anti-Americanism. Soon she was reported to be lecturing Soviet factory workers on the superior conditions they enjoyed over their American counterparts. These public performances were supplemented by a series of “true confessions” in Pravda, followed in February 1949 by an incendiary volume entitled The Truth about American Diplomats, a slim tract bristling with large claims about the “anti-Soviet clique” in control of the U.S. Embassy—a gang of rapacious racketeers and warmongers.

In the United States, this defection received only glancing attention as a cautionary tale of romantic misadventure abroad. Bucar, it seemed, hadn’t just developed a comradely regard for the Soviet Union’s “fine people who are doing [their] utmost toward making the world a better place to live in.” She had surreptitiously married a Russian and given birth to his child. According to Ambassador Smith, popular, pretty Annabelle had fallen for the well-rehearsed charms of one Constantin Lapschin, “an operetta singer whom we knew best for his reputation as having courted, at one time or another, almost every unattached young foreign woman in Moscow.” Besotted, she had repudiated her citizenship and embassy connection as the sole way to persuade the unfeeling Soviet authorities to relax their prohibition against foreign marriages. If only America could have “exchanged” Miss Bucar for “one of the Russian wives of United States soldiers who wanted to come to the United States to join their husbands,” Smith joked with U.S. reporters.

Echoing the ambassador, Joseph B. Phillips in Newsweek wrote knowingly that
“Lapshin had been frequenting [sic] Americans in Moscow long before Miss Bucar came there.” In other words, Soviet intelligence had set a honey trap into which smitten Annabelle tumbled headlong. As for The Truth about American Diplomats, in Phillips’s judgment, “Part of the book came from Miss Bucar and most of it from File Cabinet ‘A’—American, Anti—‘ in the propaganda office.” Couched in this way, the sting of defection subsided, with further balm supplied by Bucar’s father, a fifty-one-year-old immigrant from Yugoslavia, who disowned his daughter just as decisively as she had rejected the family’s adoptive homeland. “I won’t let her come home,” he huffed, ignoring the single most important point in this drama—his daughter’s emphatic desire not to return. “I will not recognize her. I do not approve of her becoming a Russian and I do not approve of Russia.” At a loss to explain her “leaving the best country in the world to go to a country that isn’t good,” he speculated that “too much education” had inclined Annabelle to “high people and high society” when she “didn’t have the money for either.” What had the University of Pittsburgh done?

American readers thus encountered Bucar’s defection (if they scanned the small print at all) as a sorry saga of entrapment: a woman in love, cornered into renouncing her citizenship by Soviet machinations of the most emotionally manipulative sort. Her misfortune merited a brief entry in the expanding encyclopedia of Moscow’s misdeeds, alongside the tale of a young army cryptographer working in the U.S. Embassy, James McMillin. “As a protest against the anti-Soviet policies of the capitalists who presently rule America, I refuse to go back to America and am remaining in the Soviet Union,” McMillin wrote his father (a U.S. Army colonel) on May 15, 1948—the day his two-year tour of duty in Moscow was due to end. Behind this bold assertion, however, embassy officials suspected another defection by seduction. McMillin was known to have been consorting with the estranged wife of a U.S. sergeant, Mrs. Galina Dunaeva Biconish. Like Lapshin, she appeared suspiciously eager to fraternize with Americans at a time when such liaisons had been criminalized. “A most naïve, unskilled socially and in fact timid young man,” James had been “captivated by a more mature woman”; he was “an easy prey for a romantic attachment with no knowledge of the world to aid in his decision as to whether the girl might or might not be good or bad,” his aunt ventured in a long explanatory epistle to the State Department.

Neither defection received much attention in the domestic press. American officials successfully presented the stories of Bucar and McMillin in terms of Washington’s willingness to let citizens make individual choices about where and how they lived, however ill-considered. McMillin’s “desertion” was pitched to reporters as a “result not of any political ideas but of youthful, inexperienced infatuation and attachment to [a] Soviet married woman with whom he has secretly carried on relations for some time despite repeated warnings and specific instructions from his superiors.” With their criticisms of U.S. policy dismissed as mere ventriloquism,
McMillin and Bucar were, at most, objects of passing pity: victims of Soviet “seduction and exploitation.” It remained an article of faith that no one crossed the Iron Curtain from west to east unless ensnared. As a New York Times editorial noted during the Kasenkina episode, “The only exodus to the East, barring the cases of two American Embassy employes [sic] in Moscow trapped by amorous ties, is that of slave laborers deported from their home lands and sent to a slow death in the Siberian mines. If any proof were needed as to the rival merits of the Western way of life and the Communist ‘paradise,’ that contrast alone provides it.”

