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## The Effects of Highly-charged, Civilian-centered Events on American Cold War Policy and the Soviet-American Relationship Between 1945-1950

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# The Effects of Highly-charged, Civilian-centered Events on American Cold War Policy and the Soviet-American Relationship Between 1945-1950

Dedicated to my late grandfather, Peter Hoadley Sellers. Nonno, I thought about you often and about the stories from this event which you occasionally told.

By Peter J. Jarka-Sellers

Advisor: Professor Nadya Nedelsky, Macalester International Studies Department

May 5th, 2020

## Acknowledgements:

There are many people without whom this project would not have taken place and to whom I am indebted and very grateful. First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Nadya Nedelsky. She initially encouraged me to take this project on. As I wrote and conducted my research, her frank advice was very helpful and made my work better. I am grateful for the hours that she spent talking to me as well as for the coffee in her office. Furthermore, when I was quite behind on this project and dealing with some personal difficulties, her patience and unwavering belief in me and this project were vital and deeply appreciated.

I would like to also thank Professors Andrew Latham and James von Geldern who joined Professor Nedelsky on my honors committee. They too encouraged me to take this project on and offered advice during my research which improved this project. I am also grateful to Professor Latham for his help in getting research funding from the Macalester Political Science Department and to the Department for helping fund my research.

I owe further thanks to Aaron Albertson, Connie Karlen, and Dave Collins of the Macalester Library who all assisted my research, especially Aaron with whom I met on a number of occasions. Thank you also to Kevin Morrow who pursued the results of my FOIA request and searched for further materials at the National Archives.

When I first became interested in my grandfather's and Warren (Jim) Oelsner's experience a few years ago, I made contact with Jim. He generously sent me the account he wrote of his experience, which transformed this project and my research, as well as newspaper articles that his family had collected. I am deeply grateful to him for this as well as for his encouragement that I pursue some project related to his experience.

On a different note, I want to thank my friends, family, and others who have encouraged and supported me throughout this project and who gratifyingly expressed interest in my work. I especially want to thank my mom and dad. They not only helped me realize that I wanted to take this project on, but also were constant sources of advice and support, especially when I was the busiest and most stressed. I am so grateful to them for always being a call away to talk about how the project and how it was going.

## Abstract:

This honors thesis examines the role of highly charged, highly covered, and civilian-centered international events in the early Cold War's development (1945-50). It does this through the case study of American students Peter Sellers and Warren Oelsner, who spent two months in Soviet military captivity in East Germany in 1949. Their case received substantial media coverage and the US government eventually obtained their release. By looking at a combination of government documents, newspaper articles, an account written by Oelsner, and scholarship on public and elite opinion, I find that although no single event of this magnitude had a significant effect on the early Cold War, the evidence suggests that repeated over time, these events had a meaningful yet modest influence, as American elites developed increasingly less favorable views of the Soviet Union, seeing it as an existential threat and the American public increasingly viewed it as a cruel and dangerous adversary.

## Table of Contents:

Acknowledgements	2
Abstract	3
Table of Contents	4
Chapter 1: Introduction	5
Chapter 2: Literature Review	13
Chapter 3: The State of US-Soviet Relations	21
Chapter 4: The Story of the Sellers-Oelsner Case	29
Chapter 5: The Coverage of their Case in the Media	39
Chapter 6: The Influence of Events and their Coverage on Public and Elite Opinion	43
Chapter 7: The Influence of Highly Charged, Personal Events on the Cold War	56
Chapter 8: Conclusion	65
References	70

## Chapter 1, Introduction:

During the summer of 1949, American college students Peter Sellers and Warren Oelsner took a bike trip in Europe. The departure of their ship back to the United States from Hamburg was delayed and they had a few extra days. They decided to venture across the nearby border into East Germany out of curiosity. They were ignorant of the repercussions of unauthorized travel and taking pictures. They were arrested by East German police who immediately transferred them to Soviet soldiers. They remained in Soviet military custody for two months before the US government was able to obtain their release. Their imprisonment and the release negotiations were a high priority in government and received substantial media coverage in the US.

I came to this case because Peter Sellers, one of the two young Americans held by Soviet forces in Germany, is my late grandfather. His and Oelsner's case raised two primary historical and academic questions for me. One question, which I explore in this honors thesis, is what role did the Sellers-Oelsner case, together with other similar cases, play in the development of the Cold War during its early years (1945-50)? Specifically, did highly charged, highly covered, and relatively more civilian-centered, less geopolitical events contribute to the Cold War's trajectory and development during those years? Insofar as they did, what were the mechanisms behind their contribution and how large a contribution was it? Drawing on a variety of primary sources, I reconstructed the events of the Sellers-Oelsner case and through looking at the case's effects on public and elite opinion, I conclude if combined with other similar cases, it would have had a modest yet significant impact on the early Cold War's development. The other question that the case raised was what the dynamics of the negotiations to free Sellers and Oelsner were and what can these negotiations tell us about hostage release negotiations between states more broadly, including why these state-state hostage situations occur so rarely. I have studied and written about this question separately.

When considering the Cold War, the question arises: how did two allied countries become such ardent adversaries in a mere five years and what caused that enmity? While historians have extensively studied and reached relative consensus about the major

geopolitical causes of the Cold War, namely that the US and the Soviet Union grew to distrust and fear each other following their cooperation in World War II, they have not fully studied some of the other less significant but still impactful factors, such as the role of events like the Sellers-Oelsner case. Once enmity between the US and USSR was established, it fed itself and sustained the conflict. The Sellers-Oelsner case was dealt with by foreign policy elites and covered by the general media. It therefore was in a position to shape both public and elite opinion and thereby to affect how US foreign was conducted. I will examine how events impact both public and elite opinion and then how these sets of opinion affect the foreign policy and international relations.

The causal link between any particular event such as the Sellers-Oelsner case and the development of the Cold War is not direct and no one relatively small event on its own would have had an impact on the larger conflict's development. Therefore, I use the Sellers-Oelsner case to seek to understand the likely, qualitative effects of this type of event on the Cold War's development. Then, based on the frequent repetition of these events over a longer period of time, I assess what their much more significant cumulative effects would have been. That analysis serves to demonstrate the likely composite effects of the Sellers-Oelsner case and similar cases on the early development of the Cold War. Before I conduct this analysis, I draw extensively on primary sources from the Sellers-Oelsner case to understand exactly what took place and how it was covered by the media. I also draw on general histories of the Cold War and its development to situate the Sellers-Oelsner case in the Cold War context. To assess the case's qualitative effect on the Cold War's development, I then draw heavily on work concerning the relevant dynamics to create a sequence of effects that would link these events to concrete foreign policy decisions. These dynamics are the formation of public and elite foreign policy opinion, the role of the idea of an "enemy" in US foreign policy, the biases of American media coverage of the Soviet Union, the effects of media coverage on public opinion, and the connection between public opinion and foreign policy decisions.

When beginning my research, I found that Cathal Nolan, an eminent scholar of military, international relations, and US foreign policy history had already conducted similar research in the last years of the Cold War. He examined how three events between

the end of WWII and 1950, which related to the treatment of American civilians and POWs, affected elite American opinion and by extension, the early years of the Cold War. He found that the perceived (and actual) maltreatment of Americans in such cases did play a significant role in initially souring elite opinion of the Soviet Union and then hardening elite opinion against it, an effect which he notes would have made the Cold War more intense. One of my primary endeavors, therefore, is to seek to either confirm or question his conclusions. Now, almost thirty years after the end of the Cold War with greater access to previously classified documents and the ability to examine Cold War history without many of the biases which might have influenced such research in 1990, insofar as I find the same effects as Nolan, his conclusions are rendered even more robust. The Sellers-Oelsner case is similar enough to Nolan's case studies that observing the same results confirms his findings. His and my case studies are different enough, however, that similar findings strengthen his conclusions and show that there are many more cases that feed the dynamics he observed, such that the cumulative effects of these cases have to have been substantial. My research does confirm his findings. His research, therefore, while it neither prompted me to ask these questions nor enabled my answering them, is central to my work and enhances greatly the significance of my findings just as mine does his.

Despite the similar aims and topics of my work and Nolan's, our research also differs in a number of respects. Methodologically, Nolan draws heavily on general histories of the Cold War to examine his case studies and explore the views expressed by elite policy makers about his cases. Relatively speaking, I rely less on these types of sources and draw more on novel primary sources relating to my case study such as newspaper articles, Oelsner's account of the case, and state department documents. Furthermore, I diverge from Nolan in that instead of focusing predominantly on elite opinion and its formation, I also examine in detail the formation of public opinion and the media coverage on which it was largely based. Thus, not only do I examine broader trends in public opinion, but I examine the actual media coverage of the Sellers-Oelsner case. In so doing I discuss questions such as the effects of public opinion on foreign policy elites and thus by extension its effects on the trajectory of the Cold War, questions



Nolan does not discuss. Therefore, my work considers another dimension of the question of how events like the ones we studied affected policy makers and the Cold war.

Assessing the connection between specific historical events and the trajectory of the Cold War requires examining what the effects of these events were on the opinions of two groups of people, namely the public and political, particularly foreign policy, elites. I first examine how the opinions of each group are formed and then examine how the opinions of each group affect the formulation of policy which in turn affected the Cold War's trajectory. I examine how elite opinion relies on general schematic understandings of other countries and geopolitical issues, and how these schemas that elites build are affected by events and thus lead to support for particular policies and policy inclinations. To understand public opinion, I examine how it is formed, the role of the media in that formation, and the nature of media coverage of the Soviet Union at the time. I then present the scholarly consensus around how public opinion impacts the making of foreign policy by serving to support certain foreign policy approaches and constrain others. Through understanding how the American public viewed the Soviet Union, what the public wanted to see from its leaders, and what it would punish them for, it is possible to draw well founded conclusions about how events that affected public opinion affected foreign policy beyond any direct effects those events had on elite opinion.

I find the question of how event-fueled public and elite opinion influenced the Cold War to be of special interest and importance for several reasons. The first reason is purely historical. It helps create an even deeper understanding of the particular events and dynamics which affected the Cold War's development. The second reason is that the Cold War, which defined the latter half of the 20th century, continues, and will continue for a long time, to inform contemporary geopolitics. Understanding the Cold War as well as possible enhances our understanding of our current world by showing how we got to where we are. Many current alliances, for instance, have their roots in the Cold War. The third reason, and perhaps the most relevant one, is that the Sellers-Oelsner case sheds light on a particular facet of bilateral relationships. As policy makers consider how they might want to shape such a relationship, as journalists figure out how to cover it, and as scholars endeavor to understand it, it will be useful to understand how certain types of

highly charged events concerning private citizens impacted the defining (conflictual) bilateral relationship of the 20th century. Understanding the impacts of such events and their potential implications for a larger relationship can allow policy makers to choose whether they want these events to be quickly and quietly resolved or whether they view it as advantageous to make them widely known and emotionally salient. If policy makers are driven to make events more significant, which they may be tempted to do, it is crucial that they understand the full effects of such a course of action. They must understand the conflictual trajectory on which they are putting the relationship, the potential events' effects on public opinion, and the risks that are involved. For us in 2020, great power competition is on the rise, especially between the United States and China. How the Sino-American relationship develops will greatly influence the world over the coming century and the conclusions that I draw should be relevant to policy makers, journalists, and academics in both countries as they navigate the relationship.

#### Sources and Methods:

In order to examine the early Cold War's development, I draw on a variety of primary sources in addition to academic ones. Here I detail the primary sources that I sought and was able to obtain, assess how reliable I think each type of source is and why, and explain the ways in which particular sources are useful. To obtain US government documents, I submitted Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to the Departments of State and Defense as well as to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for any and all documents relating to the case of Oelsner and Sellers. I have not yet received substantive responses from the Department of Defense and CIA. Lacking documents from the Department of Defense is especially limiting since the military, through the USMLM and the military government, was tasked with negotiating their release and was the primary authority dealing with their case. The Department of State sent me filing records corresponding to a number of documents, only some of which still exist in the archives. I obtained copies of those original documents, some of which were classified as SECRET at the time. There are important officials and events described in news coverage neither mentioned in the documents nor seemingly alluded to in the filing records. Therefore, I have reason to believe that there were, and may still be, further relevant documents which

originated at the Department of State and were not identified to me in the Department's response to my FOIA request. Nonetheless, the State Department documents I did obtain are very useful. They consist of cables, drafts of communiqués eventually sent to the Soviets, and memoranda summarizing events. They do include details and mention officials not found in any of the other sources that I have. Furthermore, despite the gaps, as a general matter they provide insight into how things worked within the government. They show what the American government knew and thought compared to what the press/public, Sellers/Oelsner, and the Soviets knew and thought at the same time. They show within government who was being kept abreast of what, when, and by whom. They show that the government was quite frank and forthcoming with the press about what it knew and how it assessed the situation. They also show how little the government knew initially about what had happened to Sellers and Oelsner and show the lengths that it went to later to learn what had happened.

I contacted Warren(Jim) Oelsner who is still alive. Peter Sellers passed away after battling cancer in 2014 before any research for this honors thesis began. Upon returning from his imprisonment, Oelsner wrote a detailed account of his and Sellers' experience which he sent to me. Fifty-nine pages in length, it describes in detail the young men's experience from the moment they decided to go into the Soviet zone from Hamburg to their release. Titled *A Factual Account of the Author's Experiences While in the Soviet Zone of Germany*, it appears to be a factual account, sometimes recording best guesses or assumptions of what was taking place as well as guesses as to people's motives, but always naming these guesses and assumptions as such and providing the facts on which these guesses and assumptions were based. It is almost completely in keeping with all other sources and at times even paints Sellers and Oelsner in a worse light than the other sources do, not omitting what in hindsight are embarrassingly foolish decisions that Sellers and Oelsner made. This further enhances its credibility. His account is also more detailed than the other sources and is often the only first-hand account of events. I take it to be the most reliable account that I have and I defer to its factual claims in the very few instances in which slight discrepancies emerge between it and other sources. His account is invaluable to my research because it allows me to construct a more accurate and much

more detailed chronology of the case than I would otherwise be able to. Furthermore, it allows me to compare the ‘facts on the ground’ to what those who were responding to the situation from afar knew, how they characterized the situation, and what they based their responses on. For example, in assessing whether the Soviets really ever believed Sellers and Oelsner were spies, it is very useful to know the list of government buildings that Oelsner photographed.

I rely heavily on press coverage from the time to know what contacts the US government had with its Soviet counterparts and with Sellers’ and Oelsner’s families as well as what the US government knew and how it assessed the case. There are enough gaps in the official documents that I was able to obtain that without press coverage, I would be missing a large amount of crucial information. Sellers’ and Oelsner’s case was widely covered. Many smaller newspapers from around the country have now been digitized and I was able to get coverage from the Associated Press (AP), United Press (UP), and International News Service (INS) which was carried by these papers. I also accessed the digital archives of the New York Times, Washington Post, and a few international papers, and through University of Pennsylvania records as well as saved newspaper clippings sent to me by Oelsner, I gained access to much of the press coverage from the local Philadelphia and New York papers near Sellers’ and Oelsner’s respective hometowns which wrote their own stories. Between these newspapers, I have confidence that I have almost all of the relevant press coverage. In total, this amounts to hundreds of newspaper articles, almost every single one unique in some way. I also have confidence in the substance of the press coverage because it reflects the State Department documents which I obtained. Therefore, I feel confident that with a few minor exceptions, what the US government told the press is what it knew to be true and reflects what its assessments were at the time. In addition to the factual account I can construct from the press coverage, it is very important to this inquiry to see how and how much the case was covered. This allows me to draw much firmer conclusions about how its coverage affected public opinion.

