

George Kennan and the Challenge of Siberia

NICHOLAS DANILOFF

The small boy pressed his nose against the window. He could hardly pass up the chance to see the doctor treat his playmate, whose arm had been mangled in the cogwheels of a mill. Through the pane, the boy spied the surgeon unsheath a saw and carefully draw its razor-sharp teeth across the injured arm below the elbow. With horror, many years later, the boy at the window would describe the amputation:

The surgeon accidentally let slip the end of one of the severed arteries and a jet of warm blood spurted from the stump of the upper arm to the inside of the window pane against which my face was pressed. The effect upon me was a sensation that I never felt before in all my boyish life—a sensation of deadly nausea, faintness and overwhelming fear.¹

The peeping boy of 1855 would grow up to be the adventurous traveler George Kennan, a cousin twice removed of the twentieth-century George F. Kennan, American ambassador to Stalin's Russia. Years after the operation, the nineteenth-century Kennan would succeed in amputating his own insecurities to brave the wilds of Siberia, to expose the horrors of the Russian penal system, and to become America's first great authority on Russia.

George Kennan, the elder, first intrigued me when I worked in Moscow as a journalist during the cold war over a hundred years later. I was drawn into the search for Kennan's traces when I began researching the life of my own great-great-grandfather, a Russian exiled to Siberia for conspiring to overthrow the czar in 1825. Siberia seemed to bring Kennan and me together. Kennan went to Siberia seeking "perilous adventure"; my Russian ancestor went there in shackles, and I journeyed across that land in search of their histories.

There was another thing that joined me to Kennan. Both of us were thrown bodily out of Russia. Kennan was expelled in 1901 as an unreliable foreigner. I was deported in 1986 on false charges of espionage. What I learned from this was that we are all links in a chain. Our actions today are determined to some extent

Nicholas Daniloff, a former Moscow correspondent, now teaches in the School of Journalism, Northeastern University, Boston.

by the actions of our predecessors. Soviet police methods grew directly out of the practices of the Russian police a century earlier. And we can expect today's Russian bureaucracy to reflect the methods of the Soviet era.

Kennan's long fascination with Russia began in 1865. Having sailed from New York and trekked across the Isthmus of Panama, Kennan set sail from San Francisco on 3 July aboard the brig *Olga* for Russia's Pacific coast. He had been hired, along with others, to survey a telegraph cable route from the United States, across Alaska and the Bering Straits, through northern Siberia, to Moscow and St. Petersburg, and on to Paris and London. The line, the Western Union company believed, would eliminate the need for a cable that engineers were having difficulty laying across the Atlantic.

Kennan was an excellent choice for this work. Born on 16 February 1845 in Norwalk, Ohio, the son of a lawyer, he had become infatuated with the fast-developing telegraph business. (The father of the telegraph, Samuel F. B. Morse, was in fact a distant relative who opened the new communications era with the famous message, transmitted from Washington, D.C., to Baltimore on 24 May 1844: "What hath God wrought?") In 1851, the six-year-old Kennan punched out his first telegraph message in Morse code. A decade later, he dropped out of high school to become a military telegrapher during the Civil War. And when the war ended, he was sailing across the Pacific. On 19 August 1865, the *Olga* dropped anchor at Petropavlovsk, Kamchatka, and Kennan's love affair with Russia began.

During the next two and a half years, Kennan and his companions roamed from the mouth of the Anadyr River, on the northerly coast of the Bering Straits, surveying routes for the projected land line. Life was, indeed, perilous. They traveled by dog sled, slept in the open in temperatures down to 50 degrees below zero (Fahrenheit), and more than once were threatened with death by blizzards and hunger.

Throughout, Kennan conversed with his diary, penciling observations in a microscopic hand in notebooks bound in soft, tan leather, which are preserved today at the Library of Congress. On occasion he wondered what his mother would think if she could see him now. His handwriting is precise, although occasionally the letters become sloppy as he complains about cold-induced numbness. To ward off extreme temperatures, Kennan wore fur-lined mittens, fur overstockings, fur-lined pants, and fur-lined parkas. He slept in a bearskin sleeping bag, but all that couldn't keep his extremities warm, or his nose from freezing.

