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## The Forgotten George Kennan From Cheerleader to Critic of Tsarist Russia

*Frith Maier*

It has been the posthumous misfortune of George Kennan (1845–1924), the American author and traveler, to share the name and even the same birthday (February 16) with his great-nephew, George Frost Kennan (born 1904), the distinguished diplomat and historian. By double misfortune, the two shared the same special association with Russia, its politics and culture, indeed the coincidence of birth helped incline the younger Kennan to take up Russian studies. As a result, few are aware that the elder and forgotten George Kennan did not simply chronicle Russian life, but became an assiduous campaigner for democracy and human rights in the tsarist realm, and that he contributed crucially to putting the issue on the American legislative agenda.

Beginning as an ardent Russophile who defended the tsars' expansionary policies, Kennan became that monarchy's severest American critic. Fresh light on how his thinking evolved can be found in his hitherto unpublished journals as the first American to visit the remote and rebellious Islamic North Caucasus, in 1870. Now that the Caucasus region is very much on Washington's policy screen, the forgotten George Kennan may deservedly be remembered afresh.

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Adapted from *Vagabond Life: The Caucasus Journals of George Kennan*, edited by Frith Maier, with contributions by Daniel C. Waugh. Published in December 2002 by the University of Washington Press. Copyright © 2002 by University of Washington Press. All rights reserved.

George Kennan had no royal commission or missionary appointment, nor was he seeking his fortune. He was born with the instincts of a world traveler a century before global travel for ordinary people became fashionable or practical. He simply found life on the road irresistible, and out of this passion developed a career he could hardly have anticipated. That his travels would include the Caucasus, barely pacified by Russia and virtually unknown to Americans in 1870, was equally unexpected. Well before the end of the century, Kennan had become a recognized expert on Russia, one whose views would have a significant impact on America's policy toward that country.

When Kennan was growing up in Norwalk, Ohio, adventure for most Americans beckoned west, toward the Pacific. As a boy he read travel books voraciously, fantasized about distant adventures, and agitated to be allowed to camp in the nearby woods. Financial difficulties in his family forced him to leave school at age 12 to work as a messenger in the telegraph office of the Cleveland and Toledo Railroad Company, where he was soon promoted to operator and manager. Desperate to escape his desk at Norwalk Station, the teenager attempted to enlist in the Military Telegraph Corps during the Civil War, but was obliged to stay at his telegraph post; capable operators were needed more in the large cities of the North than in the army.

When Kennan learned in 1864 of plans to build an overland telegraph line from America to Europe across the Bering Strait

and Siberia, he jumped at the chance for adventure, “offering his services as an explorer” and telling his superiors he could be ready in two hours to leave for Alaska—then still Russian America.

Instead of being sent to Alaska, Kennan ended up in Russia’s easternmost outposts in Asia in the employ of the Russian American Telegraph Company. For nearly two years, he tramped the mountainous wilds of Kamchatka and the Chukotka Peninsula, which were then still inhabited mostly by Koryaks and other native peoples, and a smattering of Russian fur traders. In small parties of several men, the expedition traveled sometimes on reindeer, sometimes by skin canoe, camping out through the winters in temperatures down to 60 degrees below zero. It is difficult to imagine a harsher test for a city youth whose previous experience with wilderness had been gleaned primarily from books. The Russian-American telegraph was never completed (the success of the Atlantic Cable made it obsolete), but the explorer from Norwalk had been bitten by the travel bug.

Kennan made his way home from Kamchatka overland through St. Petersburg, where everyone spoke with excitement about Dagestan—the new “Russian Switzerland.” Back in Ohio in 1868–69, he plotted how he might return to Russia, this time to the Caucasus. His interest in returning was surely fueled by the recognition he began to experience as a public lecturer and author of several articles on Siberia in *Putnam’s*, which the publisher encouraged him to expand into a book. The result was *Tent Life in Siberia: Adventures Among the Koryaks and Other Tribes in Kamchatka and Northern Asia*, which he completed in St. Petersburg while already on his way to the Caucasus. The lasting success of the book might be partly attributed to his having “occasionally deliberately altered facts in order to increase the mood of imminent danger and create a more dramatic, gripping narrative.”

