

George F. Kennan and the Division of Europe

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John Lewis Gaddis's biography of George F. Kennan is a masterpiece. Gaddis marvelously connects Kennan's public and academic life with his private background, explores the twists and turns of his volatile psyche, and demonstrates how his analyses and judgments were frequently affected by his spells of gloominess and unstable health. This remarkable piece of historical writing, based on a vast array of sources, among which Kennan's diaries play a principal role, certainly gives a sufficient incentive to discuss the legacy of the man who so significantly influenced the major postwar foreign policy strategies of the United States.

Gaddis points out in the epilogue the major achievement of Kennan's strategy of containment—that it offered an alternative course between appeasement of the Soviet Union and the disastrous scenario of a third world war.¹ However, Kennan's own opinions overlapped with the course of U.S. foreign policy for only a brief period—two or three years at most. He had already been consistently critical of U.S. foreign policy throughout World War II. Hence, it is legitimate to ask what would have been the outcome if his recommendations had been accepted sooner. The result of such an inquiry is distressing: If he really thought in August 1944 that the Soviet Union's refusal to assist the Warsaw Uprising was the moment for an Anglo-American showdown with Iosif Stalin, bolstered by a threat to discontinue the Western-Allied support and sponsorship of the Soviet war effort, as Kennan later claimed in his memoirs, such a drastic decision—adopted at a time when the Germans, with their front lines shortened and thus consolidated, were by no means yet defeated—would have at least seriously slowed Soviet progress into Central Europe.² However, that progress was certainly preferable to a prolongation of Nazi rule. The Soviet advance, for all the cruelty and injustices it

1. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. 694.

2. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 211. Gaddis shows, however, that Kennan's actual recommendations of the day were far less radical. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 183.

caused, did not mean an attack against the very right of the occupied countries to exist.

Kennan's suggestion, made in a letter to Charles Bohlen dated 26 January 1945 and again in the wake of the end of the war in Europe, that the continent be divided into spheres of influence and that the United States dissociate itself from what was happening in the Soviet sphere offered the East-Central European countries no hope whatsoever. Moreover, as Bohlen rightly points out in his memoirs, this outcome was utterly unacceptable for the American people, who, after a long and hard war, "deserved at least an attempt to work out a better world."³ What Kennan was suggesting at this juncture, a few days before the Yalta conference, was something much worse than the actual outcome after the war. Even the "percentages agreement," discussed by Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden on the one hand and by Stalin and Vyacheslav Molotov on the other hand in Moscow the previous fall, which is usually presented as the starkest and most blatant example of great-power Realpolitik, sought to secure for the West at least some influence in the Balkans—in a measure that rather "understated actual Soviet predominance."⁴ Kennan, for his part, "realistically" proposed to write these countries off completely.

The Marshall Plan offer, designed largely by Kennan, certainly represented a positive deviation from this way of thinking: It was deliberately made open to the East European countries that should, in Kennan's words, either "exclude themselves by unwillingness to accept the proposed conditions or agree to abandon the exclusive orientation of their economies."⁵ Judged by the Hungarian example, this extension of the offer all but demonstrates how little the Western officials knew about life behind the Iron Curtain. For most countries of Eastern Europe the Marshall Plan came too late because Soviet control there was already too tight and impossible to break.⁶ However, this was not the case for Czechoslovakia, whose economy was *not* yet oriented exclusively toward the Soviet Union; indeed, it was still oriented much more toward the West. Gaddis joins or tacitly accepts Kennan's sweeping generalization in claiming that the "Eastern Europeans were at first told to accept aid with a view to sabotaging the Marshall Plan from within, but Stalin then

3. Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History 1929–1969* (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 177. See also George F. Kennan to Charles Bohlen, 26 January 1945, in Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Charles Bohlen Papers, Box 3, Restricted Letters—George F. Kennan Papers; and Charles E. Bohlen to George F. Kennan, n.d., in Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Charles Bohlen Papers, Box 3, Restricted Letters—George F. Kennan Papers; and Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 188–189.

4. Elisabeth Barker, *British Policy in South-Eastern Europe in the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 146–147.

5. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 268.

6. László Borhi, "Was American Diplomacy Really Tragic?" *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 2005), p. 166.

countermanded these instructions as well.⁷⁷ The epic story of Czechoslovakia's acceptance and later refusal to participate in the Paris conference on the Marshall Plan hardly fits this assertion: The tiny democratic majority of ministers within the Czechoslovak government was genuinely convinced that the offer would help the country's economy. However, when Stalin and Molotov explained to a Czechoslovak delegation (composed of the Communist Prime Minister Klement Gottwald and the democratic ministers of foreign affairs and justice, Jan Masaryk and Prokop Drtina) on 9 July 1947 that any participation in the conference would be considered an unfriendly act against the USSR, none of the ministers dared to resist, and the government accordingly executed an immediate U-turn.⁸ Haunted by the German menace, with faith in the West fatally shaken by the experience of Munich and subsequent destruction of Czechoslovakia, most of the Czechoslovak democratic politicians were ready to exchange freedom and prosperity for security, the source of which they could see only in Moscow.