Another source that is integral to this thesis is public opinion (polling) data. I obtained these data through academic sources devoted to polling about the Soviet Union

and the Cold war. These data provide insight into how Americans viewed the Soviet Union starting in the 1930s. They show long-standing trends in public opinion as well as the end-of-the-war public opinion baseline in 1945. These data then show how quickly public opinion changed between 1945 and the early fifties as well as what the qualitative shifts in public opinion were over those years. Understanding what the changes to public opinion were shows what changes in opinion need to be accounted for which is crucial in trying to determine how events like the Sellers-Oelsner case contributed to the shifts in public opinion.

I also tried to obtain Soviet and East German documents. I submitted inquiries to numerous German archives. Due to the unavailability of documents which were generated by Soviet occupying forces before the founding of East Germany later in 1949, these inquiries yielded nothing. Additionally, I had contact with a Russian historian of the Cold War. Russian archives are quite closed and administrative as well as time constraints led to her only finding one brief mention of the case.

Briefly, the following chapters contain the following portions of this thesis. The next chapter, chapter two, summarizes the literatures most important to my analysis of the Sellers-Oelsner case and explains my contributions to them. It is the work contained in these literatures which allows me to construct the sequence of effects that is so critical to my findings. In the following three chapters, chapters three, four, and five, I lay out the Sellers-Oelsner case and its context. Chapter three presents the causes and key events of the early Cold War as well as the Germany specific context that is integral to understanding the Sellers-Oelsner case. Chapter four provides a detailed account of the events of the case itself, switching back and forth between what was taking place where Sellers and Oelsner were and how the larger world was reacting based on what it knew. Chapter five then analyzes the press coverage that the case received, providing examples and exploring how its biases were in keeping with how the American press covered the Soviet Union at the time. Chapter six draws on the prior three chapters as well as findings from the literature to assess the likely effects of the Sellers-Oelsner case on public and elite opinion. Chapter seven draws principally from the findings in chapter six and the

literature, and to a lesser extent the findings in chapter three, four, and five, to draw conclusions about how those effects on opinion translated into concrete effects on policy. Finally, chapter eight summarizes my findings and proposes areas for future research.

## Chapter 2, Literature Review:

This honors thesis draws on and contributes to historical, psychological, and political science literatures. In many cases, these fields have become mixed at the result of interdisciplinary work. Therefore, especially in the cases of the political science and psychology literatures, it does not make sense to separate by their field. Instead, I separate them by the question they seek to answer.

Many eminent Cold War historians, such as John Gaddis, Walter LaFeber, and Herbert Feis have studied the conflict's principal causes. After years of work and the increasing declassification of American and Soviet government documents, they have reached relative consensus about the principal causes of the Cold War. There is broad agreement that differing political and economic systems, different cultures, hard security concerns, and quickly building mutual suspicion and mistrust all played critical roles in the rapid development of the Cold War. These histories focus on the key dynamics and events that shaped the relationship's larger trajectory. They often neglect, however, to examine in isolation, if at all, those smaller events which were not integral to determining the Cold War's trajectory but which likely contributed to it, such as the Sellers-Oelsner case. They especially frequently neglect to apply the amount of focus that would accompany social scientific inquiry into the roles that these events played in the Soviet-American relationship and the development of the Cold War. They do not explore questions such as the one that I research in this thesis. Instead, at most, Cold War histories simply mention these events in passing as examples of larger phenomena. This thesis finds that highly charged and highly covered, less geopolitical and more and civilian-centered events contributed meaningfully but were not integral to the development of the Cold War, adding that finding as well as the novel study of the Sellers-Oelsner case to the historical literature.

In an exception to that trend, the specific question of how such events affected the conflict has already been the subject of some scholarship. In 1990, Cathal Nolan published an article, “Americans in the Gulag: Detention of US Citizens by Russia and the Onset of the Cold War, 1944-1949,” in the *Journal of Contemporary History* which concluded that while it was not “a principal cause of the Cold War,” “the Soviet Union’s disregard for the rights and welfare of Americans ... was a contributory cause of the breakdown in American-Soviet relations which began just after signature of the Yalta Agreements.” His work explores three cases. One was the fate of American POWs who, initially prisoners of Nazi Germany, came to be held by the Soviet Union as it swept across Europe taking control of the territory from the defeated Germans. After initial poor treatment and delay in the return of these POWs, the situation was made more severe by the fact that some of them were never returned and sent to Gulags in Siberia. The second case was that the marriages of US diplomatic personnel serving in the Soviet Union to Soviet wives were not recognized as legitimate and the wives were prohibited from joining their husbands in the United States, separating families. The third case was the refusal of the Soviet Union to recognize the citizenship of around 2,000 American citizens of Soviet birth or descent, its prohibiting them from leaving the country, and its condemnation of hundreds of these people to forced labor in gulags. His findings are notable and conclusive. He found that these cases did negatively and substantially affect the views of US foreign policy officials towards the Soviet Union, something he proves through public and non-public statements by those officials in which they express anger and moral repugnance, emotions that contributed to the breakdown in relations. Nolan is to my knowledge, however, the only person who has explicitly studied the question of how such events affected the Cold War.

My research, thirty years later in a different political environment with more documents available, asks nearly the same questions as Nolan did, though it considers more heavily the roles of media coverage and public opinion of the Soviet Union as aspects of the case that also would have affected the Cold War’s trajectory. His case studies were similar to mine in that they were distinct events which had the plight of Americans at their core. Nonetheless, while his research did focus on isolated events,

these events were the result of larger scale Soviet policies, they were predictable from the perspective of the government in that they unfolded more slowly over a somewhat longer period of time, the result of the events was far more dire without happy endings similar the return of Sellers and Oelsner, and the number of Americans implicated in these events was in the hundreds or thousands. One of my principal findings, namely that the Sellers-Oelsner case would have negatively impacted elite views of the Soviet Union, confirms Nolan's on the effects of these events on elite opinion. That his findings are confirmed by a case study that is similar but not identical to his renders his findings even more robust than they already were.

One crucial literature which informs my discussion of the effects that events like the Sellers-Oelsner have on foreign policy elite decision making is the literature on elite opinion in the Cold War context. This literature concerns both how elite opinion is formed and structured, and its effects on policy outcomes. A number of scholars have proposed and tested theories of how elites formed and structured their opinion of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. Ole Holsti,<sup>1</sup> for instance, draws on theories of enemy images, national images, and belief systems. He proposes that these conceptions of the Soviet Union drove how foreign policy elites approached international relations with it. The more adversarial their perceptions were, the more aggressive the policies they supported were. Alexander George<sup>2</sup> writes of operational codes and Herrman et al.<sup>3</sup> write of cognitive schemata. All of these concepts are very similar and these scholars among others have consistently found them to play important roles in structuring elite opinion. They all examine how elites reacted to certain issues in the relationship as well as how those reactions were affected by their more general perceptions.

Deborah Welch Larson has made the most comprehensive and detailed contribution to this literature. In her article "The Role of Belief Systems and Schemas in Foreign Policy Decision-Making," Larson explains that from a human psychological standpoint, humans do not have the memory capacity to retain all the things they

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<sup>1</sup> Holsti, 1962, p 244-6, Holsti 1967, p 34-9.

<sup>2</sup> George, 197-201.

<sup>3</sup> Herrman et al., 405-9.



experience or think about in detail. Therefore, the mind creates schemas which incorporate the key conclusions that people draw from each of their individual experiences. These schemas also include their intellectual understandings of things and particular examples of their beliefs. The schemas provide powerful ways of understanding the world and guide one's thinking about future information and experiences. All of the concepts that her colleagues have written about are components of schemas. Therefore, while Larson is in agreement with her colleagues and their findings, the schema concept that she puts forward is created from a wider range of contributing inputs and is therefore an even more powerful psychological device. Larson also wrote two books about the history of the Cold War in which she applies schema and other psychological theories to the conflict. In those books, she studies a number of Cold War events in detail and demonstrates the role that these psychological phenomena played. She found that schemas and schematic devices were central to how foreign policy elites approached the conflict and understood the Soviet Union. In addition to her work, Holsti's, and others' find that, in their cases, the components of schemas have large impacts on how foreign policy makers understand the world and thus what decisions they end up making.

The schema concept is very useful to understanding how the Sellers-Oelsner case would have affected public opinion. It shows how elite involvement in the Sellers-Oelsner case would have translated into lasting, negative impressions of the Soviet Union as well as how it could have served as one of the examples of Soviet transgression in an elite's Cold War schema. By showing how the schema concept applies to a detailed examination of the Sellers-Oelsner case, to which it has never been applied but which is an event from the Cold War, I confirm schema theory's applicability to the Cold War and its usefulness for understanding the conflict.

Another literature, which shares psychological roots with the elite opinion literature, is the public opinion formation and structure literature. Hurwitz and Peffley have studied Cold War public opinion a number of times<sup>4</sup> and as they wrote in their 1990

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<sup>4</sup> Hurwitz et al., p 21-3 , Peffley et al., 453-5.

paper "Public Images of the Soviet Union: The Impact on Foreign Policy Attitudes," the public, like elites, is not able to remember and carefully think through many issues. Therefore, members of the public rely on general conceptions and understandings to guide their thinking about foreign policy. Hurwitz and Peffley specifically examined whether, in addition to underlying values such as patriotism, perceptions that the Soviet Union was threatening and untrustworthy would lead to increased support for more aggressive Cold War policies. They found that they did. This finding suggests that anything that would have furthered these perceptions, like the Sellers-Oelsner case, would have led to more public support for more aggressive Cold War policy. Their theory of public opinion formation has not been studied by many other people and they have certainly studied it in the most depth. In developing their theory, they borrowed a lot from those primarily studying elites, such as Holsti. Furthermore, another strand in this literature is the elite (or followership) theory by which the public gets their foreign policy views from elites. By providing an alternate explanation and one that is durable since long standing, foundational perceptions cannot be changed immediately, their findings suggest limitations of the elite theory.

A subset of this literature explores how media coverage of particular topics affects public opinion of those topics. Since it is assumed that the media which people consume will influence what they think, there is not a lot of research studying that general relationship. Scholars have, however, examined particular facets of the intersection between media consumption and public opinion. That research has two primary findings. One, which is best demonstrated by a 1983 study from Don Munton,<sup>5</sup> is that media themes that are favorable to a given policy will lead to increased support for that policy. Implicit in that finding is that media coverage does influence public opinion. Not only does media coverage impact the public's views on particular topics, it also determines what issues are the most salient and front of mind. Known as agenda setting, this phenomenon is widely recognized in the literature and was the subject of recent research

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<sup>5</sup> Munton, 207-13.

in 2016 by Carmichael and Brulle who looked at public concern about climate change. They found that concern about climate change rose with media coverage of the issue.<sup>6</sup>

Combined, the two main elements of the public opinion formation literature, namely that public opinion on foreign policy is heavily influenced by general, underlying perceptions and that media coverage strongly influences public opinion, have important implications. They suggest that events that receive media coverage and which can reasonably be assumed to contribute to hostile perceptions, have significant impacts on public opinion. The Sellers-Oelsner case is obviously one such event. I do not directly contribute to this literature. As with the other literatures that I draw on, the extent of my contribution is to provide an example which is seemingly explained by the given theory.

The final literature concerns the effects of public opinion on foreign policy makers and their decisions. This literature is the democratic-responsiveness theory half of a larger literature which studies the relationship between elite and public opinion. The other half of the larger literature, the elite theory half, concerns the influence of elite opinion and elite cues on public opinion and is not relevant to the question that I seek to answer in this thesis, namely whether events like the Sellers-Oelsner case, through their influence on public opinion, affect policy making and by extension the Cold War. There is widespread consensus in this literature that public opinion does impact what decisions foreign policy elites make. There is similarly widespread consensus that elites cannot rely on always being able to shape public opinion. The literature concludes that for major foreign policies, the support of the public is necessary in the long run and that therefore public opinion can cause elites to alter current policies or lead not to enact policies that don't have sufficient support. Jennifer Cunningham and Michael Moore<sup>7</sup> found that public opinion and elite opinion closely track each other over time and found that much of the continuity between the two sets of opinion was due to public opinion impacting elite opinion and elites adjusting accordingly.

In a 1991 study, Thomas Risse-Kappen found that public opinion had significant effects on elite policy making in the US, France, West Germany, and Japan. He found

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<sup>6</sup> Carmichael et al., p14-6.

<sup>7</sup> Cunningham et al, p 654-5.

that those effects took the form of restraining what policies elites pursue in that “policy makers do not decide against overwhelming public consensus.”<sup>8</sup> Risse-Kappen assessed that the mechanism through which the public had this influence was their affecting elite coalition building within the given country’s political system. Douglas Foyle<sup>9</sup> also shows that public opinion impacts elite foreign policy decision making. Unlike Risse-Kappen, however, he focuses on the views of particular policy makers and examines their normative beliefs on whether the public’s preferences should be taken into account as well as their assessment of whether public support for foreign policies is necessary. He found that policy makers’ views on these questions affects the role that public opinion plays, with those who believe that public opinion should influence foreign policy and those who believe that public support is necessary taking public opinion into account much more. Furthermore, he found that Eisenhower and Dulles behaved relative to public opinion as their beliefs about its role would predict. In line with both Risse-Kappen, Cunningham et al., and Foyle, Philip Powlick and Andrew Katz<sup>10</sup> document a long history of elites closely monitoring public opinion, suggesting that if nothing else, foreign policy elites think public opinion matters which in turn means that it does.

The democratic-responsiveness theory literature is critical to this thesis because it shows how changes to public opinion that saw the public hold more negative views of the Soviet Union would have influenced Cold War decision makers as they formulated policy, which by extension would have had an influence on the trajectory of the Cold War. I do not contribute much at all to this literature through my analysis of the Sellers-Oelsner case other than by providing an example in which the democratic-responsiveness theory seems to explain what I observed.

Lastly, there have only been two mentions of the Sellers-Oelsner case. One is less than a paragraph long in a book about shipping history.<sup>11</sup> The other is a paragraph in a State Department publication introducing Ambassador Kirk’s protest letter to the Soviet Union which was being reprinted. That paragraph, which is otherwise accurate,

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<sup>8</sup> Risse-Kappen, p 510-2.

<sup>9</sup> Foyle, p 164-5.

<sup>10</sup> Powlick et al, p 50-53.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, 281.

mistakenly asserts that Sellers and Oelsner crossed the border into the Soviet zone of Germany inadvertently.<sup>12</sup> Beyond these mentions, the case is completely unstudied and absent from the historical record. This thesis both introduces the detailed study of the case and sets the record straight as to Sellers' and Oelsner's intentions when they entered the Soviet zone.

