Ambiguous Borderland

Remembering Chornobyl

Moral Aspects of the Dissident Resistance in Ukraine

Diplomatic History: The Turkey-Armenia Protocols

George Kennan and the Russian Soul

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Ambiguous Borderland


The seven essays and introduction that comprise Tatiana Zhurzhenko’s book, address the issue of Ukrainian state-nation building from a very interesting angle. They examine, at various levels, how the emergence of independent Ukraine affects the transformation of old, merely administrative Soviet borders into the “real” borders of a sovereign state and how, vice versa, the process of border making challenges, in various ways, the master project of nation building.

Border making, as the author rightly emphasizes, means not only the process of re-mapping but also of re-narrating. Delimitation and demarcation of borders, their international legitimation, the development of a modern border infrastructure and introduction of the proper border regime—all these things are definitely important but, in the case of Ukraine, most of them have been solved relatively easily. The much greater challenge for the new state arises from the people’s mentality. Whereas the western borders of Ukraine coincide with the old Soviet borders and are firmly established not only on territory but also in people’s minds, the “new” borders—with Belarus, Moldova and, especially, Russia—largely lack such a popular legitimacy.

This is the main political-cum-intellectual problem that looms large in Tatiana Zhurzhenko’s work. It is discussed on both macro- and micro-levels, which makes the book especially valuable. The macro-level is represented in the first part of the book, entitled “Remapping the Post-Soviet Space,” which consists of two essays: “Eurasia and its Uses in the Ukrainian Geopolitical Imagination” and “Slavic Sisters into European Neighbors: Ukrainian-Belarusian Relations after 1991.” The micro-level is explored in the third part of the book, “Living (with the) Border,” based on field research in a few border villages in the Kharkivska oblast of Ukraine and the neighboring Belgorodskaya oblast of the Russian Federation. It consists of two lengthy essays: “Making Sense of a New Border: Social Transformations and Shifting Identities in Five Near-Border Villages” and “Becoming Ukrainians in a ‘Russian’ Village: Local Identity, Language and National Belonging.”

The second, middle part of the book, “Bordering Nations, Transcending Boundaries,” gradually shifts the perspective from the macro-level (the chapter “Under Construction: the Ukrainian-Russian Border from the Soviet Collapse to EU Enlargement”) to the micro-level (“Slobozhanshchyna: Re-inventing a Region in the Ukrainian-Russian Borderlands”—on the area where the eventually surveyed villages are located). And, importantly, this part of the book includes the pivotal essay on “Boundary in Mind: Discourses and Narratives of the Ukrainian-Russian Border”—a detailed representation of the author’s methodology and theoretical foundations.

In fact, the methodology is briefly outlined in the introduction which informs us that the book “combines several disciplines and methodological approaches: from the history of ideas and theories of international relations to discourse analysis, political science and social anthropology” [37-38], and that the book’s ambitious idea is “to approach the post-Soviet borders as a construct produced by different political actors through various narratives; to go beyond the dominant discourses of security and integration and demonstrate their role in the process of border construction,” referring, inter alia, not only to the “elitist discourses produced by politicians and intellectuals, but also to the narratives of ordinary people living near the border and experiencing it in their everyday lives.” [22]

The notion of borders as not merely a physical reality but also a symbolic one dwells at the heart of the constructivist approach applied by the author, and clearly justifies a critical discourse analysis as the major tool of the proposed study.

The fact that the border is a construct does not mean that it is drawn arbitrarily; it usually has some prehistory, e.g. a former administrative division, a historical or ethno-linguistic boundary which can be used as a basis for delimitation. But neither these “objective” factors (usually disputed between the two sides), nor pure political will are sufficient for creating a border. The border has also to be drawn in the minds of the people. It is shaped by the political rhetoric of “national interests,” the dominant discourses of nation and state building, the discussions about national identity and “geopolitical choice”. Thus, national borders are constructed not only with border stones and fences, but also with words.” [155]

They are supported, to put it differently, not only by “hard” but also by “soft” power. They require what Claus Eder terms a “narrative plausibility” [19, 159].

The Ukrainian-Russian border is particularly interesting in this regard—not only because it is “new” and physically underdeveloped, but also because it is under-narrated, it lacks symbolic power and bears question-
able legitimacy for the majority of Russians and the plurality of Ukrainians. The symbolic weakness of the Ukrainian-Russian border is especially noticeable in the near-border areas researched by Tatiana Zhurzhenko. Here, she notes, people “usually do not see their neighbors on the other side as cultural ‘others’. It is rather economic gradients and different welfare provisions which constitute ‘us’ and ‘them’ across the Ukrainian-Russian border. Ukrainian identity in the borderlands with Russia is not exclusive and dominant, but flexible and situational, easily combined with Russian, “Slavic,” regional or post-Soviet identities” [159].

Leaving aside a debatable question whether such an identity could really be qualified as “Ukrainian” (i.e., national) rather than “Little Russian” (i.e., a merely regional part of the Greater Russian, Eastern Slavonic, Orthodox Christian, or (post)Soviet supranational identity), we can in any case assume that, for a great many people, the Ukrainian-Russian border is rather a physical than symbolic reality. It does not “separate ‘us’ from ‘them’ and does not constitute a [territorial] community whose members are supposed to share a common memory, common symbols and historical myths.” [156]

Nationwide opinion surveys reveal that a vast majority of inhabitants of eastern and southern Ukraine feel much greater affinity with Russians and even with heavily Russified/Sovietized Belarusians than with western Ukrainians who had broken away from the East Slavonic/Orthodox Christian “ummah” and formed an unquestionably modern national identity. They are “alien” not only because they belong to a different – Western/Catholic/European – civilization, but also because they represent a different type of identity, one that is apparently incompatible with both the subnational identity of “Little Russians” and the supranational identity of Orthodox-cum-Soviet-cum-Russified Eastern Slavs. They are predictably considered “nationalistic” within the prenational or supranational mental framework – even though no sociological data prove they are more “nationalistic” in whatever way than any of their neighbors to the west.

Ukraine’s identity split is the major stumbling block in the complex construction of the new national borders. The two roughly equal parts of Ukrainian society have radically different ideas about “us” and “them” and, naturally, about the “common memory, symbols and historical myths.” They have opposite views on who is Ukraine’s main enemy and who should be the main ally, and therefore which border, eastern or western, should be strengthened or even closed, and which should be softened or even eliminated. This means they promote opposing discourses and apply different “meta-narratives” to Ukraine’s eastern and western borders. One of these groups tends to present the Ukrainian-Russian border as a “site of hostility and of potential if not open conflict,” while the other group considers it as a “site of contact, cooperation and friendship, sometimes referring to old historical ties and cultural commonality, sometimes stressing mutual interests, common future, or both” [160].

One narrative is defined as the “narrative of security,” the other one as the “narrative of integration.” Both of them, as Tatiana Zhurzhenko aptly remarks, “originated to some extent from the European Union” [162]. The similarity, however, is superficial. European integration is fundamentally different from all the projects of “Eurasian” integration promoted within the CIS by Russia. First of all, European integration is voluntary: neither the members of, nor candidates to the EU are forced or even blackmailed to “integrate.” Second, European integration is value-based: all the participants of the process must meet strict criteria of democracy, human rights, and rule of law—hardly meaningful things in Russia or elsewhere in the CIS. And third, even the smallest countries in the EU have an equal voice and can, in most cases, block any decision that clearly contradicts their interests or undermines their sovereignty. None of the Russia-led “integration” projects provides this opportunity for its minor shareholders.

Tatiana Zhurzhenko stops short of labeling the post-Soviet “integration” discourses a sheer smokescreen to hide Russian hegemonic ambitions, but nonetheless leaves little room for any alternative interpretation:

Borrowing the discourse of EU integration served to legitimize integration projects in the post-Soviet space, which their critics saw as a restoration of the Soviet empire... This European discourse of integration at the Ukrainian-Russian border intertwines with the discourse of East Slavic unity and the common historical destiny of the East Slavic nations, particularly on the Russian side. [162-3]

The narrative of security at the Ukrainian-Russian border that seemingly “resonates with the EU discourse on the “soft threats” coming from the “new neighbourhood” [164] also has profoundly different meanings in both cases. The threats that emanate from Russia to its neighbors are hardly “soft.” In most cases, they include economic pressure, energy blackmail, trade and media wars, covert operations of security forces, and even direct military occupation of territories – as in the case of Moldova and Georgia. Hence, the EU discourse on security resonates primarily with the “Ukrainian fears of losing national sovereignty and falling under Moscow’s control” [164].

The fears are certainly not paranoid since a great majority of Russians still consider Ukraine (with the exception of its western regions) an integral part of the Orthodox / East Slavic / Eurasian civilization... This view was developed in Russian historiography during the 19th century and became
an indispensable part of the emerging Russian identity. Indeed, Ukraine was not just a “normal” colonial subject of the Russian empire but a constituent element for the metropolitan centre... The persistence of this narrative in Russia during the 1990s and its popularity among both the elites and the population made it difficult to think about Ukraine in terms of a separate nation with legitimate borders. While Russia officially recognized the national sovereignty of Ukraine in its present borders, the implicit condition of such recognition was its “geopolitical loyalty” to the former imperial core. Therefore any movement of the Ukrainian leadership in Western direction has been met in Moscow with great suspicion... Ukraine with its Euro-Atlantic aspirations is seen as a potential traitor of “Slavic unity”... [178-79]

To put it bluntly, Russian politics in the “near abroad” still resembles the notorious Brezhnev doctrine of “limited sovereignty” applied back in the 1960-80s by the Soviet Union to the East European satellites, with tacit Western approval. (cf Putin-Denikin 188). To make things worse, the Russian imperial view of Ukraine is largely congruent with views of many Ukrainian citizens and has broad currency in both the local and Russian mass media distributed/broadcast in Ukraine. Little surprise, then, that the Ukrainian-Russian border, being closely connected to the issue of national identity, is invested with a special symbolic meaning, which can be understood only in the Ukrainian “post-colonial” context. It is the lack of clear boundaries which makes Ukrainian identity problematic: Ukrainian culture, language, memory etc. first have to be separated from their Russian counterparts. The continuing coexistence of two cultures and languages in Ukraine, Ukrainian and Russian, is seen as a proof of an “unfinished nation-building,” a weakness rather than an asset. Significantly, this “post-colonial condition” is represented not so much by the ethnic Russians, but by the Russian-speaking Ukrainians. [164]

The term “coexistence” employed by the author tends to obscure the actual dominance of Russian language and culture over Ukrainian in most parts of the country. Even though, numerically, ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians make up less than half of Ukraine’s population, they are traditionally much more urbanized and therefore more advanced socially, culturally, and economically. This firmly secures them, even now, a strong structural dominance over the peripheral Ukrainian-speaking majority.

Equally misleading is the term “bilingualism” praised by numerous authors as a “valuable asset of the region” and quoted uncritically at one point (p. 220) by Zhurzhenko. The truth is definitely more complex. The region in question – Slobzhanshchyna, as well as all of southeastern Ukraine–represents a very dubious case of bilingualism since only Ukrainians, mostly Ukrainophone, are really bilingual there. Neither Russians nor Russian-speaking Ukrainians are able and/or willing, in most cases, to shift to Ukrainian, the language that is broadly considered in their milieu to be “inferior” or “artificial” and “alien”. Paradoxically, “nationalistic” western Ukraine represents a case of European, non-Soviet bilingualism since not only Ukrainians but also Russians in the region are able and willing to communicate in both Russian and Ukrainian, depending on the circumstances.

In fact, the major dividing line in Ukraine runs not between east and west or between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, or Russophones and Ukrainophones – even though there are some significant correlations between all these factors and two major types of the country’s identity – Ukrainian and “Little Russian”. The main split is determined by the opposing notions of “us” and “them” and the radically different meanings of being a “normal Ukrainian”. In one identity discourse, Russia is seen as the main “Other,” and the national past is considered colonial, whereas the present is seen as an unfinished process of decolonization. In the other identity discourse, the West is assigned the role of the main “Other,” whereas the past is considered a history of friendly Russian-Ukrainian cohabitation and common fighting the enemies – primarily Westerners, but also their aboriginal agents and allies – “Ukrainian nationalists” (“mazepists,” “petliurites,” “banderites,” et al.). Since there was arguably no colonialism in the past, no decolonization is needed at present. The “Little Russian” group (one may call it “Ukrainian Creole” – as opposite to “Ukrainian aboriginal”) insists on a formal equality of both languages, Ukrainian and Russian, and on a laissez-faire cultural policy, which apparently benefits them as much stronger players vis-à-vis their handicapped rivals.

