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Both inside and outside Norway, people nod in recognition at Quisling’s name. Those with personal experience of the Second World War usually know that he collaborated with the German occupation forces in Norway, even if they don’t know the details of Quisling’s Nazi sympathies in the decade between 1930 and his coup d’etat on April 9, 1940.1 Younger generations, especially in English-speaking countries, frequently use the noun “quisling” as a synonym for traitor. That this notion was born rather soon after the German invasion and Quisling’s exhortation to the Norwegians that they should turn their backs on England and submit to German protection, we see from a résumé of a number of letters that fell into the hands of English censors in November of 1940. This notes that (Vid)Kun (Q)u(i)sling also goes by the name of Vidkjent Usling (Widely Known Scoundrel), and the letters appear on the whole to have been sharply critical of both Quisling himself and his Rikshird—the Norwegian Nazi storm

troopers who had sworn allegiance to him as if he were an ancient
Norse king.2

More than fifty years after Vidkun Quisling on the night of
October 24, 1945, was executed at Akershus for treason to his
country, historians and biographers both at home and abroad still
struggle to plumb this complicated personality who played such
a marked role in recent Norwegian history, and who paid so
dearly for what he himself regarded as the fulfillment of his des-
tiny and duty. His speech in his own defense in September of
1945 concluded with these words:

If my work has constituted treason—as claimed here—then I
would to God wish for Norway’s sake that very many of the
sons of Norway may be traitors just like me, only that they
escape being thrown in prison.3

The gaps are just as wide in the judgments of posterity. Hans
Fredrik Dahl, who examines several aspects of Quisling’s person-
ality, writes:

But his often gruff speech and abrupt and awkward manner
were illuminated from within by moral thinking and incorrupt-
ible sincerity, which became a somewhat important factor early
in the 1930s, when Quisling raised the rod against Marxism.4

Else Margarete Barth got a somewhat different impression after
working through Quisling’s incomplete philosophical work *Universismen*:

2. From a summary of letters from Norway, addressed to Norwegians in a
refugee camp in Dumfries. Public Record Office, London, HS2/238. SOE/Nor-
way 84: “General and Unconfirmed Information on Norway from June 1940 to
November 1940.”

3. *Vidkun Quislings forsvarstale i lagmannsretten september 1945*. Published
by K. A. Seaver.

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Quisling’s moral development may be described as a movement away from requiring a firm character and over to the ideal of an elitist, self-willed, and changeable ‘personality.’ There is not much that is new in this, except that it was in agreement with a fashion which arose within Fascist and Nazi circles . . .

The Norwegian-American historian Oddvar K. Høidal for his part thinks that while the religious, historical, philosophical, and scientific observations Quisling made in Universismen and in “Universistiske aforismer” (Universistic aphorisms) at times were simileminded or even wrong, it is obvious that Quisling tried hard to find a universal explanation for human existence, and that “because of the mystical element in his personality, he had to fulfill the need to create such a philosophical system—this too was an essential part of his nature.”

The only thing historians on both sides of the Atlantic seem to agree on is that Vidkun Quisling’s early years and his family greatly influenced his view of life and his personality, and that the years he spent in Soviet Russia became the watershed in his personal landscape. For my own part, I want to add that in his relationship with Alexandra and Maria lies an important key to his moral concepts.

Vidkun, the oldest of four children, was born in 1887 in Fyresdal to the educator and parson Jon Qvisling [sic] and his sixteen years younger wife Anna Caroline Bang. The historian Sverre Hartmann described the atmosphere in the home as “harmonious.” Life in the Quisling family has otherwise been vividly portrayed by Arve Juritzen and by Hans Fredrik Dahl, among oth-

There was no lack of mutual consideration between man and wife, quite the contrary, but caresses were rare, and the ambience to a large degree consisted of a dry bourgeois mentality, religiosity, and family pride joined with nineteenth-century national romanticism, narrow-gauge historical studies, and—last but not least—constant ambition for the children.

Those last three qualities in particular affected not only Vidkun, but also his younger brothers Jørgen and Arne, who both survived him. That Vidkun was fond of his brothers was often confirmed by Alexandra, who added that he grieved greatly over his sister Esther who had died at a young age. As Alexandra’s recollections of her time in Oslo reveal, he also felt close to his mother and was a dutiful son to his eccentric father.

The parents had good reason to be proud of their oldest son. He graduated from the gymnasium in 1905 with a straight A average, and when Quisling completed his training at the Military Academy in 1922, his grades were so outstanding that he was commended to the king.