I see the following as my primary contributions to prior scholarship. First, the Sellers-Oelsner case has never been the subject of any historical or academic writing. Therefore, I am introducing the detailed study of the event to the annals of Cold War history. Second, I provide further evidence to support Nolan's conclusions using a similar but not identical kind of case study, thus making his conclusions only more robust. Third, I am augmenting the historical literature around the development of the Cold War more broadly by presenting evidence that the cumulative effect of many smaller events was to contribute to the American public turning on the Soviet Union, which in turn provided public support and appetite for the waging of the Cold War. Fourth, I am applying research and theories of how elite opinion is formed and structured and how it affects foreign policy decisions, how public opinion is formed and structured, especially by media coverage of events like the Sellers-Oelsner case, and how public opinion impacts elites' foreign policy decisions to a detailed case study. In doing so, I am providing confirmation of this scholarship on which I draw by providing a further example of how these theories play out in the world. Since they play out as expected, I bolster their validity and applicability. Lastly, I am drawing upon a number of literatures concerning, for example, the relationship between public opinion and elite opinion, and using such relationships as segments in sequences of effects to link the compounding of events like the Sellers-Oelsner to foreign policy decision making, which bears on geopolitical outcomes. The detailed studies of the specific relationships on which I rely are individual segments in the sequences and by themselves do not establish the sequences of effects which I propose. Future scholarship should examine these sequences and seek further examples of them.

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<sup>12</sup> Department of State Publication, p 880.

### Chapter 3, The State of US-Soviet Relations:

Having laid out the contours of this honors thesis in the preceding chapter, this chapter briefly presents the larger history of the Soviet-American relationship and the development of the Cold War, which is critical to understanding the Sellers-Oelsner case and its contribution to the conflict. In so doing, I present the consensus among historians concerning the principal causes of the Cold War as well as some of the most critical events, conditions, and statements which caused or exemplified the Cold War's development. The end of this chapter will also explore important elements of the particular situation in Germany in the summer of 1949, which provide necessary context for the events of the Sellers-Oelsner case.

In the summer of 1949, the Cold War was solidly, albeit recently, underway. Prior to the outbreak of WWII, the US and Soviet Union had not enjoyed good relations. There were a variety of reasons for this. Chief among them were substantial differences between the two countries in terms of their systems and values, the lack of close historical and political bonds, and elements of each one's national character which offended the national character of the other. Arising from these differences, the American public and American elites held the Soviet Union in low esteem. For example, the rejection of religion by the Soviet state and the persecution of Christians was an affront to America's ideals of religious freedom generally and to America's Christians specifically,<sup>13</sup> especially Catholics.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the American public's opinion of the Soviet Union was quite negative. Striking public opinion data from 1937-9 shows that at that time Americans preferred fascism to communism.<sup>15</sup> It was not just the public. The US and Soviet Union only normalized diplomatic relations in 1933.<sup>16</sup>

WWII brought the US, UK, and Soviet Union into an alliance whose purpose was winning the war with a special focus on defeating Nazi Germany in Europe. The wartime

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<sup>13</sup> Cross, p 17-8.

<sup>14</sup> Walsh, p 520.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p 515.

<sup>16</sup> Cross, p 17.

necessity of this alliance had two effects. One was that it brought the US and the Soviet Union closer together as a result of increased collaboration and communication. The highest levels of the two governments developed relations with each other that were far deeper than they had been before the war. The other was that because all other issues paled in comparison to the main task at hand, there were a number of outstanding issues between the two countries that were ignored and forgotten until after the war when they reemerged. Accompanying improved relations, American public opinion of the Soviet Union became more favorable over the course of the war. The share of the public which thought the Soviet Union should receive no wartime assistance from the US dropped by 10% and a whopping 80% of Americans both wanted and predicted post-war collaboration with the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> Showing a similar upward trend in Soviet favorability though also significant remaining skepticism of the Soviet Union's trustworthiness, in hindsight a quite predictive finding, Americans' trust in the Soviet Union to cooperate after the war rose from 40% in the winter 1942 to 50% in the spring of 1944, peaking at 55% in December of 1943 following the Moscow conference.<sup>18</sup> While these seemingly idiosyncratic results might be explained in part by different pollsters having asked the questions, they indicate that, without having lost their long-standing distrust of the Soviet Union, Americans wanted and had a hard time imagining anything but continued cooperation.

By 1944, when an Allied victory became a matter of when instead of if, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin began to plan for and discuss the postwar world. At this time, Soviet-American relations were good enough that it was not clear whether the countries' post-war relationship would deteriorate again or whether it would contain significant goodwill and cooperation. As noted above, the public as well as many governmental and non-governmental elites supported a cooperative relationship with the Soviet Union following the war.<sup>19</sup> One of the largest questions concerning Europe was the futures of soon to be liberated countries--which great power would wield influence in

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<sup>17</sup> Walsh, p 516.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p 516-7.

<sup>19</sup> Cross, p 27, LaFeber, p 27, Santis, p 2.

them and what types of political and economic systems would be in place where. In February of 1945, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin met at the Yalta Conference which produced agreements about Soviet entry into the Pacific theater and by what terms was Germany to be defeated and divided, as well as the Declaration of Liberated Europe which served as the primary blueprint for the future of those countries which the Red Army was liberating from Nazi Germany. This agreement spelled out the post-war status of these soon to be liberated countries including Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria among others. It stipulated that the Soviet Union and Soviet-aligned local actors would have disproportionate influence in the futures of these countries but that there would also be free elections to decide how their people wanted to be governed.<sup>20</sup> The agreement was vague because its parties couldn't agree on more specific terms. According to Roosevelt's chief of staff, the agreement's lack of specificity meant that the Soviet Union "could stretch it all the way from Yalta to Washington without ever technically breaking it."<sup>21</sup> Though the countries were still wartime allies against the not yet defeated Germans and Japanese, significant tensions and apprehensions were emerging in the relationship, both when Roosevelt was negotiating the agreement and then even more starkly when Truman came to power and confronted the Soviet Union over what he termed violations of the agreement among other things.

Increasingly strained relations began to sour rapidly immediately after World War II's end. Nonetheless, initially different high-ranking officials in the US government held differing views as to how the US should engage with its Soviet counterpart. Some, including President Truman, were more suspicious while others, such as Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, were more inclined towards cooperation. By February of 1946, even Byrnes would have given up on cooperation.<sup>22</sup> Multiple factors contributed to the breakdown in relations. One was a change in American foreign policy thinking brought about by World War II which was newly concerned with the prospect of one country controlling sufficient industrial resources to dominate the world, impose its system on the

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<sup>20</sup> LaFeber, p 14-5, Feis, 20-22.

<sup>21</sup> Leffler, p 96.

<sup>22</sup> Harbutt, p 627-8.



world, and defeat the US. The prospect of the Soviet Union completely controlling the Eurasian landmass was intolerable and terrifying to American policy makers.<sup>23</sup> Another was what the US government saw as blatant Soviet violations of core parts of the Yalta agreement as well as agreements concerning Germany. While the US also did not abide by all of the commitments it made before the end of the war, sometimes securing more favorable outcomes when it had the power to impose them such as the US blocking the Soviet Union from extracting reparations from the Allied zones of occupation which would become West Germany, the American perception was that the Soviet Union's violations were egregious and a fundamental betrayal of trust. This perception is certainly fair. One of the most prominent examples of a Soviet violation is its renegeing on its Yalta agreement commitment to elections in Soviet-controlled Eastern European countries. Contributing to the strife surrounding the Yalta agreement was the fact that Truman has not been privy to Roosevelt's foreign policy making and therefore did not understand the political decisions that Roosevelt had made when negotiating at Yalta, many of which involved concessions to the Soviet Union.<sup>24</sup> That increased his distrust of the Soviet Union as well as its distrust of the United States. Cold War historians agree that the breakdown in trust was of critical detriment to the relationship<sup>25</sup> and it is difficult to overstate just how large a role disagreements over the Yalta Agreement played in that breakdown of trust. Herbert Feis chronicles that importance in his book *From Trust to Terror: the Onset of the Cold War, 1945-1950*.

As a more actively adversarial relationship between the superpowers quickly developed, momentum towards cold war snowballed and relationship-stressing events proliferated. Stalin's hostile 1946 speech inaugurating the Five-Year Plan and the Soviet Union's quick assertion of control over Eastern Europe were among such events. Another major factor in the deteriorating relationship was the differing political and economic systems of the two countries. In so far as the United States was trying to design a new global system and institutions to realize it, the Soviet Union's refusal to participate in

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<sup>23</sup> Friedberg, p 38-9.

<sup>24</sup> Leffler, p 90-4.

<sup>25</sup> Larson, 1997, p 21-5.

organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its blocking otherwise interested countries from participating in the Marshall Plan directly hindered American efforts.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the vastly different values of the two countries, namely capitalist democracy on the part of the US and authoritarian communism on the part of the Soviet Union, provided fertile ground for moral disapproval of the other's and a greater sense that the geopolitical success of the other would come at the expense of cherished values.<sup>27</sup> All these dynamics compounded each other. Lack of trust made potential expansion seem more threatening. Incompatible systems based on different values made that expansion more threatening. The eminent Cold War historian John Gaddis emphasizes the degree to which all these factors combined to cause the conflict. While he is receptive to revisionist critiques of the US which argue that the Cold War was not totally inevitable and that certain flawed assessments of the world caused the US to misinterpret and thus respond unnecessarily forcefully to the Soviet Union, Gaddis stresses that the views and assumptions of US policy makers were rational and that they rarely had good alternatives.<sup>28</sup> The famous Long Telegram that same year exemplified the already emerging consensus that Moscow was fundamentally an adversary. In it, deputy head of the mission in Moscow George Kennan wrote "we have here a political force [the USSR] committed fanatically to the belief that with US there can be no permanent modus vivendi that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure."<sup>29</sup>

Europe was soon largely divided along de facto, soon to be officially designated, lines of control. Those countries that Soviet troops had occupied after the war such as Poland and Romania rapidly became communist dictatorships with illiberal help from the Soviet Union. In contrast, those that were occupied by British and American forces, such as Greece, mostly became capitalist democracies. Similar contests over which superpower's preferred government would hold power also took place in Asia, most

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<sup>26</sup> LaFeber, p 39, 60, Jervis, p 171-3.

<sup>27</sup> Jervis, p 171-3, Gaddis, 1972, p 358-9.

<sup>28</sup> Gaddis, 1972, p 356-61.

<sup>29</sup> Kennan.

notably in China and Korea. In Greece, however, the emergence of the US' preferred government required American intervention and on March 12th, 1947, President Truman addressed a joint session of Congress asking it to appropriate resources for Greece. His speech is remembered for proposing the Truman Doctrine, namely that to support "free peoples," America would contain the spread of (Soviet) communism anywhere in the world.<sup>30</sup> Five days later, President Truman again appealed to Congress, this time asking it to quickly pass the massive Marshall Plan and resume the selective service, both of which it did by wide majorities. He urged these measures to counter the "increasing threat" of the Soviet Union and ensure the "survival of freedom."<sup>31</sup> These speeches both constituted a notable shift in rhetoric that would last throughout the rest of the Cold War and signified an all of government acceptance of the Cold War.

When exactly the Cold War began is the subject of differing opinions with different Cold War historians making different claims and using different criteria to decide what constitutes the Cold War. To some it started as soon as World War II ended while to others it started as late as 1947 with the announcement of the Truman Doctrine. What causes were the most significant and the extent to which they were avoidable is similarly the subject of some debate which often breaks down along ideological lines. For Sellers and Oelsner, however, when exactly between 1945 and 1947 the Cold War started and what its causes were are not particularly relevant. By 1949, less than four short years after the end of WWII, the adversarial relationship between the US and the USSR had cemented itself and greatly intensified, and the Cold War was well underway.

No single event reflects the state of the relationship in 1949 better than the Soviet blockade of Berlin and the Berlin Airlift. The city of Berlin, like the rest of Germany, was divided into British, French, American, and Soviet occupation zones. Berlin was located deep in the Soviet zone. To reach their zones and by extension to sustain the people living in those zones, the Americans, British, and French Allies had to pass through the Soviet zone. In retaliation for the increased integration of the Allied zones in West Germany and the introduction of the Deutschmark, as well as in an effort to force

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<sup>30</sup> Feis, 193-5, LaFeber, p 48-58, quote p 55, "The Truman Doctrine, 1947."

<sup>31</sup> LaFeber, p 73.

the Allies out of Berlin all together, the USSR increased its number of troops in the Soviet zone of Berlin and formed a blockade, preventing Allied trains and trucks from reaching Berlin and depriving the city's population of basic necessities. To provide for the people of Berlin and more importantly, from a geostrategic perspective, to maintain the Allied presence in Berlin, the US and Britain supplied the Allied zones by plane with over 2.3 million tons of food, fuel, and machinery. The USSR recognized Allied resolve and eventually lifted the blockade. The Soviet blockade and airlift showed the US that the USSR was willing to hold over two million people hostage to force the US to abandon territory designated to it by mutual agreement and that the USSR presented an existential threat to American interests. Furthermore, it showed the effectiveness of taking a hard line against the USSR. On the other side, the blockade and airlift showed the USSR that the US was steadfast in its commitment to Berlin and Germany, and that it would expend blood and treasure to secure its interests.

The Berlin Airlift, the official creation of the Soviet-controlled German Democratic Republic and the Western-aligned Federal Republic of Germany, and other events of 1949 made Germany a focal point of the Cold War, especially in that year. Both the US and USSR spied on the other and both feared being spied on by the other. In that environment the illegal presence of one country's citizens in the other would have automatically prompted suspicion and drawn scrutiny. Also at the same time, since the Cold War was young and had just recently developed into the intense struggle of the next four decades, both countries were still learning how the other operated and neither knew what was characteristic of how the other spied.

For Sellers and Oelsner, who were detained less than three months after the end of the blockade, the effects of the tense relationship and recent events in Germany were that the Soviets were especially suspicious of Americans and especially attentive to anything they might regard as sinister. This made the Soviets more apt to think that Sellers and Oelsner were spies rather than foolish youths. While it is understandable that two college students making last minute plans were neither fully cognizant of the political situation nor had given its implications substantial consideration, it is equally understandable that Soviet authorities found it hard to believe that Americans were innocently entering the

Soviet zone simply to see it and were innocently taking pictures because things looked interesting. Thus, from the perspective of Sellers' and Oelsner's intentions receiving charitable interpretation by the Soviets, it was the worst possible time for them to illegally enter the Soviet zone.

The bureaucratic situation in Germany in 1949 was also relevant to Sellers' and Oelsner's case. In 1947, the US created the United States Military Liaison Mission (USMLM). It had locations in Potsdam and West Berlin, and although it was led and staffed by US military officers and personnel, its missions were diplomacy and intelligence gathering. It served as the primary diplomatic link between the United States' occupying forces and their British, French, and Soviet counterparts. Between 1947 and the USMLM's close in 1990, its personnel developed expertise and procedures, especially relating to interaction with the Soviets. The two sides also developed some level of mutual understanding as to how certain situations would be approached and what each country's respective mission was empowered to do by higher authorities. The USMLM is regarded as an example of successful diplomacy between the US and USSR during the Cold War and is credited with helping prevent hot war in Germany.<sup>32</sup> In 1949, however, the USMLM and its Soviet counterpart had not yet developed much of the mutual understanding and many of the procedures that they would go on to develop. The lack of a more established diplomatic relationship between US and Soviet forces meant that at the time of Sellers' and Oelsner's disappearance and detention, the USMLM had neither as robust diplomatic procedures in place nor as deep an understanding of the Soviets as it would go on to develop. Therefore, it is likely that had the same incident occurred twenty years later, the USMLM would have been able to obtain their release more quickly, potentially even days later.

