William Allen White, editor and publisher, Emporia Gazette, 1929.
The “Russian” Adventures of
Henry and Me:
William Allen White and
Henry Justin Allen in Stalin’s Russia

by Norman E. Saul

The title of this article regarding the visits of the prominent Kansas editors and publishers William Allen White and Henry Justin Allen to Russia in 1933 paraphrases one of White’s best-known books, *The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me*. Published in 1918 as a semi fictionalized account of White and Allen’s 1917 visit to France, the work reflects the men’s experience as representatives of the American Red Cross. They were among the first on hand to welcome initial contingents of American troops to the Western Front of the Great War. In *Martial Adventures*, White captured the tenor of the times, the pathos and horror of the war, with feeling, objectivity, and a sense of humor. He described, for example, the sound and shock of an incoming bombardment as being like picking up the Haynes’s hardware store down the street in Emporia, shaking it up, and dropping it back down.1 The book certified White’s reputation as a preeminent journalist and master teller of American life and experience at home and abroad.

Henry Allen, White’s longtime friend and political alter ego, seemed to just be along for the ride in France. Allen stayed on with the Red Cross through 1918, however, and rode the publicity of White’s book to victory in the Kansas gubernatorial election in November 1918, thanks to White’s skillful campaign management in Allen’s absence. Allen (1868–1950), who was the same age as White, was born in Pennsylvania but moved with his family to Kansas in 1870. Twenty years later he graduated from Baker University in Baldwin and began a career in journalism as editor of the *Manhattan Nationalist* in 1894. He subsequently ran newspapers in Salina and Ottawa and then to the *Wichita Beacon* (1907–1928) as publisher and editor, as White was for the *Emporia Gazette*. Naturally, they became close associates but also at times rivals. They obviously enjoyed jousting on issues and traveling together.

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Unlike White, Allen never published a major book, but he had political ambitions. He ran unsuccessfully for governor of Kansas on the Progressive Party ticket in 1914, then won election as a progressive Republican in 1918, succeeding another Kansas editor, Arthur Capper. After his tenure as governor ended in 1923, Allen was appointed U.S. Commissioner for the humanitarian organization Near East Relief, focusing on Armenia and Ukraine. He returned to national politics in 1928 as director of publicity for the Republican Party. Following Kansas Senator Charles Curtis’s resignation in 1929 (to become Herbert Hoover’s vice-president), Allen was appointed to serve temporarily in Curtis’s place, but lost the special election in November 1930 to Democrat George McGill of Wichita.2

As recounted in the winter issue, White had developed a serious interest in the events surrounding the Russian Revolution and the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. His eagerness to attend the proposed 1919 Prinkipo conference as an official observer for the United States reflected that deep interest. This meeting was an attempt by the peacemakers at Paris to bring the various Russian political factions, including the Bolsheviks, together to try to sort out their differences in a neutral setting. To White chagrin, this conference failed to take place, in large part because the numerous anticommunist factions in Paris (those supporting Paul Miliukov, the largely discredited Alexander Kerensky, and the White Russian army commanders Admiral Alexander Kolchak and General Anton Denikin and also those supporting the restoration of the Romanov dynasty) refused to participate with the Bolsheviks, then in power in Moscow. But White’s interest in Russia and Russians endured as he sought to educate the Kansas and American public.3

Throughout the 1920s, White’s interest in Russia remained evident in his editorials for the Gazette, syndicated columns, and extensive correspondence. He gained inspiration from a fellow Republican “maverick,” Raymond Robins, who had served as a Red Cross officer in Russia from 1917 to 1918. Robins opposed military intervention in the Russian Civil War and supported official recognition of the Soviet Union. Also sympathetic to reaching an understanding with Bolshevik Russia were fellow journalists Walter Lippmann and Harper’s Weekly editor Norman Hapgood. Both strongly objected to military intervention—specifically the blockade of Soviet Russia during the “Red Scare” of 1919—and dismissed as ridiculous any serious communist threat to America, arguing that the best antidote to communism was American social and economic advancement.4

White—perhaps influenced by his conversations with Samuel Harper in 1917 and early 1918—had made his position on Bolshevism clear in a letter to a friend, and he remained consistent:

2. Allen also held controlling interest in the Wichita Beacon. Reelected in 1932 in the Franklin Roosevelt sweep, McGill was only one of four


It can never take hold in a community where the majority of the laboring men own their own homes and the majority of farmers own their own land. It appeals to the landless and the homeless. The most stabilizing influence in any country is the ownership of a bit of ground. The wisest statesmanship is that which will enable every individual to have that stake, that little possession.5

