



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI



<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Helda

---

'Geopolitics of Sympathy' : George F. Kennan and NATO Enlargement

Piirimäe, K

Routledge

2024-01-02

---

Piirimäe, K 2024, 'Geopolitics of Sympathy': George F. Kennan and NATO Enlargement',  
Diplomacy & Statecraft, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 182-205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2024.2303860>

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/574141>

10.1080/09592296.2024.2303860

---

cc\_by

publishedVersion

---

*Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.*

*This is an electronic reprint of the original article.*

*This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.*

*Please cite the original version.*

# 'Geopolitics of Sympathy': George F. Kennan and NATO Enlargement

Kaarel Piirimäe

To cite this article: Kaarel Piirimäe (2024) 'Geopolitics of Sympathy': George F. Kennan and NATO Enlargement, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 35:1, 182-205, DOI: [10.1080/09592296.2024.2303860](https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2024.2303860)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2024.2303860>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 08 Mar 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1664



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## 'Geopolitics of Sympathy': George F. Kennan and NATO Enlargement

Kaarel Piirimäe 

Institute of History and Archaeology, University of Tartu, Estonia; University of Helsinki, Finland

### ABSTRACT

In the light of the dramatic escalation of the Russian war on Ukraine since February 2022, questions concerning the handling of Russia in the post-Cold War era, and the enlargement of NATO in particular, are timelier than ever. This article scrutinises the views of George F. Kennan, one of the most influential critics of the decision to expand NATO. It is widely accepted that Kennan's opposition to NATO was grounded in realism about international affairs. A careful study of the development of his thinking, based on his private papers and archival sources from many countries, suggests that his perceptions of developments inside Russia and his imagination of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe were more important than any foreign policy doctrine. Kennan's criticism was grounded in his 'geopolitics of sympathy', understood as a fusion of mental maps, sympathies and personal connections towards the region affected by NATO enlargement. However, Kennan's geopolitics must be considered in conjunction with his ideas about international order, in particular with his defence of empire.

The focus of this article is on George F. Kennan and how his perception of Russia and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) affected his ideas about the role of NATO in the post-Cold War order. Kennan's importance lies not in his impact on decision-making, as he had little influence on President Bill Clinton's policies despite sympathies felt on either side, but in the longevity of his warnings about NATO enlargement. Curiously, long after the man's passing, the question about the fallacy or rightness of 'Kennanism' seems to be as pertinent today as it was more than sixty years ago.<sup>1</sup>

Many scholars criticising NATO enlargement refer to Kennan as the ultimate authority who warned against the consequences.<sup>2</sup> Arguing against Clinton's decision was the last significant thing Kennan did in his life. In October 1996, at Columbia University's Harriman Institute, Kennan reacted to a talk by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, calling the plan of NATO enlargement a 'strategic blunder of epic proportions'.<sup>3</sup> In an article in the *New York Times* the following year, he famously argued that it 'would be the

**CONTACT** Kaarel Piirimäe  [Kaarel.piirimae@ut.ee](mailto:Kaarel.piirimae@ut.ee)  Institute of History and Archaeology, University of Tartu, Jakobi 2, Tartu 51005, Estonia

© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era'. Kennan expected that NATO expansion would give rise to undemocratic and anti-Western forces in Russia and would lead to another Cold War, but was certain that official Washington would persist. He was right: it proved easy for Clinton to ignore not only Kennan, whose credibility was undermined by his long-standing opposition to NATO, but, more remarkably, the majority of the U.S. foreign policy and scholarly establishments.<sup>4</sup>

Kennan's warnings are cited as prophetic by scholars who view NATO expansion as a fateful miscalculation. Intellectual sources of the criticism vary, but most tend to point out the anachronism of preserving a Cold-War institution made to contain an adversary that no longer existed. It is argued that by expanding NATO, which in Russia was viewed as a threat to its status, if not security, the United States betrayed the West's most ardent supporters and gave ammunition to anti-Western, nationalist, and neo-imperialist voices in that country.<sup>5</sup> Some scholars have gone as far as to argue for a new 'post-Western' or 'multipolar world order', which intentionally or unintentionally implies a retreat of NATO and even accepts a Russian sphere of influence as a 'realistic' option leading to a *détente* with Russia.<sup>6</sup>

This article's analysis of Kennan's views offers a novel interpretive window into this geopolitical or 'realist' school of thought. The objective is not to analyse whether Kennan got it right with respect to Russia, but to suggest a new point of view for analysing Kennan and perhaps other 'realists' like him. The first section of the article discusses diverse avenues for analysing Kennan's thoughts and suggests the perspective of 'geopolitics of sympathy' for unlocking his ideas. The second section provides context for debates over NATO enlargement in the 1990s by discussing Kennan's role as the 'wise man' who was called to give advice to governments. Kennan's difficulties with establishing a clear position on NATO are scrutinised. The third section examines Kennan's views on the countries affected by NATO enlargement but primarily Russia, Latvia, and Estonia – the countries he knew best from the 1920s onward. The fourth part analyses Kennan's views about accommodating the power of Russia in a sustainable international order. The structure of the article follows a thematic rather than chronological logic.

## Interpreting Kennan

Kennan's thinking has been characterised as a form of realism about international affairs: he is said to have been realistic in contrast to the naiveté of the supporters of NATO enlargement. Just days before another, large-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia on 24 February 2022, Stephen M. Walt, the pre-eminent scholar of structural realism (also known as 'neorealism'), wrote: 'The great tragedy is this entire affair was avoidable. Had the United States and its European allies not succumbed to hubris, wishful thinking, and liberal

idealism and relied instead on *realism's* core insights, the present crisis would not have occurred'. He continued: 'That is why several prominent U.S. *experts* – including diplomat George Kennan ... opposed enlargement from the start'. Walt mentioned two other 'experts' but, significantly, cited Kennan's name first. What is more, he did not name any neorealists, for example John Mearsheimer, who has been most vocal about the supposed 'liberal delusion'.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, Walt characterised his school of thought as realism, when he is primarily associated with structural realism.<sup>8</sup> Walt's point of departure is the supposed anarchical world order and the anxiety of all states about security. From that point of view, any kind of Russia would look at NATO enlargement as a threat, potential or real, because the intentions of NATO may change.<sup>9</sup> This was not Kennan's perspective, as he had little patience for the scientific pretensions of structural realism.<sup>10</sup> Similar to classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, Kennan placed much emphasis on human nature and domestic politics. The containment concept, which he developed in the late 1940s, sprang not from the apparent danger that the Soviet military superpower posed to the Western world, but from what Kennan saw at the time as the dangerously expansive, but ultimately fragile, revolutionary Soviet regime. Indeed, Kennan was not worried about Soviet military preponderance and by the 1950s regarded it as no threat at all.<sup>11</sup>