In summary, in the summer of 1949, the Cold War was a full-fledged, zero-sum global power struggle. Both the US and the Soviet Union regarded the potential power of the other as an existential threat. Importantly, however, public opinion lagged behind elite opinion. For example, in June, 1946 when the vast majority of American elites had

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<sup>32</sup> Vodopyanov, p 1-2.

already soured on the Soviet Union and had already undertaken significant steps to make the public share those views, when asked whether Russia was taking actions to become a ruling power or for its own protection, 58% said ruling power and 29% said protection.<sup>33</sup> By May, 1949 those numbers had shifted to 66% and 15% and would eventually reach 79% and 10% in July of 1953.<sup>34</sup> Thus from the perspective of public opinion, the Cold War was still gaining steam, allowing events in 1949 to still have a substantial influence on the Cold War through their effects on public opinion.

#### Chapter 4, The Story of the Sellers-Oelsner Case:

Just as the previous chapter presents the history of the Cold War's development, this chapter, drawing on the primary sources that I was able to obtain, presents the history of the Sellers-Oelsner case. Understanding the facts of their case in detail is critical to assessing their case's effects on elite and public opinion as well as analyzing the media coverage of their case. It is also an interesting and compelling story in its own right that deserves to be told in full.

During the summer of 1949, Peter Hoadley Sellers and Warren James Oelsner, undergraduate students at the University of Pennsylvania, took a bike trip in Britain and France. They then took a train to Hamburg where they were scheduled to board a ship on July 30st to take them back to the United States. The shipping line they were to have travelled back on was owned by Oelsner's father. Upon arrival in Hamburg early on July 29th, they learned that the ship had been delayed for repairs until August 2nd leaving them three days to explore. At the time Hamburg was located in the British occupation zone and was not far from the border between the British and Soviet zones. In his account of their time in captivity, Oelsner writes that they decided to bike towards the border between the British and Soviet Zones and that they "welcom[ed] the opportunity of seeing what constituted the Iron Curtain." Outside the small border town of Büchen in the British zone, Sellers and Oelsner were questioned by British border officials who

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<sup>33</sup> Quester, p 660.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p 660.

“warned” them, as the interaction is characterized in Oelsner’s account, that they were near the Soviet zone. Oelsner writes that acting against this advice, “we ascertained its [the Soviet zone’s] general location and proceeded on our way.”<sup>35</sup> It was clearly their intention to enter the Soviet zone. They soon crossed the border by bicycle south of Büchen and along the way, Oelsner photographed a small building which the students later learned was a local headquarters of the Soviet border authorities. A sign partially in Russian, which Oelsner also photographed, confirmed their arrival in the Soviet zone.

The following morning, after spending the night in a field nearby, Sellers and Oelsner hid their bikes and reentered Boizenburg where they had eaten late the night before. There Oelsner took another picture before they found a place to eat breakfast. This picture was of a shipyard which happened to serve as a communist meeting place. While they waited for their meal to arrive, Oelsner took the fifth of five pictures: an East German police station. It was presumably the waitress, who, at that point, contacted the police. As the students were getting ready to pay and leave, East German police entered and demanded to see their papers which they could not produce. Sellers and Oelsner were then arrested and brought to the police station that Oelsner had just photographed. Oelsner wrote that he and Sellers had not understood how seriously the Soviets took unauthorized travel and that they had thought that if they were caught, they could say they had mistakenly entered the Soviet zone and would simply be sent back across the border.

In keeping with this plan, when the East German police searched and questioned Sellers and Oelsner, they told the police that they had mistakenly entered the Soviet zone and that they had been trying to go to a town the same size as Boizenburg in the British zone that is also south of Büchen called Lauenburg. Despite this explanation, the local police called the Soviets who sent two soldiers who again searched their belongings. Sellers and Oelsner were then taken to the Boizenburg jail. From there, the Soviets, who had evidently learned the general location of the bicycles, took the two Americans there, demanding that they reveal the bicycles’ exact location. When they refused, they were

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<sup>35</sup> Oelsner.

taken back to the jail. During this exercise, the Soviet soldiers repeated the word *spion*, German for spy, indicating how they had already assessed Sellers and Oelsner. Sellers eventually revealed the location of their bicycles and they were taken from their cells again. After a painstakingly detailed inventory of their things, Sellers and Oelsner were transported by truck to Schwerin, the Soviets' regional headquarters.

That night, Sellers was questioned for two hours and Oelsner was questioned for nearly six. From this point on August 1st until August 8th, Sellers and Oelsner were kept apart. The pictures which Oelsner took played a large role in the Soviets initial assessment that Sellers and Oelsner might be spies. In their questioning of Oelsner, which both he and State Department documents termed an "interrogation," Soviet soldiers asked him a number of questions about his alleged spy activity, including "Why did you come to take pictures of our fortifications?" and "By whom were you sent?". They told him "We know that you are a spy," and sometimes made threats such as "Do you wish to see your family again?"<sup>36</sup> To the Soviets, the fact that Oelsner took these pictures was not compatible with Sellers and Oelsner having entered the zone innocently and accidentally. They were right that Sellers and Oelsner had actually entered the zone purposefully, but they had trouble accepting the more innocent explanation that in the poor, run down post-war Soviet zone, the larger and more notable Soviet buildings simply made the most interesting pictures. The incriminating situation, the larger atmosphere of spying and US-Soviet tension, and Sellers' and Oelsner's dubious explanation all contributed to the assessment that Sellers and Oelsner might have been spies.

The following day, on August 1st, Sellers was questioned. Meanwhile, Oelsner broke the light fixture in his cell and otherwise resisted his captors. Sellers and Oelsner were transported separately to another jail, which they would later learn was in Magdeburg. Sellers was transported by truck with the bikes and a German woman, while Oelsner was transported blindfolded and handcuffed in a car. It seems from the difference in their treatment that, at this point, Oelsner was the subject of more suspicion than Sellers, something that would seem to be borne out over the next few days, when both

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



would be subjected to further questioning. Oelsner was questioned once on August 2nd and twice on August 3rd, and Sellers was questioned on August 2nd and August 4th. On the 2nd, Oelsner, confronted with the discrepancy that Sellers had admitted to their willfully staying in the Soviet zone while he maintained it was a mistake, admitted that their presence in the Soviet zone was intentional. He was also asked more questions that indicated that he was suspected of spying, and was told that lying carried a three-year prison sentence. In the first questioning session the next day, in addition to more questions about spying, Oelsner was threatened with a trial and told that he could be sent to Siberia. In the second session, he was asked about his pictures, which had been developed. Three of the five were of important Soviet buildings with a fourth of the German police station! Oelsner was again told that he was a spy and was asked repeatedly to sign an inaccurate statement, which he refused to do. On August 4th, Sellers was questioned for a long time about whether Oelsner could have been a spy while he was not; the Soviets had apparently concluded by now that Sellers was definitely not a spy. Sellers later recounted to family that at some point during these days of questioning, he was asked about esoteric mathematical principles to test his claim that he was a student of mathematics. On August 5th, Oelsner signed an accurate statement about his activities and on August 8th, Sellers and Oelsner were reunited and allowed to live together in an above-ground room rather than in cells below ground level. These developments show that Sellers and Oelsner were no longer suspected of being spies.

On August 10th, having asked to talk to one of the higher ranking Soviet officers the day before, Oelsner was brought to the Soviet major, who told him that US military authorities would be informed of their detention. In fact, US authorities were not told until August 24th. Oelsner's questions about his and Sellers' release were "met with the complacent 'You will see' or 'That is unimportant.'"<sup>37</sup> According to Oelsner's account, "the Major definitely inferred that we were no longer considered spies," confirming what seemed to have been the Soviet assessment since August 5th.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

The *United Press (UP)* later reported that two weeks after Sellers' and Oelsner's disappearance, Major General Mihail Dratvin, the Deputy Soviet Military Governor, demanded on or around August 13th that the US return three Soviet army deserters believed to be in an Allied zone.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile in Magdeburg, on August 16th, Sellers and Oelsner committed what was to be deemed significant misbehavior. They had been tossing a metal cup around and had just attempted a backflip when a stern faced officer entered their room. Oelsner was surprised and said 'hello' in Spanish, which caused him to chuckle. The officer took this as an affront and began to talk furiously in Russian and to gesticulate ridiculously. Having been under considerable strain for over two weeks, this sight was amusing and Sellers and Oelsner began laughing uncontrollably, laughing the "furious" officer "out of the room."<sup>39</sup> The following day, as punishment, they were separated, taken back to their small, underground cells, put in solitary confinement for the next eighteen days, and had their food portions reduced.

Back in the United States, the missing students and the efforts to locate them began to attract significant media attention, which would continue throughout their time in East Germany and into the weeks following their return. On August 15th, newspapers around the US began to carry an *Associated Press (AP)* story about the students' disappearance. The following day, Brigadier General Norman Schwarzkopf Sr., Deputy Provost Marshal for the American Zone of Occupation, ordered a search throughout all the Allied zones.<sup>40</sup> There was increasing speculation that Sellers and Oelsner might be in the Soviet Zone but this was not yet known.<sup>41</sup> Five days later, on August 20th, US High Commissioner John J. McCloy ordered a "top priority" search which was even reported by the *Times* of London among many other publications.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "Russians to Free 2 Americans."

<sup>39</sup> Oelsner.

<sup>40</sup> "Missing Lad In Germany Not B.H. Boy."

<sup>41</sup> "Missing N.Y. Shipping Scion Feared Held in Red Germany."

<sup>42</sup> "Hunt for 2 Americans Lost In Germany Given Priority." and "News In Brief, American Youths Missing In Germany."

The US government first learned that Sellers and Oelsner were in Soviet custody through a German informant on August 22nd.<sup>43</sup> An inquiry into Sellers' and Oelsner's situation sent to the Soviets by the USMLM on August 16th had not received a response. On September 24th, two days after the US learned of Sellers' and Oelsner's situation from the informant, Soviet officials confirmed to their US counterparts that they were holding Sellers and Oelsner, a fact which the State Department was then able to confirm to the press.<sup>44</sup> Sometime between the 24th and 26th, the USMLM received word from Major Maslen, a Soviet liaison officer from the USMLM's Soviet counterpart, that Sellers and Oelsner would be returned upon the release of the three Soviet army deserters. US officials did not disclose the contents of this communication to the public, but the cable was read to the press by Oelsner's older brother. Oelsner's brother characterized Sellers and Oelsner as "hostages," a characterization that was widely adopted by the American press.<sup>45</sup> Lester Sellers, the young Sellers' father, cited the same cable, although he was hesitant to adopt the same characterization.<sup>46</sup> Although a state department spokesman was not able to confirm that Sellers and Oelsner were being held as hostages, on August 29th, CBS News reported<sup>47</sup> General George P. Hays as saying that the Soviets had officially referred to Sellers and Oelsner as hostages. American officials clearly conceived of Sellers and Oelsner as hostages.

In a press conference on August 31st, Secretary of State Dean Acheson had the following response to a question about hostage trading in relation to the Sellers-Oelsner case:

**Journalist:** "Mr. Secretary, there are some suggestions from Vienna that we might have kept this Russian, Barsov, for trading purposes with some of the people that they are holding of ours. What is our attitude on [the] trading of hostages and that sort of thing?"

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<sup>43</sup> "German Says Reds Seized Americans."

<sup>44</sup> "Russians Holding 2 U.S. Youths As 'Hostages' for Own Deserters."

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> "Sellers' Parents 'Relieved'."

<sup>47</sup> "U.S. Officials Appeal to Soviets to Release Two American Youths."

**Secretary Acheson:** “Well, the attitude of this government is that it does not engage in that sort of thing. Mr. Barsov wanted to return to the Soviet Union. He had committed no crime against the United States. We do not engage in holding people and trading them off against other people who have also committed no crimes. Our attitude toward the two students who are being held by the Soviet authorities in the Soviet zone of Germany is that it is an illegal, outrageous and improper thing to do. It is true that these students had passports and were improperly in the zone but they are young people who were doing no harm. Nobody accused them of being spies. Therefore, they should have promptly been put over the border into the American zone. But we would not seize some person who[m] we had no legal right to hold in order to barter him off against one of our own citizens.”<sup>48</sup>

On September 4th, Sellers and Oelsner were removed from solitary confinement and again allowed to live together in the room where they had lived before solitary confinement. On September 5th, they were given shaving equipment and tools for other self care, such as toothbrushes. On September 6th, Soviet military authorities permitted Brigadier General W. W. Jr., chief of the USMLM at Potsdam, to visit Sellers and Oelsner. They were not, however, permitted to talk privately and General Hess was not able to give them any information about the prospects of their release. The Soviets did not allow Sellers and Oelsner to write to their families. According to Oelsner’s account, the Soviets had only scheduled the meeting the previous day. General Hess verified their identity and wanted to know how Sellers and Oelsner had been treated, as well what their movements had been since they were detained. His visit explained their change in condition during the prior two days. The Soviet officers present at the meeting said that decisions about Sellers’ and Oelsner’s detention were to be made by higher authorities and that meetings were to be scheduled through General Ivanov, the chief of staff of the Soviet Forces in Germany.

On September 5th, the US renewed its demand that the Soviet Union release Sellers and Oelsner. US High Commissioner John J. McCloy sent a letter to the Soviet military governor of the Russian Zone, General Vassily I. Chuikov. McCloy and Chuikov

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<sup>48</sup> Transcripts of the Secretary’s Press Conferences

outranked Hays, General Dratvin, and Maslen. Therefore, this letter was a diplomatic escalation by the US and was portrayed as such in the American press. McCloy wrote:

No reply has been received by General Hays from General Dratvin in regard to these individuals [Sellers and Oelsner]. I feel that you may wish to know that the detention of these two individuals by the Soviet military authorities has resulted in wide publicity in the United States and is creating a very bad reaction against the Soviet Union among the people of the United States. The arbitrary detention of these two individuals by the Soviet military authorities for no other reason than their lack of proper documentation has created the impression that the Soviet military authorities are holding these two individuals as hostages for the return of deserters from the Soviet army. It is requested that you give this matter your personal attention and effect the release of these two individuals without further delay.<sup>49</sup>

This letter was widely covered in the American press on September 10th with newspapers around the country running the *AP* and *UP* stories.<sup>50</sup>

Soviet officials never informed Sellers and Oelsner if and when they would be released. They were never told why they continued to be held. Beyond the lack of information, their inquiries were derided and deemed misbehavior while comments by Soviet officials made it seem as though their detention would continue for a long time. This condition led them to take matters into their own hands and they hatched a plan of escape. They would quickly overpower their guards, leave the commandant, and make their way to the British zone. It's unclear why they thought this plan had any chance of success.

Sellers and Oelsner were visited again on September 12th, though this time by an American colonel instead of General Hess. They were reprimanded by the American colonel for their behavior, a fact which they were unsure how to interpret, although Oelsner wrote that he later realized that this was an attempt by the colonel to placate his Russian counterparts and to obtain a more favorable outcome. Following this meeting,

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<sup>49</sup> Telegram #2118.