From the Ukrainian (“aboriginal”) point of view, the political emancipation from Russia is insufficient as long as mental-cultural/discursive emancipation is not brought to completion. For many Ukrainians, as Zhurzhenko notes, the symbolic status of the Ukrainian language and culture is therefore reflected, inter alia, in the geopolitical status of the Ukrainian-Russian border. And since “strengthening national identity in post-Soviet Ukraine requires assuming a cultural and political distance from Russia,” the new border becomes “not only a symbol of, but also an instrument for the creation of this difference” [165]. In sum, within the past 20 years, “the Ukrainian-Russian border has been subject to a process of symbolic construction, which reflects problems of post-Soviet nation building, state efforts to nationalize borderlands, to assimilate them as integral part of the national territory and to invest new borders with real and symbolic power” [189].
So far, the results of these efforts are rather modest. Two crucial factors, one objective and the other subjective, put limitations on the nationalizing efforts of Ukrainian authorities and on the discursive practices of Ukrainian intellectuals. On the objective side, one should note that Ukraine is not only a heterogeneous but also relatively pluralistic country where “various political actors and ‘discursive communities’ produce texts and images of a given territory, region, nation.” Neither the government nor any other “actor” has a discursive monopoly or even clear dominance in Ukraine. “State institutions, local self-administration, business groups, NGOs, ethnic communities, political parties and organizations, media, academia, the education system, the all produce narratives and images which make sense of a border. Not only national states, but also international organizations […] and transboundary institutions […] influence and create border narratives.” In Ukraine, as elsewhere, borders are subject to both the “high” geopolitics made by experts and politicians, and “low” geopolitics made by media and pop culture.[158]

This means, in particular, that Ukrainian borders are not only ‘narrated and constructed by ‘discursive communities’ of various kinds,” but also intensively re-narrated and deconstructed by some other “discursive communities” that include pretty resourceful Russian state, Russian mass media, businesses, NGOs, as well as their pro-Russian subsidiaries in Ukraine. They produce a very powerful counter-discourse (if not the de-facto dominant discourse in Ukraine), which Zhurzhenko defines as a “discourse of integration” that features the “common past,” “traditional friendship,” and “cultural affinity” between Ukrainians and Russians. The positive rhetoric predominates, however, only in “high” politics. The “low” Russian (and pro-Russian) politics is heavily charged with traditional ethnic stereotypes and cultural supremacist that overtly undermines Ukrainian identity, ridicule Ukrainian language, promotes xenophobic- cum-conspiratorial anti-Occidentalism, and deepens the rift in Ukrainian society between the “true,” i.e. Russophile Ukrainians and perversive “nationalists.”

On the subjective side, the nationalizing efforts of the Ukrainian government are restrained not only by powerful counter-discourses and widespread sabotage at various levels but also by its own inefficiency, corruption, and institutional weakness. The main hindering factor, however, is the government’s own reluctance to pursue any coherent policy of decolonization / de-Sovietization that may effectively undermine their own Soviet-style, crypto-authoritarian dominance over the country. To some extent, Ukrainian rulers are deadlocked by two incompatible imperatives. On one hand, they need to promote state-nation building and strengthen people’s national identity in order to legitimize and secure their own rule both domestically and internationally. On the other hand, they cannot promote modern Ukrainian identity without purging it of various relics of Sovietness. Or, as Zhurzhenko aptly remarks, “in order to ‘make Ukrainians’ one has to ‘unmake Soviets’” [278]. Because, as she notes elsewhere, “(post)Soviet political culture and mentality can become an obstacle for modernization” [200].

But how can the post-Soviet rulers get rid of something that ensures their political dominance, restrains challenges from civil society and undermines real competition? The essentially non-civic, paternalistic, illiberal and irrationally anti-Western Soviet identity is one of the main pillars upon which the dominance of the post-Soviet elites is based. They are definitely not eager to destroy this pillar and expose themselves to real accountability and political competition. Yet, they cannot but yield to the imperative of state-nation building and therefore make sporadic concessions to Ukrainian national identity.

These two factors, both objective and subjective, largely determine the ambivalence and incoherence of much of Ukrainian policies, including the policy of state-nation building and border making as part of it. Tatiana Zhurzhenko exemplifies this general ambiguity with Leonid Kuchma’s official rhetoric of “multi-vectorism” that combined the “strategic goal” of European integration with a Ukrainian-Russian “special partnership”. In regard of the border issue, she notes, Kuchma’s administration paid lip service to “national security” and the necessity of “civilized borders” [the EU-styled euphemism for the need to strengthen the border with Russia] while at other occasions promoted cross-border cooperation and integration projects for the “border of friendship” [a Soviet-styled cliché applied officially to the Ukrainian-Russian border]. These two discourses – European choice and East Slavic partnership – were successfully combined and instrumentalized by Leonid Kuchma until they got into open conflict before and especially during the Orange revolution.[186]

The subsequent development proved, however, that neither the “Orange” government of Viktor Yuschenko nor the anti-Orange government of Viktor Yanukovych could completely get rid of the political ambiguity that seems to be deeply ingrained in Ukrainian society, its political culture, mentality, and identity. In Yuschenko’s case, the pro-Western, Euro-Atlantic rhetoric had not been supported by overdue institutional reforms and therefore remained shallow and self-compromising. In Yanukovych’s case, the pro-Russian rhetoric was rapidly cooled by Russians themselves who clearly signaled that they did not need any “friendship” from former vassals in the “near abroad,” but only full obedience.

This means there are very serious structural factors
in Ukrainian society, as well as important determinants in both Russia and the EU, which create a tough framework for any politician who wishes to pursue any proactive politics in Ukraine. Ukraine, together with Belarus and Moldova, belongs to a geopolitically amorphous zone “in between” and bears the classical characteristics of borderlands:

It generates hybrid models and creates political, economic, and cultural practices which combine mutually excluding values and principles, while the political space has been torn between Western and Eastern vectors. The persisting situation of a “final choice” to be made between West and East, between the EU and Russia – a “mission impossible” – produces a whole gamut of “multi-vector politics” on the national as well as on the regional level. External pressure reproduces and strengthens this political ambivalence. Led by its own interests, the EU wants to see its Eastern neighbours as “bordered lands,” whereas Russia would like to preserve them as its own traditional “borderlands.” [36]

This “borderland” situation, Zhurzhenko concludes, will persist as long as the competition between “the elephant and the bear” – the reluctant empire of the European Union and the reluctant ex-empire of Russia – determines the map of the European continent. From the political perspective the accomplishment of the border is dependent on the success of nation and state building in Ukraine and Russia, on the dynamics of their bilateral relations and on new forms of cross-border and regional cooperation emerging in the former Soviet space. [37]

All these “ifs,” however, can be subsumed under the rubric “success of nation and state building in Ukraine and Russia.” But the latter largely depends on the former. In Russia, unlike in Ukraine, the new identity is merely a continuation of the old supranational Soviet/imperial identity. Or, as Zhurzhenko astutely puts it, “the making of Russians does not require the unmaking of ‘Soviets’. The new historical narrative integrates not only symbols of the imperial Russian past but also, selectively, Soviet myths and symbols” [278]. Such an identity can barely be defined as modern and national, and certainly does not support transformation of pre-modern subjects into modern citizens – as an important precondition of full-fledged modernization and successful state-nation building.

Ukraine finds itself at the bottom-line of all these expectations. Making Ukrainians as a process of unmaking Soviets may truly be a “mission impossible.” But this is the only way to pull Russia back to reality from its imagined imperial world and make it follow suit. Ukraine’s accession in the EU and NATO might be a shock for Russians but this is the only way to wake them up and force them to reconsider their obsolete and cumbersome imperial identity centered in the heavily mythologized

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REMEMBERING CHORNOBYL

Valerii Kuchynskyi

“Ukraine launched on April 26, 2012, the construction of a new shelter to permanently secure the stricken Chernobyl nuclear power plant as it marked the 26th anniversary of the world’s worst nuclear disaster.” (Ukrainian News Bulletin)

Twenty-six years ago, Saturday, April 26, 1986, was a warm, sunny day in Kyiv. Early in the morning, as I was passing through the Ministry for Foreign Affairs building, where I worked at the time, the guard, a non-commissioned officer on permanent service with the Ministry and a friend, greeted me warmly and informed me, confidentially, that something unusual was going on: “dozens of trucks, loaded with soldiers wearing special uniforms, rushed in the early hours towards the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl. Something serious must have happened there,” he cautioned...

That was the first time I heard about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster that to this day remains the worst nuclear catastrophe in contemporary history. The nuclear plant is situated a mere 60 miles from Ukraine’s capital.

The accident had occurred in the middle of the night, just before 1:30 a.m. A power surge during the system test resulted in everything going out of control, leading to a series of explosions at reactor #4. The explosions that blew the top off the reactor caused fires, creating highly radioactive plumes of smoke. Fire crews came to the power plant from Pripyat and Kyiv, and firemen and first aid workers were the main early casualties of the disaster.

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the amount of radioactivity released was roughly 400 times more than that of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, causing at least 4,000 deaths and the evacuation of up to 400,000 people. Safety measures were ignored, the uranium fuel in the reactor overheated and melted through the protective barriers. The release of radiation did not cease until several months later when the damaged reactor was finally covered by a concrete structure known as the Sarcophagus.

At the time, nobody knew anything about all that. The day following the disaster, Sunday, April 27th, was another beautiful day: people were spending time outdoors, on their plots of land in the countryside, in the parks and on the streets of Kyiv. No official warnings were made; in fact, no information about the accident was available.

In the evening of April 28, Radio Moscow announced: “An accident occurred at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant and one of the reactors was damaged. Measures have been taken to eliminate the consequences of the accident. Aid is being given to those affected. A Government Commission has been established.” The accident was played down and life went on as usual in Soviet Ukraine. A few days later the foreign radio broadcasts—Voice of America, BBC, Radio Liberty—started giving details about the catastrophe and advice on safety measures. Very high levels of radiation were reported in Sweden and other countries of Northern Europe. Still, no information was to be found in the local news media.

The early days after the explosion were the most worrisome. Rumors about the disaster and its possible aftereffects started to make the rounds about the city. The official reaction was: “Nothing serious had happened, keep calm, and don’t succumb to panic….” We all know now that the radiation plumes passed over Kyiv several times with increasing amounts of radiation.

On the first of May the celebration of International Labor Day was held as usual, with thousands of Kyivites marching through the streets of Kyiv toward the main thoroughfare of Kreshchatyk, where the leaders of Ukrainian Communist Party and the Government greeted them from the specially erected platform, known as the Government Rostrum. The Ukrainian Party boss Volodymyr Shcherbytsky was also there. The residents of Kyiv—men, women, and children carrying flowers—assembled and participated in the parade with no knowledge of the danger in the city’s air. The next day a bike race was held on the streets of Kyiv. I don’t think there were any winners in that race.

Not until May 5th, ten days after the explosion—and only after public outcry from Europe and Government pressure from the West—did the Kremlin admit the extent of the radioactive disaster that had not been contained.

The next day, in a brief TV broadcast, Ukraine’s Health Minister, Romanenko, advised Kyivites “to stay inside if possible, to close tightly windows of the apartments, to keep washing carefully hands and the food products” and not to drink iodine with milk, as some people were doing. “Drink red wine—it helps fight radiation,” he advised. Red wine appeared in abundance in every store at a reduced price.

Then came the days of panic, when people were trying desperately to evacuate their children, their families, to send them somewhere, away from Kyiv. Trains leaving the railway stations were cordoned off by police units to control the exodus.

More than two weeks after the accident the Gen-
eral Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee Mikhail Gorbachev appeared on television and spoke about the accident, still avoiding presenting the full scope of the tragedy.

It was only much later that we learned about the size of the catastrophe, its victims, losses and consequences. One day, we may learn the truth. The number of deaths and long-term health problems connected with Chornobyl is still very much disputed. Thousands, or hundreds of thousands, or millions? The most affected by the accident, of course, were the scores of firefighters and thousands of “liquidators” or cleanup workers, who directly dealt with the explosion’s aftermath. The radioactive contamination of the vast territories, the relocation of hundreds of thousands of local inhabitants from the affected areas, serious health consequences, premature deaths, the sharp rise in thyroid cancer and in leukemia, immunological abnormalities—this is what Chornobyl has left behind.

Chornobyl was a Soviet-era accident, but its legacy is still being felt today. It all began with an official cover-up and censorship. A quarter of a century later it is still difficult to ascertain accurate information about its health effects, mainly because of the close control over data of agencies that wish to minimize for various reasons its impact.

The Soviet Government in late April and May 1986, it should be noted, rejected all outside aid. The only exception was made for the American Dr. Robert Gale, who came to Kyiv and carried out bone marrow transplants on several of the most severely affected firemen and first-aid workers. All but one of those patients died. Aid came much later, under the aegis of the United Nations, its specialized agencies, the IAEA, international financial institutions and individual donor countries.

Units 1 and 2 of the Chornobyl power station were restored to operation by the fall of 1986 and unit 3 by December 1987. Despite numerous safety problems and the IAEA decision to declare the power plant “dangerous,” it continued to operate until December 2000, when it was finally closed by special order of President Leonid Kuchma.