After attempts to line up a traveling companion fell through, Kennan sailed for Russia alone in June 1870, with \$600 in his pocket. He spent July in St. Petersburg finishing his book on Siberia, working on his Russian, and acquiring books on the Caucasus. His plans to journey over the mountain range dividing the Caspian and the Black Seas struck his Russian friends as audacious and impossible. They warned that he would not make it though the wild, unmapped country where no American had ever been. Dagestan had not so much capitulated to Russian rule as been forced to its knees; it was a country exhausted by war, where the “victorious” Russians exercised only superficial control. When Kennan’s St. Petersburg acquaintances said goodbye to him, they must have imagined he would never be heard from again.

Undaunted, Kennan took ship down the Volga, where he got his first introduction to Muslim life. “You won’t find these places on any map,” he wrote his family when he landed at Petrovskoe. Indeed, from the perspective of a Midwesterner in the nineteenth century, he might as well have fallen off the end of the earth. Kennan’s goal was “to gratify a love of rough travel and to skirmish with the difficulties of Caucasian exploration.” He certainly found the reality of travel there less romantic than the stories circulating in St. Petersburg about “the Dagestan highlanders whose chivalrous and heroic courage had won the respect and admiration even of their enemies.” The conversational Russian he had picked up in Siberia turned out to be “next to useless,” for Russian had not yet become the linguistic glue of the Caucasus. After a week spent searching unsuccessfully for guides, transportation, and interpreters, the explorer nearly abandoned hope.

By chance, he met a Georgian nobleman, Prince Giorgi Jorjadze, who was heading home to his estate in the Alazan Valley of the eastern Georgian kingdom of Kakhetia, across the rugged spine of the

Caucasus mountains. The prince agreed to let the eager American tag along with his party. Day after day they traveled hard on horseback, but in the *auls*, or villages, where they stopped to spend the night, Kennan got a remarkable introduction to life in the highlands. The grueling two-week journey only whetted the adventurer's appetite for the highlands.

Kennan had arrived on the shores of the Caspian with no definite itinerary but a rough plan to make his way across the Caucasus to the Black Sea and then south to Armenia. He had a preliminary commitment to present a series of lectures on his return to the United States entitled "The Land of the Golden Fleece," focusing on Georgia's Black Sea coast. But after crossing the Caucasus with Prince Jorjadze, he was so captivated by Dagestan that, following a brief respite in the lush Alazan Valley, he looped north through Chechen territory and headed back into the Dagestan highlands for another month. His Caucasus lecture would ultimately reflect the fact that he spent most of his time in the Muslim North Caucasus; it came to be called "Mountains and Mountaineers." In the space of ten weeks, he had described a rough circle about 600 miles in circumference in the middle of the Caucasus, encountering more than a dozen different languages as he moved from village to village, and crossing the Main Caucasus Ridge, the physical watershed and cultural divide between Christian Georgia and Muslim Dagestan.

#### *First a Cheerleader*

In our own time, the war on Chechnya has demonstrated that the Caucasus is a region of world importance that Russians—and the West at large—still have difficulty understanding. Kennan traveled through Samashki, the site of a brutal massacre of civilians by Russian troops in April 1995, and Grozny, whose bombed-out ruins shown on front pages of newspapers around the world made Chechnya a household word in

the mid-1990s. Kennan himself, in an eerie foreshadowing of the recent conflict, wrote (of the *nineteenth*-century war against the Russians): "What made the Chechenses hold out so long and so desperately, suffering hunger and peril and hardship, dying, and sending their children to die, in battle?... It was the love of independence—the natural devotion of brave men who were fighting for their country, their honor and their freedom."

In Kennan's time, travel was not undertaken frivolously. It took the young daredevil a full month of travel days from New York to reach Dagestan on the coast of the Caspian. And when he completed his Caucasus odyssey, he still had to traverse all of Europe, arriving in London with only enough money for cab fare and a cigar, before being able to replenish his funds for the long trip home. During the half year Kennan was in Russia, Napoleon III had time to declare war on Prussia, and to lose that war. So these writings, more than just depicting a jaunt across the Caucasus, form a complete chronicle that conveys the *feeling* of traveling around the world to Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Any world traveler can identify with Kennan's giddiness at being on the go, but the flip side of this youthful enthusiasm is that the journal is not always well-informed. His blindly pro-Russian bias stands in stark contrast to his later objective and critical journalistic reporting. His sympathies with Russian policy skewed his writing at the time he traveled the Caucasus and for a decade afterward. In 1877, when Russia was at war once again with the Ottoman Empire, Kennan wrote a letter to the editor of the *New York Tribune* in response to an article noting insurrection among the Chechens and the reported cooperation of the highlanders with the Turks. He expressed the opinion that widespread uprisings among the peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan were unlikely because of what he called Russia's "enlightened policy" toward these