<sup>50</sup> "McCloy Insists Reds Release Delco Boy, Pal." (*UP*) and "Urge Soviets Release Yanks." (*AP*) Two of many such articles.

Sellers and Oelsner decided to postpone their escape plan until they could interpret the significance of the meeting.

In the latter half of September, nearing two months in Soviet custody, hearing no further word from American officials, and experiencing no material change in their position, Sellers and Oelsner became desperate enough to put their escape plan into action. The relatively mild response by the Soviets to their escape attempt shows how much their situation had changed. On September 20th, after Sellers and Oelsner had been overpowered while violently assaulting their guards, the only sanction they received was the removal of the chairs and chess set from their room as well as security measures, such as having their windows boarded up and their being forced to use a pan in their cell instead of being allowed to leave their room to go to the bathroom. This is striking in contrast to earlier in their detention when they were placed in solitary confinement in underground cells and given very little food for much lesser offenses. Most notably, they were not physically abused by any Soviet soldiers, despite the violence the soldiers had received at their hands. This suggests that, by that time, the young men's release was imminent, and the Soviets did not want them to show any visible signs of mistreatment.<sup>51</sup>

Sellers and Oelsner were released to General Hess on September 28th. He brought them to Hamburg where they were questioned by US officials before returning to the US. The Soviets only informed them of their release within an hour of their being handed over. The only other indication they received was the return of their clothes that morning.

The US government vehemently protested Sellers' and Oelsner's detention following their release. A week afterwards, the US ambassador to the Soviet Union in Moscow, Alan G. Kirk, delivered a protest letter to the Soviet Foreign Office. The letter described the treatment of Oelsner and Sellers as "be[ing] in shocking contravention to the most elementary standards of international decency." It went on to raise "the most energetic protest" against the treatment of American citizens in Soviet custody in the Soviet Zone of Germany more broadly, noting other cases of detention and mistreatment, and declared that the US "expects that those Soviet officials who are responsible for these

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<sup>51</sup> Oelsner.

acts will be given instructions to prevent a recurrence of such incidents.” The letter concluded by “further insist[ing] that the elementary rights of its citizens be observed in the future in accordance with the international comity which governs the conduct of all civilized states.”<sup>52</sup> Kirk’s letter was the last event of the Sellers-Oelsner case.

It seems clear that after initially detaining Sellers and Oelsner on the good faith suspicion that they were spies and then quickly determining they were not, the Soviet Union decided that continuing to hold Sellers and Oelsner could be a useful form of leverage. Whether the Soviet Union had the return of their deserters in mind all along, whether they wanted to find out whether the Soviet deserters were in American hands or not, whether they wanted to test American willingness to engage in hostage diplomacy at the beginning of the Cold War as each side was trying to learn where the other would give, or whether it was some combination of these objectives, the Soviet Union attempted to hold Sellers and Oelsner as hostages. The Soviets may have thought that the longer they held Sellers and Oelsner, the more pressure would mount and thus that the US would be more likely to make concessions. It seems, however, that obtaining the release of Sellers and Oelsner *and* not incentivizing future hostage taking by not acceding to Soviet demands was a much higher priority for the US than extracting concessions from the US was a priority for the Soviets. This reading of the situation is supported by the seniority of the US officials concerned with the case compared to the lesser seniority of their Soviet counterparts combined with US insistence that Sellers and Oelsner be released and that the US would not engage in any “bartering” as Secretary Acheson put it. Whether the Soviets simply sought to test American boundaries and had already accomplished their goals or whether they had been hoping to extract concessions, it seems that they concluded that the costs to continuing to hold Sellers and Oelsner outweighed the potential gains. Regardless, Sellers and Oelsner were held as hostages, were not always treated well, and securing their release required significant effort, sometimes from the highest levels of the American government.

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<sup>52</sup> “Text of U.S. Protest Note to Soviet.”

## Chapter 5, The Coverage of their Case in the Media:

How the media relayed the events detailed in the previous chapter to the public is crucial to understanding how the press coverage of the Sellers-Oelsner case would have affected public opinion. The more anti-Soviet biases that were present in the coverage, the more the case would have made people think badly of the Soviet Union. This chapter first draws on Kriesberg's work examining the biases that pervaded American press coverage of the Soviet Union at the time and then assesses which of these biases were present in the coverage of the Sellers-Oelsner case. In so doing, I draw on examples from a few of the hundreds of newspaper articles about the case that I reviewed. This chapter also examines where Americans got their information about the Soviet Union at the time.

A 1947 analysis<sup>53</sup> of *New York Times* coverage of the Soviet Union between 1918 and 1946 found that while the paper's reporting was consistently factual and its quality high, there were ways in which the *Times*' coverage was less favorable to the Soviet Union than the most neutral coverage would have been. The analysis identified the following trends in the following aspects of coverage. The first aspect is common themes in the coverage's content. Kriesberg found that when coverage of the Soviet Union was negative, Soviet leaders were portrayed as "immoral and unethical" as well as "unjust, unreasonable, and arbitrary," the Soviet government was portrayed as representative of the Russian people's character as well as unlikely to succeed, the Soviet Union was portrayed as a "predatory state," and Soviet leaders and people there were portrayed as "enigmatic." When coverage of the Soviet Union was positive, the Soviet Union's cooperation with the Allies against the Axis was reported, the Russian people were portrayed as "resolute fighters," and the Soviet nation was portrayed as enterprising and forceful. In terms of the attention certain types of content received, Kriesberg found that unfavorable news about the Soviet Union received far more coverage than favorable news, favorable news about the Soviet Union received far more coverage when US-Soviet interests were parallel, and "news about the Soviet Union [was] given relatively

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<sup>53</sup> Kriesberg, p 540-64.



little attention unless it suggest[ed] a crisis in Soviet affairs or US-Soviet relations.” Lastly, Kriesberg found that while methodological flaws in the *Times*’ coverage were quite rare, they consistently cut in the anti-Soviet direction. Six reoccurring flaws were headlines that did not reflect the content of the story, stories that drew on questionable sources of information, the use of emotionally loaded words to describe the Soviet Union, “climactic reporting” that implied crisis in Soviet affairs, reporting that was “pollyannaish” about US-Soviet relations, and usually negative “opportunistic reporting” which was more timely than it was newsworthy.

As far as coverage of my case study is concerned, newspaper coverage typically occurred around major developments in the case. Thus, coverage was regular between mid-August and early-October of 1949. While the coverage consisted almost entirely of news stories (rather than opinion pieces) which accurately reflected the information that the US government had at the time and which was almost always accurate as far as my sources show, the coverage was not without less than strictly journalistic bias. Since the vast majority of newspapers printed content from the *AP* and similar national news organizations, these papers had much more leeway in the headlines they applied rather than in the text of the stories they published. Headlines expressed bias in a variety of ways. First, the Soviets were frequently referred to with somewhat derogatory nicknames such as “Reds” and “Russ.” Headlines also often chose dramatic and somewhat moralizing language over purely descriptive language. For example, an August, 23rd headline in the Rochester, NY *Democrat and Chronicle* read “Reds Seize Two Yanks, Germans Report”<sup>54</sup> while a September, 28th headline in the *Shamokin News-Dispatch* read “2 Youths Say Reds Held Them As Spies.”<sup>55</sup> These headlines are dramatic and immediately cast the Soviet Union in an unfavorable light. The many readers who probably read the headlines and not the stories under them would have come away with the impression that an evil adversary was not treating one’s own well without knowing what had taken place. Headlines also frequently referred to Sellers and Oelsner as “youths,” “lads,” or “college boys,” language which carries connotations of vulnerability

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<sup>54</sup> “Reds Seize Two Yanks, Germans Report.”

<sup>55</sup> “2 Youths Say Reds Held Them As Spies.”

and innocence that likely cause more intense negative reactions against the Soviets. Some newspapers had much more neutrally worded headlines. These provide a striking contrast. For instance, concerning the same two developments in the case, an August, 23rd headline in the *Detroit Free Press* read “U.S. Bicyclists Reported in Russian Hands”<sup>56</sup> and September, 28th headline in the *Dothan Eagle* read “Russians Release Two U.S. Students.”<sup>57</sup>

Beyond the framing of stories with the tone and diction of headlines, newspapers sometimes emphasized the most sensational and abusive facts in their headlines, leading to headlines whose content did not match the day’s primary story. For example, on the 28th of September, the day Sellers and Oelsner were released to American officials and interviewed, *The Bakersfield Californian* ran the headline “Students Tell of Being Held in Russ Dungeons.”<sup>58</sup> It is misleading to emphasize that they were held in “dungeons” and to adopt that characterization without making it clear that it was a word used by Oelsner in interviews to describe where they had been held. Even more than the phrase ‘underground cells,’ “dungeons” has especially evil, fantastical, and medieval connotations. Their release which was the day’s main news and thus the most natural content for headlines was at most implicit in the headline. Again, the *Dothan Eagle* headline from the same day provides a stark contrast. While the *AP*’s reporting was consistently high quality, it did magnify Soviet transgressions and downplay the illegality of Sellers’ and Oelsner’s actions as well as the suspicion that those actions would have reasonably engendered. Thus, the content of the coverage was ever so slightly biased against the Soviet Union as well. The content of newspapers that did not rely on the *AP* and wrote their own coverage, such as big national newspapers and local newspapers in the communities where Sellers and Oelsner came from, largely resembles the content of the *AP* stories and usually used headlines which were neither the most nor the least neutral. This type of coverage of the Soviet Union was typical of the time and is consistent with academic analysis of such coverage.

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<sup>56</sup> “U.S. Bicyclists Reported in Russian Hands.”

<sup>57</sup> “Russians Release Two U.S. Students.”

<sup>58</sup> “Students Tell of Being Held in Russ Dungeons.”

The trends of Soviets being portrayed as unjust and arbitrary, the Soviet Union being predatory, unfavorable news getting more attention, crisis moments getting more attention, headlines not always matching their stories, and loaded language that researchers found in *Times* coverage manifested themselves consistently in the coverage of the Sellers-Oelsner case. The similarity between the press coverage of the Sellers-Oelsner case and other coverage of the Soviet Union suggests that other similar events would have been covered in much the same manner. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the effects of similarly covered events on public opinion would have been the same and that the cumulative effect of such events on public opinion would have been substantial. Thus, the more of these events that there were, the more the American public would have been exposed to coverage casting the Soviet Union as a cruel, dangerous, and immoral adversary that was antithetical to their values. The next chapter will examine the effects of that coverage on broad trends in public opinion.

The public was familiar with the Sellers-Oelsner case through the extensive coverage that it and the US government's responses received in the American press. Thus, many Americans who regularly read newspapers would have been familiar with it. While newspapers in Philadelphia and near Oyster Bay, NY where Sellers and Oelsner respectively grew up covered the story the most, it was covered by newspapers around the country through the *AP*, *UP*, and *INS*. Furthermore, it was covered in national newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. I rely almost exclusively on newspaper coverage for my analysis of how the media covered their case. This is due in large part to the difficulty of accessing other forms of media. I do not think there are significant methodological issues with a focus on newspapers. One reason is that newspapers as a media source were better suited to coverage of the Sellers-Oelsner case than their non-newspaper counterparts. Rarely was the Sellers-Oelsner case one of the day's top five stories. Thus, a radio or television program only covering the day's top stories would likely have neglected it. Likewise, a weekly or less frequently published periodical magazine with a limited number of longer stories about major events and trends would have also tended to neglect the story.

The other main reason that I think I can responsibly rely on newspaper coverage is that at that time, Americans got their news from newspapers far more than any other medium. This finding comes from a 1958 study<sup>59</sup> by Mackinnon et al. which found that when asked where Americans go their information about Russia, 36.5% mentioned newspapers first. The second most mentioned source was “Reading” which was mentioned by 12.1% of respondents and likely included, at least in part, newspapers. Furthermore, many of the respondents who first cited books or television (which was even less prominent in 1949 than it was in 1958) probably also read newspapers. Therefore, if anything, one would expect that newspapers were even more dominant at the time of the Sellers-Oelsner case than they were in 1958. In short, newspapers were both by far the most influential source of information about the Soviet Union as well the best suited to cover the Sellers-Oelsner case. Finally, the evidence indicates that insofar as other media covered the Sellers-Oelsner case, that coverage was very similar to the newspaper coverage. For instance, reports by CBS journalist Bill Downs closely match the newspaper coverage.<sup>60</sup>

#### Chapter 6, The Influence of Events and their Coverage on Public and Elite Opinion:

Drawing on the previous chapter’s analysis of the media coverage that the Sellers-Oelsner case received, this chapter will examine the two sets of opinion which influenced the Cold War from the American side: elite and public opinion of the Soviet Union and the Soviet-American relationship. As noted previously, public opinion of the Soviet Union soured significantly between the end of WWII and the early fifties. While dominant opinion among foreign policy elites did not undergo the same fundamental shift after 1947 that public opinion did because it had soured much more quickly, it was nonetheless strengthened and augmented by new events. This chapter will draw on social psychology to examine how elite and public opinion, especially concerning foreign affairs, are formed, and will assess the likely qualitative effects of the Sellers-Oelsner

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<sup>59</sup> Mackinnon et al, p 415-6.

<sup>60</sup> “U.S. Officials Appeal to Soviets to Release Two American Youths.”

case on these sets of opinion. Furthermore, it will posit that the relationship between the Sellers-Oelsner case and public and elite opinion would have also been observed in many other cases during the same period of time and therefore, that the cumulative effect of these cases was likely significant. That magnitude in turn helps explain how and why this type of event likely contributed to the overall changes in public and elite opinion that occurred at the time. In doing so, this chapter will draw on the historical context, the particular facts of the Sellers-Oelsner case, the changes in public opinion that took place at the time, and the media coverage that their case received, all of which I detailed in the preceding three chapters.

Civilian citizen-centered, highly charged events like the Sellers-Oelsner case affected public and elite opinion in similar yet distinct ways. The connection between these events and elite opinion is more straightforward. First, foreign policy elites, especially those in government, are by definition interested in and paying close attention to foreign policy events. Thus, those events contribute to how these elites think about important foreign policy questions. For some elites, the effects are very direct because those elites are either working on the specific event or are employed by an agency that is. Not only would these elites be knowledgeable of and intellectually connected to the events, but they would also be emotionally and personally connected to them, rendering their conclusions even stronger and more personally influential. Employees at the State Department, for instance, were not only driven by the information they consumed in the media but also by their jobs. Those who worked on the Sellers-Oelsner case had the experience of working to free innocent youths whose unnecessarily long detention strained their families. Those employees whose job it was to correspond with Sellers' and Oelsner's families would have experienced this the most acutely. Somewhat less immediate but nonetheless far more personal than reading the news or discussing the event at a Washington social gathering, every State Department employee had the experience of their boss blasting Soviet behavior as "illegal, outrageous and improper." It defies common sense to think that hearing those words from one's boss and the leader of one's agency would have no effect on one's opinions and emotions. Over time with experiences like this compounding each other, the effects were likely substantial. The

same would have been true for Americans in political and military positions in Germany and Moscow. In this vein, in his book about career State Department officials stationed in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Santis describes how quickly and enthusiastically they responded to clear direction from department leadership.<sup>61</sup> It seems likely that same spirit would also have applied to somewhat less official directives.