New Year's Eve 1865 was brutal. Kennan scribbled, "water froze solid in 4 minutes at a distance of just 12 inches from a huge blazing fire—my tea cup full of boiling hot tea froze solidly to the saucer in my hands & the metal spoon with which I was eating hot soup would freeze to my fingers at one end while the other was in the hot liquid. Frost forms on hair and eyelids at a distance of only 3 feet from a blazing cedar fire."²

During the winter months at latitude 65 degrees north, the sun hangs close on the horizon for only three hours a day, bathing the bleak white landscape in a golden glow. Most of the day passes in darkness. Kennan tells his diaries he wishes he could sleep sixteen hours straight, announces that he is turning in, and signs

off as “Geo.” Occasionally he notes the one great compensation: the beauty of the aurora borealis:

The heavens were spanned by an immense arch of red, yellow and green in the most vivid colors every second—across the zenith there were continually passing with the greatest rapidity, while yellow bands of light from north to south, like spokes of a gigantic wheel revolving on an axis placed perpendicularly in the northwest horizon.³

Uncertain survival in these northern parts raised doubts as to the feasibility of the projected land-line. Kennan found many of the Koryak natives difficult to work with. Sometimes he had to threaten them with his revolver. To make matters worse, in the summer of 1866, famine struck the settlement at the mouth of the Anadyr River. Kennan noted on 19 August 1866:

It seems as if everything was against us in the construction of this line. We have had nothing since last spring but ill luck and ill success—the company does not support us, stores did not reach us till too late, money has not reach us at all, we have no workmen, no horses, the supply of dog food has everywhere failed and now to crown all comes this bad news from Anadyrsk.⁴

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A full year later, word came from Western Union that the Russian-American telegraph project had been canceled because the Atlantic cable had been successfully completed. Kennan, now twenty-two, was devastated. Over two and a half years, seventy-five Americans and hundreds of native workers had surveyed the whole route from the Bering Straits to the Amur River; had cut 15,000 telegraph poles, built some fifty station houses, and carved out nearly fifty miles of road around Gamsk and Okhotsk.

Abandoning all, Kennan left Okhotsk for home on 24 October 1867, traveling by troika across Siberia. The first leg followed a track south to the Lena River, then along the frozen flow to Yakutsk, a staging city for expeditions into the remote northeast. As Kennan cruised along the frozen way, wider in places than the Mississippi, his sledge crashed through thin ice and came to rest, suspended by its stabilizing outriggers, in the frigid water.

Kennan and his native drivers rescued two horses, but the third died of shock. After four days in Yakutsk, the travelers took the post road to Irkutsk, administrative center of the governor-general of Eastern Siberia. Irkutsk had been developed in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries with help from the exiled Decembrist conspirators of 1825 and their wives, Polish revolutionaries, criminals, dissidents, gamblers, trappers, and assorted carpetbaggers. Its wooden houses, embellished with finely cut window carvings and gilded, onion-dome churches earned it the reputation of the “Paris of Siberia.”

Kennan, dressed in his blue telegraph uniform with brass buttons, joined in the revelries of Irkutsk society, displaying his colloquial Russian. One official scolded him for his speech, sprinkled with saucy words used by the Siberian Koryaks and Chukchis. The official termed Kennan's words "a little queer—that's all—bizarre—but it's nothing."

"That settles it!" riposted Kennan. "I will talk no more Russian to ladies in Irkutsk!"⁵

Seeking Kennan's traces, I set out one summer for Siberia. That northerly territory holds a special place in the Russian psyche. Cruel and unusual punishment is its ordinary face. But being far from the capital's bureaucrats, Siberia's southern reaches are also the freest and potentially most productive areas of the Russian landmass. To go to Siberia is either to die or to thrive on the old frontier.

Waiting to board the plane in Moscow, I found the airport teeming with modern-day adventurers—Indian diamond buyers, South African traders, old Russian women with overflowing bags of consumer goods. On board, I met the grandson of Roald Amundsen, explorer of Antarctica, who had been hit by his own Siberian obsession: to drive four orange trucks across the Bering Strait because "no one has ever done it."