In the USSR, however, American diplomats could hardly deny Bucar’s impact, even as they distanced the woman from the scurrilous pronouncements issued in her name. “The book is obvious Soviet propaganda,” noted a ruffled embassy employee of The Truth about American Diplomats. “It is quite clear that the main sections were written or at least the content provided by someone other than Miss Bucar, since she was never in a position in the Embassy to know either the personalities or the general policy matters so freely discussed,” implying both that the claims were not all unfounded and that the embassy must have been “penetrated” at a high level. Whoever had written the book also knew how to command an audience. A first print run of ten thousand copies sold out so quickly that embassy employees—hardly well placed to elbow to the front of the line—failed to secure a copy. A second batch of one hundred thousand copies did not “appreciably relieve the situation.” “It was obvious that the average Soviet citizen, so starved for color and spice in his drab daily life, was finding The Truth about American Diplomats of exceptional interest,” one U.S. diplomat remarked. Having found a winning formula, the Soviets hastily repackaged Bucar’s “truths” as a stage play, announcing plans for a feature film, Goodbye America, in December 1950. Before long, the same spicy fare was warmed over in translation—with Hungarian-, English-, and Indian-language editions catering to anti-American appetites worldwide.

None of this augured well for America’s global reputation, nor did it make local conditions in the embassy any easier. On the contrary, the rising tide of popular anti-Americanism evident among Muscovites made the already parlous position of the embassy’s few remaining Russian staff well nigh untenable. Deprived of local translators, secretaries, caterers, and housekeepers, American officials contemplated a bleak existence under conditions akin to house arrest. Bohlen’s enraptured exclamation “What an Embassy!” now carried quite a different charge.

COLD WAR PROJECTIONS

While Annabelle Bucar achieved celebrity in the Soviet Union as an anti-American emissary, Oksana Kasenkina found herself transformed overnight into an anti-communist icon in the United States. After her valorous leap from the consulate she ceased to be the frowzy and befuddled schoolteacher of early press reports: a
“stubby little woman,” according to the Washington Post. Hitherto “dumpy,” “plump” and “matronly”—or “middly, brunette, stoute” (as described by Consul Lomakin)—she was now alluringly “diminutive.” When she received the press in the hospital on August 24, an interview that “brought about one of the greatest outpourings of newspapermen in recent years,” many remarked that she looked “much younger than her reported age of 52 years.” “Previous pictures did not do her justice,” gushed one photographer. Reporters who made the pilgrimage to her bedside found the schoolteacher not only beautified but beatified: “The sun shone through one of two windows upon the room’s white walls. A lithographed card, with a picture of Madonna and child, was propped upon a bureau, alongside the nail-polish bottle.” This air of sanctity was combined with something pleasingly familiar in her appearance. “If you saw her on a train and did not know that she is a Russian who can hardly speak English, you would say: ‘There goes my high school teacher from Lincoln, Neb., or Atlanta, Ga., or Burlington, Vt.’” The Soviet schoolteacher whose story was that “of all the women in the Soviet Union” could also pass as an American everywoman.
Any lingering doubt as to her motives—whether she intended to commit suicide or seek sanctuary in America—evaporated as columnists endowed the episode with a range of affirmative meanings. For some, Kasenkina stood as a universal emblem of humanity’s unquenchable desire for freedom, proof that “man” was not, after all, “a sorry sort of animal.” Imbuing her leap with redemptive power, several commentators cast her story as a Christian allegory. She had offered to die “that freedom might live,” rhapsodized Fulton Oursler in *Reader’s Digest*. Like Christ, Kasenkina was a resurrected martyr, even if it did take the injured schoolteacher three months to rise again.¹²³

