

The Stalin enigma

John Roskam reviews

Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War

by Robert L. Beisner

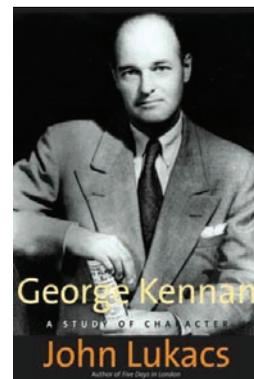
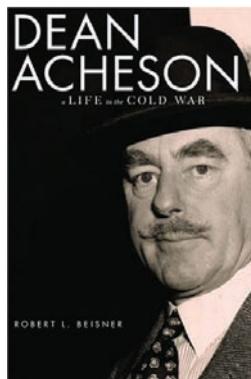
(Oxford University Press, 2006, 800 pages)

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George Kennan: A Study of Character

John Lukacs

(Yale University Press, 2007 207 pages)



The history of the twentieth century doesn't lack for big questions. And some of the biggest questions inevitably revolve around Germany and Russia. For example, was the rise of Hitler an inevitable consequence flowing from the 'character' of the German people—or was 1933 to 1945 an aberration?

Then there are the questions about Stalin, the Russian people, and the nature of the Soviet Union. Were (and are) the Russian people doomed to totalitarianism? Did Stalin conceive his objective to be to secure the future of the Soviet Union or to ensure the worldwide success of communism?

As academically interesting as these questions are today, half a century ago the answers to them had very real consequences. If it were thought that Stalin's objective was merely to ensure the territorial integrity of the Soviet Union then presumably there was little immediate risk to the West from his subjugation of eastern Europe. Perhaps there might even have been a chance that he could be susceptible to negotiation. On the other hand, if he was in fact an ideologue motivated by the expansionist ideology of communism, ceding eastern Europe to Stalin would give him a stepping stone into Europe's western half—and therefore he had to be contained and ultimately stopped.

On either side of this debate were George Kennan and Dean Acheson. Broadly, Kennan held the first position, and Acheson the second. Each occupies a central place in the history of the Cold War. Kennan was the adviser and diplomat who wrote long papers hypothesising about Russia and the quality of 'Oriental' tyranny. As Harry Truman's Secretary of State Acheson was the 'do-er'. He gave the orders, did the negotiating with foreign leaders, and he fronted (and sometimes confronted) the media and the US Congress.

Robert Beisner's biography of Acheson and John Lukacs's biography of Kennan are quite different in scope and style, yet at the heart of each is the question of the character of Stalin and communism. Beisner as an academic historian of American foreign policy has grounded his book in the documentary evidence—there are 106 pages of footnotes. There's not much about Acheson's personal life but there's ten pages of detail about what meetings he attended in June 1950 during the first week of the Korean War.

Lukacs's work is slight by comparison. There are no voluminous footnotes and few documentary sources. It's not that sufficient material doesn't exist for a budding biography—the problem is that there is too much material. Kennan died in 2005 at the age of one hundred and one, and for eighty years he kept detailed diaries, journals, and notes of his articles and speeches. And he had a not uninteresting personal and professional life. Starting in the Foreign Service in 1927 as a twenty-three year old, Kennan variously held positions at the US embassies in Prague in 1938, in Berlin from 1939 until 1942, and then in Moscow as deputy head of the mission from 1944 to 1946. He followed this with various policy roles in the State Department until in 1952 he became US ambassador to the Soviet Union.

It was a position he held for a mere four months. En route to a meeting in London he was asked by a journalist at Berlin airport whether he had many social contacts with Russians in Moscow. Kennan replied that the Soviet government prevented him from being able to meet regular Moscow citizens and the conditions for him in that city were comparable to those he suffered when he was interned by the Nazis in Germany. When these remarks were published he was declared *persona non grata* by the Soviet government—he wasn't even allowed to return to Moscow to gather his personal belongings.