His choice of a military career was understandable. From childhood, he had been imbued with a national pride and a male ideal fitting easily with an inclination toward romanticism—a romanticism to which his head-over-heels infatuation with Alexandra and his early writing efforts bear full witness. Furthermore, the same spring he graduated from the gymnasium, the union between Norway and Sweden was dissolved following a pro-


9. Poems and drafts to a short story/novella and a play: NB, Quislingarkivet, Ms. fol. 3920: III.
longed period of tension with armies present at both sides of the border. Being an officer in the independent Norwegian army was prestigious and would also have allowed Quisling release for his ingrained devotion to duty. It became evident quite soon that his choice gave him a useful start in other ways as well.

While still a young officer, Vidkun Quisling met Captain Anton Frederik Jakhelln Prytz, who was to have a great influence on the rest of Quisling’s career. They first met at a field maneuver, according to Arnold Ræstad, who also notes that Prytz quite early came to admire the younger man’s intelligence and competence, an admiration that later turned out to be mutual. This

10. Arnold Ræstad, *The Case Quisling*. Unpublished manuscript sent to the Norwegian National Archives in 1961, Ms. 154, folio series, p. 35. Ræstad’s
first meeting is likely to have taken place before 1911, when Prytz became the Norwegian Vice Consul in Arkhangelsk by the White Sea where he had established himself as a sawmill owner and lumber merchant, after first serving with a Russian military detachment in Novgorod in 1908 on the recommendation of the Norwegian General Staff.  

Subsequent to 1911, Prytz did not take part in military exercises, as became apparent when he applied for a Norwegian military pension with the rank of major in 1933.

It would have been easy for the two men to maintain contact after 1911. Dahl notes that also after that year, Prytz was in Norway every year and maintained his contact with the General Staff, to which Quisling had received a probationary appointment in November of 1911, and where he was assigned Russia as his area of special study. As usual, Quisling’s methods were thorough, and he acquired not only historical and geographical knowledge about Russia, which at that time was still an empire, but also learned Russian and delved into Russian literature.

Both his knowledge about Russia and his acquaintance with Prytz stood him in good stead when, in the spring of 1918, he was asked to serve as the military attaché at the Norwegian legation in Petrograd, as St. Petersburg had been renamed at the outbreak of World War I in 1914. The new name did not last long, however; in 1924, when Vladimir Ilyich Lenin died, this Russian capital at the head of the Finnish Bay came to be known as Leningrad, in memory of the founder of Bolshevism and a fa-

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ther of the Russian Revolution that had shaken the world’s moorings since 1917, the year before Vidkun Quisling made his first journey abroad and took his first turn with legation work. For Quisling, who seems to have felt a strong need since childhood to show the world his mettle, this journey to Petrograd—now a focus for the world’s politicians and reporters—must have seemed like a unique opportunity to make people aware of his knowledge and capabilities. Even better: he could do this while traveling with a diplomatic passport, a prestigious and useful document that he quickly learned to appreciate, according to Alexandra.

There was probably not much diplomatic social life of the usual kind under these unusual circumstances, but Quisling must have been prepared for that, since the Norwegian authorities had not given diplomatic recognition to the new Soviet government. Dahl believes that, for the same reason, Quisling’s acquaintance with Trotsky (at that time the Soviet defense minister) is likely to have been both brief and superficial. In this, Dahl’s view agrees with Alexandra’s; she said that Quisling boasted of the acquaintance but avoided giving details.

It is likely that before he left home, Quisling also knew that in Petrograd he would meet again his old acquaintance Captain Prytz, who had married a Norwegian woman while living in that city in 1915. Caroline Prytz was now in Oslo together with their little daughter, while he was putting his experience in dealing with Soviet Russian trade authorities at the disposal of the Norwegian legation during those turbulent times. It is not known whether Prytz had put in a good word for Quisling among the upper echelons of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as of the General Staff, but it is a fact that Prytz and Quisling arrived in Petrograd within a short time of each other toward the end of May, 1918, and that they shared the apartment which the Nor-

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wegian chargé d’affaires Arild Huitfeld consigned to Prytz when he himself was recalled to Oslo in September. From then on Prytz, assisted by Quisling, was responsible for the legation during the time that remained, before they had to close it down completely in December of that same year and return home under rather dramatic circumstances.\textsuperscript{15}