For those of a more secular bent, the courageous chemistry teacher provided heartening evidence that *Homo sovieticus* retained an appetite for liberty despite three decades of communist tyranny. According to Victor Kravchenko, whose defection memoir *I Chose Freedom* enjoyed pride of place in the early cold war canon, Kasenkina’s “great political significance” lay in her demonstration “that ordinary people are now beginning to break with the Soviet regime.”¹²⁴ This too was the lesson extracted by Isaac Don Levine, the founder of *Plain Talk*, who was hired to “edit” a twenty-eight-part serialization of Kasenkina’s story run by the *New York Journal-American* between September 26 and October 23, 1948. “To come to know Oksana Kasenkina,” he advised readers, “is to renew one’s love for the gifted Russian people and one’s faith in their ability to regain freedom.” She supplied a reminder that “the warm people made familiar to the Western world by Tolstoy, Tchaikowsky and Chekhov, are still alive in Russia”—quite a different breed “from that of the Moltovs and Gromykos and Lomakins, the taskmasters of her people.”¹²⁵

If Kasenkina humanized “the Russians,” she also heightened animosity against “the Soviets.” In the opinion of many columnists, the consul’s refusal to let her go made tangible for U.S. audiences a political system as alien ideologically as it was distant geographically. “The enormity of the Russian tyranny over the human spirit is indeed difficult for free Americans to realize,” opined Kathryn Stone, prescribing Kasenkina’s memoir as an antidote to incomprehension.¹²⁶ That the Soviets had dared treat America like a “semi colonial” state in eastern Europe—and Americans like credulous dupes who would fall for preposterous tall tales—added insult to injury. “Mr. Lomakin appears to have wandered into the supreme folly of assuming that a great American city was as helpless against Soviet lies and Soviet coercions as some little capital of a pseudo-independent Communist nation east of the Iron Curtain,” carped an editorial in the *New York Times*, adopting an aggrieved tone not restricted to elite press commentary. Letters and telegrams addressed to President Truman on the Kasenkina issue pressed the White House to challenge and punish the Soviets more forcefully.¹²⁷

In the State Department’s estimation, no other issue had “so dramatically raised before the world the conflict between a way of life based on personal freedom and a political ideology based on State domination of individual rights.” U.S. news me-
dia understood the salience of Kasenkina’s action in similar terms. “Personalized in the decision of one human being” were “the great issues in the struggle between East and West”: a cold war parable tingling with life-or-death drama. Confronted with a decision between “slavery” and “freedom,” the schoolteacher had elected the latter, but hers was no abstract adjudication of the relative merits of rival political systems. Ultimately, Kasenkina’s choice represented less a “leap from Marxism”—as Newsweek captioned its photo-story of the events of August 12—than a choice for America.

At a time of intense effort to burnish U.S. credentials as leader of the “free world,” opinion formers eagerly appropriated Kasenkina’s leap. When, for example, Republican presidential candidate and New York governor Thomas E. Dewey proclaimed that “we are the last, best hope of earth. Neither barbed wire nor bayonet have been able to suppress the will of men and women to cross from tyranny to freedom,” he rhetorically summoned Kasenkina to bear witness. She “could not even understand the language of our country, but in her heart she came to understand America,” Dewey told a campaign rally in Des Moines in September 1948. Admiration for the United States, in other words, had galvanized her leap as much as revulsion against the Soviet Union. In the same vein, a Chicago Daily Tribune editorial informed readers that “the freedom she saw about her in America crystallized Mrs. Kasenkina’s dissatisfaction with her status as the helot of a slave state.”

Orotund diction aside, such assertions are striking for the assurance with which they characterized Kasenkina’s motives and aspirations. Depicting her leap as a move magnetized by “freedom”—in its uniquely American incarnation—these commentators stamped the “mystery of the kidnapped schoolteacher” as an uncomplicated allegory of slavery and redemption: a tale as old as Exodus, as American as the Mayflower. In cold war storytelling of this kind, the episode’s most puzzling aspects were resolved: Kasenkina had been “abducted” and incarcerated by Soviet consular staff, from whom she had escaped through the only route available—an open window—because she had been inspired by “the freedom she saw about her.” This was a gratifying notion, but it rested less on privileged insight into Kasenkina’s consciousness than on a determination to make muddled actions enunciate a clear and congenial message.