However great the cost of lives and health hazards of the Chornobyl accident, one of its most powerful aftereffects, I think, has been psychological. The people from affected areas, including the residents of Kyiv, were gripped for a very long time by dreadful fear and by a paralyzing fatalism—later called the “Chornobyl Syndrome”—due to lack of information and the profound distress over the health of their children and loved ones.

I remember vividly the heated discussions, and sometimes quarrels and fights, over what had really happened and what was to be done. Among friends, family members, passers-by on the streets, colleagues at work. The most affected were the mothers for whom the Chornobyl disaster and its dangers became a real phobia.

The topics for discussions were: Do we need a Geiger meter to check the radiation levels? Should we carry it all the time? What about automobiles that were parked outside? Should we send our children out of Kyiv? Where to? For how long? Should we all move out? Some families moved out. Some broke up. There was an increase in mental illnesses. That continued for quite a long time.

According to a survey conducted recently in a number of European countries, the vast majority of the population (86-89%) believes that the Chornobyl catastrophe has “somewhat” or “very much” affected their health. Over 70% of French citizens are still concerned that consequences of the disaster “continue to affect their health.” Almost all Ukrainian respondents (98%) indicated that the accident “seriously affected” their health. (3).

Immediately after the Chornobyl explosion the popular discontent with the authorities and their handling of the crisis had been on the rise. People more and more frequently took to the streets by holding “unsanctioned” rallies and protest marches, demanding the truth about the disaster and calling to account those responsible.

“Rukh,” the first official opposition movement was born in Ukraine in the late 1980s. Student protest demonstrations became an everyday reality. Chornobyl triggered an ensuing political turmoil that swept the whole country and united people in their outrage with the regime. The “parade of sovereignties” of the Soviet republics during 1990, the victory of the Baltic states, the abortive coup in Moscow on 19-21 August, not to mention Ukraine’s Declaration of Independence on 24 August 1991—all demonstrated the inevitable: the Soviet Union was falling apart.

The logical end came in Belovezhskaya Pushcha, in Brezhnev’s old dacha in the forests of Western Belarus on 7-8 December 1991. The leaders of the three republics—Russian B. Yeltsin, Ukrainian L. Kravchuk, and Byelorussian V.Shushkevich—met there and put an end to the existence of the USSR by creating the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The Soviet Union was finished and on 25 December 1991 Mikhail Gorbachev resigned his presidency.

One of the first acts of independent Ukraine was the Declaration on the Non-Nuclear status of 24 October 1991, which reaffirmed Ukraine’s decision to relinquish the nuclear weapons it inherited from the Soviet Union and accede to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). That decision was undoubtedly prompted by the horrors of the Chornobyl tragedy.

By 1994, Ukraine fulfilled its obligations, acceded to the NPT as a non-nuclear state and ratified the START-1 Treaty between USSR and US on reduction of strategic arms. By the end of 1996 the last nuclear weapon left Ukraine’s territory.

Overall, the nuclear arsenal stationed in Ukraine at
the time it gained independence amounted to the third largest in the world: 220 intercontinental ballistic missiles with multiple nuclear warheads, 44 heavy bombers equipped with long-range air-launched cruise-missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, plus a considerable number of tactical nuclear weapons. All this weaponry was transferred to Russia for elimination. In return, Ukraine received a memorandum on security assurances signed by the nuclear weapons states and was applauded by the world community.

An important role in the lengthy and tiresome process of Ukraine’s demuclearization was played by the United States, which rendered considerable financial assistance and joined in the bilateral talks between Kyiv and Moscow. The involvement of the US and the ensuing trilateral format of negotiations became crucial in ensuring a successful outcome. The US acted as mediator and partner in the bilateral squabbles over the fate of the Soviet nuclear arsenal between Kyiv and Moscow, thus greatly contributing to a fruitful solution of a very sensitive issue.

Unfortunately, this was the only example of trilateral cooperation between Kyiv, Washington and Moscow to produce results. Had there been more of these Ukraine might have avoided many difficulties in its dealings with Russia.

Another important step to fight the legacy of Chornobyl and to raise nuclear safety and security was Ukraine’s decision to remove all stockpiles of highly enriched uranium (HEU) from its territory. HEU is widely used in nuclear power plants, research facilities and, in modified form, hospitals. But it is also dangerous as fuel for nuclear weapons. The complete removal of HEU, which was announced in March 2012 at the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul, South Korea, was applauded by the world community. The US called it “continuous courageous leadership of Ukraine on nuclear security.”

The paramount importance of nuclear power safety was highlighted once again by the accident in Japan at the Fukushima Daichi nuclear power plant caused by an unprecedented natural disaster on 11 March 2011. It was distinct from the Chornobyl accident in many ways: the reactors automatically shut down, there have been no large on-site fires, the release of radioactive substances has been limited, and there were no cases of radiation exposure causing death or health problems.

Still, the Fukushima disaster raised many questions about whether nuclear energy could ever be made safe enough. It also demonstrated that lessons have been learned: the rapid evacuation of people, the abiding concern not to expose workers to excessive doses of radioactivity, the transparency around the accident and international mobilization to provide Japan with expertise, protection and means of intervention. This all stands in sharp contrast with how the Chornobyl disaster was handled by the Soviet authorities.

Today one cannot but remember the glorifying lip service by the Soviet mass media to the triumph of “peaceful atom” under socialism and its complete safety. “They are safer than samovars” Soviet propaganda would boast about the country’s nuclear power plants. “We could build one on Red Square.” They did not. They built one in Chornobyl in the 1970s, in close proximity to Ukraine’s capital Kyiv with two million inhabitants. It was done contrary to the vehement protests from then President of National Academy of Sciences Boris Paton and other Ukrainian experts.

According to official data, during the 25 years since the calamity, Ukraine’s direct losses and expenditures to fight the consequences amounted to tens of billion of US dollars, and, in some years, reached 8 to 10 percent of Ukraine’s state budget.

To mark the 25th anniversary of the Chornobyl disaster last April important events were held worldwide. A special meeting of the UN General Assembly was organized at UN Headquarters in New York. Ukraine’s capital hosted the Pledging conference, the Summit on the Safe and Innovative Use of Nuclear Energy and the international conference “25 Years after the Chornobyl Catastrophe: Safety for the Future.” Participating in the events were important dignitaries from over 60 countries, including UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, Chairman of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barosso, the Prime Minister of France Francois Fillon, President of the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development Thomas Mirow and many others.

Some 600 million Euros were pledged for implementing the Chornobyl cleanup project, specific measures were mapped out to fight the consequences of the catastrophe, and the prospects for the future of nuclear energy were discussed. The money pledged will help complete the construction of a new Shelter and build safe storage facilities for spent nuclear fuel.

The remains of reactor #4 will be reburied under the New Safe Confinement, the 20,000-ton structure that spans 257 meters and will contain hi-tech equipment to carry out safe decontamination work inside the ruined reactor. The construction of the shelter, which started on 26 April 2012, is expected to cost 990 million euros and is to be put in place in 2015; the entire decontamination work on the site will push the total cost up to 1.5 billion euros ($2 billion US).

As the international community commemorates yet another anniversary of the worst nuclear disaster in history, questions about the future of nuclear energy remain unanswered. Despite serious doubts about its safety, it looks as though nuclear will continue as one of the mainstays of the world energy supply for the 21st century. For
its part, Ukraine plans to continue maintaining the 50% share of nuclear power in national production of electricity at least until 2050.

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Moral Aspects of the Dissident Resistance in Ukraine: From Rosy Expectations to Sober Reality

Myroslav Marynovych

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

This conference is devoted to the history of dissent in the former Soviet Union, and I, as a former Ukrainian dissident, would like to use this opportunity to offer a special introductory reflection. It is my moral duty and great personal privilege to thank all those who made our mission possible: those who risked their diplomatic or professional positions by meeting with us in that “empire of evil”; those who transferred our materials to the free world; the ones who helped our voices be heard; all those who gave us their invaluable support. Here, I mean governments and ordinary citizens, diplomats and journalists, editors and media communicators, cultural figures and religious communities. I mean people of varied ethnic origins (in my case, Ukrainian) living in diaspora, but also those whose connection with Ukrainian or Russian, Baltic or Caucasian cultures had been established simply through human solidarity and compassion. Let their efforts be blessed, let their support be never forgotten. On behalf of all former dissidents, I would like to express our deep gratitude to our well-known, and maybe still unknown, beneficiaries, and I ask you to be the recipients and mediators of this gratitude.

Toward a History of the Resistance Movement

The genesis of the Ukrainian dissident movement was twofold, predetermined by the twofold nature of the Soviet regime, both as a totalitarian state and as the Russian Empire camouflaged under the communist “union.”

On the one hand, the dissident movement was an attempt to provide serious resistance to the totalitarian state and aimed at the democratization of the society. In this sense, Ukrainian dissidents shared the position of all Soviet dissidents and had the Russian human rights circles in Moscow as an example to follow. And let me say at the very beginning: the support of our colleagues in Moscow was invaluable. At its early stages, the cross-Soviet dissident movement had been fed by the hopes generated by the debunking of the so-called “cult of Stalin” after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party (1956) and by a certain democratization often addressed as the “Khrushchev thaw.” A crisis of the official communist identity occurred: the former Stalinist ideological standards had been reconsidered and the official history of the state had been rewritten. Belief in the justice of the Soviet system had been damaged, but not fatally. The most active core of the dissident movement at that time consisted of optimistic and, to some extent, idealistic communists who wished that “distortions of the Lenin official policy” be removed and the existing system to be transformed into “communism with a human face.”

On the other hand, the Ukrainian dissident movement derived its inspiration from the liberation struggle of Ukrainians, which had grown markedly in the first half of the twentieth century. In some sense, it was a continuation of this struggle, but using different means. The movement for cultural, religious, and, later, civil rights had objectively weakened the Moscow colonial regime and, therefore, promoted independent trends within various subjugated nations. This liberational aspect made Ukrainian (like Lithuanian, Georgian and other) dissidents different from Russian dissidents who often considered national movements (including the Ukrainian one) to be “not truly democratic” and “polluted with national/nationalistic demands.”

Therefore, the Ukrainian dissident movement also included those politically-oriented figures for whom the struggle for human rights was a promising instrument for achieving the main goal – the political independence of Ukraine – rather than a “religion of their soul.” They prefer even to use the term “resistance movement” instead of “dissident movement”; they deliberately avoid defining themselves as “dissidents,” preferring to be addressed as “political prisoners” or “fighters for the independence of Ukraine.”

The Ukrainian dissident movement underwent several phases of development. The first one was the period of romantic hopes and this started in the public sphere with the foundation of free cultural clubs at the beginning of the 1960s in Kyiv and Lviv. During their discussions, intellectuals cautiously expressed opinions on literature and culture that differed from the official ones. This period lasted until the first arrests of 1965, which were used by the government to put an end to dangerous free thinking.

The second period could be called a period of confusion and depression. The phase of public protests

1. Keynote address presented at the conference “Non-Conformism and Dissent in the Soviet Bloc: Guiding Legacy or Passing Memory?” March 30, 2011, organized by the Ukrainian Studies Program of the Harriman Institute, Columbia University.
against arrests gave way to embarrassment and confusion. People hoped (although with less and less conviction that those arrests were simply a mistake. This period lasted until the second wave of arrests in 1972-73.

The third period was, therefore, one of reorientation. Of course, many people were disappointed and experienced despair because illusions about the humanitarian evolution of the regime were completely shattered while the “light at the end of a tunnel” had not yet appeared. However, the disposition of dissidents had been radicalized, and it became clearly visible in the materials of samvyd (the Ukrainian equivalent of the Russian samizdat), that is, oppositionist literature illegally printed at home on a typewriter. Cautious culturological freethinking had been gradually replaced by substantial criticism of the regime and the ever more resolute conclusion concerning the inevitability of change.

At that period, the broader name “Ukrainian dissidents” defined a diverse group of the “non-agreeing” consisting of: a reasonable intelligentsia which dreamt, first of all, about freedom of expression; human rights activists who responded to the international human rights call; and political fighters who expressed their longing for the change of the regime and for the independence of Ukraine.

The fourth period of the dissident movement in Ukraine was inspired by the 1975 Helsinki Accords, signed by members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), including the USSR. The first Group for Promoting the Fulfillment of Helsinki Accords was founded on May 12, 1976, in Moscow. The Ukrainian Helsinki Group was next. It was founded on November 9, 1976, by a group of ten dissidents, myself included, headed by the writer Mykola Rudenko. The Group published its Declaration in the Western media, proclaiming its purely human rights, non-underground nature and, following the example of the Moscow Group, providing names and addresses of its members.