To understand Kennan's supposed realism about NATO enlargement, it is thus crucial to know what he thought about developments *inside* Russia after 1991. As we will see, this depended on how he perceived Russia since the 1930s. However, we also need to know his views on the countries between Russia and the West that were affected by NATO enlargement either by being included or by being excluded from it. Interestingly, Kennan's knowledge of the region was limited, and he based his opinions on personal experiences, particularly from his time in Latvia and Estonia in the 1930s and the late 1980s – early 1990s.

It is impossible to overemphasise the role of Russia in Kennan's life, which simultaneously highlights the analytical importance of emotions in international affairs. Frank Costigliola, the editor of Kennan's diaries and the author of the most recent, authoritative biography, argues that behind the facade of a highly rational man – the picture of a cool-headed realist that is presented to us even today – there was an extremely emotional man that made most of his decisions on gut feelings.<sup>12</sup>

According to Costigliola, among Kennan's emotions, love for Russia was pervasive. Russia presented for Kennan everything that the United States was not: authentic, romantic, erotic. John Harper has explained Kennan's love affair with Russia with his desire to find self-knowledge, beauty, and refuge from what he describes as the spiritual desert of America of the twenties.<sup>13</sup> The 'romantic primitivism' of Kennan affected not only his views on Russia, but his philosophy and his analysis of politics more generally. Kennan discounted ideology, political ideas, and opinions as he was romantically preoccupied with

what he thought were authentic expressions of climate and geography, which in his view shaped peoples' character, behaviour, and passions. For Kennan, these factors drove world history more than ideology. This perspective, influenced by his teacher at Princeton, Joseph C. Green, and his readings of Edward Gibbon's works on the Roman empire, encouraged him to discover and describe places, which he did his entire life. As a result, his travelogues are one of the most substantial and beautiful parts of his literary legacy and a treasure trove for historians. They are also a key to understanding his geopolitics of sympathy with regard to NATO enlargement. It is precisely his travelogues and other parts of his extensive diaries that are utilised in this article as the main source of data.

To go deeper into the roots of Kennan's ideas, this article develops the concept of 'geopolitics of sympathy', which joins two approaches. The first is Critical Geopolitics, a perspective that starts from the assumption that geographical knowledge is neither neutral nor objective but a 'technology of power'. The approach views all geographical claims as inevitably geopolitical and, conversely, all politics as geopolitics involving geographical assumptions about territories and borders.<sup>14</sup> Geographic mental maps, though usually unspoken, are latent in all visions and concepts about regional order, be it in Europe or other places.<sup>15</sup> Through a close analysis of Kennan's personal writings and reflections, this article suggests a means by which such assumptions (including those propping up different views on NATO enlargement) can be unearthed through historical research.

The second part of the concept is 'sympathy', a term capturing the personal and intimate nature of the connection of people to places, as demonstrated recently by Larry Wolff in the case of President Woodrow Wilson's relationship with Eastern Europe.<sup>16</sup> The trouble with sympathy is that one cannot confer sympathy to rivaling social groups in the same degree. In Wolff's analysis, sympathy is the key to analysing the construction of the less than satisfactory post-World War I political settlement, as Wilson's 'mental map was becoming confused with overlapping sympathies'.<sup>17</sup> As we will see, similar problems were apparent in Kennan's thinking about international order in the 1990s.

The concept 'geopolitics of sympathy' underlines the *geographical* dimension of conferring sympathy to social groups and reflects the subjective nature of geopolitical views. It is not assumed that it explains *all* of Kennan's ideas, but it does help unlock some of Kennan's views on the post-Cold War order, including the enlargement of NATO. The plan of the article is to look at how his perceptions of the countries affected by NATO policies influenced his thought process. The article is primarily based on Kennan's diaries and correspondence housed at Princeton University; however, it is not supposed that these will reveal the 'true Kennan'. The diary was not only a medium for expressing feelings and thoughts, but very clearly part of what Kennan imagined would be his literary legacy; nevertheless, it is probably the best source

we have, especially if complemented by published writings, correspondence, as well as observations by his colleagues and friends.<sup>18</sup>

### **Kennan and the problem of NATO**

As a diplomat who had a distinguished career in government for almost three decades, a historian, and a prolific author who had become famous as one among the ‘wise men who made the American century’,<sup>19</sup> Kennan seemed to be an expert whose advice governments wanted to seek out. Kennan kept contact with various administrations following his retirement from the State Department in 1950/1953, but most of the time his advice was not sought after. Dean Acheson, his friend and boss at the State Department, recapped the official view of Kennan’s utility at the time: he was ‘not a very useful policy adviser’.<sup>20</sup>

However, the end of the 1980s and 1990s presented Kennan with another opportunity. The collapse of the Soviet bloc seemed to vindicate his views about the fragility of Communism.<sup>21</sup> Encouraged by the admiring public and attention from President George H.W. Bush, he gave up his historical studies and decided to dedicate his remaining years to influencing current affairs.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the 1992 election of Bill Clinton and his team of experts sympathising with Russia presented a unique moment when his feelings towards Russia matched with those of powerful actors within the administration. In autumn 1993 he was invited by Talbott and Secretary of State Warren Christopher to give advice to Russian experts at the State Department and was assured that what was expected of him was not the ‘limited professional competence’ of an expert but the ability to look at the entire subject from a greater distance – this is to act as the wise man, which had been his dream all along.<sup>23</sup> The structure of the international system in the post-Cold War era, including the future of NATO, were clearly among the questions he was expected to comment on.