Deciphering how Kasenkina herself made sense of the events of August 1948 is no easy task. Repeatedly spoken for, she rarely made public statements without others’ mediation. Her “own story” as related first by the New York Journal-American and then a memoir, Leap to Freedom (1949), was ghosted by Isaac Don Levine, although his name appeared nowhere in a memoir that claimed to be set “down from the heart”: “For if the leap is meaningful, only the life behind it makes it so.” For the Hearst press, this massive front-page serialization afforded an opportunity to familiarize readers with a sweeping survey of the Soviet Union, from the Bolshevik revolution to the horrors of collectivization and the purges. With a husband lost to
the gulag, a daughter claimed by famine, and a son surrendered to the great patriotic war, Kasenkina’s family saga encompassed Soviet history’s grimmest chapters.

Narrated in the lunging style of sentimental anticommunism, *Leap to Freedom* offers an unreliable guide to its purported author’s state of mind in August 1948. Surely the “plucky woman who planned for years to gain the shelter of democracy” was considerably more complex than the one-dimensional heroine of anti-Soviet hagiography? An alternative, albeit inconclusive, interpretation arises from the one extant document seemingly written by Kasenkina herself: the letter she dispatched from Reed Farm to the Soviet consulate. This was the impassioned missive from which Lomakin read aloud at his August 7 press conference—a document later requested by the State Department to assist the criminal inquiry into Kasenkina’s alleged abduction and detention in the consulate.

Senior State Department personnel assumed that this letter had been either fabricated in its entirety or amended to support the Soviet version of events—suspicions bolstered by the willingness with which Lomakin handed over the document. Scenting imminent victory in this tug-of-war, Ernest Gross (the State Department’s legal adviser) and Chip Bohlen playfully envisioned Ambassador Panyushkin sitting up late into the night, feverishly practicing Kasenkina’s handwriting—a ruse that FBI handwriting specialists would soon rumble, they imagined. Exposed as fraudulent, the letter would affirm Soviet mendacity by demolishing Lomakin’s claim that the schoolteacher had *asked* to be retrieved from Reed Farm.133

Contrary to State Department expectations, however, graphologists found no discrepancies in the handwriting of various samples available to them. Kasenkina, it seemed, was the letter’s sole author.134 She insisted otherwise, yet when interviewed by detectives (on at least two different occasions soon after her leap) she proved reluctant or unable to establish where material had been inserted into her original text. Perhaps she had penned it in a state of such confusion that she retained no subsequent recollection of composing it. Or perhaps, still in shock when questioned, she was incapable of bringing that moment back into focus. Conceivably, though, Kasenkina may have wished to distance herself from a document that did less to clarify her intentions than to call her lucidity into question, casting doubt over constructions of her leap as a move “magnetized by freedom.” The letter certainly imparted no suggestion that its author was driven by an overwhelming desire to begin life over in the United States, borne aloft by her ardor for freedom and hatred of Soviet tyranny.135

Other than disparaging the “capitalistic system,” the author says nothing of America. Nor does she directly express an intention to defect. Formulaic expressions of love for “the fatherland” and hatred of “traitors” aside—“never in my life shall I go against the dictatorship of the working class”—the document is over-
whelmingly personal and confessional in tone, intimate and imploring. The writer presents herself as a soul in torment: a mother distraught by the unconfirmed supposition that her soldier son has perished; a devoted teacher “persecuted” by her colleagues, tormented by pupils taught to revile her. (“They threw nails, books, screwdrivers and penholders, and all kinds of objects at me. The thing that was dearest to me, the thing I lived by, was killed.”) For reasons unclear, she has been vilified as a thief. Her mind is in turmoil: “I was in despair, ready to commit suicide. . . . I was alone, in the silence of the grave.” Nothing is mentioned of a refusal to return to the Soviet Union. Her plea is for a sympathetic ear, a word of understanding from the consul general, who (she says) pushed her away: “I admire you infinitely as a person who is worthy of our fatherland. And I should have told you everything, but you would not receive me. I was crushed. You should have drawn closer to me and understood my state of mind.” The tone is that of a rejected lover, begging for reconsideration.