Very soon, it became clear, however, that non-underground groups were even more dangerous for the Soviet regime than those underground. After three months of hesitation, the KGB decided to punish the Ukrainian Helsinki Group members for “spreading anti-Soviet propaganda aimed at undermining the Soviet state and social order” – the crime considered, according to the USSR Criminal Code, to be the “most dangerous state crime.” During the next few years, authorities arrested six Ukrainian Helsinki Group members, myself included, and expelled from the country another two. The persecutions had not frightened the “non-agreeing”; instead, they served to mobilize a protest movement in Ukrainian society. As a result, during the 1980s, the Group experienced two more waves of “kamikaze” membership which were inevitably persecuted. Today it is being suggested that there were 41 Ukrainian Helsinki Group members in total. The Group had never announced its dissolution and continued its activities either in prison or abroad. For the whole period of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group’s existence, only one renunciation (Oles Berdnyk) and one suicide (Mykhaylo Melnyk) took place. On July 7, 1988 (that is, during the time of Gorbachev’s perestroika) some members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group declared the foundation of the Ukrainian Helsinki Union with clear political goals. The latter, in fact, was the prototype of a political party.

At the time of Ukrainian independence, members of the 1960-80 Ukrainian resistance movement had become differentiated according to different socio-political orientations. Those who were working to change the system headed the political opposition and made political careers. They became members of parliament and leaders of political parties. The smaller portion of dissidents, again myself included, refused to take part in political activities and continued to defend human rights or act in the cultural or religious field. Finally, a third group of former dissident, either because of their age or health problems, withdrew from any activity, limiting themselves only to participation in some public events.

The diversity of different political orientations chosen by former dissidents met harsh criticism later on. Instead of one consolidated opposition party, it was a conglomeration of rival groups for the most part united around former dissident leaders who stood in opposition to the Communists. This was considered to be a weakness (or even a particular fault) of the dissident movement because its diversity resulted in conflictual divisions. In fact, the dissident movement had never been monolithic and, therefore, could not satisfy all people’s expectations. Indeed, dissidents were united, first of all, in the non-acceptance of the imperial and totalitarian communist system, though each of them viewed the future development of Ukraine differently.

The importance of the dissident movement, at least in Ukraine, lies in the fact that just as a chemical particle can crystallize an oversaturated solution, the appearance of dissidents allowed the crystallization of people’s expectations and their disobedience. As Andrey Amalrik accurately said, they “… made a brilliantly simple thing – in a country that was not free, they began to act as free people and, because of that, started to change the moral atmosphere and the traditions that ruled the country.” Their merits in this are invaluable and beyond doubt.

At the same time (unlike in the Czech Republic) Ukrainian dissidents did not lead their society to the final victory of democracy. The victories they achieved were temporary, and their enormous passionate energy was misused by other political forces. However, in spite of the evident human weakness and failures of the Ukrainian dissidents, one should not censure them. This is because the third wave of democratization (according to Huntington) ran up against the invisible, but very real, cultural “wall” that existed between the two cultural civilizations, namely, the Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Asian ones. Ukrainian dissidents were not able to overcome this wall in principle.

Difficulties of subsequent decades lead me to the conclusion that the task of all Ukrainians who want a better country must lie in the creation of an intermediary
body that will not allow destructive conflict to pull apart both civilizations but will rather transfer mechanically Euro-Atlantic models of democracy into a qualitatively different Euro-Asian civilization. This would permit the fulfillment of a two-fold task. First, in this way the unity of the Ukrainian nation – which is predestined to exist on both sides of the “barricade” – can be safeguarded. Secondly, by fulfilling this national task Ukraine at the same time may fulfill the civilization task of harmonization of two cultural worlds.

Values of Dissidents and the Present Time

Today Ukrainian dissidents may simultaneously take pride in their participation in manifest national democratic achievements and yet be in despair about no less evident moral failures.

One of the most important values supported by fighters of the movement of resistance was freedom: civil, national, religious freedom and the freedom of self-expression. These goals were mainly achieved though everything can be understood relatively.

Until the year 2010 the level of civic freedoms was much higher than that in Soviet times. In the country there was real freedom of the press though it was based not on the existence of the middle class, which is relatively weak in Ukraine, but rather on the reality of political clans. The major achievement of Ukrainian democracy, especially after the Orange Revolution, was freedom of elections, though electoral legislation had some holes that made some falsification and manipulation of voices possible. Finally, the fate of Ukrainian democracy seems to be that of all weak democracies. As a result of the free elections of 2010, those who came to power are actively changing the legislation to avoid losing power in the future. Therefore, weak democracy has logically been transformed into an imitative democracy.

Violations of human rights did not disappear – they only changed their character. Ukrainian authorities still infringe upon human dignity which leads to the diminishment of the scope of people’s rights and the level of citizens’ responsibility. Corruption is destroying the state system of justice and the courts. Thus, the former dissidents cannot rest on their laurels.

Ukrainian independence was achieved, but due to various factors the actual independence has become considerably weakened. The inner inter-regional differences that ought to be viewed as a potential richness for a state in harmony assume contradictory forms that are hard to overcome. These differences are being abused by some political forces who incite one part of the nation against the other. This also influences the geopolitical position of Ukraine because it happens to be divided into two parts. One part of Ukrainian society has chosen a Euro-Atlantic geopolitical orientation wanting to legitimately join the EU and find shelter in a collective security system, above all NATO, from the neimperialistic aspirations of Russia. Incidentally, this is exactly the position most dissidents identify themselves with. The other part of Ukrainian society considers itself to belong to the Russian (Eurasian) cultural region. This makes Ukraine more vulnerable, with its energy dependence on Russia. In this case the concept of the geopolitical security of Russia does not presuppose the true independence of Ukraine.

Inter-ethnic peace is being maintained in Ukraine and the freedom of ethnic minorities is, for the most part, safeguarded. In this sense, the goal of the dissidents has been fulfilled. However, the inertia of the previous Soviet model “Russian and Russian-speaking majority vs. non-Russian minorities” is still very much present. According to this model, Ukrainians were a discriminated minority. After twenty years of independence Ukrainians have not succeeded in the realization of their status of ethnic majority and in safeguarding their cultural rights in certain regions in Ukraine, that is, in the East and South of the country and in Crimea. Moreover, after the 2010 elections the counter-offensive of Russian-speaking politicians began to take place. In order to safeguard the comfort of a one-language (Russian) regime they demagogically insist that there are two official languages in Ukraine – Ukrainian and Russian. In addition, these political forces attempt to misuse international mechanisms developed for defending weaker, or vanishing, languages to safeguard the monopoly of the Russian language which is strong even without this ploy. This not only fools the expectations of dissidents that in an independent state Ukrainian culture and language will have the opportunity to develop freely, but also the counter-offensive of these Russian-speaking “extremes” move Ukraine away from a balanced harmony between the titular nation and ethnic minorities which was also the dream of the dissidents.

One of the most obvious achievements of Ukrainian democracy was (and, I hope, still is) the progress in the sphere of religious freedom. Thanks to some parity between different religious and confessional groups this freedom demonstrated an ability for self-stabilization and self-adjustment. Certain dissidents played an important personal role in the revival of previously persecuted religious organizations and in initiating inter-religious and inter-confessional cooperation. During the year 2010 there was also an attempt of pro-Russian forces to turn this situation back to the past by giving some preferences to the Moscow Patriarchate. The idea of the “Russian world” developed by Patriarch Kirill I of Moscow is being used by the Moscow Patriarchate and its supporters in state authorities to make the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate the established church of Ukraine and press back all of its rivals. The religious rights of some Orthodox rivals of the Moscow Patriarchate have obviously been violated. However, I believe that putting the genie of religions back into the bottle of the Third Rome will be most difficult.

Thus, in many spheres of national existence the dissident mission has been successful, but it has not become irreversible and has not received the necessary legislative and system guarantees. Therefore, the question of its future importance for the nation is still open.
There are two spheres, however, in which this mission met with deadly failure: the dissident belief in establishing the rule of law and in the post-communist revival of social and personal ethics. The injustice and immorality of the communist period has been reproduced under different ideological slogans but, at the same time, has even been strengthened in certain areas. The old mechanisms of regulating injustice and immorality have lost their efficiency, but new ones have not been developed. The court system has become the instrument of the ruling authorities for settling accounts with the opposition. Mass corruption undermines the self-confidence of the nation in the possibility of influencing the course of events and making social recovery possible. The Orange Revolution managed to revive the hope of part of the nation in their own abilities, but not for long.

Solzhenitzin’s old slogan “not to live a lie” remains a dream. In spite of all the achievements in the sphere of freedom of speech, modern Ukraine does not live the truth. As I mentioned earlier, freedom of speech and the press is based on a variety of clans, each of whom, according to its own interests, speaks only a part of the truth, and at the same time adulterates it with propagandistic lies. Therefore, a whole set of semi-truths are in circulation in the country and this causes confusion among the people and is accepted by them as one big untruth.

Few people in Ukraine nowadays believe in the possibility of building a just order. The weakness of civil society permits economic and ministerial abuse. The crisis of the court system engenders feelings of being defenceless. Thus, the dissidents’ hopes of establishing the rule of law have not been fulfilled.

This raises a question about the correctness of the dissidents’ position taken after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the matter of bringing communists to justice for the crimes of the communist regime. In retrospect we now realize that it was not possible, contrary to dissidents’ beliefs, to start with a “blank page.” Non-repentance for the sins of the communists and non-punishment for their crimes quite naturally resulted in the abuses committed by later administrations. As a result, legal nihilism has developed in the nation, and the national discourse easily adapts to clan loyalty and servility. Untruths and cunning behavior are tolerated.

One more belief of the Soviet opposition as a whole also failed, namely, the belief that post-communist governments would be wiser and more intellectual. In Ukraine today intellectuals try to formulate new and prospective strategies of development, but the latter cannot be fulfilled because of the closed nature of the ruling powers. The authorities use intellect only for their political egos.

Voices of rare moral authorities (for example, the voice of Yevhen Sverstiuk) are also less effective. Because of the self-isolation of the ruling elite in the fortress of power these voices cry out in the desert in vain. The weakness of their voices is caused not because the nation allegedly does not share their conclusions about the moral degradation of the ruling elite. According to some studies more than 55 percent of those surveyed mentioned moral degradation as the main reason for the present social problems of Ukraine. The real problem lies in the fact that people are not eager to be in opposition to legal and moral highhandedness because it seems to them that without people’s solidarity it would be too dangerous, unprofitable and, consequently, unattractive.

Under these circumstances Ukraine needs a new solidarity civic movement – a movement for the implementation of the rule of law and for the moral recovery of the society. The ability of former dissidents to initiate such a movement is limited: some of them are too old; others, because of political compromises of previous years, have ceased to be moral authorities for the nation. So the question remains open as to who will lead this, in my opinion, inevitable civic movement in the future.

Instead we may rather firmly state that former dissidents laid down the main precondition for that – the life of freedom. During the last two decades the Ukrainian nation has moved through a valuable school of freedom. And even if the experience achieved is partially negative, it is still invaluable for the ability of an individual to mature from the totalitarian “vice” to the level of a responsible citizen.

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DIPLOMATIC HISTORY: 
THE TURKEY-ARMENIA PROTOCOLS

David L. Phillips

The Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations and the Protocol on the Development of Bilateral Relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Turkey (“The Protocols”) were signed on October 10, 2009. The Protocols represented an unprecedented advancement in relations between Turkey and Armenia. However, failure to ratify them was a significant bilateral, regional, and international setback.

This article is a diplomatic history of events leading up to signing of the Protocols. It assesses the work of Turkish and Armenian diplomats negotiating the Protocols and the role of Swiss mediation. The monograph evaluates ensuing problems, including conditions imposed on ratification, as well as the effect of domestic politics in Turkey and Armenia on normalization.

At present, Armenia is not a foreign policy priority for Ankara. The Protocols may be dormant, yet they still provide a roadmap to the way forward. Studying the history of Turkish-Armenian rapprochement serves as the basis for specific recommendations aimed at (i) intensifying civil society activities, (ii) expanding commercial cooperation, and (iii) stimulating intergovernmental contact.

History

Turks and Armenians are divided by different perceptions of history and separated by a border closed to travel and trade. Central to their disagreement is the huge gap in national perceptions of events that occurred at the end of the Ottoman Empire.

Beginning on April 24, 1915, Armenians were rounded up and deported. More than a million perished between 1915 and 1923. Some Turks dispute these facts, underscoring the war context in which events occurred. They refer to “shared suffering,” recalling their families who fled their homes in the Caucasus, the Balkans, and the Black Sea region as the Ottoman Empire collapsed. At the beginning of World War I, the Ottoman Empire spanned 4.3 million square kilometers. By war’s end, it was reduced to 770,000 square kilometers. Between 1911 and 1926, an estimated 2.9 million were either killed or forced to migrate to Turkey.1

Turkish-Armenian relations are also influenced by the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (NK), an Armenian territory placed by Stalin in Soviet Azerbaijan. When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, Armenia and Azerbaijan declared independence. NK followed by declaring itself independent from Azerbaijan in September 1991, resulting in full-scale war. NK formally declared independence on January 6, 1992. Approximately 900,000 people were displaced by the conflict.