When Kennan began to think about the future of NATO, he was already an old man. In April 1989, at the age of 85, he confided in his diary that he did not have the strength to be more than a ‘casual observer’ of international politics.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, his commentaries were timely and sometimes even ahead of times. Already in February 1989, Kennan took for granted that the Cold War was over and in November began to discuss the future of Germany, future roles of NATO, the Warsaw Pact, and the whole ‘political structure of European society’.<sup>25</sup> He did not excel in offering solutions – he warned against hasty decisions and ‘loose talk’ about things like German reunification – but rather shined with his insights about the nature of the changes underway. He framed it all as a challenge of opportunities rather than danger, which presented policy-makers with the chance to remake the failed settlements of 1919 and 1945.<sup>26</sup>

In December 1989 Kennan gave a talk at the Council of Foreign Relations, where he identified the great question of the coming age: should one reintegrate formerly communist Eastern Europe into the European system ‘ordered

under the benevolent umbrella of the NATO alliance[?]<sup>27</sup> Kennan was sceptical: resulting from the region's authoritarian past, the peoples of Eastern Europe were, according to him, unable to handle day-to-day challenges of running democratic governments. Moreover, eastern Europeans, unlike the Finns, were not going to respect Soviet 'security interests' and would thereby destroy the political future of Gorbachev, all of which persuaded Kennan not to support complete sovereignty, but sovereignty limited by what he indicated were the legitimate security interests of the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup>

Kennan had been hesitant about the future of NATO in November. Now he seemed to be convinced that both NATO and the Warsaw Pact had to give way to a new all-European security structure – 'a structure resembling nothing that has ever existed in the past'. In the creation of that structure, the US would have to be heavily involved. On that basis, one would be willing to agree with the conclusion of John L. Gaddis, Kennan's chosen biographer: 'Kennan wondered why the alliance should even survive the end of the Cold War, much less grow'.<sup>29</sup> However, the conclusion is a hasty one considering a talk Kennan had given earlier in May 1989 at a conference of the senior members of the NATO community (some 200 people), hosted at NATO headquarters in Mons.<sup>30</sup>

This was a historic moment. His diary reflects his hesitation because ever since NATO was founded, he was convinced that this was 'the center of all that was wrong in the Western-establishment thinking' and now, for the first time, he was going to speak at 'the camp of the enemy'. Kennan decided to take a benevolent stance, however. He was startled to find himself thinking that not only had NATO of the Cold-War era become obsolete but his own grievances against it had also become irrelevant.<sup>31</sup>

In his presentation on 9 May 1989, Kennan admitted that NATO would still be needed for some time to come, but only if it was transformed into an organisation that was not directed against any specific foreign power and would act as a 'general manifestation of military-political prudence on the part of the whole western European community'. He acknowledged that NATO had proven 'indispensable' as a guard against divisions on the continent and hoped that it could be reshaped for the 'key task' to assist 'the overcoming and the eventual removal' of the East – West division.<sup>32</sup> It is quite easy to imagine George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton sitting in the audience and devising their strategies for the 1990s that saw NATO enlarged and transformed from a military to a security organisation with simultaneous efforts to engage Russia.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, Kennan is not known for these remarks but for his vehement opposition to enlargement and to NATO itself. Why? Is it because Kennan's presentation at NATO headquarters was confidential? Is it because Kennan's biographers have emphasised aspects of Kennan that matched their own deep conviction about the mistake of NATO enlargement?<sup>34</sup> Another question is whether something happened after May 1989 for Kennan to change his mind. His diary offers a possible clue, as he seemed disappointed by what he

thought was the traditional mentality still prevailing in NATO, hence his sense of vindication after returning from Mons that he had been right all along.<sup>35</sup> This hardly solves the problem, as he repeated his approving views towards NATO in his personal philosophy, *In the Cragged Hill*, written between 1991 and 1993. In this volume, neglected by biographers, he again advanced the idea that a transformed NATO should take the lead in integrating *all* of Europe.<sup>36</sup>

One can perhaps infer from this that Kennan had difficulty deciding on what would be the most practicable post-Cold War settlement. He favoured the continuation of NATO, but at the same time wanted to leave the security of Europe to Europeans.<sup>37</sup> On another occasion, he argued that the US should not withdraw but hold on to key alliances in Europe via NATO as well as with Japan.<sup>38</sup> In the final analysis, Kennan's hesitations and contradictions seem to be associated with his views of Russia and his struggle to balance his sympathy for Russia with his consideration for small states looking for support from the West, which we will try to unlock by looking at Kennan's mental maps of Eastern Europe.

### **Kennan's mental map: Russia and the Baltic states**

From 1989 to 1991, Kennan witnessed the sudden collapse of the Soviet sphere of influence in CEE and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself, but doubted that the problem of Russia's predominant power had been solved. Indeed, it was anyone's guess whether Russia would remain a weak power for long. Kennan, who always took a long-term view, expected the world to fall back to the state of things as had existed before 1914, or with regard to Russia before 1917, the assumption being that Russia would return to liberal, albeit imperial, traditions.<sup>39</sup> In a letter to the Finnish diplomat Max Jakobson in 1996, Kennan warned against identifying the 'Russian regime with the Communist one that preceded it'.<sup>40</sup> Kennan thus agreed with scholars, like Richard Pipes, who emphasised the strength of the authoritarian tradition and stressed that the Russian *Sonderweg* was not derailed by Communism, but disagreed about how dangerous Russian imperialism would be.<sup>41</sup>

The first instance when Kennan had to grapple directly with the problem of reconciling Russian power with the aspirations of smaller countries was in March 1990 when Lithuania declared independence and challenged Gorbachev openly.<sup>42</sup> The ensuing Baltic – Soviet crisis caused Kennan to search for a balance between his sympathies for Gorbachev and sympathies for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Kennan came to respect Gorbachev as a reformer but was also pleased to receive attention from the Soviet government and Gorbachev personally. He was delighted by Moscow's recognition of his Cold War-era role as an advocate of US-Soviet friendship. Gorbachev personally met Kennan on two occasions and literally embraced him. In March 1990, Kennan confided in his diary with his usual understatement that the 'generous acknowledgment from the official