Lippmann, Hapgood, and Allen, along with White, welcomed the substantial aid provided to Russia by Herbert Hoover’s American Relief Administration from 1921 to 1923. Even earlier, White had let it be known to Hapgood and others that he would gladly serve on another rumored special commission to Russia, a position for which he was being considered. Colonel Edward House, Woodrow Wilson’s chief adviser, responded to Hapgood’s suggestion: “I do not think a better solution could be made for a member of the proposed Russian Commission than William Allen White. However, the situation at present is so confusing that I hardly know how to advise. I shall be glad to warmly recommend his appointment.” White, along with the Lippmann, planned a visit to Soviet Russia as part of Sherwood Eddy’s annual tour group in 1926, but the trip was aborted because his wife, Sallie Lindsay White, was ill.6

White continued to ascend the ranks of America’s political and social commentators, rivaling and respected by all contemporaries, but was not fully appreciated as the voice on international affairs that was demonstrated in his Emporia Gazette editorials. Those in the Eastern establishment looked forward to his semiannual visits to Washington, Philadelphia, Princeton, and New York. The ten Santa Fe trains a day that stopped in Emporia delivered a who’s who of American political and literary personages to his front porch. He wrote and received around fifteen letters a day, not including the numerous telegrams and telephone calls received and sent. White was enamored with the telephone and virtually lived by the typewriter, the telephone, and, of course, the printing press. Adding to this were the many person-to-person conversations at home and away.7

William Allen White’s dedication to addressing major national issues and his belief in the importance of informing the public on international issues naturally rubbed off onto Henry Allen. As publisher of the

Wichita Beacon, Allen strove for an honest and moderate Republican Kansas, moving the state firmly into the national spotlight during the “progressive” era. Allen might have been White, except that White had already won national recognition for his books, leaving Allen in his literary shadow but with time to involve himself with politics. After his terms as governor, Allen’s interest in international issues was reignited by his service as a fill-in as senator in 1929 and by his involvement in Near East relief in the 1920s.8

White and Allen often took to the road, speaking at a variety of occasions and turning down others. Few texts can be found, however, as both disliked prepared speeches. When Carl Ackerman, an associate editor of the New York Times (and also a veteran of reporting on revolutionary Russia), asked White for a copy of a speech he had made in Philadelphia, White responded that he had none. “It was a blithe, gay, irresponsible, impromptu melee in which I left the young people to ask questions and I answered, which is my favorite indoor sport.”9

White also had a taste of real politics when, in 1924, he ran for governor—not really to attain the office but to wage a campaign against the Ku Klux Klan. For his efforts, White won commendation in Eastern political circles and saw


9. White to Carl Ackerman, March 14, 1924, C, folder Ackerman, box 80, White Papers.

Kansas become one of the first states to outlaw the Klan. Meanwhile, the Harding administration firmly established nonrecognition of Soviet Russia as the official policy of the United States, with Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes its chief architect. In fact, nonrecognition of the largest country in the world was a formality that placated conservative, ethnic, and religious sectors. Economic and cultural relations between the two countries actually expanded in scope in the 1920s. Americans traveled to Soviet Russia with the blessings of the Soviet consulates in Berlin, Montreal, and other European cities in granting visas, while Boris Skvirsky, director of the Russian Information Bureau in Washington, served as an unofficial ambassador of the Soviet state in negotiating visas, reuniting families, and solving financial complications. The hypocrisy of these arrangements did not elude White, nor many others.

The Democratic Party was generally inclined toward accommodation but had constituencies who were strongly opposed: Polish and Jewish immigrants, Catholics, and labor unions. The nonrecognition issue thus blurred party lines, but William Allen White was among a number of influential Republican progressives who were convinced that the early rationale for nonintervention was fading, and the ascendancy of Democrat Franklin Roosevelt to the presidency in 1933 would usher in change. This directly influenced Allen and White’s decision to travel to Russia in 1933.

White thought all along that military intervention, naval blockades, and political nonrecognition were not only bad ideas but also irrational. Allen went even further, praising the accomplishments of a new, progressive Russia diverging from its revolutionary past. The Soviet Union boasted impressive economic advances in the early 1930s as a result of the Five Year Plans, while the West endured the effects of the Great Depression. White’s friends and associates who had visited the country, such as Norman Hapgood, Theodore Dreiser, Raymond Robins, Sinclair Lewis, and Edna Ferber, had similar views. Ferber had just returned from Russia as White was preparing to go there. “It is incredible, and the most interesting thing I’ve seen in my life,” she wrote White. He agreed after his trip: “We stayed there two weeks—two gorgeous weeks—and saw the world turned upside down.”