Turkey expressed solidarity with its Turkic brethren in Azerbaijan by joining Baku’s economic blockade of Armenia. Though a ceasefire was negotiated in 1994, no final peace agreement was reached between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey recognized Armenia, but did not establish diplomatic relations. Armenia’s western border with Turkey and its eastern border with Azerbaijan remain closed to this day.

Contact

Beginning in June 2000, prominent Turks and Armenians, including former diplomats and leading Diaspora representatives, held a series of exploratory meetings at the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna. The governments of Turkey and Armenia gave their tacit approval.2 So-called track two involves contact, communication, and cooperation between civil society representatives who come together to discuss their differences. By engaging private citizens in developing ideas and experimenting with solutions, non-state actors are able to creatively explore the underlying conditions that gave rise to conflict and develop joint strategies for addressing shared problems through reciprocal efforts. Track two contributes to the development of mutual understanding with the goal of transferring insights to decision-makers and shaping public opinion. It is not a substitute for official diplomacy; however, its flexibility helps compensate for the inherent constraints on officials.

The Vienna meetings culminated in the creation of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC), which was announced on July 9, 2001. TARC broke the ice. It served as a lightning rod creating space for other civil society initiatives. It focused on confidence-building measures (CBMs), including travel and trade between Turkey and Armenia. In addition to catalyzing dozens of civil society initiatives, TARC worked with the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) to “facilitate the provision of an independent legal analysis on the applicability of the United Nations Genocide Convention to events which occurred during the early twentieth century.” The legal analysis presented to TARC
on February 4, 2003, found that:

International law generally prohibits the retroactive application of treaties. The Genocide Convention contains no provision mandating its retroactive application. To the contrary, the text strongly suggests it was intended to impose prospective obligations only on the states party to it. Therefore, no legal, financial, or territorial claim arising out of the events could successfully be made against any individual or state under the convention.\(^3\)

The analysis also concluded that “the term genocide […] may be applied to many and varied events that occurred prior to entry into force of the Convention.” It continued,

As developed by the International Criminal Court (whose statute adopts the Convention’s definition of genocide), the crime of genocide has four elements: (1) one or more persons were killed; (2) such persons belonged to a particular national, ethnic, racial, or religious group; (3) the conduct took place as part of a manifest pattern of similar conduct against the group; and (4) the conduct was perpetrated with the intent to destroy in whole, or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such. At least some of the perpetrators knew that the consequence of their actions would be the destruction of, in whole or in part, the Armenians of eastern Anatolia, as such, or acted purposefully towards this goal, and therefore, possessed the requisite genocidal intent. The Events, viewed collectively, can thus be said to include all the elements of the crime of genocide as defined by the Convention, and legal scholars as well as historians, politicians, journalists and other people would be justified in continuing to so describe them.\(^4\)

The full impact of the analysis has yet to be realized.

TARC’s work was endorsed in a letter to the peoples of Turkey and Armenia signed by fifty-three Nobel laureates. Organized by Elie Wiesel, recipient of the 1986 Nobel Prize for Peace, the signatories called on Turkey and Armenia to ease tensions “through additional treaty arrangements and full diplomatic relations.” It also commended civil society initiatives and called for normalizing travel and trade between Turkey and Armenia, adding: “An open border would greatly improve economic conditions for communities on both sides of the border and enable human interaction, which is essential for mutual understanding.”\(^5\)

In his 2004 Remembrance Day statement on the Armenian genocide, President George W. Bush indicated: “On this day I commend individuals in Armenia and Turkey who have worked to support peace and reconciliation, including through the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission.” In his 2005 statement, Bush specifically highlighted the ICTJ-facilitated analysis as a way forward on reconciliation.

**Joint History Commission**

On April 10, 2005, Erdoğan sent a letter to Kocharian proposing the establishment of a joint history commission to study archives and historical records. He wrote, “I believe that such an initiative would shed light on a disputed period of history and also constitute a step towards contributing to the normalization of relations between our countries.”\(^6\)

Erdoğan’s proposal was intended as a game-changer. Not only did he expect that the commission would refute the genocide, he also wanted to undermine efforts aimed at genocide recognition by demonstrating that Turks and Armenians were talking to each other. Ankara resents foreign parliaments “legislating history.” As of early 2012, nineteen countries and the European Parliament have recognized the Armenian genocide; Slovenia and Switzerland treat denial of genocide as a crime.

Ankara also demands that Armenia recognize its existing borders. However, Armenia recognized Turkey’s borders in the 1921 Treaty of Moscow and the 1922 Treaty of Kars. Both Turkey and Armenia are members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which requires member states to respect the territorial integrity of other members.

In response to Erdoğan’s proposal for a joint history commission, Kocharian proposed an official intergovernmental commission on all bilateral issues. Kocharian’s letter of April 25, 2005, indicated, “We have proposed and propose again that, without pre-conditions, we establish normal relations between our two countries. In that context, an intergovernmental commission can meet to discuss any and all outstanding issues between our two nations, with the aim of resolving them and coming to an understanding.”

The exchange of letters resulted in a series of exploratory meetings between Turkish and Armenian officials. On July 14, 2005, reports surfaced of “secret talks” between Turkish Undersecretary Ahmet Üzümü and Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Arman Kirakossian in an unnamed European country. A total of three meetings were held in Vienna. Ankara insisted that no mediators be involved, deliberately seeking to exclude U.S. and Russian officials. It also wanted to limit the influence of the Armenian Diaspora by insisting on confidentiality.
The Vienna talks started in mid-2005 and ended the following year. An official from Switzerland’s European Directorate played an informal facilitation role, but the meetings were exploratory and Switzerland had no mandate. At the final meeting, Üzümçü proposed two parallel commissions, one on historical issues and another on bilateral matters. He indicated that progress in the former would result in Ankara opening its border for diplomats to travel. The border would be opened for normal travel and trade based on the commission’s final conclusions. Kirakossian proposed one commission with sub-commissions. When Üzümçü rejected this format, Yerevan broke off the talks.

Swiss Mediation

Switzerland’s Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey was scheduled to visit Ankara in October 2003. The Turkish MFA, however, cancelled her visit following a decision of the Canton Vaud Swiss Regional Parliament to recognize the Armenian genocide. Relations deteriorated further when the Lower House of the Swiss Parliament recognized the genocide on December 16, 2003.

Switzerland facilitated a meeting between Turkish and Armenian officials on the margins of the UN General Assembly on September 16, 2007. Michael Ambuhl, a highly regarded diplomat and negotiator who was serving as State Secretary and Head of the Directorate of Political Affairs in Switzerland’s Federal Department for Foreign Affairs, was the point man. Switzerland’s role as an honest broker was based on the concept of neutrality. Switzerland had recent experience making its “good offices” available on Iran and the Russia-Georgia conflict. Switzerland also has experience that is relevant to Turkey-Armenia issues. It is a small land-locked country with 700 years of history as an independent state surrounded by big neighbors. Ambuhl was not given any specific guidance. He was told to “bring (Turks and Armenians) together and do something good. You’re just not allowed to spoil it.”

Ankara agreed to broaden the scope of talks to include opening and mutual recognition of the borders, as well as the establishment of diplomatic relations, if Yerevan agreed to the joint historical commission. Professor Jean-Francois Bergier briefed both sides. Bergier presented his methodology to Kirakossian in Bern, then visited Ankara in December 2007 to brief Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs Ertuğrul Apakan. Bergier’s work focused on what happened, why, and in what context. He was a specialist in the methodology for dealing with the past (when memories and historical truths do not overlap). The Bergier Commission had been established by Swiss federal authorities to investigate Switzerland’s conduct during World War II and its handling of assets by Jewish depositors who died during the Holocaust. Bergier was also highly regarded for his work bridging gaps between adversarial parties on a range of historical issues in Europe.

In response to Switzerland’s concept paper on “Dialogue Turkey-Armenia” of September 2007, Ankara submitted its views in writing on January 4, 2008. The Swiss revised the paper on January 29, and submitted it to the Turks and Armenians. Turkish officials focused on preliminary ideas for the establishment of a joint history commission, insisting that the border could only be opened when the commission had been established and had started its work. After Ambuhl attended Sarkisian’s inaugural, he presented both sides with a revised Dialogue Turkey-Armenia paper and invited Apakan and Kirakossian for their first trilateral meeting on May 21, 2008.

The meeting was held at an ornate castle in Gertzence, a hamlet close to Bern, which was taken over by Switzerland’s central bank and turned into its study center. The Turkish delegation at Gertzence was led by Apakan and included Ünal Çeviköz. The Armenian delegation was led by Kirakossian and included Armenian Ambassador to Switzerland Zohrab Mnatsakanyan and its BSEC Representative Karen Mirzoyan. The session was a chance to get acquainted, gauge expectations, and explore the agenda. It was also an opportunity to define Switzerland’s role as facilitator. “Both sides rapidly agreed that we should take it over,” says Ambuhl. “We had an informal mandate. It would have been complicated to negotiate a written agreement.”

At the end of the meeting, Ambuhl issued the “Swiss Non-Paper Outline of the Discussion.” The non-paper indicated that the process sought to achieve the “normalization and development of bilateral relations, resolving differences and diverging interpretations regarding the historical past.” It also called for the creation of a “working group to elaborate the modalities for the establishment of an historical commission.”

The second meeting in Gertzence took place in July 2008. The parties agreed that their work would focus on the establishment of diplomatic relations, normalization, mutual recognition, and opening the border, and creation of a trilateral commission of experts dealing with the historical dimension. Ankara entered into the process and was prepared to go along with the first two items, as long as the third item was realized. The historical commission was its priority. Turkish officials sent Ambuhl a paper entitled “Elements of a Tripartite Commission of Experts and Historians” on July 23. Three days later, Swiss officials finalized their proposal for the tripartite commission and presented it to both sides.

Meetings moved from confidence-building to substance, addressing the delicate question of sequencing. “Slowly, slowly, we prepared the text,” Ambuhl explains.
“The text was always drafted by us, the Swiss.” The third meeting at Gertzenzec was held on September 15. Three Protocols became two, with the Protocol on the historical commission integrated into the Protocol on the Development of Relations. The Protocols were refined during ministerial and working-level trilateral meetings in New York (September 22–24, 2008), Gertzenzec (October 25, 2008), Bern (January 21, 2009), Davos (January 27, 2009), and on the margins of the Munich Security Conference (February 7, 2009).

U.S. officials were not informed. Switzerland cultivates its independence, which is why it is not a member of the EU. Washington was kept in the dark, until a chance meeting between Apakan and Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Daniel P. Fried in the Lufthansa business lounge at the Munich airport in December 2007. Congressional support for genocide recognition, the president’s annual statement on Remembrance Day, and upcoming presidential elections made it difficult for the United States to play a mediation role.10

Freedom of Expression

Turkish-Armenian contacts occurred against the backdrop of international concerns about human rights in Turkey, especially Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, which criminalizes “insulting Turkish identity.” Nobel Prize Laureate Orhan Pamuk and well-known journalists -- Murat Belge, Halkı Şahin, Erol Katircioğlu, and Hasan Cemal of the daily Milliyet -- were charged under Article 301. So was Hrant Dink, the Turkish-Armenian and editor of the Agos.

Dink was assassinated outside his office in Istanbul on January 19, 2007. Erdoğan expressed his profound regret: “A bullet has been fired at democracy and freedom of expression.” He called it an “attack on Turkey and Turkish unity and stability,” adding that justice would be served to “dark hands” behind the incident.11 There was also a popular outpouring of support for Dink. Up to 100,000 people gathered in an eight-kilometer procession to the Armenian Church in Kumkapi where his funeral service was held. Tens of thousands of Turks rallied with placards reading, “We are all Armenians. We are all Hrant Dink.” Turks gathered in Taksim Square on April 24, 2007. Launched on December 15, 2008, the “Apology Movement” organized 35,000 signatures on a petition stating: “My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915,” and offering an apology for their suffering.12

There was a nationalist backlash in response to popular sympathy for Dink. Trabzon soccer fans in Kamil Ocak Stadium waved banners that read, “We are all Turks; we are all Mustafa Kemal.”13 Shots were fired outside the Armenian Church during a ceremony led by Mesrob marking the fortieth day after Dink’s murder. Prosecutors pressed charges against Dink’s son Arat and his Agos colleague, Serkis Seropyan, for publishing an interview with Hrant Dink about the genocide. A rival website was launched entitled “We don’t apologize.” A service denial attack bombarded the on-line petition of the apology movement with millions of messages, rendering it inoperable. The Internet attack was traced to Turkey’s Interior Ministry.

Football Diplomacy

Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül was one of the first foreign leaders to congratulate Serj Sarkisian when he was elected president on February 19, 2008. His letter “broke the ice, extending a new hand to the Armenian side.”14 In response, Sarkisian invited Gül to Yerevan to watch the World Cup qualifying match between Turkey and Armenia on September 6, 2008. Sarkisian’s newly-appointed foreign minister, Edward Nalbandian, was tasked with arrangements.