people. After the capture of Imam Shamil, the leader of the rebellion, he wrote: "Russia strove by every possible means to win over the most prominent men—men who might become leaders of another insurrection—and to open to them a new career." He was impressed by the Russians' zeal to educate highlander boys in Russian schools and saw the Russian influence as a civilizing one.

Kennan's support for Russian actions in the Caucasus, and Russian foreign policy in general, was in line with popular sentiment in America during that decade. The countries of Western Europe were critical of Russian expansionism: just 14 years before Kennan arrived on the shore of the Caspian, Britain and France had teamed up with the Turks in the Crimean War to defend the territorial status quo and quell Russia's ambitions against the Ottoman Empire. The Caucasian Wars were in full swing, but the Crimean War was not a mission of mercy by Britain, France, and the Ottomans to assist the Caucasians in their resistance to Russian colonization. Nonetheless, the struggle of Shamil and his fighters was widely publicized, especially in England.

Kennan's lack of sympathy for Shamil's war of independence in part may reflect sour Anglo-American relations. He was disinclined to be partial to Shamil specifically *because* the British championed the mountaineers' cause. Relations between Great Britain and the United States had yet to thaw; in fact, in the years immediately following the Civil War, Americans despised Britain. The United States, not yet a Great Power player and not involved in the nineteenth-century skirmishes with the Ottoman Empire, publicly opposed Britain on the Eastern Question, the paramount diplomatic problem of the day. Following the axiom "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," when it came to the conflicts between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, the United States until the end of the nineteenth century tended to take the part of Russia in order *not* to be aligned with Britain.

Kennan's uncritical advocacy of Russia's presence in the Caucasus seems particularly naïve considering that just a few years before he set off for Dagestan, upward of a million Adyge (also referred to as Cherkess or Circassians) had been forced by the Russians' scorched earth policies to abandon their ancestral lands north of the Terek River and in the Black Sea valleys between Sukhumi and the Crimean Peninsula, fleeing to the Ottoman Empire with hundreds of thousands dying en route. The dislocation and exodus of North Caucasian peoples, including Chechens to Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, continued through the turn of the century.

But Kennan, born in 1845, was a young boy at the time of the Crimean War and was evidently not well informed about the details of the decades-long Caucasian conflict when he went there. The U.S. press published little on the Caucasus in the years immediately preceding Kennan's journey and what little reporting there had been of the Caucasian Wars dismissed the Muslim resistance as the "battle of semi-barbarism against the advancing column of Muscovite colonization." During his travels in the Caucasus, Kennan's sources were limited to Russian army officers because few highlanders spoke Russian, not to mention English; presumably this further contributed to his pro-Russian bias. Apart from everything else, the lack of any real American strategic interest in the Caucasus could explain his lack of sympathy for the fate of its indigenous peoples.

#### *Then a Critic*

For several years after his return from Russia in early 1871, Kennan struggled to find a career in which he was comfortable. He had little enthusiasm for his clerical jobs in banking and insurance, but finally in 1878 landed a position as an Associated Press reporter in Washington, D.C. He had continued to lecture on his Russian travels, having expanded his repertoire to include the Caucasus, and he contributed commentary on

Russian affairs in letters to the editor published in prominent newspapers such as the *New York Herald*. In the same year that he headed off to the nation's capital he published two articles based on his experiences in the Caucasus, but he could not arouse publishers' interest in a book on the subject any more than he could in his translations of famous Russian writers. During that decade there was in fact still little evidence of how successful his journalistic career would eventually become, thanks largely to his experiences in Russia.

Successive disasters in American exploration of the Arctic (including areas north of the Bering Strait) provided a new opportunity for Kennan to capitalize on his Siberian expertise in a widely publicized lecture for the American Geographical Society in February 1882. He devoted much of the talk to the Siberian exile system, in the process defending what he saw as its virtues. Kennan's lecture career really took off at this point, but his views on the subject of the Siberian exiles increasingly provoked criticism.