This anguished cri de coeur concludes with an entreaty that the consul fetch her from Reed Farm: “I implore you, I implore you once more, don’t let me perish here. I am without will-power.” Lomakin had not, then, misrepresented the overall sense of the letter when he read from it on August 7, though it contained no reference to her kidnapping by “white Russian bandits” as Soviet protest notes later alleged. Had Kasenkina’s dispatch been forged or strategically doctored, one would expect it to corroborate her abduction by reactionaries and FBI gangsters, while expressing a fervent desire to return to the USSR. Yet the letter contains no such material, and its tremulous register—suggestive of a woman perilously close to breakdown rather than a resolute patriot—would seem a curious choice for any Soviet forger. Given the peculiar tone and content, it appears more likely that Lomakin handed over a letter written by Kasenkina herself, convinced that it would resolve in his favor a central issue in the dispute. After all, the letter’s most unambiguous statement is its concluding plea that the consul retrieve its author from Reed Farm.

Much discussed while it remained in Soviet hands as the key to a mystifying affair, this document was never publicized once delivered into State Department keeping. Unsurprisingly, U.S. officials exhibited scant enthusiasm for making its contents known, despite legal advice that sanctioned its publication. What good would be served by releasing this opaque document to the press? Ideological investors in Kasenkina’s “daring spirit” had little use for inner conflict or messily human irresolution. Suggesting a woman in extremis, the letter disrupted a core element of the dominant narrative: the schoolteacher’s kidnapping by Lomakin.138 While it remained unclear why Kasenkina, having sought assistance in escaping Reed Farm, would then leap from the consulate window on August 12, the letter hinted at a suicidal state of mind. Asked by a police detective why she had jumped, some six hours
after the event, Kasenkina’s reply indicated a stronger desire for deliverance than for asylum: “I was considering my position and what would happen if I returned to the Soviet Union and I came to the conclusion that I would only have a bad life there and have a very bad situation and there was nothing else for me to do.”

Naturally, Kasenkina’s memoir presented her as a heroic freedom seeker, though it could hardly avoid some explanation of her faltering resolve. In *Leap for Freedom* the author confesses a desire to have the consul understand her break with “the soviet,” attributing the compulsion that led her to write a “silly and hysterical” letter from Reed Farm to the thrall still exercised over her by a Svengali-like Lomakin. But the memoir hinges less on August 12 as the moment of decision than an earlier epiphany that inspired the schoolteacher to plot her escape—a chain of events set in motion with a brisk injunction, “To the Roxy!”

*Iron Curtain, Silver Screen*

Attentive readers of Kasenkina’s memoir would immediately have appreciated the significance of this destination—for Manhattan’s Roxy Theater had also made headline news in 1948. On the night of May 11 it had been the scene of a violent clash between two thousand demonstrators and counterpicketers over the movie set to enjoy its theatrical premiere inside. Pro-Soviet demonstrators against a feature they billed as “Propaganda for World War III” jammed Seventh Avenue, while fifteen thousand bystanders crowded the sidewalks all the way to Times Square, many spilling across town as a Henry Wallace campaign rally in Madison Square Garden concluded. Police officers “swinging two-foot-long nightsticks like polo mallets” struggled to separate the placard-wielding “red hot crusaders”—“Wallaceites, Communists, fellow travelers and troubled innocents,” in *Time*’s partisan characterization—from their opposite numbers: members of the Catholic War Veterans, the American Legion, and Veterans of Foreign Wars who had been drinking in nearby taverns. Scuffles, punches, and a handful of arrests ensued as “picket signs were splintered, leaflets shredded, clothing ripped.”

The attraction that caused this “randan at the Roxy” was Twentieth Century-Fox’s *The Iron Curtain*. Hollywood’s “first shot in the ‘cold war,’” Darryl F. Zanuck’s ballyhooed pet project dramatized the high-profile defection of Igor Gouzenko in September 1945. A disillusioned twenty-six-year-old cipher clerk, “Eager Igor” had deserted his post at the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa, brandishing evidence of a transatlantic atomic spy ring. Filmed on location in Canada, *The Iron Curtain* depicted Gouzenko’s growing repugnance for his Soviet masters’ atomic acquisitiveness—“delight[ed] every time somebody slips them the dope that there’s such a thing as uranium,” noted the *New Yorker*’s skeptical critic. Impressed by North Americans’ hospitality, affluence, and godliness, Gouzenko (Dana Andrews) makes elaborate plans to defect with his pregnant wife (Gene Tier-
ney). After initial skepticism from the Canadian officials, whom he approaches with evidence daringly smuggled from embassy vaults, Gouzenko’s claims are finally taken seriously—just before the net of Soviet counterintelligence closes in.

