

An Assessment of John Lewis Gaddis's *George F. Kennan: An American Life*

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The latest book by John Lewis Gaddis is a masterpiece written by a distinguished scholar about a distinguished diplomat and policy strategist. Both Gaddis and his subject won their reputations from U.S.-Russian/Soviet relations, one by studying the topic and the other by actually formulating and implementing U.S. policy toward the USSR.

The book makes for good reading, with something intriguing on every page. Gaddis shows that the life of a man of thought can be just as interesting as that of any man of action. However, we see that George F. Kennan's "actions" in public life usually consisted of influencing governments by offering analysis and policy recommendations.¹

Gaddis presents the drama of a person with a scholarly mind who operated in the political world. Scholarship requires comprehensive analysis, whereas politics needs only policy recommendations, the clearer the better. That is why, after giving his brilliant piece of advice about containment and seeing it implemented in U.S. foreign policy, Kennan often felt upset and produced analyses that sometimes contradicted what he had written earlier. That was not a situation of "double personality disorder," but the normal state of an intellectual's mind that cannot reduce reality to just one side of it.

Through five parts and twenty-five chapters, Gaddis, the preeminent historian of the Cold War, lays out the story of a life that becomes another history of the Cold War, now written from the vantage point of a biography of one of its greatest strategists. Kennan lived much longer than the world system he (along with other senior politicians in Washington and Moscow) designed. Moreover, he witnessed both the beginning and the end of the USSR,

1. Kennan, according to Gaddis, early realized that the "United States had no foreign policy, only the reflections of domestic politics internationally," and so the reader may conclude that Kennan's major service was the creation of a foreign policy for his country. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. 63.

the American archrival in the twentieth century. The subject's long life provides the biographer with an opportunity to probe deeply into the past and to trace the origins of some concepts and misconceptions that were developed in the United States and Soviet Russia about each other well before the Fulton speech or the "Long Telegram" or the "X" article.

Gaddis's book is based on his unique knowledge of the documents, both official records and Kennan's private papers, which he skillfully uses to make a highly readable book. Many of the documents had not previously been available and are discussed for the first time in the biography. Historians know how valuable such gems can be in shedding light on the past. The book, though intended for a general audience will also force specialist historians in many countries, including the United States and Russia, to reevaluate their understanding of past events and persons.

In a brief commentary I cannot do full justice to Kennan's extraordinary life or analyze all the themes so brilliantly discussed by Gaddis. However, there is one important theme that seems problematic—namely, the degree of Kennan's expertise on Russia and the USSR.

Let us start in the middle of the nineteenth century when the U.S. minister to Russia, Neill Brown, sent reports to his superiors describing life in Russia as repugnant and Russians themselves as distrustful. He insisted that "secrecy and mystery characterize everything" and that "all they [Russians] have is borrowed, except their miserable climate." Brown complained that the Russian government "possesses in an exquisite degree the art of worrying a foreign representative without giving him even the consolation of an insult." Kennan found these letters in 1936 and compiled his own report (signed by Ambassador William C. Bullitt) using Brown's dispatches with almost no change. The young diplomat insisted that they still precisely described Iosif Stalin's Soviet Union. Kennan was apparently proud of his discovery, and Gaddis joins him in boasting. On five occasions in the book Gaddis returns to the story of Brown's dispatches and Kennan's use of the texts at various junctures. In a lecture delivered at the Foreign Service School in 1938 and another at the Canadian Defence College in 1948, Kennan quoted Brown's dispatches. In 1952, after learning that Soviet intelligence had planted a listening device in the U.S. Great Seal in the ambassador's office, Kennan read the dispatches aloud into the Great Seal. Gaddis highlights these occasions to demonstrate Kennan's love for history.²

Certainly, these anecdotes are intriguing, but how could the Russia of Nicholas I and the Soviet Union under Stalin possibly be so similar? Brown, the former governor of Tennessee who was serving as U.S. minister to Russia

2. *Ibid.*, 110, 465, 503, 710.

from 1850 to 1853 when he wrote the dispatches, had little formal education and no prior experience in diplomacy, and he did not know Russian or any language other than English. His appointment to this diplomatic post stemmed solely from his role in the Whig Party, whose candidate for the presidency (Zachary Taylor) had won the 1848 election. The Russian diplomat Eduard Stoeckl, a contemporary of Brown, described him as “a person of moderate principles and talents.”³ Brown arrived in Russia without his family. His modest salary did not permit him to attend aristocratic balls and parties in St. Petersburg, and he felt lonely and frustrated. Without a diplomatic agenda, he devoted his reports to sarcastic commentaries on the Russian way of life. He concentrated on xenophobia and police surveillance, which he saw as characterizing the whole of Russian society.⁴

For a more nuanced picture, however, we should turn to the dispatches of other U.S. ministers of that epoch, such as Charles S. Todd (1841–1846) and Thomas Seymour (1853–1858), both of whom had quite different views of Russia. They described the development of railroads, the readiness to accept new technology, and the high level of science and university education.

