

**The Opposing Self**

George Kennan:  
A Study of Character

by John Lukacs

*Yale. 207 pp. \$26.00*

Reviewed by  
Richard Pipes

THE AUTHOR of this study, a Hungarian survivor of the Holocaust, is a prolific writer who has produced over two dozen books, most of them devoted to 20th-century history. He was a personal friend of George F. Kennan (1904-2005), the American diplomat and historian; in 1997, he published a slender volume of his correspondence with Kennan concerning the origins of the cold war. Here, although willing to concede that Kennan occasionally erred in his judgments, by and large he treats him with unconcealed adulation: in his opinion, his protagonist was nothing less than America's "conscience."

The present book is not a biography in the conventional sense of the word but rather an essay that attempts to penetrate Kennan's personality (or "character"). It proceeds in a roughly chronological manner, tracing Kennan's career from his Midwestern childhood, to his term as an undergraduate at Princeton, his years in the U.S. foreign service, and his decades as scholar in resi-

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dence at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. Throughout, Lukacs stresses Kennan's seclusion and loneliness. But the evidence he presents, unfortunately, does not sustain his exalted notion of Kennan's achievement.

AT HEART, Kennan was a pacifist and isolationist in an age when neither ideology was feasible. His insistence on being a cold-war realist and, at the same time, a pacifist and an isolationist entangled him in insoluble inconsistencies that, in the end, ruined his government career.

Unlike most of his colleagues in the State Department and so-called "Sovietologists" on university faculties, Kennan, who served as deputy head of the U.S. mission in Moscow from 1944 through 1946, knew Russian history well and realized early on that since the 1930's, and behind the façade of Marxism, the driving force of Soviet politics was Russian nationalism and imperialism. (Lukacs quotes him to the effect that the issue was not how Bolshevism had changed Russia but "how far Russia has changed Bolshevism.") On these grounds, he made short shrift of the illusions prevailing in the United States at the end of World War II concerning the possibility of continuing the alliance with the USSR in peacetime. His "Long Telegram" of 1946 to Secretary of State James Byrnes, and "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," the 1947 article (signed "X") in *Foreign Affairs* that made him famous, warned the West against believing in Moscow's good will. These writings were very influential in redirecting U.S. foreign policy under President Truman.

Yet almost in the same breath in which he stirred public anxiety about Soviet intentions, Kennan warned against "the hysterical sort of anti-Communism which . . . is gaining currency in our country." What did he expect? That the public at large would accept the finely nuanced policy he had spun in the

privacy of his study and not react emotionally to the dangers he had depicted? He was forever chagrined that Americans at large—and the politicians who led them—ignored his strictures against excess. This caused him to develop a distaste for democracy. He came to believe that democracies were incapable of conducting a long-range foreign policy, and even to favor restrictions on universal suffrage: his model statesman was Bismarck.

How unsuited Kennan was for diplomacy was revealed in 1941 after Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Kennan, who seems to have regarded Stalin as a greater threat to the world than Hitler, advocated granting military aid to Moscow but warned against an alliance with it. As he explained to Lukacs many years later, he wanted to “preclude anything which might

identify us politically or ideologically with the Russian war effort.” This position might have been entertained in college senior common rooms but was entirely unrealistic as political prescription. Once the USSR entered the war on our side—even if not of its own free will but only after being attacked by Germany—public opinion could be rallied to its support only by depicting it as a friendly power, that is, as an ally.

The various subtleties that Kennan introduced into his Soviet policy after the war were equally impracticable. He said in 1946, quite correctly, that “Moscow was highly sensitive to the logic of force” but not to the logic “of reason.” Yet during the cold war he opposed virtually every step Washington took to strengthen and deploy its forces, whether by building the hydrogen

bomb or by positioning its military on the European continent. He objected to America’s intervention north of the 38th parallel in Korea and its later involvement in Vietnam.

His position on Jews and Israel was also ambivalent. Lukacs concedes that he held anti-Semitic views, objecting to Jewish political “pressures,” but qualifies this assessment by saying that Kennan’s anti-Semitism was “neither general nor categorical.” He opposed Washington’s prompt recognition of Israel in 1948. He also objected to the postwar de-Nazification of Germany and to the Nuremberg trials.

KENNAN’S inconsistencies irritated Truman’s Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, causing him to ignore much of his counsel. Under Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles terminated Kennan’s government career, whereupon Kennan grew increasingly bitter toward his native country. He now renounced his “X” article (a fact Lukacs does not mention), saying that he found it difficult to believe he had written it. Indeed, he came to regard anti-Communism, which he had done so much to stimulate, as more dangerous than Communism, and warned that the United States was on its way to becoming a totalitarian state. He downplayed the importance of nuclear weapons, ignoring their powerful psychological impact on the conduct of cold-war diplomacy. In effect, he came to oppose nearly all measures that would “contain” the USSR and its allies. If his advice had been followed, the policy he formulated in 1946-47 would have turned into an abstract formula, devoid of content.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Communism in Russia and the rest of Eastern Europe, Kennan, unwilling to give the U.S. any credit for these welcome events, characterized as “childish” the notion that U.S. poli-

cies could have decisively affected domestic Soviet affairs—because “no great country has that sort of influence on the internal developments of any other one.” But in the “X” article he had been of the opposite opinion. “It is entirely possible,” he wrote there, “for the United States to influence by its actions the internal developments, both within Russia and throughout the international Communist movement.”

ON THE BACK of Lukacs’s 1997 book of correspondence with Kennan, the latter was described as “one of the greatest diplomats in the history of the United States.” On the evidence submitted in *George Kennan: A Study of Character*, this statement cannot be justified. Indeed, I think it fair to say that Kennan was a failure as a diplomat, given that he negotiated no major international agreements, was not invited to participate in the critical Yalta and Potsdam summits that decided the postwar division of Europe and administration of Germany, and, except for a brief instant in 1946-47, exerted no influence on his country’s foreign policy.

But if not a diplomat, he was an immensely powerful intellect and a man of unimpeachable integrity. His command of the English language, whether written or spoken, was awe-inspiring. These qualities emerged in the scholarly work to which he devoted himself for the last half-century of his long life while a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study. There he wrote major works on the origins of World War I (*The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order*, 1979, and *The Fateful Alliance*, 1984); on Soviet-American relations in the period 1917-1920 (2 vols., 1956, 1958); and a brilliantly succinct synthesis, *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin* (1961).

Here Kennan’s searching mind and remarkable energy enabled him to penetrate the mystery of great

historical events without the interference of his moralizing self. He was not the “conscience” of his country, but these books are a worthy monument to him.

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