Walter Lippmann, a prominent author and newspaper columnist and good friend of White, was also sympathetic to reaching an understanding with Soviet Russia in the wake of the revolution. Both Lippmann and Harper’s Weekly editor Norman Hapgood strongly objected to military intervention, the blockade of Soviet Russia during the “Red Scare” of 1919, and dismissed as ridiculous any serious Communist threat to America, arguing that the best antidote to communism was American social and economic advancement. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.


12. White to Edna Ferber, October 23, 1933; and Ferber to White, August 7, 1933, C, folder Ferber, box 202, White Papers.
Going to Russia in 1933 was not such a novel, nor yet an easy adventure. Sherwood Eddy, a former YMCA official in revolutionary Russia and an advocate of recognition, had organized several tours to the new Soviet Russia in the 1920s. The object of the tours was education as well as general tourism, and Eddy promised interviews with prominent Soviet officials as a reward for signing on. Supported by William Barber, director of the Bureau of University Travel, Eddy sought recruits among the elites of Washington, D.C., and the nation, with an emphasis on journalists, educators, and congressmen; he held out the carrot of assistance in obtaining material to publish articles about the trip. In 1933 Eddy specifically promised Henry Allen an opportunity to visit a Russian collective farm and wondered if he could bring along some friends. Allen reported to White that Eddy wrote, “It’s like visiting a western border mining camp.” Eddy’s “seminar” eventually numbered about thirty, but most joined for only part of the trip or skipped in and out. Allen, in fact, went to Bucharest first to visit his daughter, who was married to the U.S. minister to Romania, and to leave his wife there. He then went to Berlin to join the tour.13

William Allen White’s foray into the communist world was made directly from London by passage on a Soviet ship to Leningrad. He later recounted his impressions for readers of the Gazette: “The Soviet ship was as Russian as Russia. Our first meal on the boat was breakfast.” After describing the impressive quantity and variety of cold meats and cheeses and copious egg dishes, he added, “and a quart bowl of caviar. The second or third morning they put on two bowls of caviar, one pink caviar, which I mistook for currant jam. . . . All through the meal were two kinds of bread—white bread and Russian black bread, sour, heavy, unpalatable bread that I tried to eat toasted but it almost broke my teeth.”14

The ship stopped for two days in Hamburg—a city “full of Nazis and visiting Fascists”—to take on freight, and White was relieved to re-embark for lunch: “At luncheons on the boat the really Russian food appeared—borsch, a beet soup with cabbage and sour cream, pretty good if you like it, and all sorts of Russian entres [sic], strange, weird and altogether delicious foods if one has an adventurous stomach as we have. We enjoyed the Russian cooking and the Russianer it got the better we liked it and the more we ate.”15

Noting that such food would be fattening and “bad for the figure,” White added, “Still in all Russia I never saw a fat man or a stout woman; though I searched for one for weeks.” When White landed in Leningrad without the proper visas, an Intourist official who rescued his party from a hotel impasse turned out to have spent some time in Leavenworth and to be a former avid reader of the Gazette. White was quick to ask, “Lansing [state] or the federal penitentiary?” “The federal penitentiary,” he responded; while living in the United States as a young man, White’s communist rescuer had been a “wobbly” (a member of the International Workers of the World).16

White and Allen each spent two weeks in Stalin’s Russia in August 1933. While Allen, who arrived by train from Berlin, stayed with the agenda of Eddy’s tour group and saw more of the countryside, White concentrated his time in wining and dining the resident Moscow American correspondents—Walter Duranty, Junius Wood, Eugene Lyons, and especially Maurice Hindus. Although White, as well as Allen, made arrangements with press syndicates to write columns that essentially paid for their sojourns in Russia, neither sent material directly from Russia but rather waited until after recrossing the border. Thus, they had an advantage over resident reporters because they avoided any Soviet interference and because they had no future plans that might be compromised as a result of their work. The regular reporters knew this and intentionally provided information that could not easily be published from Moscow.

Thanks to his many well-known publications, White had guaranteed audiences for his Russian articles by contract.


14. William Allen White, “Some Notes on Russia,” Emporia Gazette, October 27, 1933; see also Emporia Weekly Gazette, November 2, 1933.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid. This was probably George Andreychin, a Bulgarian immigrant to the United States, who became a member of the IWW (International Workers of the World, generally referred to as “Wobblies”) during World War I, was arrested, and later deported in 1919 to Soviet Russia, where he had never resided. He found a position with Intourist, the Soviet official travel agency, especially working compatibly with the American embassy personnel later in 1933 and 1934 in securing housing and other facilities. For more on him and his sudden disappearance, see Charles E. Bohlen, Witness to History, 1929-1969 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 22-23.
with the North American Newspaper Alliance, owned and managed by John Neville Wheeler and informally known as the “Wheeler Syndicate.” Its many subscribers included the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Emporia Gazette; White thus joined a list of distinguished contributors that included Ring Lardner, Grantland Rice, Edna Ferber, Dorothy Thompson, Joseph Alsop, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. The Wheeler Syndicate was probably most famous, however, for hiring Ernest Hemingway to cover the Spanish Civil War in 1937.  