The Turkish delegation consisted of approximately 200 people, including business, civil society, and media representatives. Hundreds of Armenians lined Gül’s motorcade route, demanding that Turkey recognize the genocide and waving placards that read: “1915—Never Again.” They staged a torch vigil at the Armenian Genocide Memorial and rallied near the presidential palace. Sarkisian and Gül had a private dinner, during which Gül reiterated Turkey’s proposal to set up a joint history commission, as well as other pre-conditions to normalization such as resolution of the NK conflict and an end to Armenia’s campaign to gain international recognition of the genocide. In their joint news conference before driving together to Hrazdan Stadium, neither leader mentioned pre-conditions or obstacles to normalization. Turkish officials would, however, use the dialogue to deter international recognition efforts, warning that recognition would undermine the diplomatic process underway with Armenia.

U.S. Approach

On February 1, 2007, Senate Resolution (S Res.) 65 condemned Dink’s assassination, urged Turkey to repeal Article 301, and called on Ankara “to act in the interest of regional security and prosperity and reestablish full diplomatic, political and economic relations with the government of Armenia.” H Res. 252 was introduced on March 17, 2007. It called on the President “to accurately characterize the systematic and deliberate annihilation of 1,500,000 Armenians as genocide and to recall the proud history of United States intervention in opposition to the Armenian Genocide.” Co-sponsored by more than 140 members of the U.S. House of Representatives,
the House International Affairs Committee, chaired by Congressman Tom Lantos (D-CA), moved H. Res. 106 by a vote of 27 to 21 on October 10, 2007. Speaker Nancy Pelosi was determined to bring the resolution to the floor before Congress adjourned on November 22.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama stated, “the Armenian genocide is not an allegation, a personal opinion, or a point of view, but rather a widely documented fact supported by an overwhelming body of historical evidence.” Obama called for the United States to recognize the genocide on twenty-one separate occasions. Joseph R. Biden and Hillary Clinton were also on record as repeatedly calling for genocide recognition when they served in the U.S. Senate.

Presidential candidates typically call for genocide recognition, but then change course upon assuming office. While Obama was under strong pressure from Armenian-Americans to honor his campaign pledge, he was also under pressure from Ankara not to mention the “g-word.” At a press conference with Gül in Ankara on April 6, 2009, Obama said that visiting Turkey just seventy-seven days after being inaugurated was a “statement about the importance of Turkey, not just to the United States, but to the world.” Obama did not use the term “genocide.” His written statement indicated, “I have consistently stated my own view of what occurred in 1915, and my view of that history has not changed. My interest remains the achievement of a full, frank and just acknowledgement of the facts.”

**Initials**

Delinking the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia from resolution of the NK conflict was a procedural breakthrough. According to U.S. Ambassador to Turkey James F. Jeffrey, Obama did not discuss delinkage with Gül or Erdoğan during his April trip. Gül and Erdoğan were also silent on delinkage. Turkish officials thought it was in the interest of the normalization process to allow “constructive ambiguity.”

The Protocols were initialed on April 2, and announced by Babacan and Nalbandian in a joint statement on April 22.

Obama’s April 24 statement referred to “Meds Yeghern,” which, literally translated, means “great calamity.” Meds Yeghern is used by Armenians as an interchangeable term for the genocide. Some Armenians were upset because the statement misspelled the Armenian term. Turkey’s MFA criticized Obama for failing to honor Turks killed by Armenians during the period. Gül reminded Obama, “everyone’s pain must be felt.”

The text of the Protocols was not made public until August 31, 2009. Lack of transparency fueled speculation and criticism from within Armenia’s governing coalition, as well as opposition parties. Armenians also criticized the timing of the announcement, on the eve of Remembrance Day. Turks also criticized the Protocols for selling out the interests of Azerbaijan.

**Azerbaijan’s Reaction**

According to Mehmet Ali Birand, “Babacan briefed [Azerbaijan’s President Ilham] Aliyev at least four times, but Baku did not take it seriously until the last minute.” U.S. officials also tried to keep Baku informed. Though Deputy Assistant Secretary Matt Bryza visited Baku on April 15, 2009, to neutralize opposition, Baku denounced the Protocols and condemned Turkey for betraying their Turkic brethren. According to Fried, “the Azeris had a fit.”

When Ahmet Davutoğlu replaced Babacan as foreign minister on May 1, 2009, he wanted to negotiate an entirely new agreement. Erdoğan travelled to Azerbaijan on May 12-13, 2009. In Baku he dismissed reports of delinking as “slander” and “disinformation.” He told the press, “the Turkey-Armenia border has been closed due to Nagorno-Karabakh’s occupation and will not be solved until it is liberated.” Erdoğan told the Azerbaijan Grand National Assembly on May 13: “The current situation in Nagorno-Karabakh cannot be accepted and will never be accepted. I want to repeat once more that until the occupation ends, the border gates [with Armenia] will remain closed.”

Erdoğan’s call for a complete withdrawal raised the bar higher than the Minsk Group’s negotiating position, which was focused on a phased withdrawal of Armenian forces from areas around NK rather than from all territories in Azerbaijan. Presented at the OSCE ministerial conference in November 2007 and updated in 2009, the Madrid principles of the Minsk Group envisioned a settlement based on the return of territories surrounding NK to Azerbaijan, a corridor between NK and Armenia, self-government guarantees, and a legally binding referendum to determine NK’s final status.

Turkish officials were surprised by Erdoğan’s demand for a complete withdrawal of Armenian forces from all “occupied territories.” Not only was Erdoğan very emotional during his press conference on May 12, but his speech the following day included comments that were “not in notes sent by the MFA to the Prime Minister’s Office.” On this and other important issues, a small circle of advisers around the prime minister “made recommendations independent of the MFA.”

“We expected the Protocols would lead to reactivation of the Minsk Group,” said Atpakan. An anonymous MFA official indicated that there was “a gentlemen’s agreement” to that effect. Sure enough, diplomatic activity on NK intensified. Sarkisian and Aliyev met for two hours on the sidelines of an EU Summit in Prague on May 7, and held bilateral meetings with Gül. Erdoğan
went to Moscow after Azerbaijan in order to galvanize the Minsk Group. Sarkisian and Aliyev met again in St. Petersburg on June 4. In the twelve-month period beginning in June 2008, Sarkisian and Aliyev met seven times. Ever optimistic, Bryza welcomed “significant progress.” Ankara’s approach eliminated any sense of urgency, relieving Baku of pressure to make a deal. Lack of progress on NK also relieved Ankara of pressure to push for ratification, which would distract the AKP from battles on the domestic front.

Beginning in 2007, the government launched an investigation of Ergenekon, a clandestine ultranationalist network of uniformed and retired military, secular dissidents, journalists, and academics. Taraf broke a series of stories about extraordinary measures by former military officers and members of the deep state intended to justify a coup and overthrow the AKP government. The military was convinced that Erdogan had a hidden agenda to subvert the country’s secular system. The AKP’s electoral victory in elections on July 22, 2007, further marginalized the military. So did direct presidential elections that Gül won on August 28, 2007, making him Turkey’s first openly devout Muslim president. A referendum on constitutional reform was held on September 12, 2010, and approved by nearly 58 percent of voters. The referendum was a critical victory, boosting the AKP’s prospects of winning a third term and fulfilling its pledge to do away with the 1982 constitution, which was drafted by the military junta.

Signing Ceremony

Fried was replaced as Assistant Secretary by Philip H. Gordon. “[Normalization] should proceed within a reasonable time frame,” said Gordon. “It means that the process can’t be infinite. It can’t go on forever.” On June 24, 2009, Switzerland drafted a press release announcing the text. Both sides took exception to elements of the draft, which included only three paragraphs. The release was not issued until August 31. On September 1, Calmy-Rey joined the Turkish and Armenian foreign ministers when they announced they would start “internal political consultations [to] be completed within six weeks following which the Protocols will be signed and submitted to the respective Parliaments for ratification. Both sides will make their best efforts for the timely progress of the ratification in line with their constitutional and legal procedures.”

Negotiating too hard over the press release was a harbinger of disagreements to come. The signing ceremony was scheduled for the University of Zurich on October 10, 2009. Davutoğlu and Nalbandian each planned remarks to commemorate the “historic moment in Turkish-Armenian bilateral relations.” Turkish and Armenian negotiators had reached an understanding: they would avoid open discussion of sensitivities. Neither Davutoğlu nor Nalbandian would mention the genocide or refer to NK.

Thirty minutes before the signing ceremony, which was scheduled for 5:00 pm, texts were exchanged through the U.S. delegation. Nalbandian was aghast, and refused to leave his room at the Dolder Hotel. The Swiss came up with a compromise: neither side would make remarks. Clinton and Nalbandian drove in the same car to the signing ceremony, which was held at 8:00 pm. Clinton, Solana, Calmy-Rey, Lavrov, and Kouchner stood behind Nalbandian and Davutoğlu as witnesses, and as a signal of the international community’s support. Only Calmy-Rey made brief remarks.

Winston Churchill spoke in that same auditorium on September 19, 1946, saying: “The first step in the recreation of the European family must be a partnership between France and Germany.” The historic address concluded, “Let Europe rise.” The symbolism was trenchant. If France and Germany could overcome their enmity and Europe could bind together in common purpose, then Turkey and Armenia could also overcome their differences.

The Protocols

Through the Protocols and the annex, Turkey and Armenia agreed to establish diplomatic relations and open the common border within two months after the entry into force of the Protocol on the Development of Relations. In Article 3 and the annex, which Ambühl calls “diplomatic engineering,” the text specifically addressed the matter of who would do what, and when. It indicated that the signatories:

Agree on the establishment of an intergovernmental bilateral commission which shall comprise separate sub-commissions for the prompt implementation of the commitments mentioned in operational paragraph 2 above in this Protocol. To prepare the working modalities of the intergovernmental commission and its sub-commissions, a working group headed by the two Ministers of Foreign Affairs shall be created 2 months after the day following the entry into force of this Protocol. Within 3 months after the entry into force of this Protocol, these modalities shall be approved at ministerial level. The intergovernmental commission shall meet for the first time immediately after the adoption of the said modalities. The sub-commissions shall start their work at the latest 1 month thereafter and they shall work continuously until the completion of their mandates.
The parties also agreed to ratify the Protocols in their parliaments within a “reasonable time frame.”

While the Protocols described the commitments of both parties, they did not take into account their different hopes and expectations. According to Apakan, reality has two shores.” Yerevan viewed the Protocols as a way to end the embargo by Turkey and boost Armenia’s economy. Yerevan expected that the Protocols would give a new dynamic and sense of urgency to the Minsk Group. The historical commission would buttress the genocide’s validity, advancing recognition. The Protocols also represented a legacy opportunity for Sarkisian, who saw the diplomatic breakthrough as a way of securing his place in history.

Ankara viewed the Protocols as a way of preempting international attempts at genocide recognition, undermining allegations of genocide. It anticipated that the Protocols would catalyze negotiations returning territories to Azerbaijan, ending the NK conflict, and laying to rest notions of a “Greater Armenia.” In addition, rapprochement with Armenia would put Turkey in good stead with the EU.

Azerbaijan’s view was unambiguous. Aliyev condemned the Protocols, threatening to stop natural gas sales to Turkey and to seek alternate routes via Russia, Iran, or Georgia. Four days after signing the Protocols, Azerbaijan agreed to sell Russia at least 500 million cubic meters of gas annually, starting in 2010. In a blow to Europe’s goal of diversifying energy sources, Aliyev announced support for Russia’s South Stream energy project and, in a setback to Nabucco, postponed the development of the Shah-Deniz gas field until 2017. Azerbaijan also jack-ed up the price of gas it sold to Turkey.

The Constitutional Court

On November 17, 2009, Sarkissian’s government asked the Constitutional Court to determine if the Protocols conformed to Armenia’s constitution and its Declaration of Independence that stated: “The Republic of Armenia stands in support of the task of achieving international recognition of the 1915 Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia.” Ankara decried the move, claiming it was an impediment to ratification. It is, however, obligatory in Armenia to get approval from the Constitutional Court before proceeding with parliamentary ratification of bilateral agreements.

On January 12, 2010, the Constitutional Court upheld the Protocols’ conformity with the constitution and Armenia’s Declaration of Independence. The Court also ruled that the Protocols placed no obligation on Armenia regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Sarkisian announced on February 10, “I guarantee a positive vote in parliament if the Turkish side votes without preconditions and within the timeframe.” Two days later, he sent the Protocols to Parliament. Erdoğan viewed the Constitutional Court’s involvement as an act of bad faith. On March 16, he roiled tensions by threatening to expel Armenians working illegally in Turkey. “We are turning a blind eye to 100,000 Armenians living [illegally in Turkey],” he said. “Tomorrow I may tell these 100,000 to go back to their country.” To Armenians, his threat evoked memories of death marches in 1915. Nalbandian reacted, “this statement was a shock for everyone and not only in Armenia. The Armenian Genocide started with exactly such statements in 1914-1915.” Erdoğan further exacerbated tensions by calling the Statue of Humanity, a symbol of Turkish-Armenian reconciliation, “a freak” and ordering its dismantling.