Faulting this production for its paranoid outlook and exaggeratedly villainous Soviets, liberal critics castigated Zanuck for his attribution of malign intentions to the Kremlin, a contemporary intervention that could only aggravate East-West tensions. “I am old-fashioned enough to want my wars declared for me by the President, and not by a motion-picture company,” announced Robert Hatch in the New Republic.145 Naturally, though, the heroine of Leap to Freedom didn’t see it that way, enraptured by the heady sensation of watching her own fate foretold on the big screen:

For although I understood little of the dialogue I knew it was my story that was being told. Igor Gouzenko and I were one growing up in Russia; learning to fear the Soviets, to whom life meant nothing; getting to detest their lives, hypocrisy and lust for power; becoming oppressed in body and spirit; coming to the New World and passionately craving freedom—and daring to escape. Again I caught my breath as we were about to fail. Again I wept from anger and helplessness when the Canadian authorities, one after another, displayed an incredible indifference and lack of understanding. Then dawning comprehension; quick, desperate last-minute moves; and finally, wonderful, ecstatic freedom!146

Kasenkina’s story and Gouzenko’s did indeed have common elements. Having monopolized the headlines with their defections, both enjoyed considerable celebrity thereafter. Gouzenko, living under protection in Canada, garnered an impressive sum for the sale of his story to Cosmopolitan magazine and Twentieth Century-Fox. His memoir appeared in May 1948, opportunistically timed to coincide with release of The Iron Curtain. (If Kasenkina’s autobiography sounded remarkably similar, that perhaps owed something to their shared ghostwriter.) Five years later, Gouzenko followed it with a best-selling novel, Fall of a Titan, the screen rights to which he sold for $100,000.147 In similar fashion, Kasenkina’s “leap for freedom” was quickly bankrolled into a leap into the “high income bracket.” While still in the hospital, she hired an attorney to negotiate the sale of her story and earned $45,000 from its serialization—a sum that far outstripped the spontaneous public donations to a fund for her assistance. With her royalty check, Kasenkina settled her medical bills, buying a four-room apartment in Queens and spending $2,050 on a new Buick sedan. Soon her attorney playfully reported that his client was “such a good American that she got arrested for speeding the other day.”148 Financially secure, she had no use for any of the offers of accommodation that admirers around the country extended while she recuperated, including “marriage proposals from far and wide.” One horse breeder from Michigan even enclosed pictures of his horses as well as a likeness of himself—to no avail. Kasenkina declared herself “too old to marry again.”149
The consulate’s celebrated escapee clearly aroused sentimental anticommunism at its most amorous, continuing to receive between forty and fifty congratulatory letters a week months after August 1948. But she didn’t inspire only romantic projections. Quickly, she joined a growing number of witnesses—exiles from either the USSR or the party (if not both)—whose testimony on communism derived heightened credence from its claim to firsthand authority. In the inverted epistemology of the early cold war, to see was to disbelieve, a formula attested by a steady stream of memoirs written by those who having “kissed communism now, under the imprint of good old-fashioned capitalist publishers, wish to tell.” Of these, Whittaker Chambers’s blockbuster Witness (1952) cornered the most lucrative market, even if the author’s “descent into the inferno of totalitarianism” was made “tourist class,” without his ever venturing east of the Elbe. Chambers’s spiritual odyssey was by no means the sole exemplar of this genre, however. The memoirs of both Kravchenko and Gouzenko had earlier lingered on best-seller lists. And if the canonical apostates were predominantly male—Arthur Koestler, André Malraux, Ignacio Silone, Richard Wright—their company was expanded by former agents such as Elizabeth Bentley and Angela Calomiris. Both produced accounts of their underground lives that promised as much kissing as telling, accentuating thralldom to the party as “an intellectual and moral slavery that was far worse than any prison.”