Why, then, did Kennan find Brown's texts so astute and so relevant when describing Stalin's USSR? In the 1960s, when Soviet critics of Stalin's regime severely criticized Nicholas I, that was an example of the “Aesopian language” needed to bypass censorship. However, historians tend to see the details that distinguish one epoch from another rather than make them indistinguishable. The scale of comparison used by Brown (and subsequently by Kennan) is so large that it omits crucial details and causes Tsarist Russia to look equal to the Soviet Union under Stalin. Neither Brown nor Kennan offered any empirical analysis of Russia and instead relied on a canned and clichéd set of descriptions borrowed from one generation to the next.

Brown and people of like mind possessed a strict set of values that he used in judging the foreign country. In many cases the “reference points” that were important for Brown, such as freedom of the press and democratic elections, did not meet any corresponding reality in Russia. On the other hand, his vantage point did not permit him to see Russian achievements that did not correspond to his American experience. Thus, when Brown criticized Russian diplomacy, he in fact admitted that most Russian diplomats were more polished than he, a rank amateur.

Kennan claimed to be a historian of Russia (and Gaddis supports this

3. Edward Stoeckl to Karl Nesselrode, Cable No. 5, 22 January / 3 February 1850, in *Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire*, Moscow, Fond 133, Kantselyaria 1850, Opis' 469, Delo 138, List 77 ob.

4. See Kenneth E. Shewmaker, “Neill S. Brown's Mission to Russia, 1850–53,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (December 2001), pp. 81–98.

claim and defends Kennan against a group of professional historians who harshly criticized his writings). However, historians should acknowledge the possibility of different interpretations of foreign countries and be aware of the historical dynamics that can make sweeping generalizations over centuries largely useless for policymaking. Gaddis sometimes juxtaposes Kennan to another foreign policy intellectual of the age, Walter Lippmann, who was famous for, among other things, introducing the term “stereotype” into foreign relations analysis. What Kennan boasted about was just a stereotype about Russia he helped to maintain.⁵

This is not to say that Kennan did not understand Russia. His knowledge and grasp of Soviet realities developed over his long life, and he eventually became an excellent specialist in the field. However, the fact that Kennan early on acquired a reputation of being the best U.S. expert on Russia and kept that informal title throughout his life obscures to some extent the fact that he began with almost no competition and that the generalizations he made about Russian history when he was a young diplomat were not as sharp as his later papers. Gaddis devotes almost no attention to the development and change of Kennan’s views on Russian history and Russian culture (although he does look in depth at the changing nature of Kennan’s views of the international order). The fact that Kennan was considered the best expert on Russia in the 1930s tells us less about Kennan than about the lack of real expertise in the United States during those years. Gaddis claims that “by the end of [Kennan’s] first decade in the Foreign Service he was explaining Russian society far better than Russians were doing for themselves.”⁶ That assertion is dubious.

Escaping the hoary question of “Who started the Cold War?” is almost impossible when writing about Kennan. However, Gaddis this time, unlike in his past work, does not address the issue. Instead, he simply wants to see the world through Kennan’s eyes. Hence, the book does not discuss the relevance of either the “Long Telegram” or the “X” article to the real intentions and policies of the USSR.

Gaddis quotes Kennan’s papers from 1947 and 1948 to show that

5. There are other instances in which Kennan saw Russia through the nineteenth-century stereotypes. His description of Leningrad was, probably inadvertently, a repetition of the words written by another nineteenth-century historian and diplomat, John Lothrop Motley, in 1842. Compare what Kennan wrote (“the city should never have been built and would perhaps one day sink back into the swamp from which Peter had raised it”) with what Motley had earlier written: “[Peter I] raised St. Petersburg out of the morass; but . . . this city may at any moment . . . be inundated and swamped forever.” See Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 84; and George W. Curtis, ed., *The Correspondence of John Lothrop Motley* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900), Vol. 1, p. 124. The motif dates even earlier to Aleksandr Pushkin’s narrative poem *The Bronze Horseman: A Petersburg Tale*.

6. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 117.

Kennan was convinced that “the best way to avoid another such catastrophe would be to stay stronger than all potential adversaries.”⁷ Despite adding Kennan’s own later criticism of “hardline” views, neither Kennan during his lifetime nor Gaddis in his biography seems to recognize the possibility of similar thinking on the Soviet side. Even more, given the devastating scale of the human and material losses in the USSR during the war, Kennan’s assessment seems unduly alarmist.