Allen signed with the even larger McClure Newspaper Syndicate. Mainly known for comic strips, it also included the New York Evening Post, which had the largest circulation in the country at the time, and the Detroit Free Press, whose publisher was an old friend of Allen. Grove Patterson, editor of the Detroit Free Press and also a participant in Eddy’s Russian tour group, actively promoted Allen’s columns in over a dozen other newspapers, earning Allen’s gratitude. Although many others had visited Russia in the early 1930s and wrote about their impressions, White and Allen probably had the largest audiences because their articles appeared in newspapers such as the New York Times and the New York Evening Post at a time when Russia was drawing considerable attention in America.

White broke into print first, on October 1, 1933, with a center column and two more on the next page of the editorial section of the Sunday New York Times, entitled “New Russia Found Much Like the Old.” He opened by describing an interview with the editor of Izvestia, the official government newspaper, about his early revolutionary efforts to obtain funds for underground publications; White noted that at the same time Joseph Stalin was raising money by robbing banks. A keen student of history, White cited precedents of Americans assisting Russia, such as John Paul Jones serving as an officer in the Russian navy during the reign of Catherine the Great, and noted that Americans were currently encountering problems similar to Jones’s: “They are invariably met with secret sabotage, with studied indifference, with

17. For an interesting account of the management of American information, see John Wheeler, I’ve Got News for You (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1961). Regarding whether the syndicates paid full expenses, another Kansas editor, Charles F. Scott of Iola, reported that White had cabled his son in Emporia, “Cable me some money immediately; mother has bought everything but transportation home.” “Author’s Wife Tours Europe ‘Shop-to-Shop,’” Washington Post, October 9, 1933, 9.
18. Allen to M. A. Raines, October 30, 1933; Grove Patterson to Allen, October 19, 1933; and Allen to Patterson, November 3, 1933, C, folder Russia correspondence, box 135, Allen Papers.
intrigue, neglect and an inflexible incompetence which is a heaven-sent gift to the Russians. They have no sense of efficiency as Americans know the word. Unlike the English, the Russians are willing to try anything once and spoil it.”19 He also acknowledged the suppressive role of the secret police but recalled that this was nothing new, as it had prevailed in imperial Russia. Adopting the Soviet First Five-Year Plan rhetoric, White added,

Yet the machine moves; Russia goes on. The great industrial enterprises on the rivers and in the mountains and in the new cities that have grown up on the plains are actually functioning. They are turning out finished products, they are transforming wood and stone and steel into houses, iron into trucks, tractors and automobiles, copper into electric cables, and chaos into a civilization. It is not the American kind of civilization which clicks with precision. It bumps and rattles just as [John] Paul Jones found it bumped and rattled in Catherine’s day. But it stands up and marches.20

White presented a mixed review of admiration for the effort and achievement in the industrialization campaign but cautioned about what it would mean in the long run. He was convinced that a majority of the citizens backed the regime and looked forward to the results their efforts would bring.

Allen followed White by a day, his article featured on the front page of the New York Evening Post with a banner headline, “Senator Allen Looks into the Real Russia.” He

20. Ibid. White was aware of the considerable American contributions to the Soviet industrialization drive in the First Five-Year Plan that began in 1928 and was beginning to pay fruit by 1933. Over three thousand American engineers were employed in major projects, including a farm-tractor factory in Kharkov (International Harvester), a construction-machine works in Chelyabinsk (Caterpillar), and especially the building of the largest automobile and truck factory in the world at Nizhny Novgorod (Austin Company and Ford Motors). For details, see Saul, Friends or Foes?, 209–53.
eschewed history and claimed to tell it like it is now, admitting that members of the tour group found evidence to bolster any preconceived notions they had about Soviet Russia. The excellent and free nurseries and kindergartens were especially impressive, he reported. “But a Doubting Thomas could go to Moscow on a rainy night and find at midnight in every one of many districts bedraggled lines of men and women, many with children, waiting until stores opened in the morning so they could get their allotted quantity of bread and coal oil.” Allen was also impressed by the number of recent graves in the villages and the pinched faces of hungry children. He promised to tell in future articles of the Soviet government’s thorough liquidation of the kulaks (prosperous peasants) and of any counterrevolutionary activity. But his tone was generally positive: “The ideas that Russia borrows from us as she travels to the right, as well as the notions we may borrow from her as we travel toward the left, will be kept in mind during these articles.”