Soviet side' did 'mean something'.<sup>43</sup> The new Russian government continued the courtship. In 1992, the first Russian ambassador Vladimir Lukin and his assistant and historian Vladimir Pechatnov visited him at his home in Princeton. What gave Kennan 'unusual satisfaction' was that the ambassador had not even presented his credentials at the White House before seeing him.<sup>44</sup>

Did Kennan have a bias towards Russia that clouded his judgement? This was, indeed, the assessment of some of his closest colleagues and friends. Loy Henderson (1892–1986), whose career crossed Kennan's at several points, had trouble understanding Kennan's lack of compassion for the suffering of other people. Kennan's advice as Mr. X to leave Eastern Europe under Soviet control, along with the constant 'fondness for Russia and romantic feelings', rendered Kennan's advice impartial for Henderson. Elbridge Durbrow (1903–1997), who alongside Kennan had been in Bill Bullitt's team that went to Moscow in 1934 and later headed the Eastern European department and the personnel division at the State, noted in 1982 that from 'uncle George's' books, or from literature, Kennan had acquired a 'real love for the Russian people'. A love that 'pops out all the time, between the lines and directly'.<sup>45</sup>

The uncle whom Durbrow referred to was actually the cousin of Kennan's father, George Kennan (1845–1924), the famous explorer of Russia, who influenced the younger Kennan's decision to seek a career in diplomacy and to invest in studying Russia. However, the idea was not just to advance knowledge of Russia, but also to advocate certain policies, which seems to have been rooted in the way the role of experts was conceived in the United States around the turn of the twentieth century and thereafter.<sup>46</sup>

There was a difference in the way the two men looked upon Russia. The elder Kennan, through his travels in Siberia and contacts with Russian rebels, became a critic of the oppressive Tsarist regime. The younger Kennan, however, became an admirer of the country's imperial qualities and the apparent parallels to other pioneer nations, such as the United States. Moreover, he imagined that Tsarist Russia was a liberal empire, a country where a figure like Anton Chekhov, for whom Kennan had unusual affection, could flourish.<sup>47</sup> In the 1990s, when many observers wondered if Russia belonged to the Western world at all, Kennan would comprehend the country in the context of a longue durée of Russian history, expecting that the new Russia of the 1990s would fall back to the 'real' and essentially liberal traditions of the Tsarist Empire. 'Russia belongs very largely (not entirely) to the Western world', he noted.<sup>48</sup>

Kennan's sympathies for Russia had been visible during his activities as a scholar for much of the Cold War era. In 1974, he founded an institute that conveniently bore the name of his ancestor and was dedicated to the study of the Soviet Union but was always supposed to influence policy. As part of Cold War area studies, but independent of any major university, the Kennan Institute, located in Washington D.C., reflected the Cold War preoccupation

with the USSR. Like the rest of Soviet studies, it was fixated on Russia as the centre, neglecting the other nationalities of the USSR and even peripheral regions of Russia itself.<sup>49</sup>

This had major political implications. In 1991, Kennan defended this choice against calls to expand the field to include the cultures of other Soviet republics. Privately, he expressed disgust towards what he called the 'pseudo-intellectuals' who could not appreciate that Russian culture was 'incomparably richer and stronger than any of the others'.<sup>50</sup> This amounted to a claim that only nations allegedly possessing a high culture were legitimate objects of scholarly effort, but also implied that non-Russian cultures were less important in the larger scheme of things and could be overlooked when political claims were raised. This in fact would be Kennan's point of view, save perhaps for the Baltic states.

Kennan was unusually well-informed about the Baltic countries, where his diplomatic career started in the 1920s. One can even say that the path towards becoming the famous Mr. X and architect of containment was through dealing with the problem of Russian power in the Baltic states. The interesting aspect of Kennan's mental map was the importance of Estonia and Latvia and the almost total absence of CEE countries, like Poland or Hungary, not to speak of the Balkans. Despite his personal involvement with Polish questions in 1944, his ambassadorship in Yugoslavia in 1961–1963, or his friendships with people like the Hungarian American scholar John Lukacs, the Baltics were central in Kennan's mental map.

Perhaps the young age at which Kennan came to the Baltic states was decisive in establishing an intimate connection. He was 24 years old when he was sent to Tallinn as part of his training as a specialist of Russia. The next year, in 1929, he was transferred to Riga, which was the main American listening post on the Soviet Union before President Roosevelt opened diplomatic relations.<sup>51</sup> The Baltic countries left a deep impression so that even decades later a boat trip on the Baltic Sea prompted Kennan to note: 'I suddenly was absolutely filled with a sort of nostalgia/.../. It meant an enormous amount to me'.<sup>52</sup>

Frank Costigliola is right to criticise Gaddis for overlooking just how sensitive and emotionally involved Kennan was as a thinker. But Kennan's impressions of the Baltic landscape, written in beautiful prose and interesting in their own right, also reveal their essentially anonymous and hollow nature.<sup>53</sup> Kennan's exclamation in a journal entry from 1929 captures his aloofness: 'Good people, ... busy yourselves with the mechanisms of your quiet lives, but do not talk to me. We have nothing to offer one another'.<sup>54</sup> In his memoirs he would admit: 'I never saw the inside of an Estonian home, either. . . I was, after all, not primarily interested in Estonia. . .'.<sup>55</sup> It was very fitting that of the two pieces of memorabilia he had preserved from his times in Estonia and Latvia, one was German china from Riga and the other a Russian landscape painted by a Russian artist in Tallinn. There was nothing genuinely *Estonian* or *Latvian* in his home.<sup>56</sup>