Elite foreign policy opinion is driven, in large part, by general assessments of foreign policy issues, such as the Soviet-American relationship, and by general conceptions of other countries, such as the Soviet Union. Social psychologists, most notably Deborah Larson, have applied psychology to understanding the formation of elite opinion, specifically in the Cold War context. The author of *Origins of Containment: a Psychological Explanation* and *Anatomy of Mistrust: U.S.-Soviet Relations during the Cold War*, Larson argues in both her books that for the Cold War to be fully explained, the crucial decision makers and their rationales must be subjected to psychological analysis. Political scientists, such as Ole Holsti, have similarly drawn heavily on psychology to inform their analyses of the Cold War. The human mind, as Larson explains in her article "The Role of Belief Systems and Schemas in Foreign Policy Decision-Making," is incapable of retaining all the information which it initially possesses in its short-term memory.<sup>62</sup> Therefore the brain takes specific inputs from one's short-term memory and translates them into less detailed conceptions and impressions that are retained in one's long-term memory. The composites of these conceptions and impressions on a similar topic, combined with more specific pieces of information and personal experiences, are called schemas. Describing this phenomenon Larson writes: "Schemas include specific instances, exemplars, and analogies as well as the more abstract knowledge found in belief systems. Schema theory recognizes that people frequently approach problems not by applying abstract propositions but by drawing examples from their experience."<sup>63</sup> In other words, in the foreign policy context, elites

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<sup>61</sup> Santis, p 212-3.

<sup>62</sup> Larson, 1994, p 18-21.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p 20.

synthesize everything that they learn and experience into schemas which reflect their reactions to the issues that they deal with.

Importantly, schemas create powerful frameworks for understanding the world and for interpreting events. Therefore, it is quite clear how significant it would be whether a schema is favorable to another country or not and whether a schema understands a relationship as a struggle or a partnership. By the summer of 1949 with the Truman Doctrine two years earlier, the Berlin airlift earlier that year, and a struggle with communism taking place across the globe, abstract belief systems conceiving of the Soviet Union as an adversary would have been solidly in place among elites. In that way all foreign policy elites would have already had some significant, relatively well-developed schema in place. Nevertheless, the Cold War was new enough that these schemas probably did not yet contain as many specific instances and exemplars as they eventually would a decade into the conflict. Furthermore, some schemas probably did not yet include fully formed judgments of all the facets of the Soviet Union and Soviet-American relations. Thus, in the summer of 1949, foreign policy elites were in the process of refining and adding to their Cold War schemas.<sup>64</sup> The events of the Sellers-Oelsner case as well as the experiences of working on it are exactly the types of things that would have helped build or comprise schemas.

It is clear what impacts the Sellers-Oelsner case would have had on schemas. It would have reinforced schemas conceiving of the Soviet Union as cruel and unscrupulous in its use of innocent and illegally detained students as attempted bargaining chips. Relatedly, it would have furthered the idea that the Soviet Union could not be trusted to abide by international laws and norms such as the principle of not detaining people without charges. It also would have reinforced the idea that the Soviet Union was a threat to the wellbeing of Americans arising from the poor treatment of Sellers and Oelsner. More generally, it would have confirmed and deepened the existing schema that the Soviet Union was an evil adversary and would have provided a very specific example which an official might always have as part of their assessment of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>64</sup> Larson, 1997 p 19-25.

Many scholars, chief among them Holsti, have found that one crucial component of foreign policy schemas is whether those schemas conceive of another country as ‘the enemy.’<sup>65</sup> The importance of schematic ‘enemy’ conceptions is that, as both Larson and Holsti found, once another country is the ‘enemy,’ everything it does is seen according to that schema, fairly or not.<sup>66</sup> Thus once ‘enemy’ is part of a schema, it is persistent and self-perpetuating; treating another country as an enemy eventually creates that reality, whether it was fully there before or not. In addition, Stone et al. observed a very strong tendency to always have an ‘enemy’, finding that as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, American press coverage of China suddenly became less favorable, with China having replaced the Soviet Union as the ‘enemy’ in that context.<sup>67</sup> This finding about portrayals of China shows how central having an ‘enemy’ is to schematic thinking. Events such as the Sellers-Oelsner case, in which innocent American citizens were unnecessarily wronged and harshly treated by the Soviet Union, would have served to strengthen the Soviet Union as ‘enemy’ element of schemas.

Another dimension to elite opinion is that of moral perceptions. In the context of the foreign affairs bureaucracy amidst the Cold War, moral contempt for the Soviet Union and its system was influential.<sup>68</sup> It buoyed motivation to defeat the adversary, diminished respect for the adversary, and made the adversary seem more threatening.<sup>69</sup> For instance, John Foster Dulles contemptuously wrote that “Soviet Communism starts with an atheistic, Godless premise. Everything else flows from there.”<sup>70</sup> Emotionally it caused anger, resentment, and disgust, none of which furthered a more amicable relationship with the Soviet Union. Nolan shows how much Soviet treatment of American citizens under its control disgusted and angered high ranking American officials. He quotes Averell Harriman, who at the time was overseeing the administration of the Marshall Plan and who had very senior roles in both the Truman and Kennedy

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<sup>65</sup> Holsti, 1962 p 244, Holsti, 1967 p 16, Robin, p 627., Larson, 1994 p 19, Murray et al., p 456.

<sup>66</sup> Holsti, 1962 p 246, 248, 250, Holsti, 1967 p 16, Larson, 1997 p 19-25.

<sup>67</sup> Stone et al., p 104-5.

<sup>68</sup> Larson, 1997 p 19, Santis, p 211, Harbutt, p 631.

<sup>69</sup> Hurwitz et al, p 9.

<sup>70</sup> Holsti, 1962 p 247.



administrations,<sup>71</sup> as saying “I am outraged ... that the Soviet Government has declined ... that our contact officers be permitted to go immediately to points where our prisoners are first collected, to evacuate our prisoners, particularly the sick.”<sup>72</sup> Even more starkly, Foy Kohler, an American chargé in Moscow who would later serve as an ambassador during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, wrote back to the US that “the Soviet dictatorship is as ruthlessly destructive of personal liberties as any known to history” and proceeded to compare the Soviet Union to Nazi Germany.<sup>73</sup> These are just two of many expressions of these sentiments.

In the Sellers-Oelsner case, the Soviet Union subjected the two Americans to harsh conditions and subjected both them and their families to considerable emotional and psychological hardship for the purpose of extracting concessions. I was not able to obtain any private conversations expressing the same sentiments as Kohler and Acheson for the Sellers-Oelsner case, though these sentiments come through strongly in the public statements US officials made about the case such as Secretary Acheson’s press conference and Ambassador Kirk’s letter. Furthermore, I suspect that if I had been able to get Department of Defense documents in time or if more State Department documents still existed, I would have found records of American officials expressing the same sentiments in private that they expressed in public. In Nolan’s cases as well instances related in *The Diplomacy of Silence*, those sentiments were expressed in private.

Just as in Nolan’s case studies, large numbers of officials worked on the Sellers-Oelsner case.

The size of the list of high ranking political and military officials who were involved in the Sellers-Oelsner case and whom it would have given another negative experience to build schemas disfavorable to the Soviet Union demonstrates just how much of the bureaucracy the case affected. These officials include: Secretary of State Acheson, Lt Gen George P. Hays the High Commissioner for the US Occupation Zone in Germany, Maj Gen Schwarzkopf the provost marshal for the US sector, Robert Murphy a political

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<sup>71</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica.

<sup>72</sup> Nolan, p 528.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p 539.

advisor on Germany who would go on to serve as an ambassador to Belgium and Japan and an undersecretary of state, Alan G. Kirk, the US ambassador to the Soviet Union in Moscow, Brig Gen Walter W Hess the Chief of U.S. Military Liaison Mission to Soviet Zone in Germany, James Riddleberger, a foreign service officer who would go on to lead the Bureau of German affairs as well as serve as an assistant secretary of state and ambassador to three countries, and John J. McCloy the Military Governor and High Commissioner for West Germany who would go to advise every president through Reagan. Furthermore, this already substantial list, which I compiled from mentions of these officials in newspaper articles and State Department documents, understates the reach of the case. It is by no means exhaustive, failing to include young officials who had more junior positions at the time but who would go on to inhabit higher ranking positions, officials who did not have public facing roles such as advisors to Acheson in Washington, and officials who likely worked on the case but do not happen to appear in any of the documents I had gained access to such as Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs George Perkins.

Since the influence of these events on the Cold War's development depends on their effects compounding, it is important to note that not only did similar events occur again and again, but many of the same officials who featured in Nolan's cases also featured in the Sellers-Oelsner case. They include Murphy, Acheson, and Hays on the American side and Dratvin on the Soviet side. For these American officials, the Soviet maltreatment of Americans was a consistent pattern rather than a single occurrence, the handling of which by their Soviet counterparts was always the same. This is expressed in Ambassador Kirk's letter protesting Sellers' and Oelsner's detention and treatment. While the letter focuses primarily on the Sellers-Oelsner case and was clearly prompted by it, it refers to another specific cases as well as to a pattern of unacceptable Soviet treatment of Americans:

The case of Oelsner and Sellers is only the latest of many that have occurred in Germany. Circumstances vary but the basic pattern is the same. United States citizens, whether civilian or military, are arrested, held for long periods of time, sometimes miserably mistreated, and eventually released,

without charges or apologies. The recent case of Pvt. John J. Sienkiewicz, a United States soldier who escaped on Sept, 16, 1949, from a prison in the Soviet sector of Berlin after ten months of imprisonment under brutal and uncivilized conditions, is another illustration in point.<sup>74</sup>

The pattern that this letter refers to is a very narrow category of event that would include neither Nolan's case studies nor events like the 1951 conviction and two year imprisonment of the *AP*'s Prague bureau chief, William B. Oatis, on bogus espionage charges, another case that received considerable attention.<sup>75</sup> That this narrow category got its own high profile response demonstrates both how many of these cases there were and the very adverse reaction that they provoked among American foreign policy elites. Since the type of cases in this narrower category are understudied, they are absent from the historical literature and it is difficult to know exactly how frequently they occurred. What is most important, however, is the American perception that they were a very regular occurrence. Furthermore, the fact that the Sellers-Oelsner case prompted Kirk's protest letter indicates that it was seen as an especially significant case by American officials and suggests that it would have left some sort of lasting impression on them, likely as a part of their larger Cold War schemas. Thus, the significance of the case suggests that it is especially worthy of study to better understand both Soviet-American relations and their development at this time.

In short, while elite opinion was significantly ahead of public opinion and did not undergo very much change after 1947 in terms of how the Soviet Union and Soviet-American relations were fundamentally viewed,<sup>76</sup> it was early enough for elite opinion to be subject to new effects. Elite schemas were not yet either as flush with examples of grievances or as intensely loathing as they would become. Events like the Sellers-Oelsner case which were specific manifestations of larger assessments of the Soviet Union and which led to scathing moral judgements of the Soviets in very concrete terms likely played a significant role in the development of certain facets of elites' schemas. Though

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<sup>74</sup> "Text of U.S. Protest Note to Soviet."

<sup>75</sup> Fainberg, p 26-8.

<sup>76</sup> LaFaber, p 71.

Nolan does not employ the schema concept in discussing the effects of his case studies on foreign policy elites, this finding perfectly matches Nolan's finding that cases of Soviet maltreatment of innocent Americans made elite American views of the Soviet Union more negative and augmented the Cold War.

The connection between events like the Sellers-Oelsner case and public opinion is more complicated and less direct. As opposed to foreign policy elites, it is neither a given that the public pays attention to nor that it particularly cares about foreign policy events and questions which do not directly affect it (major wars with Americans fighting and dying are one of the clear exceptions). Additionally, unlike the elites who comprise the bureaucracy which responds to such events, since there is no direct relationship between the public and the events, the public relies on news coverage to mediate events for it.<sup>77</sup> Therefore it is crucial that the Sellers-Oelsner case received the large volume of media coverage that I analyzed in the previous chapter and that that coverage came in mediums to which many American paid close attention. Thus, the media determined not only what information the public received also the tone with which that information was conveyed.

According to the framework for understanding the role of public opinion in US foreign policy generated by Powlick et al, the general public does not usually pay close attention to foreign policy matters though those matters do sometimes break through and then command considerable attention and media coverage.<sup>78</sup> Sellers' and Oelsner's mysterious disappearance and the significant amount of press coverage that it received likely peaked public interest initially. Once their case had broken through and commanded attention, that in turn brought more coverage and more attention, as well as attention from relevant elites who then had to take managing public sentiment into account when crafting their own responses. The dramatic nature of the Sellers-Oelsner case, centered around the whereabouts and wellbeing of two young Americans, made it a much more compelling story than a similarly high-profile diplomatic disagreement would have been, a reason that the average American might have followed and been invested in the case. That interest and subsequent attention was necessary for the case to have had

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<sup>77</sup> Krishnaiah et al, p 648, Carmichael et al, p 6.

<sup>78</sup> Powlick et al, p 52.

any significant influence on public opinion. Sellers said that in the period immediately following his return, he was sometimes recognized as one of the two youths who had been imprisoned in East Germany and that many people were familiar with the case.<sup>79</sup> His experience is further indication that the Sellers-Oelsner case had, in fact, broken through.

The relationship between media coverage and public opinion has been the subject of a significant amount of research, sometimes specifically in the Cold War context. Studies have consistently found that media coverage affects public opinion, both in terms of the media informing what issues people are thinking about<sup>80</sup> and what people think about particular issues. Two types of relationships emerge. One is that themes in media coverage pertaining to certain foreign policy issues affect the public's views on those issues.<sup>81</sup> The other is that media coverage creates general underlying impressions amongst the public and then, when the public considers a given foreign policy issue, its views of that issue are informed by the underlying impressions that have developed over time.<sup>82</sup> These dynamics are potentially complementary and the ultimate opinions of media consumers are likely a product of both. Both dynamics underscore the influence that media coverage has on public opinion.

Munton, a Canadian Cold War scholar, studied the former dynamic. Looking at coverage of nuclear arms and arms control in the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's preeminent newspaper, he found a strong correlation between the media presenting increased military strength as furthering security and public support for Canada acquiring nuclear weapons, especially among those who paid closer attention to media coverage, strongly suggesting that media coverage was causing their beliefs to change. When themes in media coverage changed and arms control efforts were portrayed as furthering security, public support for arms control increased, again disproportionately among those paying close attention to

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<sup>79</sup> Conversation with Lucy Bell Jarka-Sellers, Sellers' daughter.

<sup>80</sup> Feezell, p 490-2, Carmichael et al, p 6-7, Watt et al., p 428-30.

<sup>81</sup> Munton, p 209.

