George Kennan and the Russian Soul:

Issues from the Authorized Kennan Biography by John Lewis Gaddis

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George Frost Kennan is probably best known as the author of the "containment policy" which served as the overarching principle informing U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the demise of the Soviet Union itself in 1991, very much along the lines that Kennan had foreseen when launching his policy recommendations in 1946, one might assume that the master's life and thoughts would be of consequence today only to historians of the Cold War, like his authorized biographer John Gaddis.

However, a second abiding concern of Kennan throughout his career was to defend the principle of interest-based foreign policy, or Realpolitik, as opposed to the moralistic-legalistic approach to policy formulation which prevailed in the American foreign policy community of his day. Since that very same object of Kennan's scorn, Wilsonian idealism, has become even further entrenched in the Washington of our day, Kennan's life and thoughts are also directly relevant to current politics in America. Moreover, as I will set out in this essay, there are issues surrounding Kennan's career in government service that are instructive as regards today's practices of recruiting and promoting top level planners and implementers of foreign policy. For these reasons, it is very good that in his biography of Kennan which came out last year Gaddis does not let his own persona intrude —put simply, he does not get in the way. He has thereby facilitated a growing discussion about Kennan in the professional community.

Gaddis has condensed and made accessible the vast written record left behind by a statesman turned scholar and public intellectual who had a very elevated opinion of his life's mission and, most exceptionally, saved for posterity all the contradictory drafts, correspondence, diary entries and finished policy papers that historical figures commonly purge to improve their image of single-mindedness if not saintliness.

Gaddis was unperturbed by the fact that Kennan himself produced a very readable and useful autobiography in two volumes when still at the top of his intellectual form. What he has done is to take the story forward into the final decades of a public life that continued to the ripe age of 101. This meant evening out, pacing the narrative from birth to death very much as the master might have done himself from an afterlife.

Gaddis points out changes in Kennan's positions, the many zigzags that perplexed his contemporaries, but he is never judgmental. He draws on the many interviews he took from Kennan's family and colleagues to clarify points in the diaries or correspondence which are equivocal or easily subject to misreading. But as Gaddis tells us at the outset, he does not attempt to deal with the differing interpretations of Kennan that have accumulated in the extensive literature of previous biographies and other secondary literature.

Looking over Kennan's life as set out by Gaddis, I explore here a couple of questions relating to his career advancement and setbacks which have lessons for the Executive which nominates our senior diplomats and planners, and for the Senate which vets and approves them.

Before embarking on these various questions, I want to be very clear that any "broad implications" come up against the fact that George Kennan was extraordinarily gifted. He was a brilliant master of the English language in both spoken and written form, whose persuasiveness in presenting policy recommendations was freely acknowledged by his opponents as well as by his allies. This may explain why he was spared ad hominem attacks by his opponents in an age that was at least as bitterly polarized as our own.

Kennan was a very quick learner, a person with the ambition and the ability to fill all space made available to him, to move into new areas of activity with great self-confidence and to perform usually at the highest levels. At the same time, Kennan had a nonconformist personality and an academic turn of mind which made it difficult for him to remain in place within a large organization like government service and ultimately took him to a research milieu on a university campus for the second half of his life, to everyone's relief, including his own.

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The first of my questions is in what sense was

Kennan an expert on Russia. After all, the notion of his expertise was fundamental to the acceptance and dissemination of his strategic policy-making at the height of his government career. And yet while Gaddis uses the term ”expert” repeatedly in relation to Kennan, he takes it for granted without question. The closest Gaddis comes is a remark on Kennan’s draft for an unpublished book on government organization, written in 1938 when Kennan was stationed in Washington as a Russia specialist in the European Division: “Kennan’s analyses of the U.S.S.R. were as sophisticated as anything available at the time. By the end of his first decade in the Foreign Service, he was explaining Russian society far better than Russians were doing for themselves.”

This contrasts with the biographer’s evaluation of Kennan’s commentary on the U.S. in the same document, which he concludes were ill informed and shallow. Was there genuinely a difference in Kennan’s understanding of the one society and misunderstanding of the other? Or is it Gaddis’s failure to see what might just have been flawed in Kennan’s Russian expertise at this time?