I could not help thinking that Kennan, object of my search, typified the vitality of reckless youth, plunging ahead without regard to the consequences. He ranked, in my judgment, among such adventurers of the last century as Stanley and Livingstone, who penetrated darkest Africa; DeLong and others who sought the Northwest Passage; Nansen, Peary, and Cook who vied to reach the North Pole.

In Yakutsk, Professor Vasily N. Ivanov, director of the Institute of Humanities Research, recited what he knew of Kennan from graduate student days: "He brought to Russia ideas about freedom, he had many friends, all of them progressive."⁶ Dmitry K. Sivtsev, the ninety-two-year-old director of the Sitinski open-air museum, added, "Kennan was a great northern explorer who wanted to promote freedom and democracy. We have none of his materials. Can you send us some of his books?"⁷ The director's remarks were not surprising: the Soviet government did all it could to expunge the memory of a man it considered a foreign troublemaker.

One question haunted me: How could an insecure youth, convulsed at the sight of blood, leave the warm safety of an Ohio telegraph office to throw himself into harm's way? The traces in Siberia had become so faint they were hardly detectable. It was only when I returned to America that I stumbled on Kennan's own explanation in Washington, D.C., at the Library of Congress.

"I happened to be born with a vigorous constitution, an active imagination, an ardent love for the out-of-door life—particularly in the woods—a thirst for adventurous experiences, and a voracious appetite for books of travel," Kennan wrote in an unpublished autobiography that is preserved today in the Madison Building of the Library of Congress. "Before I was five years of age, I had a whole fleet of small wooden boats—cargo ships, warships and pirates—which had been made for me by my father, or carved out of blocks by myself, and which I used to sail over the carpet in the dining room to remote ports in the tropical zone

behind the stove, or to the arctic regions in the spare bedroom, where there was no fire.”⁸

As a young man, Kennan had dropped out of high school to help his father support six children. He was curious but sickly, deemed unfit for service with the Union forces. In his quiet moments as a telegrapher, he brooded over his weaknesses. He became convinced that physical courage could be cultivated.

“Cincinnati,” he wrote, “toward the end of the Civil War was a much rougher and more lawless city than it ever has been since. Fights, street robberies, and murders were daily occurrences and all of the men in our office who had to do night duty carried weapons as a matter of course. I bought a revolver and began a course of experiment upon myself.”⁹

Finishing work at 2 a.m., he would wander into the meanest parts of the city. Once he rescued a man from being robbed; another time, he saw a hoodlum slash a man’s throat. Writing a decade after the operation that so nauseated him, Kennan now declared in 1864, “I did not get faint nor sick; and every time I went through a street that I believed to be dangerous, or had an experience of this kind, I felt a small accession of self-respect.”¹⁰ The experiment succeeded.

Not only did Kennan survive Siberia, he capped his adventure with a first book that he cast as a travelogue for the general public, *Tent Life in Siberia*. Published in 1870, the book was an immediate success and launched his career as an author and lecturer. It also prompted a second journey; this time his objective was the Caucasus, that alpine ridge between the Black and Caspian seas that splits Russia from Asia Minor and divides Christendom from Islam.

Kennan caught the Caucasian bug while homeward bound in 1868. The Caucasus was then in vogue, made fashionable by the end of the Russian pacification wars a decade earlier and popularized by Russia’s great writers, Pushkin and Lermontov. In the fashionable shops of St. Petersburg, Kennan saw the exquisitely wrought shirts of chain-mail used by the tribesmen, daggers and swords inlaid with gold and silver, and the scarlet and white hoods of Circassian horsemen, which aristocratic ladies of the capital had adopted as their own.

Kennan sailed from New York for St. Petersburg on 11 June 1870. Ignoring warnings from his Russian friends about the armed bandits he would encounter, he sailed alone down the Volga River. He changed boats at Astrakhan, and arrived at the Dagestani port of Petrovsk on 12 September. Following Kennan’s footsteps, I too traveled to Dagestan as Russia waged war in Chechnya in 1995. My Russian friends, like Kennan’s, urged me to forget the venture. Like Kennan, I ignored their advice.