Many of these “ex-communist anticommunists” made careers not only from their literary endeavors but by serving as expert witnesses before congressional committees. Not so Kasenkina. She did, however, perform a similar—if somewhat more ornamental—function for various anticommunist groups and gatherings that sought to derive luster from her celebrated leap. In March 1949, for example, Kasenkina appeared alongside Sidney Hook, Alexander Kerensky, Max Eastman, and others at the inaugural meeting of Americans for Intellectual Freedom, a gathering convened to counter the “Communist-controlled” Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace concurrently assembled at New York’s Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Eighteen months later, she spoke at a rally in Manhattan to observe “Freedom Sunday”—an event that formed part of a larger “Crusade for Freedom” aimed at mobilizing “the forces of truth to pierce the Iron Curtain and defeat the ‘Big Lie’ of Communism.” Still intermittently in the spotlight in 1951, Kasenkina (whose conversion to Catholicism had been widely reported) contributed an essay entitled “We Worship GOD Again” to an audacious issue of Collier’s that anticipated Russia’s “defeat and occupation, 1952–60” after a nuclear war won by the United States.

Hollywood also took notice of this unlikely celebrity whose melodramatic story was invariably narrated in cinematic terms. The studios may not have snapped up Leap to Freedom as they had Gouzenko’s The Iron Curtain, but in different ways Kasenkina made her mark, on screen and off. The “escapee”—a prototype she
did much to inaugurate—made a starring appearance in several Hollywood productions, often transmuted from widowed schoolteacher into willowy ballerina. MGM’s *The Red Danube* (1949) typified this genre. An overwrought treatment of forcible repatriation from the western zones of occupied Austria, it starred Janet Leigh as a displaced Russian ballerina relentlessly pursued by the Red Army. In no danger of being described as dumpy, poorly dressed, or excessively made up, the twenty-two-year-old Leigh appeared “disarmingly pathetic as the tormented ballerina,” the *New York Times*’s critic noted. But if *The Red Danube* improved on Kasenkina in the tragic character of Maria Bühlen, it also made a striking amendment to the novel on which its screenplay was based. In Bruce Marshall’s *Vespers in Vienna*, the dancer “shoots herself in the breast” as the Red Army closes in. In MGM’s movie, however, Maria regards “the freedom of an open window as preferable to a resumption of her dancing career under Russian sponsorship”—with fatal consequences.

Whether or not this plot change intentionally gestured toward Kasenkina, contemporary critics certainly noted the fluidity with which “actual events” inspired
cinematic scenarios and vice versa. Claiming inspiration from Hollywood’s dramatization of a true story, the Soviet schoolteacher had upped the ante for cultural producers. “What’s the use of paying 50 cents to see dull unimaginative movies or paying 25 cents to the lending library for silly stupid detective yarns in a country where you can have adventures like Mme. Kosenkina’s for nothing?” inquired a Washington Post editorial in August 1948.158

Hollywood was not to be outdone, however. Anticommunist thrillers like Sofia, a B-movie yarn of American agents venturing behind the curtain to kidnap a team of Russian atomic scientists, rose to the challenge. Patently ludicrous, its plot was retrieved from outright disbelief by the improbable melodrama of its real-world referents. “With Soviet captives hopping out of consulate windows and testimony of derring-do unfolding in Washington as the current headliners, Sofia is promoted from the implausible to a strictly exploitable film, synchronized to the news of the day,” Variety observed.159 At least one director attributed to Kasenkina a more personal epiphany. Edward Dmytryk, imprisoned for some months as one of the recalcitrant Hollywood Ten, told a Saturday Evening Post reporter that the schoolteacher’s leap had sparked a stirring of conscience that heralded the onset of his political maturity.160

Everyone, it seemed, wanted to congratulate, copy, or court Kasenkina—eastern bloc dissidents, New York intellectuals, Michigan horse breeders, and Hollywood directors alike. In tumbling from the consulate, she became a beacon for others to follow, boldly advertising the attractions of life in the United States while tearing a “sudden rent in the Iron Curtain.” Time attributed the anti-Soviet consensus that coalesced in 1948 largely to Kasenkina’s bold act, which hastened the “slow swelling of resolve in many hearts”—“at the corner store and the village market, at the tea table and the union meeting.” Yet the woman who turned 1948 into a “year of resolution” appeared prone to crippling, and ultimately unfathomable, indecision.161 She may have made the cold war “Something That People Can Understand,” but what propelled her through the third floor window of East Sixty-first Street remains as mysterious now as it was on August 12, 1948.