At the very beginning of his comprehensive monograph, Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America’s Soviet Experts (Oxford, 2009), David Engerman reminds us of a fact which bears directly on how and why George Kennan was a rare bird both in his generation of Foreign Service officers and in the generations which followed: “Even if government agencies had sought out Soviet expertise in the United States before World War II, they would have found precious little. There was no field of Russian Studies, just a handful of scholars, varying widely in interest, energy, training, and talents, spread thinly across American universities.” As Engerman sets out in detail, the whole discipline of Russian-Soviet studies in America got its start in the midst of the 1940s when academics were brought into classified military intelligence work. It was launched on a broad scale only when the Cold War set in.

Indeed, what expertise Kennan had when he joined the Bullitt mission to re-establish a U.S. embassy in Moscow in 1933 came from the special training he underwent in the Baltics and in Berlin as part of a newly created program within the State Department intended to give a very few young American diplomats the equivalent of postgraduate area studies training covering parts of the world which seemed to have prospective importance.

I find it regrettable that Gaddis chose to report extensively on Kennan’s family background and childhood in the first 90 pages of the biography and then to cut out even the thin information about the nearly three years of Kennan’s training for his life’s work as a Russian expert that we can find in chapter 2 of the Memoirs, 1925-1950. From the Memoirs, we know that Kennan’s superiors in the State Department set the objective for his academic studies in Berlin as follows: to give him the knowledge of the Russian language and history that one might have met with among the educated classes of pre-revolutionary Russia. It was assumed that with this solid basis, he would learn whatever was needed about the contemporary Soviet Union at his diplomatic post. And this is an approach with which Kennan said he agreed, though he notes he had requested authorization to take courses on Soviet finance and political structure which were taught at a high level in Berlin at the time and was turned down by Washington.

In addition to one year’s formal language training in the special department of the University used for preparing translators-interpreters for service in the German Foreign Office, in his second year Kennan followed regular Berlin University courses on history and studied language and literature with private tutors. The latter were mostly cultivated Russian emigrés rather than qualified pedagogues. They gave him the Russian classics and readings in Kliuchevsky which appear to have served as the intellectual matrix for all his later writings inside and outside the U.S. government.

What are we to make of this pre-revolutionary Russian gentleman whom Kennan had become by way of his formal and informal training at State Department expense assuming the duties of political analyst in the diplomatic mission in Soviet Russia, not to mention those of strategic policy planner for Europe and the world in Washington in 1947?

First of all, it is obvious that his reliance on historians of imperial Russia in the liberal tradition, particularly Vasily Kliuchevsky, would have given Kennan a perspective on the country’s trajectory dating from the 1870s and 80s which took no account of the cataclysmic events that changed the course of state dramatically and established leadership structures of a new kind which themselves evolved over the course of the next two decades in unforeseeable ways. Notwithstanding his excellent Russian, upon taking up his duties in Moscow Kennan would have lacked the skills and knowledge base on Soviet Russia to be a full-fledged analyst, and he would have been unlikely to find on the job either colleagues or superiors to guide his progress in Sovietology in any systematic manner.

In the 1930s, especially, it would have been exceedingly difficult for embassy staff in Moscow to learn much more about the country of their assignment than if they had remained in Washington. Contacts with normal Russians were minimal. Their main activities were social engagements with other members of the diplomatic community, their daily concern was familial and trying to live normally in difficult conditions. To this, Kennan had health problems that were a constant concern.

Kennan's unbalanced training and his personal predisposition to literature and artistic as opposed to scientific truth resulted in the verbose eloquence and frequent references to Dostoyevsky and Chekhov to predict and explain the behavior of Stalin and his henchmen via "the Russian character" as he called it, or "the Russian soul," the term by which this imaginative construct is more commonly known. This was the specific expertise which he wielded to great advantage. It was further buttressed in both his government and public writings by mining Gibbon and Shakespeare and other great thinkers on the human predicament.

In making these remarks, I am merely being descriptive, not deprecatory. Kennan himself would not have disagreed with the characterization, as we see from the following revelatory observation by him about what qualifications were needed for diplomatic service (as quoted by Engerman from Kennan's Princeton papers):

> the judgment and instinct of a single wise and experienced man, whose knowledge of the world rests on the experience of personal, emotional and intellectual participation in a wide cross-section of human effort, are something we hold to be more valuable than the most elaborate synthetic structure of demonstrable fact and logical deduction.

However, the opposite of "fact and logical deduction" can easily be tautological reasoning. Literary citations may merely justify preconceived analysis and recommendations.