Kennan soon discovered that Dagestan was a crossroads of travelers, armed and malevolent. At first, Kennan was perplexed, not knowing how to begin. He admitted in his notes that it was easier to sit at home and trace possible routes than to confront the situation on the ground. Eventually, a Russian introduced him to Akhmet Avarsky, the kind of cutthroat he had been warned against.

In articles published many years later, Kennan dubbed Avarsky “a tenth century barbarian” but the horseman became his guide. Avarsky boasted that he had killed fourteen men in revenge and an untold number of Russians in battle.

This prompted Kennan to ask, “How did you come to kill the first man? Was it a fight?”¹¹

“Not exactly a fight,” Avarsky replied. “We had a dispute, and he said a bad word to me. I drew my *kinjal* [dagger]—and—batz! it was done.”

Avarsky then inquired what would happen in America in a similar case. Kennan said he would call the police. Disappointed, Avarsky pushed further, “Then don’t you ever kill anybody, or go on raids or avenge blood?” When Kennan replied in the negative, Avarsky riposted, “Humph, yours must be a sheep’s life.”

Pursuing the life of a vagabond, Kennan roamed over the highlands for the next two months. He was amazed at what he saw—a world of thirty different ethnic

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groups and languages, stuck in the traditions of Julius Caesar’s era. Here blood revenge was still practiced, and a man accused of crimes could clear himself only by ordeal. Here a murderer seeking forgiveness had to wrap himself in a shroud, win the compassion of the victim’s mother, kiss her breast, or submit to execution.

Kennan recorded the customs; noted the lavish entertainment and the superb horsemanship. He sought out a Georgian Prince Djordjadze, in service of the Russians, to make the treacherous crossing over the main Caucasian ridge into the Kakhetia region of Georgia. The reluctant prince tried to dissuade Kennan from joining the party. But the stubborn American declared he was unafraid, little suspecting that his old terrors would return on the descent.

“In five minutes more I found myself riding down a narrow shelf-like path cut out in the face of a precipice,” Kennan wrote in his lecture notes,

my right shoulder brushing against a tremendous cliff, my left stirrup hanging over a thousand feet of empty air, and my horse straining every nerve to keep from slipping and getting under such headway as to run over the corner of a zig-zag before he could turn.

About half way to the bottom of the ravine we came to the worst part of the whole descent, when the path narrowed to a mere shelf of rock, pitching downward across the face of a black slate cliff at so steep an angle that a horse could barely maintain his footing on it, and ending in the corner of a zigzag, where one must either turn or slide off into empty space.

Suddenly my horse slipped a little on his hind feet over some loose sliding fragments of slate. . . . The horse recovered himself, shortened his foot steps to about two inches and continued to descend. . . . Again my horse slipped.

After sliding once or twice his own length without lifting a foot from the ground, he finally stopped, stood still for an instant as if to make sure that he had recovered his footing, and then began to take two inch steps downward. Keeping three feet constantly on the ground and edging his way around the corner of that zigzag in a manner that would have excited the admiration of a professional rope walker.¹²

Kennan left the Caucasus in November by Black Sea steamer from Trebizond for Constantinople. He was astounded by what he had seen: Barbarism had survived the centuries in the isolation of the highlands. It was Russia's noble role, he thought, to replace that barbarism with a European legal code and Western civilization. Yet in only a few years, a more mature Kennan would reverse his views about Russia's ability to shoulder the white man's burden.

Returning to the United States in January 1871, Kennan took a job at the Union Bank in Medina, in upstate New York, where he met his fiancée, Emiline Rathbone Weld. In 1877, he moved to New York, but left on short notice to take a job with the Associated Press covering the U.S. Supreme Court. In Washington he honed his skills as a journalist and sharpened his sense of justice by covering the American court system. On 25 September 1879, at thirty-four, he married "Lena."