This opened the opportunity he had been seeking to return to Russia, with the result that he became a much more sophisticated and critical observer of Russian policy and current events. A three-week trip to Russia in September 1884 had prepared the way for his ambitious journey across Siberia between May 1885 and August 1886 reporting for a series of articles in the magazine *Century* on political exiles. The articles subsequently appeared in his immensely influential book, *Siberia and the Exile System*. The journey was as rigorous as any of Kennan's previous travels, and his investigative journalism changed dramatically his own perceptions of democracy in Russia and in turn had a profound effect on public opinion in the United States.

Kennan's travels in Kamchatka and the Caucasus had left him impressed with Russian government policies, and he had subsequently publicly defended the tsar against criticism in the American press. He was

welcomed on the *Century* assignment by Russian officials, who saw in him a sympathetic mouthpiece for the tsarist government. He set off to Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Semipalatinsk, and dozens of other Siberian cities and towns firm in his pro-tsarist views, but 14 months of research (10 months of it in Siberia, and some of the rest interviewing disaffected émigrés in London) convinced him he had been wrong about the system, and he now saw that the treatment of political dissenters proved the empire was rotten.

In the United States, Kennan became a passionate crusader for Russian revolutionaries and a friend of émigré radicals, including Catherine Breshkovskaia, Peter Kropotkin, and the terrorist Sergei Kravchinskii (a.k.a. Stepniak), helping them raise money for their cause and assisting them personally. Kennan was the most influential member of the Society of American Friends of Russian Freedom, railing against the tsarist government in prominent magazines such as *Century*, *The Outlook*, *The Nation*, and *Forum*. In 1891, his outspoken stand against the monarchy earned him banishment from his beloved Russia; when he returned in 1901, he was ordered to leave the country.

As a journalist and lecturer, Kennan reached a wide public. In the late nineteenth century, lectures served the purpose that educational television does today, and Kennan was among the most popular lecturers in the country. During the 1890–91 season, he set the record for the most consecutive appearances—200 evenings straight, except for Sundays! These lectures drew crowds of as many as 2,000 people. He continued to lecture for over 30 years, while writing for popular magazines. Much of the responsibility for turning public opinion against Russia's tsarist government in the late nineteenth century belongs to him. He went so far as to oppose American food aid during the Russian famine of 1891, claiming that it supported despotism. He led a crusade in the United States in the early

1890s against ratification of an extradition treaty viewed as a threat to Russian revolutionaries who escaped to America, and during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05 he orchestrated distribution of anti-tsarist propaganda among Russian soldiers. However, Bolshevism was not the replacement system he had envisioned. After the November 1917 revolution, he expected the Bolsheviks to be overthrown quickly; when they were not, he advocated U.S. military intervention to support the White Army.

While he reported primarily on events in Russia, Kennan's interests were international in scope. He covered the Spanish-American War from Cuba and wielded his anti-Russian pen in Tokyo during the Russo-Japanese War. He produced an account of the eruption of the island of Martinique in 1902, a two-volume biography of railroad magnate E. H. Harriman, and translations from the Russian of folk legends about Napoleon's march to Moscow. He was for ten years the Supreme Court reporter for the Associated Press. But Russia was his most abiding journalistic passion, and he was one of few Americans reporting on Russia around the turn of the century. Kennan's views were listened to by policymakers in Washington, and at his death in 1924 he was eulogized as the "chief intellectual link between America, Europe and Russia for fifty years."

Something of his eloquence and his principles can be sensed in this paragraph from *Siberia and the Exile System*, in which he sought to explain the sources of revolutionary violence in Russia, which he expressly condemned but went on to say:

The [Tsarist] Government first set the example of lawlessness in Russia by arresting without warrant; by punishing without trial; by cynically disregarding the judgments of its own courts when such judgments were in favor of politicals; by confiscating the money and property of private citizens whom it merely suspected of sympathy with the revolutionary movement; by sending fourteen-year-old boys and girls to Siberia; by kidnapping the children of "politically untrustworthy" people and exiles, and putting them into state asylums; by driving men and women to insanity and suicide in rigorous solitary confinement without giving them a trial; by burying secretly at night the bodies of people whom it had thus done to death in dungeons; and by treating as criminal, *in posse* if not *in esse*, every citizen who dared ask why or wherefore.

The bill of indictment against tyranny, it would seem, has not changed. ●