That Kennan was able to parlay such qualifications, which may be understandable for consular assignments or even higher embassy posts, into the top foreign policy planning position in the land says as much about those who employed him as it does about his own ambition and talent. In the Foreign Service of his day, which recruited from elite schools like his own Princeton, the notion of a well-rounded education and social grace was prioritized. Clearly a strong command of languages, English first, would be a major advantage. However, as Engerman makes plain, by the time Kennan made the statement cited (1950), he was becoming something of a dinosaur. Official Washington, with the support and cooperation of private donors in the Rockefeller Foundation and Carnegie Corporation, was turning to a fact-based, multi-disciplinary approach to Russian and other area studies, first at Harvard and Columbia, then, with time, in many other university centers across the country.

In sum, it would be safe to say that the George Kennan who drafted the "containment policy" in 1946 was relying heavily for inspiration on his own instinctive sense of Russia and the Russian people, including its top leadership. For him at this time, literary allusion trumped factual knowledge. In the event, his judgments on Soviet intentions and capabilities were spot on. But that cannot allow us to ignore an important epistemological point.

Where Kennan's insight came from would be a mere curiosity were it not for the containment policy being the quintessence of a realist approach to foreign relations, which is supposed to be founded on detailed factual knowledge of the given area and interests in play, not derived from universalistic principles like its antithesis, idealism. The homework implicit in Realpolitik was never done. Kennan's reliance on artistic truth and personal vision held the possibility of greater conviction and prescience than would any tediously documented policy paper. At the same time, it left room for greater volatility and inconsistency in his writings.

The question of Kennan's Russian expertise contains within it one other: what did Kennan know and when? In effect, he became a fully-qualified expert on Russia in the period after he left government service, after his greatest contributions to U.S. foreign policy were made. Upon joining the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and after publishing his Chicago lectures as American Diplomacy: 1900-1950, for which he was subjected by established scholars to searing criticism, Kennan resolved to make good on his conversion to academic life and researched according to the canons of the day his two critically acclaimed volumes on the early history of Soviet American relations, Russia Leaves the War and The Decision to Intervene which were both published in the mid-1950s. The speed with which he turned out these thick and heavily footnoted tomes, which, according to Gaddis, he wrote daily, in parallel with his archival readings, may raise questions as to whether the research followed or preceded his conclusions, but the works have stood the test of time.

The next issue which I think needs close treatment is exactly how Kennan, the chargé d'affaires in the Moscow embassy, made his meteoric rise in 1946-47 to the very nerve center of Washington foreign policy and established paternity rights not only over what came to be called the 'containment policy' but to a great deal of what became the Marshall Plan. Gaddis provides a lot of evidence and some telling observations along the way but does not draw them together conclusively. Let us try to do that now by revisiting the circumstances around his 'Long Telegram,' which was Kennan's ticket to the highest foreign policy planning position in the Republic.

Kennan was patently not a team player. He was in the 1940s constantly trying to influence US policy towards Russia by reaching through, over and outside his bosses to get the ear of the President on the assumption that Ambassador Harriman was not conveying just how terrible Stalin's regime was and how the US should very quickly end the fiction of common objectives and do

what was necessary to ensure post-war Europe took the form it desired irrespective of Russian preferences. He was fortunate to enjoy the protection of an ambassador who valued having a "heretic" on his staff and merely considered Kennan's writings as self-indulgent and impractical.

Kennan was a "realist" only in his analysis of what drove Soviet post-war policies; he was not a realist with respect to the possibilities for the American government to react, given the impossibility of changing policy on a dime in a democracy.

I would also note that what Kennan was recommending during WWII was not significantly different from what British Prime Minister Churchill was telling the American government at the same time, without any effect. Churchill was, of course, another practitioner of Realpolitik. Like Kennan his explanations of the behavior of the Soviet Union were based on gut feeling. And his eloquence was no less sublime. But Churchill's motives in international affairs were held in suspicion by Washington, which saw in them largely a cover for defense of British imperial interests.

Kennan put together his Long Telegram in response to a simple request from Washington to comment on the post-election speech by Stalin dated February 9, 1946 in which the Soviet leader called for greatly increased military preparations, did not mention the Allies with respect to the recent war effort and repeated Marxism-Leninism doctrine to the effect that there could be no co-existence between capitalism and socialism. Ambassador Harriman had already left his post, and Kennan used the opportunity to dispatch to the State Department a great deal more than the expected brief analysis of the speech. His 5,000 word analysis of Soviet intentions for post-war Europe was a bid to reach its mark without any intermediation and present a full-blown foreign policy doctrine. In the event, policy towards Russia was then in flux due to incremental American dissatisfaction with Soviet behavior on the ground and to the new President's growing readiness to break with his predecessor's policies and assert direct control over foreign policy. Thus, the soil was already well prepared for a policy statement such as Kennan produced. Events had caught up with him and his piece was perfectly timed to be useful.