In their respective series of articles that followed, White and Allen were clearly not gullible Kansans in the land of Oz. In his syndicated column on October 4, “A Major Blunder,” White reviewed the events of fifteen years earlier:

The Russian blunder arose because the Bolsheviki, knowing little of America, underestimated the weight of American help to the Allies in the war. So the Bolsheviki roared loudly and long about world revolution. Moreover, they began spreading propaganda for world revolution and so frightened the rest of the world into perpetual jitters which recur whenever the word Bolshevist or Communist appears.

He deplored the rejection of commonsense trade with the Soviet Union that resulted in Kansas farmers lacking the opportunity of selling hog fat to a country that needed it.

Allen’s October 6 article, “Soviet Industrializes as Farmer Pays the Way: 5-Year Plan Still in Dream Stage,” emphasized the shortcomings and terrible human costs that Stalin’s Russia was enduring. Even more graphically, White enumerated the loss of life due to collectivization and the accompanying famine. He cited various estimates of the number of lives lost, siding with Walter Duranty’s figure of five million during the two preceding years, higher than the figures given in most Western press reports of the time. A Soviet-sympathizing former senator from Iowa and current foreign trade adviser to the Department of Agriculture, Smith Brookhart, thought that this estimate was an exaggeration, but White verified the number with Duranty. Allen, meanwhile, headlined, “4,000,000 Kulaks Wiped Out in Russia,” not far from White’s figure.

Both agreed that the famine in Russia was a terrible thing, partly balanced by the great opportunities for employment in industry that contrasted sharply with the situation in the United States. White concluded, “Probably, when history is written about the year 1933, the historian, if he gives any attention to the 15 years between 1918 and 1933, will write ‘in these years, for the first time on earth, a civilization developed without the aid of capitalists. It began to work.’ Then, to be fair, history will bite her pencil and finally add these qualifying words: ‘After a fashion.’” These sympathetic, pro-Soviet expressions did not pass without criticism. Some letters to the editors took issue with such comments as White referring to Stalin as a benevolent dictator.24

Both White and Allen were emphatic in supporting diplomatic recognition, thus lending powerful middle-American Republican voices to Roosevelt’s initiative. Perhaps not coincidentally, their articles seemed to pave the way for a formal letter dated October 10 from Mikhail Kalinin, the figurehead Soviet president, agreeing to a negotiation in Washington. On October 21 the Washington Post announced, “Soviet Accepts U.S. Invitation to Hold Recognition Parley: Moscow Hails Roosevelt Step.”25 This was a fitting welcome home for the Kansans from Russia, who had stepped off the Vulcaina in New York the day before.

In several ways Allen’s reporting was more resourceful, informative, and focused than White’s in portraying an up-and-coming Russia that America could and should do business with. It was also more extensive, with separate articles on Russian food supply, religious affairs, labor, agriculture, and finance.26 Even conservative columnist Drew Pearson commended Allen for his direct approach: “Just a line to tell you how much I have enjoyed reading your swell stories on Russia. They certainly have been timely and have shown to some of us upstarts that we shall have to advance a lot further before we can equal some of the old time bears like you.”27

Allen and White continued to write about Russia after their return to Kansas. In a full-page article in the Sunday New York Times on November 5 entitled “The Meaning of Recognition for Russia and for the U.S.,” Allen listed his reasons for supporting the Roosevelt initiative. These included Russia’s move to the right; its withdrawal from pushing world revolution; a major increase in Russian-American commerce, with

27. Drew Pearson to Allen, November 18, 1933, C, folder 1933, box 37, Allen Papers. Pearson was from Kansas, and his father and mother had attended Baker University with Allen. Pearson to White, April 1, 1933, C, folder Drew Pearson, box 204, White Papers.
Russia providing the United States with raw materials and importing manufactured goods, thus countering opposition from labor unions; excellent business with Russia that was already helping American companies; the fact that France, the only major democracy left in continental Europe, was establishing closer relations; and, finally, the prospect of joint action to counter Japanese aggression in Asia. The latter point was also a primary motive of Soviet interest in gaining U.S. recognition, and it was no accident that the soon-to-be-appointed Soviet ambassador, Alexander Troyanovsky, had just served five years as the Soviet envoy to Japan.28

White again was first in print, but only for readers of the *Emporia Gazette*—which, of course, included more than a hometown audience. In an editorial dispatched by telegraph upon landing in New York, White fully supported diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union by the United States:

There is no reason why Russia should not be recognized at this time by the United States. . . . No other party in any other European country has been in charge of government so long. There is no danger of the spread of communist propaganda in America. Moreover the communists are too busy with their own problems to have much time or money to waste trying to organize a communist revolution in the United States.