Suspension

Azerbaijan was not invited to the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington on April 12-13, 2010. Erdoğan denounced the genocide resolution during his speech at the summit. “We are against a one-sided interpretation of history,” Erdoğan said. “History cannot be written in a parliament or judged by a parliament.” Erdoğan and Sarkisian met for about eighty minutes. However, Sarkisian rejected an open-ended process that lead “nowhere.” Neither Sarkisian nor Erdoğan spoke to the press after the meeting.

Obama held bilateral discussions with both leaders. Sarkisian indicated, “we are ready to have normal relations with all our neighbors but we will not tolerate someone dictating conditions.” Erdoğan implied flexibility if Armenia returned “at least two of the occupied Azerbaijan (i.e., districts) initially.” The districts he proposed were the most strategically important.

Sarkisian decided that Armenia could not continue the normalization process past April 24, with domestic pressure intensifying and opposition parties calling on the government to withdraw its signature. “The ball cannot remain in one court indefinitely,” said Sarkisian. “Every football game has time limits.” In his national address on April 22, Sarkisian suspended but did not withdraw Yerevan’s signature.

Clinton praised Sarkisian’s decision as “very statesmanlike and very impressive.” Her visit to Yerevan on July 4, 2010, was seen as a signal of support for Sarkisian. According to Clinton, “And now, as they say in sports, the ball is in the other court.”

Accountability

A historic opportunity was missed by failing to ratify the Protocols. Ankara held the false hope that signing the Protocols would fast-track a deal on NK. It also hoped
that Armenians would stop their campaign for genocide recognition. Treaties embody commitments, however, not wishful thinking.

Turkish officials did not gauge the intensity of Baku’s obstructionism to normalization of Turkey-Armenia relations, or progress on NK. They underestimated Aliyev’s willingness to manipulate energy costs and supplies, and failed to gauge the impact of the Azerbaijani lobby in Turkey.

Senior officials in Turkey’s MFA deserve commendation for their professionalism throughout the negotiations. While Çiller displayed vision and statesmanship, Erdoğan played a different role. Fried maintains, “Turkish society was ready, but Erdoğan didn’t lead. Turkey is the greater power and should have shown greater wisdom.”

Yerevan also bears responsibility. Yerevan should not have allowed the Protocols to be announced on the eve of Genocide Remembrance Day. The timing of the announcement galvanized opposition among a broad cross section of Armenian society, which believed that the Protocols would be manipulated by Ankara to undermine genocide recognition. As a result, more moderate opposition parties were radicalized.

Both sides failed to adopt a public diplomacy strategy, preparing public opinion for compromise. Waiting so long to disclose the text was a mistake. Lack of transparency fueled speculation. To neutralize opposition in Turkey, the Armenian government could have made a clear and unambiguous statement that it recognized the Turkish-Armenian border. Sarkisian’s unwillingness to underscore Armenia’s respect for Turkey’s territorial integrity, especially after the Constitutional Court’s finding, fueled opposition by armenian nationalists and security establishment.

The United States is also at fault. The Obama administration missed an opportunity to reaffirm de-linkage of the Protocols with NK when Obama visited Turkey in April 2009. There was a failure to communicate between the U.S. embassies in Ankara and Yerevan. As late as the Nuclear Security Summit, U.S. officials maintained they had a “plan B.” No fallback plan was apparent other than convincing Sarkisian to suspend rather than withdraw his signature. While Clinton invested her personal prestige in Zurich, the Obama administration bureaucratized the follow-up. A “Special Envoy for Ratification of the Turkey-Armenia Protocols” could have played a useful role in maintaining momentum, working the system in Washington, and keeping the parties focused on next steps rather than pre-conditions.

The Way Forward

The one-hundredth anniversary of the Armenian genocide will be marked in 2015. Outstanding issues between Turkey and Armenia are not going away. Leading up to the anniversary, political and moral pressures on Turkey are intensifying. There is currently no intergovernmental contact. Armenian officials insist there is nothing to discuss until Turkey acts on the Protocols.

Representing the stronger power, Erdoğan could issue an executive order to open the border and normalize travel and trade as a step toward diplomatic relations. Boldly, he could submit the Protocols for ratification by the TGNA with his personal endorsement. Prosecution or threats of prosecution in Turkey of anyone who acknowledges the Armenian genocide should cease, and Article 301 should be abolished. Turks should be able to discuss their history freely. These steps would be taken “in the name of humanity.” Magnanimity is in accordance with Islamic principles which enshrine the sanctity of life. At this stage of his life, Erdoğan should be thinking about his legacy and not about scoring political points.

Some significant steps are possible short of ratification. The Kars-Gyumri gate could be opened allowing train traffic. Turkey has a state-of-the-art fiber optic cable that terminates in Kars, and Armenia needs access to a fiber optic cable to address growing demand for Internet and related services. Armenia has an electricity surplus that could be exported to help Turkey power its economic development. Textiles and piece goods could be manufactured in a Qualifying Industrial Zone, an industrial park and a free-trade zone linked to a free-trade agreement with the United States for goods benefiting both Turkish and Armenian concerns. Both people-to-people and commercial contact can be expanded through new charter flights between the eastern Turkish city of Van and Yerevan. Turkish Airlines could open an office in Yerevan to facilitate arrangements. Two hundred Armenian trucks travel annually through Turkey via Georgia to other countries. Rather than treat Turkey as a transit country, the procedure could be amended to allow those trucks to off-load in Turkey. Likewise, Turkish trucks should be allowed to deliver goods to customers in Armenia. Turkish products should be allowed to have Armenia as their official destination in the export registry, and Armenian products should be treated similarly. Linkages should also be established between local chambers of commerce and mayors with the goal of establishing sister-city relationships and fostering trade and investment.

Symbols and monuments can be a catalyst for reconciliation. The Ani Bridge across the Akhurian River is historically significant for connecting the southern Caucasus to the Anatolian plains, and as a symbol of Armenian cultural presence in modern-day Turkey. It should be restored and opened, at least for tourism. A joint committee of Turkish and Armenian restoration experts could identify monuments and cultural sites for
rehabilitation and a research committee of historians could identify, assess, and explore arrangements for accessing all archives.

Regarding inter-governmental contact, NATO’s Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Center is a well-placed platform for expanding cross-border exercises enhancing emergency preparedness, with the ancillary benefit of building confidence. Turkish-Armenian relations should be seen in a broader European context. Integration of Turkey and Armenia into the EU is ultimately the best structure for normalizing relations between Ankara and Yerevan.

The ICTJ-facilitated study on the applicability of the Genocide Convention represents a win-win that both sides can use to enhance their positions. The legal finding should be repositioned as a tool for future dialogue and as a roadmap for reconciliation.

The terms “rapprochement” and “reconciliation” are often used interchangeably, but they have very different meanings. Signing of the Protocols was an event that occurred on a specific date, while reconciliation is a process that occurs over time. While rapprochement is stalled for now, interaction continues. As a safety net, civil society is playing a critical role that deserves political and financial support. Reconciliation is like riding a bicycle. You fall off the moment you stop pedaling.

NOTES
2. Founding Turkish members of TARC were former Foreign Minister Ilter Türkmen, former Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs Özdem Sanberk, former Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs Gündüz Aktan, former Lieutenant General Şadi Ergüven, and the founding director of the Istanbul Policy Center at Sabanci University, Üstün Ergüden. Founding Armenian members were former Foreign Minister Alexander Arzoumanian, Ambassador David Hovhannisyan, former Foreign Policy Adviser to Russian President Boris Yeltsin Andranik Mingranyan, and former Chairman of the Armenian-American Assembly Van Z. Krikorian. David L. Phillips was TARC’s Chairman.
3. The finding did not preclude the use of other legal instruments to seek compensation.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
18. “Turkey Criticizes Obama Comments.”
20. Fried, in discussion with author.
22. Erdoğan Pledges Continued Support for Azerbaijan,” Asbarez.com, May 13, 2009,
23. Anonymous Turkish MFA official, in discussion with author.
27. Emil Danielyan, “Armenia, Turkey Move Closer
to Historic Deal.”


39. “Obama Urges Armenia, Turkey To Normalize Ties.”

40. Sabah, April 15, 2010.


43. “Armenian FM quotes Hillary Clinton.”

44. Fried, in discussion with author.

45. Marie Yovanovitch, in discussion with author, April 13, 2011.
George Kennan and the Russian Soul:
Issues from the Authorized Kennan Biography by John Lewis Gaddis
Gilbert Doctorow

George Frost Kennan is probably best known as the author of the “containment policy” which served as the overarching principle informing U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the demise of the Soviet Union itself in 1991, very much along the lines that Kennan had foreseen when launching his policy recommendations in 1946, one might assume that the master’s life and thoughts would be of consequence today only to historians of the Cold War, like his authorized biographer John Gaddis.

However, a second abiding concern of Kennan throughout his career was to defend the principle of interest-based foreign policy, or Realpolitik, as opposed to the moralistic-legalistic approach to policy formulation which prevailed in the American foreign policy community of his day. Since that very same object of Kennan’s scorn, Wilsonian idealism, has become even further entrenched in the Washington of our day, Kennan’s life and thoughts are also directly relevant to current politics in America. Moreover, as I will set out in this essay, there are issues surrounding Kennan’s career in government service that are instructive as regards today’s practices of recruiting and promoting top level planners and implementers of foreign policy. For these reasons, it is very good that in his biography of Kennan which came out last year Gaddis does not let his own persona intrude — put simply, he does not get in the way. He has thereby facilitated a growing discussion about Kennan in the professional community.

Gaddis has condensed and made accessible the vast written record left behind by a statesman turned scholar and public intellectual who had a very elevated opinion of his life’s mission and, most exceptionally, saved for posterity all the contradictory drafts, correspondence, diary entries and finished policy papers that historical figures commonly purge to improve their image of single-mindedness if not saintliness.

Gaddis was unperturbed by the fact that Kennan himself produced a very readable and useful autobiography in two volumes when still at the top of his intellectual form. What he has done is to take the story forward into the final decades of a public life that continued to the ripe age of 101. This meant evening out, pacing the narrative from birth to death very much as the master might have done himself from an afterlife.

Gaddis points out changes in Kennan’s positions, the many zigzags that perplexed his contemporaries, but he is never judgmental. He draws on the many interviews he took from Kennan’s family and colleagues to clarify points in the diaries or correspondence which are equivocal or easily subject to misreading. But as Gaddis tells us at the outset, he does not attempt to deal with the differing interpretations of Kennan that have accumulated in the extensive literature of previous biographies and other secondary literature.

Looking over Kennan’s life as set out by Gaddis, I explore here a couple of questions relating to his career advancement and setbacks which have lessons for the Executive which nominates our senior diplomats and planners, and for the Senate which vets and approves them.

Before embarking on these various questions, I want to be very clear that any “broad implications” come up against the fact that George Kennan was extraordinarily gifted. He was a brilliant master of the English language in both spoken and written form, whose persuasiveness in presenting policy recommendations was freely acknowledged by his opponents as well as by his allies. This may explain why he was spared ad hominem attacks by his opponents in an age that was at least as bitterly polarized as our own.

Kennan was a very quick learner, a person with the ambition and the ability to fill all space made available to him, to move into new areas of activity with great self-confidence and to perform usually at the highest levels. At the same time, Kennan had a nonconformist personality and an academic turn of mind which made it difficult for him to remain in place within a large organization like government service and ultimately took him to a research milieu on a university campus for the second half of his life, to everyone’s relief, including his own.

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The first of my questions is in what sense was
Kenan an expert on Russia. After all, the notion of his expertise was fundamental to the acceptance and dissemination of his strategic policy-making at the height of his government career. And yet while Gaddis uses the term "expert" repeatedly in relation to Kenan, he takes it for granted without question. The closest Gaddis comes is a remark on Kenan’s draft for an unpublished book on government organization, written in 1938 when Kenan was stationed in Washington as a Russia specialist in the European Division: “Kenan’s analyses of the U.S.S.R. were as sophisticated as anything available at the time. By the end of his first decade in the Foreign Service, he was explaining Russian society far better than Russians were doing for themselves.”

This contrasts with the biographer’s evaluation of Kenan’s commentary on the U.S. in the same document, which he concludes were ill informed and shallow. Was there genuinely a difference in Kenan’s understanding of the one society and misunderstanding of the other? Or is it Gaddis’s failure to see what might just have been flawed in Kenan’s Russian expertise at this time?

At the very beginning of his comprehensive monograph, Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America’s Soviet Experts (Oxford, 2009), David Engerman reminds us of a fact which bears directly on how and why George Kenan was a rare bird both in his generation of Foreign Service officers and in the generations which followed: “Even if government agencies had sought out Soviet expertise in the United States before World War II, they would have found precious little. There was no field of Russian Studies, just a handful of scholars, varying widely in interest, energy, training, and talents, spread thinly across American universities.” As Engerman sets out in detail, the whole discipline of Russian-Soviet studies in America got its start in the midst of the 1940s when academics were brought into classified military intelligence work. It was launched on a broad scale only when the Cold War set in.