In the 1920s and the 1930s, Kennan's perception of the Baltic was overshadowed by his overarching interest in all things Russian. The region, especially Latvia's capital Riga, merely provided the scenery and stimulus for embracing remnants of Imperial Russian culture that for an American diplomat was inaccessible at the time. As a traveller, Kennan did not try to be an accurate observer either. He noted frankly that the period of discovery was 'nearing its close', thus there was no need to introduce 'strange places' to fellow citizens back home. In the vein of modern primitivist travelling, the purpose was primarily self-reflection.<sup>57</sup> His impressions thus reflected his own feelings and yearnings, which were primarily associated with his imagination of Imperial Russia. For example, all the churches that he noticed in Latvia and Estonia were 'Russian [Orthodox] churches', although these were predominantly Lutheran lands.<sup>58</sup> Seeing a Russian quarter in Teheran in 1944 gave him the occasion to remark that Teheran was very similar to Tallinn, suggesting that Tallinn was associated in his mind with Russia.<sup>59</sup> This was all the more surprising considering that he had come to the Baltic states by way of Germany and must have known the strong German cultural influence in the former Baltic provinces of Estonia and Livonia. There is little evidence to corroborate Costigliola's claim that Kennan was influenced by his studies at the University of Berlin's Oriental Seminar and had adopted an essentially Germanic perspective on Russia.<sup>60</sup>

Kennan's perception that he was trolling in Russian lands is evident in his description of a trip to Helsinki in 1929. Kennan marvelled at the modern, indeed American, face of the city that had 'no sense of age and tradition'. The train station (designed by Eliel Saarinen), in particular, would have done justice to Chicago or Detroit, but this was only a façade, as Kennan would find out, for behind the modern building there were strange box-like passenger cars of the old Russian railway, '... and one realizes that Helsingfors is not Finland, that it belies its hinterland, that the modern, Twentieth-century Finns are literally all dressed up and no place to go', Kennan concluded.<sup>61</sup> Still, Kennan was puzzled by the apparent contrast between Reval (Tallinn's Germanic name) and Helsinki, but then, sitting in the dining room of a hotel in Helsinki he realised: all the guests were speaking Swedish, so he concluded that Helsinki was not really a Finnish town at all but a city 'stormed and captured by the up-to-date Scandinavians'. Kennan was convinced that their conquest ended with the city limits (indeed, the train station), 'and for hundreds of miles beyond there stretched the bleak melancholy expanse of northern Russia... ageless... unconquerable'.<sup>62</sup> Kennan was thus relieved to find out that Finland and the Finns were still essentially Russian and the elements of modernity had been introduced by Swedish tourists.

In Kennan's mental map, the landscapes of Estonia, Latvia, and Finland were characterised with words 'bleak', 'flat', 'dull', and 'sober', which in his mind were the essential qualities of Russia.<sup>63</sup> He also expressed on several occasions his interest in the imperial Russian railway system, which reflected his understanding of the Russian empire as an essentially amorphous organism without clear borders,

a network of connections and influence rather than a clearly bounded entity. Thus, the terms ‘Russia’, the ‘Russian empire’, or the ‘traditional Russian empire’, lacked precision in geographical terms – something that we can also note in Kennan’s comments in the 1990s.

### Accommodating Russian power: empire and world order

When the Baltic countries were occupied and annexed by the USSR in 1940, Kennan would probably have agreed with President Roosevelt that ‘all those Baltic republics are as good as Russian’.<sup>64</sup> According to Loy Henderson, Kennan ‘looked with contempt on those [Baltic] people’ and his attitude was: ‘How can these people want to be separated from Great Russia?’<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, there is no direct evidence that he did *not* regret the annexation. In 1941, he referred to Russia’s ‘destruction of the Baltic states’ when arguing against Roosevelt’s policy of extending moral support to Stalin.<sup>66</sup> In 1948 under Kennan’s direction, the National Security Council argued that as long as the Soviet Union could crush small countries like the Baltic states, which had ‘given evidence of their ability to handle their affairs’, international peace and stability would continue to be under threat.<sup>67</sup>

It is possible that as a ‘realist’, Kennan understood the futility of complaining about Russia’s sphere of influence and realised that his feelings for one or the other rivalling group in CEE did not matter anyway. This was certainly his experience in 1944–1945 when he witnessed the collapse of the effort of Stanisław Mikołajczyk, the Prime Minister of the Polish government in exile, to wrestle Poland away from Soviet control.<sup>68</sup> His own concept of containment advocated a clear delineation of spheres of influence rather than efforts to penetrate the Soviet sphere, failing to realise that eastern Europeans, like Mikołajczyk, would probably have appreciated exactly such efforts even when prospects of success were slim.<sup>69</sup>

By the 1990s, Kennan’s perception of the Baltic states as a natural part of Russia had changed. A June 1987 visit to Riga prompted him to wonder about the sources of his impressions over half a century earlier: ‘To me, as bewildered, foolish, but sensitive young man, this view, this landscape, once had their own mysterious meaning . . . How much of this lay in what I was seeing and how much in myself, God alone knows . . .’<sup>70</sup>

Kennan probably understood that what he had ‘seen’ before the war was not in fact present in the landscape but rather in his own mind and that Latvia, even after fifty years of Soviet colonialism, was not Russia. Although he continued to refer to the Baltic states as part of the ‘traditional Russian empire’ – conveniently passing over earlier history before their conquest by Peter the Great – they began to feature in his mental map as independent entities.<sup>71</sup> When he visited the Soviet Union in October 1990, he included in his itinerary a short stay in Estonia. In comparison, he would never visit any of the countries of the former Warsaw Pact or non-Russian republics of the former USSR.