He then proceeded to refute the antirecognition argument through a series of “It may be said” statements, including “It may be said that the communists do not recognize the Christian God. Neither do the Turks, nor the Japanese, nor the Egyptians whom we recognize.” White continued,

Russia needs moral support in her contest with Japan. American recognition will give Russia that moral support before the world. Russia needs to buy American heavy machinery. She wants particularly American goods. . . . From every standpoint the recognition of Russia is common sense. It would have been common sense in Harding’s day. . . . It would have been wise if Coolidge or Hoover had recognized Russia. It is not only wise but it is highly necessary that the American senate shall back up the obvious contention of President Roosevelt to recognize the Soviets.29

Both White and Allen repeated that fascism was just as cruel and hostile to American ideals, yet the United States continued to recognize Germany and Italy while casting communism as undemocratic. On a practical level, they argued that recognition accompanied by substantial credits would reduce Russia’s need to export grain to pay for industrialization (U.S. engineering). This would allow Russia to better feed its people while also raising the demand for American wheat and would turn greater profits for Kansas farmers, an argument that won favor throughout the Central Great Plains. As a result, few voices throughout rural America voiced opposition to establishing a closer relationship with the Soviet Union.

More resistance to recognition came from Democratic Party sectors of the urban population, especially labor unions, Polish and Ukrainian Roman Catholics, and anti-Russian Jewish quarters on the grounds of the use of forced labor and suppression of religious freedom and ethnic identities. One specific source of this opposition centered on the Soviet export of lumber to the United States. Besides the charge of “dumping” at below cost, critics accused the Soviet Union of utilizing forced labor in the production process.30 Despite such opposition, however, many were convinced that American business with the Soviet Union was good for a country emerging from the Great Depression and was indicative of the rise of the United States in international prominence.

The Kansas newspapermen naturally responded to invitations to speak on these issues, and Henry Allen especially excelled at such events. Within a week of his arrival in New York, Allen delivered a speech at a special convocation at the University of Kansas (KU) in Lawrence entitled “Russia as I Saw It.” The *University Daily Kansan (UDK)* advised in advance that “no student can afford to miss hearing him,” and apparently few did, as Chancellor Ernest Lindley reported to White, “We had Henry Allen for convocation recently, and he made, as always, a great


speech. Twenty-five hundred students were there.”32 The 
UDK published a full column on October 27, with the 
headline “Henry Allen Says Soviet Recognition Essential 
to U.S.” Allen also spoke in Topeka and Ottawa and in 
his hometown at the University of Wichita (now Wichita 
State University), where he made a dramatic impression, 
according to the dean of education.33

White spoke on his experiences in Russia on November 
17, first to more than 150 faculty members at the University 
Club on “Present Russia Improves the Past” and then, 
later that afternoon, to the annual Kansas high school 
editors’ conference.34 That evening he was scheduled to 
speak at the Missouri Press Association in Kansas City at 
the Muehlebach Hotel, but he lamented to Henry Allen, 

I was in Kansas City last night, scheduled for a 
speech on Russia. They got me on my feet at just 
ten minutes after ten, I cracked a joke and sat 
down. I won’t begin talking on Russia for anybody 
after nine o’clock and at ten it would be cruel. I 
know I disappointed the audience, but I would 
rather disappoint them than weary them by talking 
seriously after ten… Program makers should learn 
to keep off piano soloists and local silver tongues 
and President’s addresses and that sort of thing at 
the forefront of a program.35

He settled for conducting a seminar on Russia the next 
morning for visiting members of the Associated Press.

After his return to the United States, White assumed 
a new role as a member of the advisory committee to the 
Book of the Month Club and for a number of years dealt 
especially with books with an international focus. Aware 
of this, Eugene Lyons, a foremost Moscow reporter, had 
the publisher A. A. Knopf send White the proofs of his 
book, Moscow Carrousel, and asked for his appraisal and 
support. “I really think it will be a unique contribution 
to the literature on the new Russia,” wrote Lyons, “and 
one which, in the light of your personal observations 
there, ought to appeal to you a lot.”36 The book received 
White’s blessing: “The book has the unique quality. It is 
thruthful rather than factual. I have read [William Henry] 
Chamberlin and Duranty, and like them both, but your 
book has charm, and is deeply and essentially truthful. . . 
. . Your truth comes out of your method, your medium. I 
am delighted with it.”37