Nonetheless, Gaddis correctly raises the question of why this piece by a relatively unknown Foreign Service officer was taken up with such alacrity in Washington. He remarks on the boldness of the paper, which set out its points in unqualified terms and advanced one solution without setting out any alternatives. This Gaddis contrasts with a recent policy review on Russia which the State Department had entrusted to Kennan's colleague Chip Bohlen and Geroid T. Robinson. Gaddis identifies Robinson as "a Columbia University historian of Russia who had worked in the Office of Strategic Services during the war."

In fact, Robinson was substantially more skilled in bureaucratic ways than this introduction suggests. He had been chief of the USSR Division within the OSS and had a reputation as a hard driving boss. His administrative skills were rewarded soon afterwards by his appointment as director of the newly created Russian Institute at Columbia University.

We are given to understand by Gaddis that the Bohlen-Robinson policy paper was indecisive and ended with several policy options, none of which was especially persuasive. Be that as it may, this type of format is what all hierarchical organizations demand. After all, decisions on strategy are supposed to be taken by an informed leader, not by a subordinate rapporteur.

We must bear in mind that at the time he wrote the Long Telegram Kennan was no longer 'mentally' a Foreign Service officer. He had submitted his letter of resignation eight months previously and was in a suspended state pending career change. This may well explain why Kennan allowed himself to violate all organizational rules in his paper.

The Long Telegram gave coherence to a policy volte-face on Russia which was otherwise underway in Washington. Kennan had placed an all-or-nothing bet which was fortuitously timed and broke the bank. As a consequence, all doors were open to him in Washington.

In quick succession he was invited to join the newly created National War College to give the first course on strategic policy planning directed at senior officials of the various branches of the U.S. military and State Department in several decades. This was invaluable exposure within the government. He was then encouraged to popularize the newly adopted containment policy among the broader public through lectures and publications. This was the context for the 'Mr. X' essay 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct' which appeared in Foreign Affairs magazine in June 1947 with which Kennan's name was to be inalienably linked for decades.

In the spring of 1947, he was invited to head a new Policy Planning Staff reporting directly to Secretary of State George Marshall, which effectively set course on 360 degrees of American foreign policy over the coming two and a half years.

It would neither be unkind nor untrue to say that Kennan was brought to power by the skills of a speech-writer, drawing on his native eloquence. But, we see from Gaddis that once he arrived at the center of power, Kennan made his unique contribution and earned his place in history thanks to his work as strategic planner. This was, I emphasize, a position for which he had received no specific training. Just as Kennan created his lectures for the War College by learning on the job, so he ran the

Policy Planning Staff of 5, using it as a sounding board for analyses and recommendations that were nearly all his own and which he devised on the spot while reinventing himself. His methods were those of a highly gifted prima donna, not a collegial player. Moreover, he succeeded precisely because his boss, George Marshall, practiced a policy which is rare in large bureaucracies of putting most of his eggs in one basket. When Marshall was succeeded in office by Dean Acheson, the far more common habit of taking information and advice from multiple sources was implemented. Acheson also restored the traditional organogram with its deference to the chiefs of regional desks. Kennan then lost both his influence and his will to stay on in government service, which ultimately led to his early retirement at the start of the Eisenhower administration.

My remarks on the fit between Kennan's personality and the jobs he occupied in the government which emerges from Gaddis's biography should be leavened by one further observation from when my intellectual commitments intersected with Kennan's in the late 1970s. At the time, Kennan was on the board of the US Committee of East-West Accord and I was a junior member and contributor to its publications. The common objective was lobbying the U.S. Congress on behalf of a more constructive, less adversarial relationship with the Soviet Union, in favor of slowing, then reversing the strategic nuclear arms race. Kennan revealed at the time what Gaddis makes plain throughout his career in and out of government: a genuine affection for the object of his policy planning and research, namely Russia. At the time, such a mindset was held by a minority of the American foreign policy community. Today it is virtually nonexistent. I would be delighted if the restoration of Kennan's life and thoughts to active discussion today contributed to the rehabilitation of a more reasonable and open-minded approach to Russia as a legitimate permanent interlocutor for the United States in any collective approach to managing international affairs.

Gilbert Doctorow was a 2010-2011 Harriman Visiting Scholar.