The catastrophic conditions in Russia were due not only to the world war (which, at least as far as Western Europe was concerned, was officially over on November 11, 1918), but to the uprisings and civil wars that were a consequence of the Revolution. On his journey in the spring of 1918 through Eastern Europe and across the new demarcation line at Brest-Litovsk, Quisling everywhere saw signs of continuing devastation of various kinds and reported home about them. Høidal comments that the intelligence Quisling included with his first report to the Department of Defense did not hold a very high standard, but he admits that the accounts which the young officer subsequently sent from his post in Petrograd gave a good overview of the military situation and the chaotic conditions generally. And Quisling was not far wrong in the opinion he expressed on October 23, 1918, about five months after his arrival, that there was a worrying similarity between Russia’s present situation and that which confronted France in the summer of 1793 after the execution of the French royal couple.\textsuperscript{16}

Tsar Nicholas II, who had been taken prisoner and forced to abdicate in March of 1917, was shot on July 17, 1918, together with the rest of his family, because the revolutionary authorities


\textsuperscript{16} Høidal, Quisling, pp. 19–20, with reference to Quisling’s report no. 12 til Det kgl. forsvarsdepartement (The Royal Department of Defense), RA, GA, Journalsaker 1166.
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wanted to prevent the counter-revolutionary forces threatening Ekaterinburg (Sverdlovsk) from liberating the tsar from his prison there. Although the tsar's fate was kept secret at the time, there were enough rumors to cause turmoil all over Russia. The capital, where Quisling and Prytz found themselves, was no exception. The situation grew even more tense after Uritsky, the head of Petrograd's Cheka, was murdered on August 30, while on that same day in Moscow Lenin was seriously wounded in an assassination attempt by Dora Kaplan.

In both private letters and official reports, Prytz and Quisling described their experiences when they returned to Petrograd from their summer holiday in Norway and encountered martial law and conditions so dangerous that even the four walls of a legation were no guarantee of safety. While Quisling was still in Norway, a group of Cheka men had forced their way into the British Embassy in Petrograd and murdered the British naval attaché Captain Cromie, who had stood his ground as long as he was able. After Cromie's body had been tossed out of an upstairs window, the Bolsheviks arrested most of the British and French representatives in the city. That meant even more work for the few remaining diplomats. Prytz said on a later occasion that his legation represented six embassies and ten legations that autumn. It was left to the Dutch minister Oudendijk to assume responsibility for British interests; he was also able at long last to have Cromie's body turned over to him. The funeral took place


18. RA, Privatarkiv Frederik Prytz, box 1, “Foredrag holdt i Trondheim 25. april 1941.”
on September 6, in other words right after Quisling had returned to town.  

The Cromie murder and its political repercussions were bad enough in themselves, but it probably made a particularly deep impression on Prytz and Quisling that no less a power than Great Britain had been treated in this manner. Prytz was born and in part raised in England and still had good connections there, and whether it was due to Prytz or for other reasons, Quisling’s ideal was an English gentleman—as Alexandra not infrequently learned in connection with what he considered correct behavior.

This predilection for all things English is clear in Quisling’s literary attempts dating from this period in his life. Not only did he exercise his language skills in a long and sentimental poem in English, but the same folder at the National Library in Oslo contains the incomplete draft to a short story or novella taking place in London during World War I. The tall, elegant Prince Variagin comes out of his hotel one rainy day and sees a desperate young girl of gentle birth who is now reduced to making her living as a prostitute. When she offers to return to the hotel with him, the prince steps back and says that it won’t do—“I’m not that way.” A short while later, he nobly takes off his raincoat and gives it to the streetwalker along with several pound notes. Before he leaves her, he also counsels her to be brave; she is syphilitic in consequence of her choice of profession. Back at the hotel that same evening, the prince awakens considerable interest in “a somewhat plump blonde in her thirties, dressed with taste.” We

19. Some of the information here comes from George W. Yourieff. He survived the horrors of war and revolution in Russia, and he and his family were good friends of Minister Oudendijk’s in both Russia and China. See also Lockhart, British Agent, especially pp. 318–19.

20. NB, Quislingarkivet, Ms. fol. 3920: III: 2–3. The poem “Summer Night” is dated 12.7.1920 by Quisling personally. The prose draft has no title and is undated.
do not find out how things progressed after this evening in London, however.

It is unlikely that Quisling was inspired to occupy himself with such fantasies in Oslo while working hard to make himself stand out at the General Staff, and conditions were no more propitious while he was living in Petrograd. Nor would he have had the time and opportunity for such activities after his arrival in Russia as Nansen’s assistant, early in February of 1922. Everything indicates that it was while he was in Helsinki from September of 1919 until the end of May, 1921, that he embroidered this sampler.