<sup>82</sup> Hurwitz et al., p 21-23.

media coverage.<sup>83</sup> American scholars have found similar relationships between media coverage and public opinion.<sup>84</sup>

The second, more indirect dynamic, namely that media coverage generates general impressions that in turn affect public opinion of particular foreign policy issues, is more relevant to the Sellers-Oelsner case in which press stories concerned the Cold War but did not explicitly address larger policy issues. Hurwitz et al. put this theory to the test using detailed polling data. Drawing on psychology that I discussed in relation to elite opinion, they propose that similar to elites creating schemas, “in their [the public’s] need to simplify the international environment, individuals rely on more general, abstract beliefs and orientations to evaluate specific foreign issues.”<sup>85</sup> In keeping with this dynamic, they conclude that their “results suggest that beliefs about the basic nature of the Soviet Union operate as central premises in mass belief systems in foreign affairs.”<sup>86</sup>

Hurwitz et al. asked poll respondents about their underlying impressions of the Soviet Union, namely whether it is trustworthy and whether it poses a threat to the US. They also asked respondents generally about militarism and containment postures, whether respondents had a “preference for an assertive stance emphasizing military strength” and whether they “believe it is necessary to limit the influence of communism and the Soviet Union” respectively.<sup>87</sup> Lastly, they tested respondents' support for specific foreign policy positions such as increasing defense spending, aiding the contras, and sending American troops to central America to counter communism. Their findings were statistically very robust. Both respondents who did not trust the Soviet Union and those who viewed it as a threat supported containment and militarism postures at much higher rates. While Hurwitz et al. also polled other factors that might influence public opinion such as party affiliation and level of patriotism among others, they found that, irrespective of these other variables, lack of trust led to greater support for increased defense spending and expanding the US nuclear arsenal, and that viewing the Soviet

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<sup>83</sup> Munton, p 203, 209.

<sup>84</sup> Krishnaiah et al, p 648.

<sup>85</sup> Hurwitz et al., p 21-22.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p 22.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p 16.

Union as a threat led to increased support for expanding the US nuclear arsenal, aiding the Contras, and especially sending troops to central America.<sup>88</sup> Especially for the intents and purposes of this chapter, their keynote finding is that general conceptions of the Soviet Union directly affect support for particular policies.

Relatedly, whether the public thinks regularly about an issue is almost as important for that issue's salience as what people actually think of that issue. Recently, Carmichael et al studied the relationship between media coverage and public concern about climate change. In keeping with the literature that they reviewed, they found that concern rose dramatically as the volume and frequency of media coverage increased.<sup>89</sup> Watt et al. found that the increased salience of issues after media coverage is temporary.<sup>90</sup> Their findings and those of others<sup>91</sup> make clear the importance of regular coverage for an issue to remain salient.

I will now apply these findings about media coverage and public opinion to the Sellers-Oelsner case and its coverage. It defies all logic to think that the detention and maltreatment of two American college students by the Soviet Union would not have made the Soviet Union seem more threatening, an impression that the majority of Americans would come to have.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, it is almost unimaginable that the Soviets' refusal to disclose their detention of Sellers and Oelsner during McCloy's top-priority search would not have made the Soviet Union seem more untrustworthy. Combined with Hurwitz et al.'s research, those effects should have translated into some amount of increased support for more aggressive Cold War policies. During the two-month span in which the case unfolded, there were seven developments which prompted fresh rounds of press coverage. Averaging almost a major development per week, the regularity of the coverage would have kept not only the case but the broader reactions it engendered towards the Soviet Union in the public consciousness for an extended period of time, increasing their salience as the literature suggests. That extended salience would have in

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p 16-9.

<sup>89</sup> Carmichael et al, p 6,7,16.

<sup>90</sup> Watt et al., p 428-30.

<sup>91</sup> Feezell, p 490-2

<sup>92</sup> Hurwitz et al., p 5.

turn made the issue of Soviet transgressions against Americans a more important issue to the public.

Furthermore, the personal, citizen-centered nature of the Sellers-Oelsner case likely made it much more impactful in terms of the public drawing negative moral conclusions about the Soviet Union. The case was the polar opposite of intellectually geopolitical. One can easily imagine a man reading the paper at breakfast and saying to his wife ‘It’s a shame the horrible things those damned Russians are doing to our boys.’ That reaction would be indicative of a strong, negative moral judgement of Soviet behavior and would have contributed to the “images of the USSR”<sup>93</sup> that Hurwitz et al. found were central to the eventual formulation of concrete foreign policy views.

Many scholars including Hinckley and Oldendick et al. have noted how much the Vietnam War fragmented both public and elite foreign policy opinion.<sup>94</sup> Post-Vietnam, large numbers of Americans became skeptical of American Cold War policy while others remained supportive of it.<sup>95</sup> It’s important that this fragmentation had not yet taken place in 1949. In this pre-Vietnam era, the vast majority of the population would much more frequently arrive at the same sets of views when presented with a given Cold War related foreign policy question.<sup>96</sup> Therefore it is likely that the vast majority of the public was drawing the same conclusions from the Sellers-Oelsner case, making its effects on public opinion much less ambiguous and much more potent in terms of pushing opinion strongly in a single direction.<sup>97</sup>

I cannot definitively claim any certain effect of the Sellers-Oelsner case on public opinion. I do, however, show what effect the case would have had and likely did have to some small extent, an effect that would have been magnified to larger significance by other similar cases having the same effects in the same period of time. Furthermore, the effect that the Sellers-Oelsner case likely had fits the changes in public opinion taking place at the time. Public opinion data shows a clear intensification of anti-Soviet

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p 22.

<sup>94</sup> Oldendick et al, p 371, Hinckley, 298-9, Chittick et al., p 201, Murray et al., 477.

<sup>95</sup> Quester, p 647.

<sup>96</sup> Powlick et al, p 35, Hallenberg, p 150.

<sup>97</sup> Hallenberg, p 154.



sentiment between 1946 and the early 1950s.<sup>98</sup> For instance, when asked in January of 1949 if they supported sending aid to Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Government, a containment policy, only 29% of Americans supported it with 54% opposed. By January of 1951, a mere two years later, 54% of poll respondents supported the policy with 32% opposed.<sup>99</sup> Therefore like elites, the public's view increasingly became that the Soviet Union was an evil and dangerous adversary that needed to be contained.

The scholarship and the historical evidence suggest that the Sellers-Oelsner case would have likely had small effects on both public and elite opinion. They also suggest that these effects would have been very similar to those of other similar events during the same period of time, thereby together having a more significant effect on public and elite opinion. The next chapter will examine what the ramifications of these effects would have been on the Cold War.

#### Chapter 7, The Influence of Highly Charged, Personal Events on the Cold War:

In the previous chapter, I examined theories of elite and public opinion formation and applied those theories, as well as empirical research by scholars on the same topics, to the Sellers-Oelsner case. In doing so, I showed why their case and other similar events would likely have made elite and public opinion slightly more hostile to the Soviet Union. Building on the previous chapter, this chapter will explore the theories and empirical findings which connect elite and public opinion to concrete policy decisions. It is impossible to say exactly how much any one factor such as hard security concerns or opposing societal systems, let alone any type of event, contributed to the development of the Cold War. Nonetheless, it is both possible and productive to draw conclusions about the qualitative impact of a certain type of event on the Cold War's development. Similarly, it's possible and productive to draw conclusions about the approximate relative magnitude of a particular type of event's impact. To draw these conclusions, I will draw on extensive scholarship showing how elite and public opinion impact foreign policy

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<sup>98</sup> Quester, p 656, 659-63.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p 662.

decisions and thus how effects on elite and public opinion arising from events like the Sellers-Oelsner case would have likely impacted foreign policy decision making and by extension, the Cold War.

I start with elite opinion by relaying how scholars have shown that it impacts foreign policy decision making. Larson writes in her article “The Role of Belief Systems and Schemas in Foreign Policy Decision-Making” that “Schema theory has the potential to uncover the relationship between policymakers' knowledge and experience and their decisions on current foreign policy issues.”<sup>100</sup> In that article, she explains that schemas affect how policy makers interpret events in turn influencing what policies seem to be the rational responses. She also explains that when policy makers have gaps in their understanding of a given situation as they frequently do, they use existing schemas to fill in those gaps, which can lead to schemas guiding policy making in place of full situational analysis. This can lead to the pursuit of policies that don't best fit a given situation and which perpetuate a given schema. Yet another effect of schemas is that once they are entrenched, while they are still subject to change, they can lead to the dismissal of countervailing evidence. Finally, she explains that schemas can affect policy makers' memories in that what they remember fits their schema rather than reflecting actually what happened. The effect is that policy makers can exit situations drawing the wrong lessons.<sup>101</sup>

In her two books about Cold War history, Larson chronicles how elite schemas and their elements affected foreign policy making.<sup>102</sup> Her understanding of the effects of schemas and their elements on policy making is widely shared though she has articulated the theory most explicitly and comprehensively, which is why I've focused so heavily on her work. Hurwitz et al., Holsti, and George, among many others, have all applied similar theories and observed similar effects.<sup>103</sup> In other words, the schemas that policy makers

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<sup>100</sup> Larson, 1994, p 29.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p 23-9.

<sup>102</sup> Larson, 1985, p 53-54, Larson, 1997, p 21-3.

<sup>103</sup> Hurwitz et al., p 4-6, Larson, 1994, p 19., Lane p 176-7, Khong, Herrmann et al, p 422-4, Holsti, 1962, p 244-6, Holsti, 1967, p 18-24, George, p 220-2.

develop inform the policy decisions they make and can be used to show the likely effects on policy of events that contributed to the formation of those schemas.

Examining the impact of belief systems and national images, both critical elements of schemas, on foreign policy, Ole Holsti uses John Foster Dulles, secretary of state from 1952-59, as a case study. He shows that Dulles' distrust of the Soviet Union ran so deep that he even viewed reductions in the size of the Soviet army with suspicion.<sup>104</sup> Dulles was one of the foremost architects of American Cold war policy during the 1950s, so much so that in relation to the Cold war, the Eisenhower administration has been referred to as the "Eisenhower-Dulles"<sup>105</sup> administration, despite Richard Nixon having been vice president. Therefore, the shape of his schemas had a large impact on American Cold War policy, and by extension, the Cold War. Dulles' distrust of the Soviet Union and thus its negative effects on the Soviet-American relationship are in keeping with Larson's analysis of the effects of mistrust on the part of the larger American foreign affairs apparatus at the time. In her book *Anatomy of mistrust: U.S.-Soviet relations during the Cold War*, she found that a lack of mutual trust between the superpowers increased confrontation and decreased collaboration on issues such as arms control.<sup>106</sup> Holsti's example seems to explain the state of the world at the time. Until détente began in the late sixties, the relationship between the US and the Soviet Union that had deteriorated so much after World War II continued to be very poor. During this period, which culminated in the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, limited progress on arms control was made slowly and painstakingly, as evidenced by the time and difficulty of negotiating the 1963 Test Ban Treaty.

Though no one has conducted a similar psychology-based analysis focused on Secretary Acheson specifically, he held the same position in government and played a very important role in the Truman administration's Cold War policy, very similar to the role that Dulles played in the Eisenhower administration's policy. Thus, the shape of his schemas would also have likely had a significant effect on American Cold War policy

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<sup>104</sup> Holsti, 1962, p 248-9, Holsti, 1967, p 24-7.

<sup>105</sup> Medhurst et al, p. 157.

<sup>106</sup> Larson, 1997, p 19-25.

and by extension the Cold War itself. I focus on Acheson because he was the most senior official who was heavily involved in the Sellers-Oelsner case. In addition to the press conference, that involvement is documented in internal cables that he regularly received concerning developments in the case and asking him to sign off on steps that officials in Germany were considering.<sup>107</sup> The other American officials involved in the case would have been affected in much the same way as Acheson and their schemas would have also informed their policy making. Especially in the cases of those who held senior executive positions within their respective domains such as McCloy, there was ample scope for their schemas to have wide influence on how they conducted policy within those domains.

Another instance in which the effects of elite schemas on Cold War foreign policy preferences (and by extension choices) can be observed is at the conflict's end. Peffley et al.'s examination of changes to public enemy images, a crucial element of schemas, inspired a near replication of their study, this time geared towards elites. Using polling data from before and after the nuclear arms control summits of 1987 and 1988, Peffley et al. had found that improvement in the public's enemy images of the Soviet Union led to support for lower defense spending and less aggressive military policy.<sup>108</sup> Murray et al. conducted almost the same research though they instead examined elites in the period immediately after the Cold War ended. They researched the effects of the end of the conflict on elite belief systems and found that even limited changes to enemy images in those policymakers' belief systems led to concrete changes in certain policy preferences, such as decreased support for containment as well as less enthusiasm for high defense spending.<sup>109</sup> The result is that officials in influential positions who were subject to these changes in preferences would have made less confrontational policy choices vis a vis the Soviet Union/Russia. While the end of the Cold War is obviously a particularly stark change in the situation on which people built schemas, it nonetheless illustrates the powerful effects that schemas have on foreign policy choices and shows that foreign

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<sup>107</sup> Telegram #2118, Telegram #2745, Telegram #2153.

<sup>108</sup> Peffley et al., 453-457.

<sup>109</sup> Murray et al., p 456, 464.

policy preferences change as schemas change. Russian/Soviet ability to obliterate the US many times over did not change at all. Instead, it was changing schemas conceiving of the Soviet Union/Russia as less threatening which led to different policy support. Thus, a strong connection can be observed between schemas and foreign policy decisions.

I now apply these findings to the Sellers-Oelsner case. Insofar as events like the Sellers-Oelsner case combined to make elite schemas towards the Soviet Union more adversarial, as my analysis in the previous chapter suggests they did to some degree, then they would have caused elite foreign policy makers to favor more aggressive policies as the scholarship I've discussed so far in this chapter suggests. These elites would have then taken more aggressive stances, both in the larger geopolitical context as well as in their specific interactions with their Soviet counterparts. Therefore, I think that we can reasonably expect that the composite effect of events like the Sellers-Oelsner would have been to make the Cold War slightly more intense and slightly more adversarial.

Having assessed the impacts of changes in elite opinion on foreign policy, I turn now to the effects of public opinion on foreign policy decision making. Public opinion ultimately influences foreign policy through its effects on elite policy makers. Within the study of the interplay between public opinion and elite opinion regarding foreign policy, there are two schools of thought, namely democratic-responsiveness theory which holds that foreign policy elites are impacted by the views of the public in the formation of policy and also elite theory, which conversely holds that the views of the public are influenced by those of elites. There is evidence to support both<sup>110</sup> and as they are definitely not mutually exclusive and only the former explains the influence of events on foreign policy decisions, I will subsequently ignore the latter in this thesis other than to make a few brief but relevant observations. The first is that insofar as elites are able to exert some amount of influence over the public's foreign policy views, that provides reason for elites to pay attention to those views. Foyle and I share this supposition.<sup>111</sup> Second, it gives them reason to take pre-existing alignment between public and elite views seriously because insofar as those views are already aligned, elites are spared the

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<sup>110</sup> Cunningham et al, p 641.

<sup>111</sup> Foyle, p 144.

time and effort of endeavoring to change the public's views. Furthermore, the uncertainty over whether elites will in fact be able to change public opinion in a given situation should make them hesitant to take the risk that they might not succeed in doing so. Lastly, therefore, unless one has an absolutist belief in the elite theory and sees no validity in democratic-responsiveness theory whatsoever, the points I've just raised about elite theory actually support the simultaneous existence of democratic-responsiveness theory. In the rest of this chapter, I will operate under democratic-responsiveness theory and focus on public opinion impacting elite decision making.