Henry Allen and William White were not alone in 
supporting a new relationship with Communist Russia, 
their Republican voices coinciding with a critical point in 
the negotiations process then under way by Roosevelt’s 
Democrat administration. They emphasized economic 
and diplomatic gains to be won and acknowledged 
the injustices of the past. Their writings and public 
engagements were vital in shaping American acceptance 
of normal and friendly relations with an oppressive 
communist regime. Though most Americans opposed 
the very idea of communism, they were convinced by the 
logic that fascism and dictatorship were not much better. 
Both men welcomed the arrival of Soviet Commissar 
for Foreign Relations Maxim Litvinov in New York on 
November 7, 1933, the sixteenth anniversary of the 
Bolshevik Revolution.38

The discussion of important international issues by 
two notable Kansans in 1933 helped lay the foundation 
of crucial bipartisan support of a military-political alliance 
of 1941, to become known as the “Grand Alliance” of 
World War II, in which William Allen White once again 
played an important role. The Munich Conference and 
the German invasion of Czechoslovakia (September- 
October 1938) was followed by the Nazi-Soviet Non-
Aggression Pact, the Russian and German invasion of 
Poland and the British and French declarations of war 
against Germany. President Roosevelt sought White’s

31. Ernest Lindley to White, November 7, 1933, C, folder Lindley, 
box 204, White Papers. Lindley was the longest-serving chancellor of the 
university, from 1920 to 1939; University Daily Kansan, October 26, 1933.

University Daily Kansan, October 27, 1933; see also “For Recognition: 
Henry J. Allen, Newly Returned from Russia, Favors the Plan,” Lawrence 
Daily Journal-World, October 27, 1933; Leslie Sipple to Allen, November 
1, 1933, C, f. Russia, box 135, Allen Papers.

33. University Daily Kansan, November 18, 1933.

34. White to Allen, November 18, 1933, C, folder Allen, box 202, 
White Papers.

35. Eugene Lyons to White, December 20, 1934, C, folder Eugene 
Lyons, box 216, White Papers.

36. White to Lyons, December 31, 1934, ibid. Eugene Lyons, Moscow 
Carrousel (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1935) was indeed a success, but even 
more popular would be Lyons’s Assignment in Utopia: An Autobiography 
(New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1937). Lyons, born to a Jewish 
family in Western Russia that emigrated to the United States, grew up on 
the Lower East Side of Manhattan, rising to excel in English at Columbia 
University. He worked for two socialist newspapers, the New York Call 
and the monthly Liberator. Reemigrating to Soviet Russia, he worked 
for Soviet news agencies, then was the chief Moscow correspondent for 
United Press International (1928–1934), winning fame for a two-hour 
interview with Joseph Stalin and for his criticism of another Moscow 

37. One important “sticking point” remained: settlement of the 
American claims for the debt owed to the United States for large loans 
made to the previous Provisional Government in 1917, which had been
advice in December 1939 in a full two-page letter labeled “Personal and Confidential”:

I have been getting to the point where I need a few helpful thoughts from the philosopher of Emporia. . . . I hope that the next time you come East you will come and spend the night at the White House and let me sit you on the sofa after supper and talk over small matters like world problems. . . . The world situation seems to me to be getting rather progressively worse as the weeks go by. . . . I do not want this country to take part in a patched up temporizing peace which would blow up in our faces in a year or two.38

The president continued with some anxiety and indication of not being able to gain much guidance in Washington on the Russian-German accommodation:

If . . . Germany and Russia win the war or force a peace favorable to them, the situation of your civilization and mine is indeed in peril. Our world trade would be at the mercy of the combine. . . . What worries me especially, is that public opinion over here is patting itself on the back every morning and thanking God for the Atlantic Ocean (and the Pacific Ocean). We greatly underestimate the serious implications to our own future.

FDR concluded:

renounced by the Bolshevik regime in 1918. Litvinov, anxious to secure “the deal,” suggested that the Soviets might consider a figure of $100 million to be repaid. The United States, equally resolved on recognition, agreed that details could be worked out in the future. This was the “gentleman’s agreement” between Roosevelt and Litvinov reached on the afternoon of November 15. A formal exchange of notes establishing diplomatic relations followed the next day. The Soviet Union postponed acting on the issue and avoided renegotiating a payment, fostering considerable criticism from conservative quarters of the Roosevelt “agreement.” See Saul, Friends or Foes?, 298–301.


39. Ibid.
White reluctantly declined the president’s invitation, citing his wife’s illness—she always traveled with him—and the Washington weather in January. This was, nevertheless, the beginning of his major involvement in another international role.