He was in Helsinki because the Norwegian Department of Foreign Affairs had decided to handle Norway’s Russian interests from its legation in the Finnish capital and therefore moved the remainder of the Petrograd legation there in April of 1919. Quisling, who had meanwhile resumed his work at the General Staff and also established something of a reputation as a speaker on Soviet Russia, applied for and was granted the post of intelligence officer (later changed to military attaché) at the Helsinki legation, where he arrived in the middle of September, 1919.

The appointment appeared to be one more lucky move in his life’s chess game, because Minister Andreas Urbye, who headed the legation, was very pleased with his new associate. For many years he therefore did everything in his power to enable Quisling to move over into the diplomatic service, although without success in the end. Urbye was often away from Helsinki and left Quisling in charge of the legation during his absences. As the chargé d’affaires, Quisling helped his old friend Prytz with information about the Finnish lumber market. In all sorts of ways, life both inside and outside the legation was considerably more peaceful than it had been in Petrograd, and Quisling evidently had plenty of time to spare for his own interests. Now that his life was following a more normal pattern, the shy and awkward young
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officer also enjoyed the acquaintance of a young woman for a change. Her name was Nini Bø. Their relationship did not survive Quisling’s return home in 1921, although Nini, at least, had evidently been truly in love. The experience nevertheless seems to have made Quisling sit down at his desk to ponder the relationship between men and women.

Little did he know, when he returned to Oslo, that reality lay waiting right around the corner in Russia. In Kharkov, now the capital of the Ukraine, lived two young women who had experienced childhood, war, and Bolshevism in ways very different from one another. One was Alexandra Andreevna Voronina, who turned sixteen while Captain Quisling was still serving at the Helsinki legation. The other woman was Maria (Mára) Vasilievna Paseshnikova.

All the photographs from Maria’s youth show that she was beautiful. Alexandra, too, often said that Maria was attractive in a somewhat heavy, dark manner, and that she dressed and carried herself with style. She was several years older than Alexandra and also—aside from a large number of photographs—considerably more sparing with information about herself. The Norwegian National Library nevertheless has evidence that the first chapter of Maria’s supposed memoirs via Parmann shaved only a year or two from her age, for her student card gives her birth date as October 27, 1899, and shows that she was registered at her university in 1921. In December of 1922 she completed her studies at the university’s Institute of Economics, where she had been enrolled since 1918.

Among Maria’s personal papers at the National Library there are also some notes that she wrote to herself while she was in prison in 1945, and in which she reminds herself to talk as little


22. NB, Quislingarkivet, Ms. fol. 3920: XI: 4.
as possible about Russia.²³ She followed this rule so conscien-
tiously that when Parmann was helping her with her book, she
let him have only one single anecdote from her childhood, namely
a story about a doll’s shoe which Alexandra recalled having told
Maria one endless evening in Paris in 1924—one of many such
evenings. Maria’s handwritten notes also tell about the time she
met Quisling: “I lived at the center of town right across from a
nice little park and an old, beautiful church (named kirke) along
a long river (not far from long river).”²⁴ Compare this with Al-
exandra’s detailed description of her Kharkov home in the next
chapter, written many years before she learned the stories Maria
had been telling about herself.

Nor did Arve Juritzen manage to unearth more concrete in-
formation about Maria than that which was available at the Na-
tional Library and in other Norwegian archives, and even her pas-
tor during her last years in Oslo was aware that his famous
parishioner’s personal life was and remained an enigma.²⁵

Alexandra sincerely admired Maria because the latter had, de-
spite poverty and ignorance at home, managed to work her way
up through the Soviet system, and she assumed that Maria had
probably seen the same real and imagined qualities in Quisling
that had made her marry him herself in 1922. Besides, to her way
of thinking Maria’s background was a downright advantage and
also honorable enough to be in no need of false feathers. For this

²³. NB, Quislingarkivet, Ms. fol. 3920: X: 2.
²⁴. NB, Quislingarkivet, Ms. fol. 3920: X: 11. Translated by K. A. Seaver,
as closely as possible, from Maria’s somewhat flawed Norwegian. There is no
reason to make fun of her mistakes, however. She learned Norwegian remark-
ably fast. Nevertheless, one gets the impression that her skill stopped developing
in later years, probably because she was living alone and was rather isolated
from the rest of the world.
²⁵. Parmann, Maria Quislings Dagbok og andre etterlatte papirer, Oslo 1980,
reason, her surprise at how Maria had used details from her own life and background was just as great as at the myth about Maria's privileged family and upbringing. It is probably no coincidence that this myth reached its zenith after Quisling and Maria were safely back in Norway and did not risk Soviet Russian inquisitions.