Back in the 1920s and the 1930s, Kennan made no acquaintances among Estonians or Latvians. From a safe distance, he observed and described people who piqued his curiosity.<sup>72</sup> In the late 1980s when his diaries were being published, he began to worry about critics noticing the absence of ‘real people’ – another indication that his perceptions had changed.<sup>73</sup>

The way Kennan described in his diary the visit of Lennart Meri, the President of Estonia, at his home in Princeton in June 1996 to receive Estonia’s highest decoration is different, perhaps deliberately so, from his encounters with Baltic people before the war. Not only did he describe Meri’s visit at length, but he was also willing to acknowledge the good manners of the Estonian President: ‘He [Meri] proved to be a very dignified, highly cultured, and in all respects presentable man’. Kennan admitted that it was hard to understand why Estonia had identified him ‘as the great friend of that country’ (indeed, Kennan’s opposition to NATO was a direct challenge to Estonia’s security policies) but added, ‘I am grateful for it, because I do have high respect for the Estonians – the best, from my standpoint, of the Three Baltic peoples’.<sup>74</sup> It is curious that Kennan was willing to heap that much praise on the Estonians, as such feelings had not been apparent before. Rather than reflecting a conviction, he was probably under the spell on emotions after the visit of a ‘cultured’ man from the east.

By May 1990, Kennan made his choice and came out in support of Baltic independence: ‘the Baltic countries will have to receive, sooner or later, their sovereign independence’. At the same time, remaining true to his view formed by 1944–1945 that the US should not actively interfere in the Soviet sphere of influence, he considered it ‘very unwise’ to actively support the break-up of the Soviet empire. In other words, Baltic independence depended entirely on the goodwill of Gorbachev.<sup>75</sup>

Kennan was willing to support Baltic independence, but independence did not mean that the countries would be free to determine their foreign and security policies. At the time when the post-Cold War world was beginning to unfold, Kennan was struggling deeply with the prevalent idea of the sovereign equality of states and the principle, enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act, that all countries were free to choose their allies. *In the Cragged Hill* Kennan gave vent to some of his concerns, expressing the opinion that immense differences in size and importance between nations made a mockery of the ‘lofty terms’ of sovereignty and equality. Moreover, independence was associated not only with freedoms, but more so with a ‘grave burden of responsibility’, so that ‘smaller emerging nations’ should be relieved of ‘some burdens of total independence’. Autonomy could be an option, Kennan suggested.<sup>76</sup>

In spring 1993, around the time when the Clinton’s administration began contemplating NATO enlargement, Kennan set to work on a more substantial paper on ‘the structure of the international community’.<sup>77</sup> By January 1994, he had written 18 pages of what he described as ‘not-bad material’, which he sent to

his friend, the political scientist Richard Ullman. Kennan's point of departure was the international order that existed in the late nineteenth century. He commended this order for what he believed to be the ability of 'very few hands' – the great imperial and royal chanceries – to control the unfolding of world events. These hands, Kennan claimed, derived their steadiness from superior education, tradition, inheritance, and a sense of personal security based on affluence and class.<sup>78</sup> Kennan regretted that this order was destroyed in two world wars and that the end of the Cold War had revealed just 'how terribly disorderly' the world had become since then. The greatest threat to stability was not the great powers but the proliferation of the smaller and weaker powers after the break-up of the 'great structure of colonialism'.<sup>79</sup> Kennan wanted to replace the contemporary nation-state system with a more hierarchical structure reflecting the actual power disparities between the strong and the weak. Looking for clues from history, he discussed the League of Nations' mandates system but considered the earlier imperial systems even more practical, as these had allowed for a 'large spectrum of titles, designations, prerogatives and duties for the smaller and weaker entities'.<sup>80</sup>

Dick Ullman's reply was courteous, praising the paper as interesting, provocative, and lucid, but took the author to task for the lack of examples about how small countries had in fact been responsible for all the troubles in international affairs. He also pointed at the danger of great powers exerting hegemony.<sup>81</sup> Ullman thought the treatise was Wilsonian, Hegelian, and surprisingly 'un-Kennanesque'.<sup>82</sup> The only point of agreement between the two men was on ethnic nationalism, which Ullman also found a pernicious force, but the danger in his view concerned the birthing process of states rather than the existence of multiple small countries per se.<sup>83</sup> As a result of Ullman's critique, Kennan abandoned the attempt to publish the treatise, admitted inability to make progress and delegated the whole question to Ullman and latter's colleagues at the Woodrow Wilson School. The fate of the treatise is impossible to infer from the correspondence but apparently it never saw print.<sup>84</sup>

It was precisely during this exchange with Ullman that Clinton's idea of expanding NATO was brought to Kennan's attention. While most authors cite Kennan's observations in 1996–1997, he commented on the idea already in January 1994. The immediate political context was the astonishing victory in the Russian parliamentary elections of Vladimir Zhirinovsky, a politician running on an openly nationalist and imperialist platform. Kennan claimed that he had always rejected the idea of enlarging NATO as a measure to guarantee 'outlying territories' against a possible Russian attack. Although not revealing his earlier favourable views towards NATO, he was strictly speaking correct, because in 1989 he had suggested enlargement not as a negative measure against the USSR but rather as a positive measure for uniting Europe. Unlike many proponents of NATO enlargement, he thought Zhirinovski's rise was not sufficient grounds to start considering Russia as

a potentially aggressive, expansionist power.<sup>85</sup> Apparently, Kennan's comment should be viewed primarily as an answer to those pundits in the United States who envisaged a stronger NATO as a reassurance against the possible rise of a revanchist Russia, and not as Kennan's definite disapproval of NATO enlargement.<sup>86</sup>

Kennan pointed to another problem associated with NATO enlargement. This was what he perceived as the highly unstable situation in the internal and external politics of the CEE countries, with the possible exception of the 'historic Bohemia'.<sup>87</sup> Clinton's visit to the region after a NATO summit and the encouragement the president gave to these "countries" (if you may call them that) – Kennan used quotation marks in his diary – appeared to Kennan as terribly misguided.<sup>88</sup> It is not clear exactly which countries Kennan referred to in quotation marks. Clinton had toured the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. Perhaps he referred to all of them but more plausibly to the former non-Russian Soviet republics because he did not consider them worthy of being called a 'country'.<sup>89</sup> The other interesting aspect was that Kennan was imprecise when he talked about the borders of the different countries – he complained about NATO expanding 'right up to the Russian borders', when in fact only Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary were included in the first round.<sup>90</sup> It was probably intentional that he talked about the region as a shapeless geographic space.