Perhaps it was because Lukacs knew Kennan personally that he's not forced to rely on the written sources. Lukacs is an accomplished story-teller being best known for his *Five Days in London, May 1940* and this biography is really a story about Kennan's character and his thoughts.

Although Kennan is famous as the architect of America's policy of 'containment' against the Soviet Union, the strategy he consistently advocated for the United States was more sophisticated than one of simple opposition. Kennan was concerned that 'anti-communism' blinded Washington's policymakers to the real nature of what was occurring in the Soviet Union in the 1940s. According to Kennan, Stalin's communism was merely a 'fig leaf' that the dictator used to justify his despotism. '[W]hat Stalin wanted were people, not always necessarily communists,

John Roskam is the Executive Director of the Institute of Public Affairs.

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but people entirely subservient to Moscow.' In 1938 Kennan argued: 'We will get nearer to the truth if we abandon for a time the hackneyed question of how far Bolshevism has changed Russia and turn our attention to the question of how far Russia has changed Bolshevism.'

Kennan's famous 'Long Telegram' written from Moscow in 1946 attempted to explain to his superiors in Washington the Russian mentality. In eight thousand words Kennan argued that Russia's attitude to the West was dictated by fear and paranoia—it was an attitude that was not dictated by communism. As Lukacs puts it, Kennan's 'reading of Marx and, even more, his experiences made him see—and astonishingly early—that the so-called class struggle was not the main force in history or, indeed, in human nature; that the struggle of nations and of states were infinitely more important; that nationality was more decisive than class.' Kennan maintained that the best way to respond to Russia was through the threat of force—which was the only thing that the Russians understood.

In later years Kennan became immensely frustrated that 'force' was interpreted to mean only military force, when in fact his aim was to have the Western powers appreciate that economic and political force can in the long run be more effective than military action. He predicted the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union on the basis that its ideology and its economic system were unsustainable. The only problem was that he never predicted when that collapse would occur.

The Long Telegram arrived in Washington on 22 February 1946, and, by coincidence, two weeks later Churchill gave his 'Iron Curtain' speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. The sentiments of Kennan's telegram and Churchill's speech were not the received wisdom. Both came at a time when many thought that it was still possible that the wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union could continue into the peace. The conservative columnist Walter Lippmann described Churchill's comments as an 'almost catastrophic blunder' and accused him of being a warmonger while the main concern of British foreign minister Ernest Bevin was that Stalin might be offended by the speech.

By the time Dean Acheson became US Secretary of State in 1949 notions about co-operation with the Soviet Union had disappeared. Acheson saw communism itself as the foe that the United States was fighting. While he regarded Stalin as little different from Peter the Great or Ivan the Terrible, Marxism-Leninism provided an 'ideological zeal and fighting power' that had been absent in the Russian leaders of the past. Communism 'had transformed the Soviet regime into an inexorable force, like a river.' Furthermore, 'you can dam it up, you can put it to useful purposes, you can defeat it, but you can't argue with it'.

Critics of Acheson's cold war strategy then and since have maintained that the threat the Soviet Union posed was only ever minimal, considering the economic dominance of the United States and the advan-

tage the Americans had in nuclear weapons. But as Beisner writes this ignores 'the ability to feel fear and confidence simultaneously'.

That combination of fear and confidence is what stimulated the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, and the creation of NATO. These were all postwar creations that Acheson regarded as important. By contrast, for him the United Nations was not important. Acheson's attitude to the United Nations could be summed up as:

people who could not face the truth about human nature were for the UN; people who fairly squished with the juice of human kindness but who had a pretty soggy brain were also for the UN; people who preferred to preserve their illusions intact favoured the UN.

Acheson was happy to engage in diplomatic debates 'but he considered such debates valuable only when they occurred among those already in agreement on fundamentals'—and communists and liberal democrats didn't share such agreement. His criticism of the UN is just as powerful now as it was half a century ago.

These books may have American diplomats as their subject, but they are dominated by the figure of Stalin. Kennan and Acheson may have disagreed about the relationship between Stalinism and ideological communism, but whatever they were fighting, they were united against it.