I sought recollections of Emiline and George from his younger cousin Ambassador George Frost Kennan, now in his nineties, living in Princeton, N.J. The younger Kennan remembered Emiline as "difficult." Possibly she was embittered by the stillborn death of their only child, George Weld Kennan, in 1883. Of his older relative, whom he met in 1910, Kennan added,

He really was in the intellectual sense a self-made man. He always had to do it himself with very little money. It is quite amazing for a boy of his background. I would put him as a genteel, very brave Victorian of the school of Darwin. But very withdrawn personally.¹³

Reading Kennan's letters to Emiline, I found the adventurer anything but withdrawn in his private communications. Habitually, he began his missives, "my dear little girlie" and "my dear Queenie" and "Sweetheart." He inquired about her health, her state of mind, and praised her lavishly for her support during his lengthy trips away. He wrote of his loneliness without her, and, toward the end of his life, of moments of depression. In one letter in 1884 he came close to being passionate: "I don't realize what an ever fresh comfort and pleasure it is to be taken close in your arms against your warm soft body, until I am separated from you and can only experience it in remembrance." In preserving these letters, Emiline left a handwritten note in the correspondence for 1901–09, saying, "GK had a horror of endearments being published, so altho we wrote daily, often 2 or 3 times daily, I have destroyed nearly all."¹⁴ Among the surviving letters is one lavishly praising her for encouraging him to make his great Siberia expedition in 1885–86.

During that fifteen-month journey, Kennan won an international reputation for his exposé of the Russian penal system. His study forced him to revise his early views of the benign nature of Russia's "civilizing mission." He turned from admirer to bitter critic. In retrospect, it seems ironic that what prompted Kennan to undertake the second Siberia trip was the picture his contemporaries were painting of Russia as an evil empire—a picture that Kennan thought far too dark—even after the assassination of the liberal Czar Alexander II in 1881.

In August–September 1884, backed by *The Century Magazine*, he returned to Russia to explore the possibility of refuting dire accounts by his contemporaries

of the anti-tsarist revolutionary movement and the prison system. In St. Petersburg, he won support from Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander G. Vlangali, who believed his visitor was a friendly observer, one who would improve Russia's image in the West. Vlangali gave Kennan a letter requesting local authorities to render every assistance.

On 2 May 1885, Kennan sailed again for Russia with George A. Frost, an artist who would produce sketches for the ambitious study. Frost had worked on the telegraph line in northeast Siberia and was a survivor of the second battle of Bull Run. Kennan believed he would be a reliable companion, never anticipating the crisis Frost would precipitate toward the end of their journey.

The pair left St. Petersburg on 31 May 1885 for a journey of more than eight thousand miles by train, carriage, horseback, dog sled, and sleigh. They traveled to Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Perm, Yekaterinburg, Tyumen, Omsk, Semipalatin-sk, and as far south as the Altai mountains. From there they turned north to Barnaul, Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, and into eastern Siberia as far as the Kara mines. They visited prisons, collected statistics, sought out official documents, and interviewed political prisoners. They came face to face with all the repressive mechanisms used to punish criminals and control dissent.

Their first shock came at the forwarding prison at Tyumen, where conditions were worse than Kennan had expected. Overcrowding, filth, and lack of proper medical care contributed to a high mortality rate. Kennan discovered that the incidence of death at this prison between 1876 and 1886 ranged from 23.7 to 44.1 percent of inmates, compared to a prison death rate in the United States of 1.7 to 2 percent. He wrote,

The air in the corridors and cells, particularly in the second story, was indescribably and unimaginably foul. Every cubic foot of it had apparently been respired over and over again until it did not contain an atom of oxygen; it was laden with fever germs from the unventilated hospital wards, fetid odors from diseased human lungs and unclean human bodies and the stench arising from unemptied excrement buckets at the ends of the corridors.¹⁵

Kennan had expected dissidents exiled to Siberia to be fanatic revolutionaries; nihilists intent on assassination and the forceful overthrow of the established government. What he discovered was that both men and women opponents were often well-educated people who sought constitutional government and rule of law. Commenting on one dissident, Adam Bialoveski, Kennan wrote,