Gaddis is surely right that Kennan “hit the jackpot as a ‘Russian expert,’” but that does not mean that Kennan was evenhanded in his assessment of the Soviet Union, which only recently had suffered the worst disaster in Russia’s long history.⁸ Kennan had no doubt that Soviet behavior was “aggressive,” but he was a diplomat whose goal was to support his own country’s foreign policy, not to find balanced and nuanced truth about an adversary. Could a historian weigh “aggressiveness” and “self-defense” more accurately?

When describing the substance of the “Long Telegram,” Gaddis mentions Kennan’s insistence that “the Soviet regime *needed* external enemies to justify its internal rule.” This characterization is just an early example of a constructivist methodology of approaching foreign policy.⁹

Similarly, Gaddis describes McCarthyism in the United States from a purely domestic point of view but analyzes anti-Americanism in the USSR solely as a foreign policy phenomenon. Gaddis provides (again, through Kennan’s eyes) a colorful picture of anti-American propaganda in Moscow in 1952 but mentions just briefly the “hostility” directed toward Soviet Ambassador Aleksandr Panyushkin and his staff at the embassy in Washington. To be sure, I do not mean to imply that the processes were identical. Stalin was a cruel dictator, and Russian history had taught Russians tough lessons, but could there have been other explanations of the Soviet policies? Gaddis mentions Kennan’s attempt “to see the situation through Soviet eyes,” but this empathy went only so far.¹⁰

Only well into the Cold War did Kennan (and Gaddis who follows him) start to mention the great sacrifice made by the Soviet people in World War II. Even without Stalin, Communism, or the strictures of Russian history, the experience in World War II would explain much about the Soviet Union’s conduct in the immediate aftermath of the war.

Gaddis’s book in fact reveals contradictions, not consistency, in Kennan’s

7. *Ibid.*, p. 374.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 228; see also, p. 250. An earlier biographer of Kennan, Walter L. Hixson, makes a similar point, albeit regarding U.S. (not Soviet) foreign policy, in *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

10. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 443, 450–452, 464.

attitude toward Russia. Kennan saw it as the same country under Ivan the Terrible, Nicholas I, and Stalin, but as differing from any other country because it had adopted Communism.¹¹ In this way, Marxism-Leninism became just a variant of Russia's unchangeable social and political landscape.

The last part of the book provides us with a portrait of another Kennan, this time finally free from his obligations to the state, and even, at some point, having turned into what Gaddis describes as a "counter-cultural critic." That was not the route often chosen by retired Foreign Service officers. For Kennan, his new freedom provided time for reflection and writing. Still, he was a part of the political world—probably more so than the world of academics that he formally inhabited. He was contacting Soviet Ambassador Anatolii Dobrynin and commenting on Ronald Reagan's policies toward the Soviet Union in magazine articles. Kennan wanted to retain the reputation he had earned before World War II as the country's "number one" Soviet expert, and to some extent he kept it. New generations of Soviet experts mostly came from academia and learned more about U.S.-Soviet relations in their universities, but Kennan had been a part of those relations himself, a position nobody else could claim.

Gaddis seems lenient toward his hero, offering little that was scandalous about Kennan. The main exception comes when Gaddis accurately describes Kennan's views on race and Jews, noting that Kennan saw white Protestant Europeans as "almost the only modern, reasonable—if you will, tired—peoples with whom we can live."¹²

A few minor points in the book might raise the hackles of some specialists. Gaddis refers to "over 230 years of Russian-American diplomatic relations," but in doing so he rejects the conventional date of the beginning of diplomatic relations—either 1807, when the mutual recognition and exchange of letters took place; or 1809, when ministers were first exchanged. Gaddis supports as the starting point the date of Francis Dana's earlier mission to St. Petersburg (1780–1783), which was not, however, received by Catherine the Great or given official status.¹³

Readers who know Russian will immediately realize that the family name of Kennan's Russian friend in Germany must have been "Kozhevnikov" not "Kozhenikov" (though it is possible that the family's German papers were issued with the erroneous spelling).

Despite these problems, Gaddis has produced a great biography that fills

11. Kennan also contended that at some point the Russian people would overthrow the Bolsheviks and become a U.S. ally.

12. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 359.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 469.

the diplomatic history of the twentieth century with the flesh and blood of a real life. For a historian, however, the greater is the book that does not end the theme but opens a discussion. There is room for more discussion about one of the sharpest minds of the last century, and this monograph will shape that discussion.