Given the apparent invincibility of Axis advances in Europe (with France to fall to the German blitzkrieg in the summer of 1940), President Roosevelt once again called upon William Allen White in May 1940 to head a national committee, awkwardly titled the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies (CDAAA; more generally referred to as the William Allen White Committee). With chapters in nearly every state, its purpose was to prepare the United States for a more active role in opposing the antidemocratic forces that seemed to be sweeping the world (including those of Japan in the Far East). White was pleased at the response and relayed his enthusiasm in a telegram to the president:

My correspondence is heaping up unanimously behind the plan to aid the allies by anything other than war. As an old friend, let me warn you that maybe you will not be able to lead the American people unless you catch up with them. They are going fast. But only you can and must keep them out of war by giving them some other economic equivalent in aiding the democracies.

Nineteen-forty was a year of approaching crisis for Americans—and also an election year. This is not the place to recount the internal turmoil of the Republican Party and White’s role in it—turmoil that led to the surprise nomination of Wendell Willkie, who successfully utilized grassroots support to achieve a surprising victory over his favored rivals, Senator Robert Taft and Manhattan district attorney Thomas E. Dewey. White was among those who early favored Willkie as a moderate
compromise with reasonable approaches to the unfolding international scene. He later applauded Willkie’s support of the Selective Service Act in August 1940, a bill that substantially increased the size of the U.S. Army and that was opposed by the isolationist wing of the Republican Party.42

White also urged Willkie to support, or at least not to directly oppose, the controversial Destroyers for Bases Agreement between the United States and Great Britain whereby fifty World War I-era U.S. Navy destroyers were transferred to the Royal Navy in exchange for a few equally aging British bases. As a result, Republican resistance to this step toward engagement was muted, and the exchange occurred by executive order in September 1940, with little Republican opposition to Roosevelt’s bypassing of the Senate.43

After the election White wrote two editorials, one congratulating FDR on his victory, the other commending Willkie. He wrote personally to the latter, “I want you to know that you went through the campaign so far as I can see without flaw, spot or blemish. You made an honest, courageous, intelligent fight. You are the only leader in the Republican Party who knows what it is all about and who is honest enough not to pollyfox.” What he had in mind is clear from his adding, “One more thing, I wish you would join our Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. We need your name. I have five hundred members in good standing. There is no assessment and no dues.”44

By this time a split had developed within the CDAAA between those who desired to avoid any military commitment and those willing to be more actively engaged. White tried to steer a middle course but resigned his chairmanship when that proved impossible. He had, however, succeeded in bringing into existence a program known as “lend-lease,” which provided direct support to the Allies through unrestricted borrowing with the promise of vague future payment for all purchases from the United States of vital domestic and military supplies. The Lend-Lease Act was signed by the president on March 11, 1941, allowing Great Britain to survive the air battle over its country and ward off a possible German invasion. The program was extended to the Soviet Union in June, after it was invaded by Germany.45 Arguably, the lend-lease program proved crucial in turning the tide in favor of the Allies, paving the way for ultimate victory in 1945.

Though a thorough study is yet to be done, evidence indicates that the Kansas press in the 1930s followed the lead of White and Allen in supporting U.S. recognition of the Soviet Union in late 1933 and promoting the crusade for support to the Allies, leading to the development of the lend-lease program. A starting point for future research is an unusual collection of the editorials of Victor Murdock, published in the Wichita Eagle from 1938 to 1944 that records his major emphasis on the important role of the United States in world events and on the history of Kansas. Murdock’s writings are an interesting mix of local and historical events on the international scene of America at war.46 William Allen White and Henry Justin Allen had shown the way through their ventures into the Soviet world and their continuing understanding of the political reality of the times and the events leading to World War II. [KH]

42. White was a member of the Kansas delegation, but it was controlled by Alf Landon, who supported Dewey. See, among others, Donald R. McCoy, Landon of Kansas (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 444–53; for more on Willkie and Selective Service, see Steve Neal, Dark Horse: A Biography of Wendell Willkie (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 138–45. (Personal note: I cheered on a sidewalk in Elwood, Indiana, Willkie’s hometown, during a mass celebration of his nomination on a hot August day—quite an experience.)

43. Dewey offered to make a public announcement of support for the Roosevelt initiative, but Willkie, in the middle of the election campaign, demurred. But he did not object to the use of a presidential executive order. Neal, Dark Horse, 139–41.

44. White to Wendell Willkie, November 6, 1940, C, folder Willkie, box 348, White Papers. And he concluded by inviting the Willkies to Estes Park, Colorado, the next summer: “I can take you where the fishing is fairly good and the scenery is Grade A, and the food not bad.”