To brand such a man as a nihilist was absurd, and to exile him to Siberia as a dangerous member of society was simply preposterous. In any other civilized country on the face of the globe except Russia he would be regarded as the most moderate of liberals.¹⁶

What astounded me about Kennan's account when I first read it was the extent to which Russia's Soviet leaders had adopted the czarist practices of administrative imprisonment, torture, internal espionage, and press censorship—and elaborated upon them all. As a correspondent in Moscow in the early 1960s and again in the 1980s, I combated bugged apartments, walls with ears, "friendly" Russian

journalists with surveillance agendas, and an unnerving feeling that whatever I did must have violated some regulation. Evil empires, it seems, admire evil practices and improve on them.

As Kennan and Frost ventured further, they discovered a paradox that survived into Soviet days: brutality mixed with unexpected generosity. Occasionally the explorers received help from officials who secretly disliked the policies of St. Petersburg. In Omsk, one functionary shocked them when he said, "Mr. Kennan, if you find it necessary to speak of me by name in your book, please don't speak of me favorably."

Stunned, Kennan asked why. The official replied, "Because I don't think your book will be altogether pleasing to the government; and if I am mentioned favorably in it, I shall be harried by officials here more than I am now. My request may seem to you absurd, but it is the only favor I have to ask."¹⁷ In ten years as a Moscow correspondent, I met officials who spoke the same Alice-through-the-Looking Glass language more than once.

"To be expelled, after a long career of observing Russia, is to have your life's work repudiated; your person violated."

From the very start of their journey, Kennan and Frost encountered the suspicious gaze of the police regime that I came to know a century later. At Perm, they were stopped by four gendarmes who questioned them intensely about their activities. In so doing, the police displayed an unnerving knowledge of their movements over the last twenty-four hours.

"Both in going and returning," one of the gendarmes noted, "you devoted all your attention to the prison. This morning it was the same thing over again. Now what were you looking at that prison in that way for?"¹⁸ Such encounters, which happened often enough in the Soviet Union, inevitably prompted paranoia among visitors. In Kennan's case, the police backed off only after he produced Vlangali's assistance letter.

The official penchant for spying on visitors is disconcerting for anyone who becomes an intimate observer of the Russian scene. Who is looking over your shoulder? What law have you unwittingly violated? Why do you feel unease, guilt? As Kennan and Frost neared Tobolsk, Frost began to suffer from paranoia. Everywhere he saw enemies; for nine days he could not sleep.

Kennan's notes—written in his own shorthand and occasionally Morse code—are interspersed with observations about Frost's frequent delusions. On 2 March 1886, Kennan recorded in his notebook:

He has been in a state of perfect panic at Tobolsk without the slightest apparent cause. He didn't want to drink tea for fear of being drugged so that he could . . . be more easily murdered on the road. He saw in the hall leading to our room today a bottle of chloral which probably gave him the idea of being drugged . . . at about 4. am He crept over to

me. I was lying on the floor, clutched my arm thus waking me & putting his lips close against my ear whispered to me in tones of great agitation & terror that there was a man and a woman just outside of our door talking about murdering us.¹⁹

And in a letter to Lena, mailed from Tyumen the following day, he expanded on Frost's hallucinations:

I asked what was the matter and he whispered with his lips still close against my ear that there were people just outside our door in the entry who intended to murder us—that he had heard their footsteps coming up the stairs and has since been listening to their low conversation outside the door. That the man who was to murder us had lost courage a little at the door but that a woman who was with him was urging him on saying, “What are you afraid of—the servants are all drunk,” and then he heard them say something about “mogeela” [a grave].²⁰

Although Kennan described Frost's behavior as unbearable, he never lapsed into self-pity or neglected his professional observations. He did decide, however, to speed up their return to London. On 13 April 1886, Kennan put Frost on a steamer from England to America. Then, exhausted but unwilling to give in, he returned for several more months in Russia, this time accompanied by Lena, who had traveled to England to meet him.