Considering his open-minded attitude towards NATO back in 1989, it is curious how strongly cemented his opposition to NATO enlargement became. He fought against the opening of NATO publicly as well as privately when he met and corresponded with Clinton's officials. A revealing source for analysing the difference between his views and those of the administration are the letters he exchanged with Talbott, the key person responsible for devising the two-track strategy to expand NATO and engage Russia. Kennan became particularly agitated over the involvement of the US military in an exercise in the Crimea, perceiving it as an intrusion into the legitimate sphere of Russian influence.<sup>91</sup>

The disagreement seemed to boil down not as much to diverging sympathies (although these may have been also present) as to conflicting conceptions of security. While Kennan's was a traditional, state-centred perspective on security, Clinton's administration was developing a novel conception that took societal, or human, security as a point of departure.<sup>92</sup> In Talbott's view, an exercise like the one in Crimea brought stability to the region and enhanced the security of not only Ukraine but also of Russia: 'A strong, new NATO, operating in partnership with a strong, democratic, new Russia, will give the Russian *people* something they have not had for over two hundred years: a genuine, sustainable peace with the nations to their west'. Talbott knew that the Russian government had difficulty accepting that true security and stability were based not on subjugation and intimidation of its neighbours but on cooperation. NATO was going to base its strategies on the hope that Russia

would eventually see things that way, while in the meantime prepare for the possibility of Russia returning to a position of hostility.<sup>93</sup>

Kennan remained unconvinced, probably struggling to accommodate his geopolitics of sympathy with his appreciation of the value of different national cultures and the need to ensure their co-existence.<sup>94</sup> What caused Kennan to have second thoughts, privately, about his opposition to NATO's greater role in a new Europe was not Talbott's argumentation, but a seemingly unimportant piece of information that he received from his old friend, the German publisher Marion Dönhoff, in July 1997. Kennan talked with Dönhoff over the phone and came to an argument over whether the Poles were anti-Russian or not. Dönhoff told him that they were not anti-Russian at all. His wife Annelise also sided with Dönhoff. Kennan, who had great respect for Dönhoff, lost sleep over the issue.<sup>95</sup>

What could be the reason for Kennan's agitation? Was it because he realised that he had been wrong about the Polish mentality? Probably, because he had opposed NATO enlargement primarily because he assumed this was directed against Russia. But this was not crucial. What probably caused him to lose his balance was his realisation of how little he actually knew about the region. Although a living legend, revered as the foremost expert on international affairs and Russia in particular, he could not persuade Dönhoff or even his own wife. At a loss to explain his point of view, Kennan was aghast: 'The entire thrust of my activity as an official and a publicist must be regarded as misguided and useless. With that recognition my entire view of myself, my work, and my life collapses'.<sup>96</sup>

When Kennan noted this, he was 93 years old. He would live another eight years, but criticism of NATO enlargement would remain his last significant intervention in international politics. The doubts that he expressed about his own position, indeed his realisation that he knew almost nothing about the region affected by NATO enlargement and by his own opposition to it, would remain confined in his private diaries. His contradictory visions about the future of NATO remained unexplored by biographers and sympathisers alike. Kennan would become a prophet who foresaw trouble ahead.

## Conclusion

In debates over NATO enlargement Kennan's name is habitually used to give an air of authority to claims that the opening of NATO to new members lies at the root of present difficulties. As recently as February 2022, Stephen M. Walt referred to Kennan first among 'prominent U.S. experts' who warned against moving NATO closer to Russian borders. Walt, just as many other commentators, treats Kennan almost as a genius of the thought and practice of realism in international affairs. Indeed, Kennan's observations have outward similarities with the views of other notable opponents of NATO enlargement, such as John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz.<sup>97</sup>

However, 'realism' is probably not the best lens for analysing Kennan's thought. The inconsistency of his ideas about the desirable role for NATO suggests that he was not following any neat theory of international relations. In fact, Kennan had very little in common with IR theorists.<sup>98</sup> Kennan made up his mind and turned decisively against enlargement only after perceiving the step as a measure against Russia (which it was not, at least as directly as Kennan perceived). In contrast to structural realists, who supported collaboration with Russia for purely pragmatic reasons (i.e. to balance against China), Kennan was an admirer of the Russian people and Russian culture and, despite some misgivings, never gave up on his hope of Russia's eventual incorporation into the West.<sup>99</sup>

Another problem concerns Kennan's cult of empire as part of his 'realism'. In fact, the two aspects of his thought seem indistinguishable.<sup>100</sup> Kennan never made a secret about his regret that the West had given up imperial possessions in Asia, Africa and elsewhere. In the 1990s, he tried to design new principles for accommodating self-determination of small peoples with the predominant power of great nations but ultimately fell back to the nineteenth century ideas of empire and spheres-of-influence.<sup>101</sup> He was also a proud cultural imperialist, arguing that Russian culture was superior to any other cultural tradition in the former Soviet space and the CEE, except for historic Bohemia, and therefore 'the legitimate national interests of the great Russian people' should be given special consideration.<sup>102</sup> On the other hand, one must also consider that if Kennan was consistent in anything, it was in his criticism of the instances of American universalism and imperial behaviour around the globe. It begs a question why he refused to apply the same standard to Russian behaviour in Eastern Europe. Was it because of his deep orientalism towards the region?<sup>103</sup>

When it came to choosing between competing claims in Eastern Europe, Russia on the one side and most of the other countries on the other, it came down to Kennan's geopolitics of sympathy. By the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, he had developed sympathies for the Baltic states. He understood that his perceptions back in the 1930s had been misleading and that these nations were not in fact Russian and deserved independence, but this did not mean that these, or other small countries, could choose whatever allies they wished. For Kennan, 'independence' for small nations did not mean equality with greater powers or the right to join alliances such as NATO.