Taking into account that he had spent a year at the U.S. legation in Prague in 1938–1939 and that his experiences there had helped him to comprehend the real nature of the Nazi dictatorship, Kennan may be criticized for his later lack of differentiation when dealing with the East European countries. Nor was it the first time that he had misjudged Czechoslovakia: Although his dispatches from Prague contain many insightful observations about Czech society and its elites, Kennan's most important cable, sent from Berlin and amounting to a major policy recommendation regarding Czechoslovakia, was entirely misconceived and based on unfounded propositions.⁹ In February 1941, Kennan, who by then was the first secretary at the U.S. embassy in Berlin, argued against the recognition of the government-in-exile of Edvard Beneš and stated that if a revolt were to break out the Czech nation would unite behind the government in Prague led by the Nazi Protectorate's president, Emil Hácha, rather than behind a committee in London. However,

7. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 269.

8. Record of I. V. Stalin's talk with the Czechoslovak governmental delegation, 9 July 1947, in T. V. Volokitina et al., eds., *Sovetskii faktor v vostochnoi Evrope 1944–1953* [The Soviet factor in Eastern Europe 1944–1953], Vol. 1., 1944–1948 (Moscow: Rosspen, 1999), No. 166, pp. 462–466; Record of the talk of the Czechoslovak delegation in Moscow and the telegram of K. Gottwald, J. Masaryk, and P. Drtina for President E. Beneš, V. Široký, and V. Clementis, 9–10 July 1947, in Karel Kaplan and Alexandra Špiritová, eds., *ČSR a SSSR 1945–1948: Dokumenty mezinárodních jednání* [Czechoslovakia and the USSR 1945–1948: Documents of the intergovernmental negotiations] (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 1996), No. 160, pp. 363–369; and Record of the 96th extraordinary session of the Czechoslovak government on the participation of Czechoslovakia at the Paris Peace Conference on the Marshall Plan, 10 July 1947, in Kaplan and Špiritová, eds., *ČSR a SSSR 1945–1948*, No. 161, pp. 369–388.

9. George F. Kennan, *From Prague after Munich: Diplomatic Papers 1938–1940* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).

Hácha himself hardly shared this view. He considered himself a mere “vice-regent” of Beneš, with whom he remained in clandestine contact until Reinhard Heydrich’s arrival in Prague in September 1941.¹⁰ Even though one can understand the reasons for Kennan’s view that creation of a postwar federation in Central Europe was preferable to the reconstruction of Czechoslovakia under Beneš’s leadership, his further recommendation for adopting a pro-Habsburg orientation was devoid of political realism and verged on wishful thinking.¹¹

Even though Kennan was fully justified in his critical assessment of the growing Communist influence in Czechoslovakia after the Moscow negotiations about the new Czechoslovak government and its program in March 1945, the U.S. policy he helped design toward Czechoslovakia after it refused to participate in the Marshall Plan merely facilitated the final stage of the Communist ascent to power.¹² In his lectures at the National War College in September and October 1947, Kennan predicted that Soviet leaders, knowing their empire in Eastern Europe was unstable, would soon tighten their control over Czechoslovakia, which he said was “still a relatively free country from which Western influence could spread if allowed to take root.”¹³ In an analysis requested by Secretary of State George Marshall and dated 6 November 1947, Kennan anticipated that Moscow in an effort to consolidate its holdings in the eastern part of the continent would soon clamp down on Czechoslovakia.¹⁴ However, he believed that nothing significant was at stake: In his view, an end to multiparty rule in Czechoslovakia would be a purely *defensive* response to the success of the Marshall Plan and would merely consolidate the status quo and thus require *no action* on the part of the United States.¹⁵ The limited scope of U.S. initiatives to “rescue” Czechoslovakia reflected this fatalism, which set a pattern of U.S. policy toward that country for decades to come.¹⁶

This “non-policy” contrasted sharply with the efforts of Great Britain,

10. See Tomáš Pasák, *JUDr. Emil Hácha (1938–1945)* (Prague: Horizont, 1997), pp. 101, 109, 138–161.

11. Kennan’s memorandum, 5 February 1941, in National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, MD, Record Group 59, Department of State File 860F.01/461.

12. See Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950*, pp. 254–255.

13. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 284.

14. Policy Planning Staff, “Résumé of World Situation,” 6 November 1947, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947*, Vol. I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973), pp. 770–777. Marshall then presented the gist of the report, with a few alterations, at the Cabinet meeting of 7 November.

15. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 303–304.

16. See Günter Bischof, “‘No Action’: The Johnson Administration and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968,” in Günter Bischof, Stefan Karner, and Peter Ruggenthaler, eds., *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010), pp. 215–236.

even though British resources, further depleted by the crisis of the previous winter, were much inferior to those of the United States. British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin informed his colleagues on 5 January 1948 that Czechoslovakia was the only one of the East European countries within the Soviet sphere in which an effective and active opposition to the Communists still existed.¹⁷ He correspondingly sent his private secretary, Pierson Dixon, to Prague as the new ambassador and entrusted him with a personal message for “our mutual friend,” President Beneš, asking him what the British could do to maintain the freedom of his people.¹⁸ Nothing came of this initiative, however. On 10 February 1948, Beneš, who by this time was “slow in his speech and somewhat forgetful,” categorically excluded any possibility that democracy in his country would collapse and said that the best British contribution would be an increase in trade relations.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the British at least deserve credit for their last-minute “attempt to work out a better world” for the Czechs and Slovaks. Kennan, for his part, finally had his “Yalta.” Not the real one, marked by the Declaration on Liberated Europe, but the one he had proposed in his letter to Bohlen a few days earlier. Now, the lines were finally drawn and Europe was irrevocably divided.

However, a few months later, in August 1948, Kennan started arguing against the division of Europe (and thus repudiating the very thing he so recently had sought to establish). He claimed that “the danger of war would be greater if the continent remained split,” and he accompanied this volte-face with speculation about a peaceful withdrawal of Soviet power “in good times” and restoration of a normal balance to the European community. One cannot but marvel at the numerous other twists of Kennan’s unpredictable mind, such as when he urged the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to be cautious about releasing the text of the “secret speech” Nikita Khrushchev delivered at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. Why Kennan hesitated to light this fuse is difficult to understand. The irony of his strategic thinking vis-à-vis Eastern Europe probably reached its climax when he condemned Andrei Sakharov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and other Soviet dissidents for their activities that in his view endangered the process of détente.²⁰

Thus, the man who had once been a vehement champion of rollback and had demanded various propaganda and clandestine activities as well as a wide range of covert operations directed against the Soviet Union and its satellites

17. Cabinet memorandum, “Review of Soviet Policy,” C.P.(48)7, 5 January 1948, in The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNAUK), CAB 129/23.

18. Ernest Bevin to Pierson Dixon, 18 January 1948, in TNAUK, FO 800/450.

19. Pierson Dixon to Ernest Bevin, Telegram No. 81, 11 February 1948, in TNAUK, FO 800/450.

20. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 326–327, 518, 622–625.

was now frightened by the mildest and most authentic (because stemming from domestic Soviet sources) mode of containment.²¹ In the same way that left-wing intellectuals in the 1930s had regarded themselves as being at a crossroads, with the only two paths leading either to dark Nazi dictatorship or to progressive Communism, Kennan had come to see no alternative between the “let it be” attitude toward Moscow and nuclear war.²² Most ironically, he at the same time kept assuring everybody that there was no danger of aggressive Soviet behavior. He was so obsessed with the nuclear menace that in 1989 he did not even welcome the breakup of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, fearing that it would increase the risk of nuclear war.

Given the strange development of Kennan’s thinking as well as his fundamental reservations about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization from the time it was founded, it is no wonder that he joined the throng of Western intellectuals who in the 1990s argued against the eastward expansion of the alliance. The common denominator of their reservations was the alleged lack of sensitivity to Russia and the risk of alienating Russians and strengthening the undemocratic tendencies inside that country. However, Kennan himself had once written that Russia would never become a democracy and had disparaged Americans who were hoping for such an outcome as “quixotic fools.” Fortunately for Eastern Europe—where “prosperity and happiness have always been, like warm summer days, fleeting exceptions in the cruel climate”—the influence of independent observers on the Clinton administration’s foreign policy was limited. Thus, a chance for “sunnier days” in the countries between Germany and Russia at least grew by allowing them to join the “West” at a time when numerous obstacles were being posed by the European Union while stories of the eternal Western “Munich-Yalta” policy toward that part of Europe were omnipresent.²³

I cannot help feeling (and this feeling was strengthened by Gaddis’s biography) that the evolution of Kennan’s thoughts on many issues is a case study of intellectual inconsistency. Gaddis exposes numerous radical shifts in the strategies that Kennan suggested, often within a few months, with respect to Germany, Eastern Europe, Korea; interference or noninterference in internal affairs of other countries; the need for long-term planning versus policy on a day-to-day basis; and other matters. No wonder that even his friend Dean Acheson came to see him as “not a very useful policy adviser,” all the more so

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 354–355.