This was Kennan's last major trip to Russia. His critical articles about the Siberian prison system in *The Century* magazine in 1887 (and in his 1891 book *Siberia and the Exile System*) infuriated the Russian government. Nevertheless, Kennan returned to St. Petersburg for yet another visit in early July 1901. He wondered in a letter to Lena whether he was being followed.²¹ On 24 July, after several weeks in the capital, he was arrested, thrown into prison for thirty hours, and expelled as “politically untrustworthy.” He left by train 16 July 1901 for Berlin and London.

Kennan's expulsion sealed the bond between him and me. To be expelled, after a long career of observing Russia, is to have your life's work repudiated; your person violated. When it happened to me, I was crushed, believing that I would never return to Russia. I wondered how Kennan reacted and hunted in vain for a comment. I found a single note posted to Emiline from London on 3 August 1901, referring in passing to his expulsion. It gave no hint of his feelings. Perhaps he did not realize what a blow he had been dealt, a blow worse than the one I suffered, because in my case the Soviet empire collapsed and I have returned.

Unable to travel to Russia anymore, Kennan worked on the periphery. He covered the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05 from the Japanese side and promoted democracy among Russian prisoners of war held in Japan. As a foreign correspondent, he covered many crises, including the volcano eruption on Martinique and the Philippines insurrection, for *The Century*. As his reputation grew, he was sought after for advice by leading political figures, including President Theodore Roosevelt and Secretary of State Robert Lansing.

His expulsion would undermine his position as an expert, however. It deprived him of contact with this complex nation and forced him to rely on Russian dissidents abroad. Inability to visit Russia prevented him from viewing the political scene at close quarters and acquainting himself directly with the Marxist revolu-

tionaries who replaced the more liberal dissidents of the 1880s. As a result, he underestimated the ferocity with which the Bolsheviks would wield power; he could not foresee how the Bolsheviks would improve on the repressive mechanisms of the czarist regime. More important, he overestimated the chances of democracy in Russia.

It is hardly surprising that Kennan could no longer be a dispassionate observer. His knowledge and sense of justice prompted him to struggle for constitutional reform. If the czarist regime could be overthrown, he predicted, popular democracy would follow. He was wrong. In March 1917, Czar Nicholas II abdicated and for some months it seemed that democracy might take root as Kennan hoped. But Lenin and his cohorts overthrew the provisional government on 7 November, and Kennan soon found himself denouncing Russia's return to authoritarianism.

Kennan died in 1924, the same year as his nemesis, the founder of the Soviet state Vladimir I. Lenin. During his twilight years, his interests shifted away from Russia to domestic American issues. His last major contribution was an authorized, two-volume biography of Edward H. Harriman, builder of the Union Pacific railroad.

Today, George Kennan the elder receives mixed reviews. Some academics see him as an acute observer but a mere journalist; a specialist without systematic education, even "a snake-oil salesman." He is, nevertheless, the namesake of the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies in Washington. But for me, he is more than some honorable historical figure. He is America's first great Russia expert; the passionate but discreet Victorian gentleman. Most of all, he is the indomitable investigator who rose to the Siberian challenge, an example for us all.

"Man carries on, for months or years, an almost incessant fight with a hostile and pitiless environment," he wrote. "He is alone—or almost alone; he has little sympathy or encouragement from the outside world; he is deprived of the facilities and appliances of material civilization; most of nature's laws and forces are arrayed against him; and he backs his own unaided body and brain against cold storms, ice, deep snow, hunger, desolation, and all the depressing influences of darkness and solitude. . . . In such a situation, personal character rises into absolute predominance, and success, when achieved is due almost wholly to the courage, forethought, and steadfastness of the individual actor."²²

NOTES

George Kennan's papers are housed at the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. I would like to thank the library and its personnel for help in examining the papers.

1. George Kennan, Box 88 (unpublished) *Autobiography*, 63
2. Box 19, First Siberian trip notebooks, 31 December 1865
3. *Ibid.*, December 1865
4. *Ibid.*, 19 August 1866
5. Box 88, *Autobiography*, 265–68
6. Author's interview, July 1996
7. *Ibid.*
8. Box 88, *Autobiography*, 6–7
9. *Ibid.* 65 et seq.
10. *Ibid.*