Research from Risse-Kappen and Cunningham et al. among many others provides overwhelming support for the democratic-responsiveness theory, suggesting that public opinion does, in fact, affect elite foreign policy decisions, especially in democracies.<sup>112</sup> Scholars have identified a number of different mechanisms behind this effect. One foundational mechanism is that elites cannot rely on always being able to convince the public to support the foreign policy that they would prefer,<sup>113</sup> or at least at a minimum, that this is usually a long difficult process.<sup>114</sup> Therefore, elites are forced to take public opinion into account. One way this mechanism plays out is that public opinion constrains foreign policy elites, namely that they decline to pursue certain policies if those policies do not have sufficient public support.<sup>115</sup> Another way is that public opinion will push elites to discontinue or alter a given ongoing foreign policy because it is unpopular in its current form.<sup>116</sup> A third is that foreign policy elites are pressured to move policy in a certain publicly supported direction and thus potentially to move in directions that they would not otherwise take.<sup>117</sup> A slightly different mechanism, proposed by Risse-Kappen, is that public opinion on foreign policy affects the formation of elite coalitions with a country's domestic politics and that these, within the country's structural context, affect the country's foreign policy. He found that the US Government, because of its relatively

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<sup>112</sup> Risse-Kappen, p 510, Powlick et al, p 52, Hallenberg, p 177, Cunningham et al, p 654. Herron et al., p 454, Hinckley, 296-7.

<sup>113</sup> Oldendick et al, p 381, Foyle, p 143.

<sup>114</sup> Hurwitz et al., p 22, Risse-Kappen, p 482.

<sup>115</sup> Powlick et al, p 52.

<sup>116</sup> Risse-Kappen, p 502.

<sup>117</sup> Foyle, p 145-6.

open system, is more impacted by public opinion than otherwise similar countries such as France.<sup>118</sup>

These mechanisms by which public opinion influences foreign policy are not, however, uniformly applicable. Foyle found that while, across the board, policy makers do take public opinion into account, their normative views as to the role that public opinion should play in policy making combined with their views of whether considering public opinion is necessary affect how much influence public opinion actually has. Based on these dimensions he identifies different orientations that policy makers may hold. One orientation consists of those who think that public opinion should play no role at all because public opinion pressures are inherently less informed than elite experts, only leading to worse outcomes, and because public support is not necessary to successful policy. Right or wrong, this orientation affords public opinion the least influence on the conduct of foreign policy. Even this orientation, however, is not insulated from the dynamic that if a given policy is hugely unpopular and the public's opposition cannot be changed, the policy is unviable. Normatively similar, some policy makers do not want public influence to guide policy formation but believe that public support is important and willingly take it into account as much as they feel that they need to. This group affords public opinion somewhat more influence. The other two groups, which normatively believe that public opinion should guide policy making to some extent, afford public opinion the most influence.<sup>119</sup> Foyle documents that both Eisenhower and Dulles believed that even though policy makers should be the ones deciding the direction of policy, for foreign policies to be viable, they had to receive public support. Dulles said that "[for] foreign policy to be successful [, it] must be supported and understood by the people."<sup>120</sup> He concludes that this orientation informed how Eisenhower and Dulles handled the US response to the First Taiwan Strait Crisis in line with how one would have expected.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Risse-Kappen, p 510-2.

<sup>119</sup> Foyle, p 145-7.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p 150-7, quote 155.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-5.

Historians of the Cold War have found that attention to public opinion was widespread among foreign policy elites at the time, with both Feis and Santis describing such attention to public opinion in their books.<sup>122</sup> Evidence of elite attention to public opinion is also present in the Sellers-Oelsner case. Internal State Department documents confirm what McCloy wrote in his letter to his Soviet counterpart, namely that the public attention the Sellers-Oelsner case received did not go unnoticed by American elites. In a meeting on August 31st in which the Sellers-Oelsner case was discussed, both McCloy and Hays mentioned the reaction of the public with Hays remarking that “It seemed to create a good deal of disturbance back home.”<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, Foyle found that public opinion influenced certain aspects of the Truman Administration's foreign policy specifically and that Byrnes, Truman's first secretary of state, believed in a strong role for public opinion in foreign policy making.<sup>124</sup> What these various historical findings show is that the Truman Administration, its members, and the Eisenhower administration that succeeded it were all impacted by public opinion, a finding that is in line with the broader literature. By extension, these findings suggest that it is highly likely that the foreign policy elites most directly involved in the Sellers-Oelsner case would have responded to public opinion in a similar way to how their colleagues did.

The American ability to wage the Cold War was enabled by the massive deployment of public resources which required strong public and congressional support.<sup>125</sup> Therefore, as the implications of the findings I've just discussed dictate, it was critical that the public supported those policies. As the Cold War intensified post WWII, policy makers developed negative schemas of the Soviet Union more quickly than the public's views of the Soviet Union soured. Therefore, it seems likely that the operative influence of public opinion of foreign policy elites was to constrain their ability to wage the Cold War more aggressively. Here the concept of “anticipated future opinion”<sup>126</sup> is particularly relevant. It stipulates that elites are willing to go ahead of the public in the

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<sup>122</sup> Feis, p 191, Santis, p 2, 207.

<sup>123</sup> Records of the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany

<sup>124</sup> Foyle, p 145-7.

<sup>125</sup> Jervis, p 198.

<sup>126</sup> Powlick et al, p 52



moment to where they think public opinion will end up, in keeping with the finding that opinion constrains elite decision making but allowing for slightly more leeway among elites.

Later in the conflict, when the enmity between the US and Soviet Union was equally shared by the public and elites, the conflict was then driven by both public and elite sentiment against the Soviet Union, and each one might have hindered any movement toward détente. Initially however, in the conflict's early years, the public lagged behind elites. Therefore, anything that drove public opinion in the same direction as elite opinion and thus lessened the constraining effect of the public was necessary for the development of the Cold War, enabling it to intensify more quickly. Additionally, any shifts in public opinion which drove it towards elite opinion and which were not caused according to the elite theory are especially significant. They are significant because one can say that the source of these helps explain why the Cold War developed as it did.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Hurwitz et al.'s research strongly suggests that underlying public conceptions of the Soviet Union caused the public to be much more likely to support certain types of Cold War policies.<sup>127</sup> This finding, combined with the findings discussed in the latter half of this chapter that foreign policy makers are attentive to public opinion, allows me to draw definite conclusions about what the likely impact of events like the Sellers-Oelsner case on the Cold War would have been. The likely effect of these events in which the Soviet Union treated Americans poorly was that the American public increasingly viewed the Soviet Union as a morally lacking and untrustworthy threat, and as an adversary which needed to be countered. These perceptions then translated into support for stronger and more aggressive Cold War policies. For policy makers, this public support for such policies would have given them more political support to pursue those more aggressive policies, lessening the constraining effects of public opinion. Furthermore, if the public was ever ahead of elites on some issue, might have pulled them in the direction.

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<sup>127</sup> Hurwitz et al., p 17-9.

In assessing the impact of citizen-centered, highly charged and highly covered events, it is useful to consider the following counterfactual, namely that they had never taken place. While the Cold War would have still occurred due to the causes I discussed in the chapter about the Cold War's history, it might have been slightly less intense, it might not have become so intense so quickly, or it might have had a slightly less moral tenor. These hypothetical outcomes are explained by slightly less negative American perceptions of the Soviet Union. These less negative perceptions would have made the gulf between elite and public opinion slightly wider which would have likely caused the public to exert a larger restraining effect on policy makers. Such an effect would have led to less aggressive Cold War policies and thus a less intense overall conflict. Furthermore, without public views of the Soviet Union based on the maltreatment of one's tribe, the negative American perceptions of the Soviet Union would have been more abstract and less visceral. That would have made the tenor of the relationship more adversarial and less inimical.

It is impossible to conclude how much of an impact the Sellers-Oelsner case had on the Cold War. In all likelihood, on its own, the impact of the Sellers-Oelsner case was almost negligible. What the Sellers-Oelsner case does show, however, are the mechanisms by which such cases would have impacted the Cold War. Insofar as their case strengthened public perceptions that the Soviet Union was a threat and that it could not be not be trusted, they increased the public's support for more forceful policies to combat the Soviet Union. This effect on public opinion in turn affected policy makers, allowing them to enact more confrontational, aggressive policies that would have intensified the Cold War more quickly. Thus, when the Sellers-Oelsner case is not taken in isolation and its likely qualitative impact is magnified by other similar cases' impacts in the same period of time, it seems that through their effects on public opinion, these cases did have a quite modest yet significant impact on the Cold War.

Chapter 8, Conclusion:

The first five years of the Cold War were an extraordinary period in history. Incredibly quickly the US and Soviet Union went from wartime allies to ardent adversaries, creating a conflict that would define the world for the next half century and beyond. In order for that shift to occur so rapidly, the US and Soviet Union had to develop markedly different conceptions of each other than they had just had and had to view each other with newly potent fear and suspicion. Especially in the United States, not just elites but also the general public had to experience parallel shifts in their conceptions of the Soviet Union. While historians have identified crucial, mostly geopolitical events, underlying societal differences, and geopolitical competition as the predominant causes of this shift, there were other types of smaller events and other less salient dynamics which also contributed to the development of animosity between the two countries.

This honors thesis evaluates the effects of highly charged, highly covered, and civilian-centered, less geopolitical events on the development of the Cold War during its early years. As a case study, it uses the heretofore unstudied two-month imprisonment in Soviet custody in East Germany and the eventual release of American students Sellers and Oelsner. In order to evaluate the effects of such cases, this thesis proposes two sequences of effects which relate this type of event to Cold War foreign policy decision making. One traces the effects of the case on elite opinion and the other its effects on public opinion.

The elite opinion sequence starts with the application of Larson's and Holsti's psychological schema research which shows that elites develop broad impressions of other countries and foreign policy questions through a combination of intellectual understandings and specific exemplars. I show both how the Sellers-Oelsner case likely would have functioned as an exemplar in a Cold War schema and how it could have contributed to a larger intellectual understanding of the Soviet Union. I then turn to their research showing that elite schemas had large impacts on American foreign policy formation during the Cold War. I show how schemas made more distrustful and adversarial by events like the Sellers-Oelsner case would have led to more aggressive and more uncompromising foreign policy decisions and, by extension, a more intense Cold War. I therefore propose that compounding over years, the many cases like the Sellers-

Oelsner case exerted a modest yet significant contributing effect on the quick development of the increasingly adversarial Cold War.

The public opinion sequence is more complex than the elite one. First, this thesis draws on studies of news coverage of the Soviet Union at the time and finds that many of the common media biases against the Soviet Union manifested themselves in the extensive press coverage of the Sellers-Oelsner case, making a damning set of facts even seem even worse. Next, it employs studies showing that press coverage affects public opinion to show that the press coverage of the Sellers-Oelsner case almost certainly had such an effect. I subsequently draw on Hurwitz et al.'s empirically supported theory of Cold War public opinion formation which shows that like elites, the public creates schematic general understandings of the conflict and the Soviet Union. I then show how press coverage of the Soviets' maltreatment of Sellers and Oelsner would have contributed to public impressions that the Soviet Union was an untrustworthy, threatening force. Based on the creation of these impressions, I employ Hurwitz et al.'s findings that these specific impressions translate into increased support for containment policy and increasing the size of the military. I finally turn to repeated findings that public opinion and public support for certain policies affect the decisions of foreign policy makers. Thus, insofar as public opinion pushed policy makers towards these policies, public opinion intensified the Cold War. In summary, I show how, through this sequence of effects, events like the Sellers-Oelsner case would likely have led to a more intense Cold War. Therefore, as in the case of the elite opinion sequence, I propose that compounding over years, the many cases like the Sellers-Oelsner case exerted a modest yet significant contributing effect on the quick development of the increasingly adversarial Cold War.

While the sequences of effects that I propose fit the Sellers-Oelsner case well, they should be applied to a wide variety of different types of cases to see whether they continue to provide a reasonable link between the events of a particular case and the making of relevant policy. It would be ideal to do this with both widely studied cases like the Iranian Hostage Crisis as well as obscure cases. Here comparative work that applies the sequences of effects to a number of cases and evaluates them side by side would be

particularly useful. I hope to see that work done whether it uses the Sellers-Oelsner case or not.

I was not able to do intensive research into the careers and biographies of the high-ranking American officials who were involved in the Sellers-Oelsner case. Instead, to deduce the likely effects that the case had on them, I relied on a combination of their documented involvement in the case and general theories of elite opinion formation. I hope biographically oriented research into the same effect will be conducted for this and other similar cases.

There are also many particular facets of the Sellers-Oelsner case that go beyond the scope of this honors thesis. One such facet is the role that Sellers' and Oelsner's privileged backgrounds played in the American government's response to their case. Both of their families were wealthy and well-connected and leaned on their connections, facts that were frequently noted in press coverage which archaically described them as "socially prominent."<sup>128</sup> Oelsner's father was the CEO of an international shipping business. Furthermore, those connections included personal relationships with then-current and former high-ranking State Department officials. Sellers' mother, Therese Tyler Sellers, was the cousin and god daughter of former American Ambassador to the Soviet Union William C. Bullitt and Assistant Secretary of State Murphy, who played a large role in the case throughout its duration, was a family friend of the Oelsners.<sup>129</sup> Did who Sellers and Oelsner were cause the government to take their case more seriously and respond to it more quickly? A similar question can be asked of the Soviet government. While it's impossible to know how much the Soviets knew about Sellers and Oelsner and how well they understood the significance of what they knew in American society, the Soviets' hours of grilling Sellers and Oelsner about every detail of their lives likely gave them at least some idea that Sellers and Oelsner were atypically well connected. Did this lead to better treatment of Sellers and Oelsner and potentially hasten their release?

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<sup>128</sup> "Russians Holding 2 U.S. Youths As 'Hostages' for Own Deserters."

<sup>129</sup> "Sellers' Parents 'Relieved'." and "Russians Holding 2 U.S. Youths As 'Hostages' for Own Deserters."

I hope that all these themes and questions will be the subjects of future research, either in the context of this case or others. In general, I hope that the detailed introduction of this case into the historical record will lead it to be used in future research of any topic.

The most important conclusion of this thesis is not the likely effect of the Sellers-Oelsner case on the Cold War in and of itself. Rather it concerns the mechanisms by which it and other similar cases likely had some slight eventual effect on policy. Thus, the Sellers-Oelsner case contains potentially important lessons for current and future foreign policy makers. Because citizen-centered events are compelling and receive media coverage, and because that coverage affects public opinion and in turn foreign policy, government choices that create and respond to these events have indirect impacts on future international relations. If governments seek to lessen tension, then they should seek to minimize this type of event. If, on the other hand, a government *is* seeking to foster antagonistic public opinion or lower-level elite opinion against another country, then events such as these would be one means of accomplishing such changes in opinions of a relationship. While these lessons are relevant to any US-foreign country relationship, the increasingly intense great power competition between the US and China is likely to be by far the most consequential of these relationships. As some commentators<sup>130</sup> raise the prospect of Sino-American relations potentially coming to resemble the Cold War in certain ways, the Chinese and American governments would do well to keep the lessons of the Sellers-Oelsner case in mind as they shape what may well be the most significant bilateral relationship of the 21st century.

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<sup>130</sup> Myre.

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