22. See, for example, the emblematic novel by Marie Pujmanová, *Lidé na křižovatce* [People at a crossroads] (Prague: Fr. Borový, 1937).

23. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 181, 285.

because Kennan often set up visionary goals but rarely suggested specific ways of attaining them.²⁴ His ambassadorial career was disastrous. During his stints in Moscow in 1952 and Belgrade in 1961–1963, his egocentrism, marked by an absurd overestimation of his own importance on the international level, prompted his recall. Gaddis is often highly critical of his hero, and he deserves ample credit for explaining Kennan's swings as well as his solipsism of his dual personality and "academic mentality."²⁵

I enjoyed reading this book perhaps more than any other biography I have read, and I have only a few reservations about the text. One of the very few sympathetic acts that Kennan took toward Czechoslovakia was his insistence in the postwar months that the U.S. Army should not unilaterally withdraw from the western part of the country, the area it had liberated. However, the book's explanation of Kennan's reasoning—that Stalin would regard such a step as a sign of weakness—is accompanied by Gaddis's words, "despite wartime agreements that had assigned that territory to the Red Army." In reality, no such agreement ever existed, even though it was probably an *idée fixe* among some key U.S. officials: Churchill had heard the same on 24 April 1945 when he told General Dwight Eisenhower that the U.S. Army should, for political reasons, proceed swiftly into Czechoslovakia and liberate Prague. The British prime minister was surprised by the general's obvious impression, "though perhaps he is wrong," that Czechoslovakia had already been assigned to the Soviet zone. Churchill asked Orme Sargent, the deputy undersecretary in the Foreign Office, to look into how that matter stood on paper.²⁶ The subsequent instruction for General Hastings Ismay that the Combined Chiefs of Staff should stress to General Eisenhower the importance of political considerations and tell him that he should push as far eastward as possible in Czechoslovakia (i.e., until he met Soviet forces), was accompanied by the following unambiguous reasoning: "There have, so far as the FO are aware, been no discussions with the Russians assigning Czechoslovakia to their zone. So far as we know, there has been no talk of a division of operational zones in that part of the world."²⁷ Unfortunately, Eisenhower and Marshall eventually refused to allow their strategic decisions to be affected by political considerations. However, any great-power collusion assigning Czechoslovakia to the Soviet zone lacks documentary support.

In addition, one slight weakness of the book is that it rarely provides So-

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 375, 402.

25. See *Ibid.*, pp. 326–327, 402–403, 484.

26. Winston Churchill to Orme Sargent and Hastings Ismay, D. 399/5, 25 April 1945, in TNAUK, CAB 120/737.

27. Orme Sargent to Hastings Ismay, 26 April 1945, in TNAUK, FO 371/47121, N 4548/650/12.

viet reflections of U.S. foreign policy, especially at the times when Kennan was a key policymaker.

Finally, what I fail to comprehend, even after a careful reading of the book, is the meaning of its subtitle—*An American Life*. Kennan hardly ever appreciated the merits of the U.S. political system. He even thought in 1938 that a dictatorship might be good for the United States, and he loathed the American culture and “way of life,” with its ubiquitous consumerism. As early as 1935, he wrote to his sister that he had become “clearly un-American.”²⁸ Similarly skeptical remarks about his country can be found in his diaries from later years. From the mid-1970s onward, he saw the United States as the principal threat to international peace and stability. In this way at least, his “American life” was at least highly atypical.

Yet, Kennan was undoubtedly a brilliant thinker and analyst endowed with an exceptional literary talent that made most of his articles, books, and even dispatches distinctly pleasant to read. He was apparently also an excellent narrator of history: It is delightful, especially for a historian, to read even just a summary by Gaddis of Kennan’s lecture at the National War College in December 1949, when—seeking an answer to the question “Where Do We Stand?”—Kennan took the listeners on a trip through time with stops at half-century intervals from 1749 onward.²⁹ Slightly over a year later, several diplomatic historians sharply criticized the concepts of his lectures on U.S. foreign relations during the first half of the twentieth century. However, at the University of Chicago in April 1951, these lectures packed the room and then the auditorium in which he delivered them and became, when printed as *American Diplomacy*, a national bestseller that remains a classic.³⁰ Very few historians (Gaddis certainly is one of them) ever experience that kind of success—with their lectures filling auditoria and their books reaching audiences beyond the community of historians and being widely discussed on the international level.

Thus, there are many reasons why Kennan deserves due respect and even admiration. However, if one focuses on the development of what he recommended for U.S. policy toward Eastern and Central Europe, from World War II onward, the impression one gets—an impression reinforced by Gaddis’s excellent book—is one of serious disappointment.

28. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 100.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 371–373.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 434–437.