

Suzanne Massie, Reagan's Russian whisperer in Cold War, dies at 94

The author and scholar briefed President Ronald Reagan on Russian history and Soviet life, including the Russian proverb "Trust but verify" that entered the Cold War lexicon.

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Suzanne Massie, left, meets with President Ronald Reagan, Vice President George H.W. Bush and White House staff in the Oval Office on Nov. 17, 1984. (Courtesy Ronald Reagan Presidential Library)

By [Brian Murphy](#)

Suzanne Massie, an American-born writer whose explorations into the Russian soul helped shape Cold War geopolitics as an adviser to President Ronald Reagan with lessons that included a Russian proverb, "Trust but verify," which was embraced as White House policy, died Jan. 26 in a care facility in Harrodsburg, Kentucky. She was 94.

The cause was complications related to vascular dementia, said her son, Robert Massie Jr. The first encounter between Ms. Massie and Reagan in early 1984 began one of the most unexpected Oval Office partnerships of his administration. Her briefings did not directly deal with policymaking, but she was credited with helping expand Reagan's understanding of Russian culture and history in the years leading to Cold War-era détente and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union.

“Soviets are the officials,” Ms. Massie told the New York Times in 1985. “Russians are the people.”

There was not a lot to suggest that she and Reagan would mesh. She was the daughter of a Swiss diplomat and found a deep affinity with Russian life. He was an uncompromising foe of the Soviets who had declared the country an [“evil empire”](#) in 1983.

Reagan then came across Ms. Massie’s 1980 [book](#), “Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia,” which delved into Russian history and its psyche. Ms. Massie, meanwhile, had recently returned from the Soviet Union in 1983 with gloomy reports of Kremlin hard-liners exerting greater control. Suddenly, she was caught in a Washington whirlwind.

Her friend Sen. William Cohen (R-Maine) contacted Reagan’s national security adviser [Robert “Bud” McFarlane](#), who reached out to the Oval Office. Ms. Massie was soon named an informal U.S. envoy to clear the way for her next trip to the Soviet Union. First, however, Reagan wanted to meet her. Relations between the Cold War superpowers were icy. Reagan had stepped up aid to Afghan militias fighting a Soviet occupation, and the White House was still demanding answers from Moscow over the [downing](#) of a Korean Air Lines plane in September 1983 after it drifted off course en route from New York to Seoul, killing all 269 passengers and crew.

Ms. Massie said she expected Reagan to rail against the U.S.S.R. when she arrived at the White House on Jan. 17, 1984. Instead, he asked about her experiences.

“The very first thing he asked me was, ‘How much do their leaders believe in communism?’” she told the Atlantic magazine in 1993.

She offered a political quip from the Soviet streets about Communist Party bosses. “They call them the ‘Big Bottoms,’” she recounted. “They care only about their chairs, their place. And so our conversations began.”



Suzanne Massie, right, with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in a receiving line in the East Room of the White House in 1987. (Courtesy Ronald Reagan Presidential Library)

She told Reagan about the cultural influence of the Russian Orthodox Church despite the Soviet Union's officially atheist system. "No one had ever told the president of the United States that the Russians were religious," Ms. Massie [told](#) public radio's "The World" program in 2014. "I think that humanized the Russians for him in a way that he could understand."

Over the next four years, Ms. Massie and Reagan met 16 more times. In one discussion in 1986 — weeks before a summit between Reagan and Soviet leader [Mikhail Gorbachev](#) — she brought up the rhyming Russian adage, "Doveryai no proveryai," or "Trust but verify," which suggests cooperation and caution can exist in equal measure.

"You know the Russians often like to talk in proverbs, and there's one that might be useful," Ms. Massie recalled telling Reagan. "You're an actor. You can learn it in a minute."

The phrase became part of the Cold War lexicon. Reagan used it with Gorbachev at their summit in Iceland, and "Trust but verify" took hold as a baseline negotiating principle during arms-reduction talks.

"You repeat that [proverb] at every meeting," Gorbachev said in December 1987 at the signing of a treaty on cutting some intermediate-range nuclear weapons.

“I like it,” Reagan [replied](#), chuckling.

Ms. Massie’s human-focused briefings faced pushback from some in Reagan’s administration, such as Defense Secretary [Caspar W. Weinberger](#), who regarded her views as gauzy sentimentality. “I’m anti-Soviet but pro-Russian,” she once said in response.

