The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kennan's Insight Into the Russian Soul

By Gilbert Doctorow

May 28, 2012



George Kennan is best known as the author of the containment policy, which served as the overarching principle informing U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. 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, confirmed his prophetic cast. Kennan was a man who in his own age was prized for taking the long view, was a nonconformist and left government service rather early to find more congenial surroundings in a Princeton research institute for the second half of a very long life, which ended only in 2005 at the age of 101.

Though an entire industry of writings about Kennan has developed over time, the publication of his authorized biography by Cold War historian John Gaddis last fall created a stir in the general public as well as among professionals. Last month, the book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

As most reviewers have noted, the Kennan who emerges from the official biography is a very contradictory thinker who repeatedly "soiled his own nest" by turning against a conventional wisdom in Washington that rested upon his own doctrine.

This portrait of the man results directly from the relatively modest task that Gaddis set for himself: to condense and make accessible the vast written and oral record left behind by a statesman and intellectual who had a very elevated opinion of his life's mission. Kennan saved for posterity all the drafts, correspondence and diary entries that historical figures commonly purge to improve their image of single-mindedness, if not saintliness.

By not letting his own persona intrude, Gaddis has facilitated a growing discussion about Kennan in the professional community. But he leaves us with a conundrum of those zigzags in positions that also puzzled Kennan's contemporaries.

In fact, Kennan was a rare bird both in his generation of Foreign Service officers and in the generations that followed. He was trained more than a decade before the discipline of Russian-Soviet studies got its start in the United States in the midst of the world war. Russian studies were launched on a broad scale only when the Cold War set in.

Indeed, what formal expertise Kennan possessed came from schooling in Berlin as part of a newly created program within the State Department intended to give a very few young U.S. diplomats the equivalent of post-graduate area studies covering parts of the world that seemed to have prospective importance.

In his second year at Berlin University, Kennan studied with private tutors. They taught him the Russian classics and readings in historian Vasily Klyuchevsky, which appear to have served as the intellectual matrix for all his later writings inside and outside the U.S. government.

Kennan's personal predisposition to literature and artistic — as opposed to scientific — truth resulted in the verbose eloquence and frequent references to authors Fyodor Dostoevsky and Anton Chekhov to predict and explain the behavior of Josef Stalin and his henchmen via "the Russian character" as he called it, or "the Russian soul." This was the specific expertise that he wielded to great advantage when writing his "long telegram" in early 1946, which was his ticket to the inner sanctums of Washington policymaking.

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, the top-down logic in Kennan left room for great volatility and inconsistency in his writings, which could swing with the moods of his mercurial personality.

At the time he wrote the containment policy, Kennan was something of a dinosaur in the burgeoning field of Russian studies. Official Washington, with the support and cooperation of private donors in the Rockefeller Foundation and Carnegie Corporation, was turning to a bottom-up, fact-based and multidisciplinary approach to Russian studies — first at Harvard and Columbia universities, then, with time, in many other universities across the country.

All of this is not to deny that Kennan, the author of half a dozen works of diplomatic history, was an expert in the academic sense. But he became an academic expert in the period after he left government service — that is, after his greatest contributions to U.S. foreign policy were made. And even then, there is reason to say his research was not "pure" but was intended to advance his arguments as a partisan of realpolitik, as opposed to the idealist-driven foreign policy of his day.

Kennan's career and our measure of his Russian expertise provide valuable lessons for the present. Today, enrollment in Russian area studies in the United States has been reduced to a trickle because of the wide misperception that Russia is not that important to U.S. interests. Moreover, a master's degree in international affairs can be obtained in many leading U.S. universities without any requirement of language or history concentration in the geographic field of concentration, whether it be Russia, China or other area studies. In this sense, we are almost back to where we started when Kennan enrolled in his State Department-sponsored graduate courses. We can only wonder whether we will ever see the kind of gifted amateurs like Kennan when academia finally shifts policy on Russia.

Gilbert Doctorow publishes analytical essays on Russian-American relations in La Libre Belgique and is an occasional lecturer at St. Petersburg State University.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/05/28/kennans-insight-into-the-russian-soul-a15064