Indeed, what expertise Kenan had when he joined the Bullitt mission to re-establish a U.S. embassy in Moscow in 1933 came from the special training he underwent in the Baltics and in Berlin as part of a newly created program within the State Department intended to give a very few young American diplomats the equivalent of postgraduate area studies training covering parts of the world which seemed to have prospective importance.

I find it regrettable that Gaddis chose to report extensively on Kenan’s family background and childhood in the first 90 pages of the biography and then to cut out even the thin information about the nearly three years of Kenan’s training for his life’s work as a Russian expert that we can find in chapter 2 of the Memoirs, 1925-1950. From the Memoirs, we know that Kenan’s superiors in the State Department set the objective for his academic studies in Berlin as follows: to give him the knowledge of the Russian language and history that one might have met with among the educated classes of pre-revolutionary Russia. It was assumed that with this solid basis, he would learn whatever was needed about the contemporary Soviet Union at his diplomatic post. And this is an approach with which Kenan said he agreed, though he notes he had requested authorization to take courses on Soviet finance and political structure which were taught at a high level in Berlin at the time and was turned down by Washington.

In addition to one year’s formal language training in the special department of the University used for preparing translators-interpreters for service in the German Foreign Office, in his second year Kenan followed regular Berlin University courses on history and studied language and literature with private tutors. The latter were mostly cultivated Russian emigrés rather than qualified pedagogues. They gave him the Russian classics and readings in Kliuchevsky which appear to have served as the intellectual matrix for all his later writings inside and outside the U.S. government.

What are we to make of this pre-revolutionary Russian gentleman whom Kenan had become by way of his formal and informal training at State Department expense assuming the duties of political analyst in the diplomatic mission in Soviet Russia, not to mention those of strategic policy planner for Europe and the world in Washington in 1947?

First of all, it is obvious that his reliance on historians of imperial Russia in the liberal tradition, particularly Vasily Kliuchevsky, would have given Kenan a perspective on the country’s trajectory dating from the 1870s and 80s which took no account of the cataclysmic events that changed the course of state dramatically and established leadership structures of a new kind which themselves evolved over the course of the next two decades in unforeseeable ways. Notwithstanding his excellent Russian, upon taking up his duties in Moscow Kenan would have lacked the skills and knowledge base on Soviet Russia to be a full-fledged analyst, and he would have been unlikely to find on the job either colleagues or superiors to guide his progress in Sovietology in any systematic manner.

In the 1930s, especially, it would have been exceedingly difficult for embassy staff in Moscow to learn much more about the country of their assignment than if they had remained in Washington. Contacts with normal Russians were minimal. Their main activities were social engagements with other members of the diplomatic community, their daily concern was familial and trying to live normally in difficult conditions. To this, Kenan had health problems that were a constant concern.
Kennan’s unbalanced training and his personal predisposition to literature and artistic as opposed to scientific truth resulted in the verbose eloquence and frequent references to Dostoyevsky and Chekhov to predict and explain the behavior of Stalin and his henchmen via “the Russian character” as he called it, or “the Russian soul,” the term by which this imaginative construct is more commonly known. This was the specific expertise which he wielded to great advantage. It was further buttressed in both his government and public writings by mining Gibbon and Shakespeare and other great thinkers on the human predicament.

In making these remarks, I am merely being descriptive, not depreciatory. Kennan himself would not have disagreed with the characterization, as we see from the following revelatory observation by him about what qualifications were needed for diplomatic service (as quoted by Engerman from Kennan’s Princeton papers):

> the judgment and instinct of a single wise and experienced man, whose knowledge of the world rests on the experience of personal, emotional and intellectual participation in a wide cross-section of human effort, are something we hold to be more valuable than the most elaborate synthetic structure of demonstrable fact and logical deduction.

However, the opposite of “fact and logical deduction” can easily be tautological reasoning. Literary citations may merely justify preconceived analysis and recommendations.

That Kennan was able to parlay such qualifications, which may be understandable for consular assignments or even higher embassy posts, into the top foreign policy planning position in the land says as much about those who employed him as it does about his own ambition and talent. In the Foreign Service of his day, which recruited from elite schools like his own Princeton, the notion of a well-rounded education and social grace was prioritized. Clearly a strong command of languages, English first, would be a major advantage. However, as Engerman makes plain, by the time Kennan made the statement cited (1950), he was becoming something of a dinosaur. Official Washington, with the support and cooperation of private donors in the Rockefeller Foundation and Carnegie Corporation, was turning to a fact-based, multi-disciplinary approach to Russian and other area studies, first at Harvard and Columbia, then, with time, in many other university centers across the country.

In sum, it would be safe to say that the George Kennan who drafted the “containment policy” in 1946 was relying heavily for inspiration on his own instinctive sense of Russia and the Russian people, including its top leadership. For him at this time, literary allusion trumped factual knowledge. In the event, his judgments on Soviet intentions and capabilities were spot on. But that cannot allow us to ignore an important epistemological point.

Where Kennan’s insight came from would be a mere curiosity were it not for the containment policy being the quintessence of a realist approach to foreign relations, which is supposed to be founded on detailed factual knowledge of the given area and interests in play, not derived from universalistic principles like its antithesis, idealism. The homework implicit in Realpolitik was never done. Kennan’s reliance on artistic truth and personal vision held the possibility of greater conviction and prescience than would any tediously documented policy paper. At the same time, it left room for greater volatility and inconsistency in his writings.

The question of Kennan’s Russian expertise contains within it one other: what did Kennan know and when? In effect, he became a fully-qualified expert on Russia in the period after he left government service, after his greatest contributions to U.S. foreign policy were made. Upon joining the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and after publishing his Chicago lectures as American Diplomacy: 1900-1950, for which he was subjected by established scholars to scaring criticism, Kennan resolved to make good on his conversion to academic life and researched according to the canons of the day his two critically acclaimed volumes on the early history of Soviet American relations, Russia Leaves the War and The Decision to Intervene which were both published in the mid-1950s. The speed with which he turned out these thick and heavily footnoted tomes, which, according to Gaddis, he wrote daily, in parallel with his archival readings, may raise questions as to whether the research followed or preceded his conclusions, but the works have stood the test of time.

The next issue which I think needs close treatment is exactly how Kennan, the chargé d’affaires in the Moscow embassy, made his meteoric rise in 1946-47 to the very nerve center of Washington foreign policy and established paternity rights not only over what came to be called the ‘containment policy’ but to a great deal of what became the Marshall Plan. Gaddis provides a lot of evidence and some telling observations along the way but does not draw them together conclusively. Let us try to do that now by revisiting the circumstances around his ‘Long Telegram,’ which was Kennan’s ticket to the highest foreign policy planning position in the Republic.

Kennan was patently not a team player. He was in the 1940s constantly trying to influence US policy towards Russia by reaching through, over and outside his bosses to get the ear of the President on the assumption that Ambassador Harriman was not conveying just how terrible Stalin’s regime was and how the US should very quickly end the fiction of common objectives and do...
what was necessary to ensure post-war Europe took the form it desired irrespective of Russian preferences. He was fortunate to enjoy the protection of an ambassador who valued having a “heretic” on his staff and merely considered Kennan’s writings as self-indulgent and impractical.

Kennan was a “realist” only in his analysis of what drove Soviet post-war policies; he was not a realist with respect to the possibilities for the American government to react, given the impossibility of changing policy on a dime in a democracy.

I would also note that what Kennan was recommending during WWII was not significantly different from what British Prime Minister Churchill was telling the American government at the same time, without any effect. Churchill was, of course, another practitioner of Realpolitik. Like Kennan his explanations of the behavior of the Soviet Union were based on gut feeling. And his eloquence was no less sublime. But Churchill’s motives in international affairs were held in suspicion by Washington, which saw in them largely a cover for defense of British imperial interests.

Kennan put together his Long Telegram in response to a simple request from Washington to comment on the post-election speech by Stalin dated February 9, 1946 in which the Soviet leader called for greatly increased military preparations, did not mention the Allies with respect to the recent war effort and repeated Marxism-Leninism doctrine to the effect that there could be no co-existence between capitalism and socialism. Ambassador Harriman had already left his post, and Kennan used the opportunity to dispatch to the State Department a great deal more than the expected brief analysis of the speech. His 5,000 word analysis of Soviet intentions for post-war Europe was a bid to reach its mark without any intermediation and present a full-blown foreign policy doctrine. In the event, policy towards Russia was then in flux due to incremental American dissatisfaction with Soviet behavior on the ground and to the new President’s growing readiness to break with his predecessor’s policies and assert direct control over foreign policy. Thus, the soil was already well prepared for a policy statement such as Kennan produced. Events had caught up with him and his piece was perfectly timed to be useful.

Nonetheless, Gaddis correctly raises the question of why this piece by a relatively unknown Foreign Service officer was taken up with such alacrity in Washington. He remarks on the boldness of the paper, which set out its points in unqualified terms and advanced one solution without setting out any alternatives. This Gaddis contrasts with a recent policy review on Russia which the State Department had entrusted to Kennan’s colleague Chip Bohlen and Gerold T. Robinson. Gaddis identifies Robinson as “a Columbia University historian of Russia who had worked in the Office of Strategic Services during the war.”

In fact, Robinson was substantially more skilled in bureaucratic ways than this introduction suggests. He had been chief of the USSR Division within the OSS and had a reputation as a hard driving boss. His administrative skills were rewarded soon afterwards by his appointment as director of the newly created Russian Institute at Columbia University.

We are given to understand by Gaddis that the Bohlen-Robinson policy paper was indecisive and ended with several policy options, none of which was especially persuasive. Be that as it may, this type of format is what all hierarchical organizations demand. After all, decisions on strategy are supposed to be taken by an informed leader, not by a subordinate rapporteur.

We must bear in mind that at the time he wrote the Long Telegram Kennan was no longer ‘mentally’ a Foreign Service officer. He had submitted his letter of resignation eight months previously and was in a suspended state pending career change. This may well explain why Kennan allowed himself to violate all organizational rules in his paper.

The Long Telegram gave coherence to a policy volte-face on Russia which was otherwise underway in Washington. Kennan had placed an all-or-nothing bet which was fortuitously timed and broke the bank. As a consequence, all doors were open to him in Washington.

In quick succession he was invited to join the newly created National War College to give the first course on strategic policy planning directed at senior officials of the various branches of the U.S. military and State Department in several decades. This was invaluable exposure within the government. He was then encouraged to popularize the newly adopted containment policy among the broader public through lectures and publications. This was the context for the ‘Mr. X’ essay ‘The Sources of Soviet Conduct’ which appeared in Foreign Affairs magazine in June 1947 with which Kennan’s name was to be inalienably linked for decades.

In the spring of 1947, he was invited to head a new Policy Planning Staff reporting directly to Secretary of State George Marshall, which effectively set course on 360 degrees of American foreign policy over the coming two and a half years.

It would neither be unkind nor untrue to say that Kennan was brought to power by the skills of a speechwriter, drawing on his native eloquence. But, we see from Gaddis that once he arrived at the center of power, Kennan made his unique contribution and earned his place in history thanks to his work as strategic planner. This was, I emphasize, a position for which he had received no specific training. Just as Kennan created his lectures for the War College by learning on the job, so he ran the
Policy Planning Staff of 5, using it as a sounding board for analyses and recommendations that were nearly all his own and which he devised on the spot while reinventing himself. His methods were those of a highly gifted prima donna, not a collegial player. Moreover, he succeeded precisely because his boss, George Marshall, practiced a policy which is rare in large bureaucracies of putting most of his eggs in one basket. When Marshall was succeeded in office by Dean Acheson, the far more common habit of taking information and advice from multiple sources was implemented. Acheson also restored the traditional organogram with its deference to the chiefs of regional desks. Kennan then lost both his influence and his will to stay on in government service, which ultimately led to his early retirement at the start of the Eisenhower administration.

My remarks on the fit between Kennan’s personality and the jobs he occupied in the government which emerges from Gaddis’s biography should be leavened by one further observation from when my intellectual commitments intersected with Kennan’s in the late 1970s. At the time, Kennan was on the board of the US Committee of East-West Accord and I was a junior member and contributor to its publications. The common objective was lobbying the U.S. Congress on behalf of a more constructive, less adversarial relationship with the Soviet Union, in favor of slowing, then reversing the strategic nuclear arms race. Kennan revealed at the time what Gaddis makes plain throughout his career in and out of government: a genuine affection for the object of his policy planning and research, namely Russia. At the time, such a mindset was held by a minority of the American foreign policy community. Today it is virtually nonexistent. I would be delighted if the restoration of Kennan’s life and thoughts to active discussion today contributed to the rehabilitation of a more reasonable and open-minded approach to Russia as a legitimate permanent interlocutor for the United States in any collective approach to managing international affairs.

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