Few could dispute her skill at conveying that message. McFarlane once called Ms. Massie the White House equivalent of the fabled “One Thousand and One Nights” storyteller Scheherazade. Ms. Massie, he said, was able to captivate Reagan with her narratives and insights. “She was talking his wavelength about people,” he told the Atlantic. “She’s an absorbing person. Her language is salty. She can be severe in her criticism. Reagan began to lean forward.”

Ms. Massie said she knew what was needed. “I’d rather be called eccentric than boring,” she told the Boston Globe. She liked to describe how ordinary Soviets found ways to circumvent officialdom. In one meeting, she told Reagan how she once joined people dancing to Duke Ellington on Voice of America radio in a remote Soviet park, far from any prying eyes.

“There were reasons for our official blindness,” she [wrote](#) in her memoir, “Trust But Verify: Reagan, Russia and Me” (2013), “among them that in the United States we have the tendency to see everything as a reflection of our own beliefs. Being ‘like us’ is equivalent to being ‘right.’”



Suzanne Massie, left, and Russian presidential aide Yury Ushakov during the presentation of a Russian passport to her in Moscow on Jan. 24, 2022. (Sputnik/AP)

Suzanne Liselotte Rohrbach was born in New York's borough of Queens on Jan. 8, 1931. Her father was a Swiss consul general in Philadelphia. Her Swiss-born mother immigrated to the United States as an au pair with a Swiss family in the 1920s after being stranded in Moscow, where she was a French-language tutor during World War I and the Russian Revolution.

Suzanne was raised in Philadelphia and studied at the Sorbonne University in Paris before receiving a bachelor's degree from Vassar College in 1952. She then spent more than a decade in journalism in roles including researcher at Time and Life magazines and managing editor of Gourmet magazine.

She started Russian classes in the early 1960s and assisted her then-husband, historian [Robert K. Massie](#), with his best-selling 1967 [biography](#) "Nicholas and Alexandra" on the last of Russia's czarist rulers. Ms. Massie and her husband (who later divorced) later co-wrote a personal saga, "[Journey](#)" (1975), on caring for their son with hemophilia. In between those projects, she edited her first book on Soviet and Russian life, "[The Living Mirror](#)" (1972), showcasing the work and struggles of five young poets from Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. The book also reflected Ms. Massie's expanding interest in the country

that began with her first visit researching czarist history — which included investigating how Nicholas II's son, Alexei, suffered from what was later diagnosed as hemophilia. She began to see connections between the grip of the Soviet state and the gnawing anxiety that hemophilia brought to her family. "We shared the reflexes of people who live with fear," she wrote in "Journey." Leningrad, she added, "was like finding a huge family that belonged to me, but that I had never known existed."

Her other books include "[Pavlovsk](#): The Life of a Russian Palace" (1990), which tells the story of the stately building's reconstruction after the nearly 900-day siege of Leningrad by German-led forces in World War II. She was a fellow at the Harvard Russian Research Center (now the Davis Center) from 1985 to 1997 and served on the board of the International League for Human Rights.



Suzanne Massie, right, with Reagan on Oct. 5, 1987, in Oval Office. (Courtesy Ronald Reagan Presidential Library)

For decades, she kept a small apartment in St. Petersburg and, when in the United States, spent time in a home in Blue Hill, Maine, built using the same design as the country dacha of Russian poet and playwright Alexander Pushkin.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in late 1989 and the end of the Soviet Union two years later, Ms. Massie was often credited with helping focus Reagan's approach during the final chapters of the Cold War before he left office in January 1989. She said her main

contribution was helping Reagan see the Soviet Union as he would any country — with its own brand of bickering, clashing egos and dissent.

Ms. Massie said that Gorbachev was impressed that Reagan learned to listen, rather than lecture. Gorbachev, she said, once paid Reagan the compliment of calling him a “chelovek,” meaning a genuine person.

“Gorbachev appreciated this,” she [wrote](#) in a 2008 essay, “and later told me, ‘I thought I was going to meet a dinosaur. Instead, I met a ‘chelovek.’”

In 1992, she married [Seymour Papert](#), a researcher of artificial intelligence and education theory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He died in 2016. Survivors include three children from her first marriage; seven grandchildren; three great-grandchildren; and a sister.

In 1985, Ms. Massie said she considered then Soviet-era Russia “a country I think of as almost my own.” More than three decades later, she asked Russian President Vladimir Putin to consider giving her citizenship. Ms. Massie had always championed Russian human rights — trampled by Putin’s regime — but made the appeal in hopes of avoiding visa snags and continue to chronicle Russia.

In an [announcement](#) by Putin in December 2021, Ms. Massie’s request was granted, and she received her Russian passport weeks later.