This can be considered as 'realism', as realism acknowledges the power differential between nations and accepts spheres-of-influences as a fact of life. Nevertheless, Kennan's 'realism' is understandable only in conjunction with his perception of the internal developments inside Russia and of his imagination of the other players in the region. In short, Kennan's 'realism' depended on how his mental map about the geographic space in Eastern Europe and how his personal connections to places and people in the region – his geopolitics of sympathy – meshed with ideas and principles about desirable international order. He advocated for a Russian imperialist sphere of influence in CEE

because in his imagination Russia was not an aggressive and expansionist power but an essentially peaceful country of Anton Chekhov, a liberal empire connected by railways and Russian high culture, a country that had no boundaries but frontiers. Russia was Kennan's obsession and remained one until the end. He could develop sympathies for one country or the other, but these sympathies were overridden by his stronger sympathy for Russia.

Although very much a nineteenth century imperialist, Kennan was nevertheless quite fond of small states as such.<sup>104</sup> In contrast to many great thinkers of his time – liberals, socialists, and conservatives alike – he did not dislike small-state nationalism and did not despise small states simply because they were small.<sup>105</sup> As a conservative who had an instinctive dislike for modernity and wanted to keep things natural and simple, he admitted his 'preference for the small over the great, particularly in the case of the human political community'.<sup>106</sup> Kennan knew several small countries in Europe intimately. He spent almost all his post-war summers in Norway, but had probably the greatest respect of all for Swedes, whom he considered as culturally superior.<sup>107</sup> He even argued that the United States should be divided into smaller sovereign and autarchic parts. Nevertheless, he could not sympathise with all small countries equally, because as a cultural imperialist his sympathy depended on the perceived level of civilisation.<sup>108</sup>

His views of Eastern Europe were affected, throughout his long career as the 'expert' of Russia, by his exclusive attention to Russia on account of the latter's ostensibly higher cultural standard. When the Soviet Union collapsed, he insisted on continuing with what was essentially a colonial perspective on the region. As to Estonia and Latvia, the CEE countries he knew best, he perceived them initially as natural parts of Russia but by the 1980s had realised that they were not Russian at all. On the occasion of President Meri's visit in Princeton in 1996 he even admitted that these countries were able to produce 'highly cultured' and 'presentable' men.

The final point one could consider when discussing Kennan is the role of experts in major political decisions. Kennan's name is invoked when the decision to expand NATO is discussed, which suggests that he has become to epitomise the 'wise men' whose advice governments should heed by default. However, the history of the rise of experts in the United States indicates the intimate connection of such experts to policy advocacy. In the Cold War years, Kennan became, among other political and social causes that he cared for, an advocate for the Soviet Union and later for Russia. It was his 'real love for the Russian people', according to Durbrow, that damaged his reputation among his former colleagues but probably did not bother the American public or the administration of President Clinton. Rather, it was his long-standing hostility towards NATO as such that gave Clinton the grounds to dismiss his advice, but his reputation in the public as the ultimate expert or even a prophet probably withstood the test of time.

The failings of Kennan's 'expertise' were striking. There was no one more aware of that than Kennan himself, who often noted that he had been an

ordinary newspaper reader without access to much information for decades. As to the developments in CEE, he simply did not care. However, he could also be profoundly self-critical. It was at such a moment that he realised that he knew next to nothing about the region, which was affected by NATO enlargement and by his opposition to it. After that instant in July 1997, he never offered his advice again.

## Notes

1. 'Editorial: The Fallacy of Kennanism', *Life*, 3 February 1958, 33. 'Kennanism' is used also by James Pamment, 'Strategic Narratives in US Public Diplomacy: A Critical Geopolitics,' *Popular Communication* 12, no. 1 (2014): 48–64 (58). However, 'Kennanism' seems to refer to a doctrine, which the wide ranging thought of Kennan was not.
2. A selection: John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The liberal delusions that provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93 (January/February 2014): 77–89 (83); Gordon M. Hahn, *Ukraine over the Edge: Russia, the West and the 'New Cold War'* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2017), 47; Richard Sakwa, "Stasis and Change: Russia and the Emergence of an Anti-Hegemonic World Order," in *Russia in the Changing International System*, ed. Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Ersen (Cham: Palgrave, 2019), 17–38; Andrey A. Sushentsov and William C. Wohlforth, "The Tragedy of US – Russian Relations: NATO Centrality and the Revisionists' Spiral," *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (2020): 427–50, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00229-5>; Jan Eichler, *NATO's Expansion after the Cold War: Geopolitics and Impacts for International Security* (Cham: Springer, 2021), 41–44; Rajan Menon and William Ruger, "NATO Enlargement and US Grand Strategy: A net assessment," *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (2020): 371–400; Mary E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 15.
3. George F. Kennan Papers, Public Policy Papers, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library (hereafter GFK-PUL), Diaries, October 31, 1996; Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 220; John L. Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 681.
4. George F. Kennan, 'A Fateful Error', *New York Times*, February 5, 1997; Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 220; Rober W. Rauchhaus, "Explaining NATO enlargement," *Contemporary Security Policy* 21, no. 2 (2000): 173–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/135232600084042612000>.
5. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis', 83, Sakwa, 'Stasis and Change', 23; Hahn, *Ukraine over the Edge*, 47; Sushentsov and Wohlforth, 'The tragedy of US – Russian relations', 432; Eichler, *NATO's Expansion*, 41–44; Menon and Ruger, 'NATO enlargement', 374; Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 15, 158; and many others.
6. Richard Sakwa, *Russia against the Rest: The post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Rein Müllerson, *Dawn of a New Order: Geopolitics and the Clash of Ideologies* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017); Andrew T. Wolff, "The Future of NATO Enlargement after the Ukraine Crisis," *International Affairs* 91, no. 5: 1103–21 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12400.2015>; for a somewhat similar approach but different conclusion, Sten Rynning, "The False Promise of Continental Concert: Russia, the West and the Necessary Balance of Power," *International Affairs* 91, no. 3 (2015): 539–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.122852015>.

7. Stephen M. Walt, “The West is Sleepwalking into War in Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2022, accessed August 18, 2022; Mearsheimer, ‘Why the Ukraine crisis’, 77; ‘John Mearsheimer on why the West is principally responsible for the Ukrainian crisis’, *The Economist*, 19 March 2022. All emphases are mine.
8. Too often, classical realism and structural realism are conflated, notes Jonathan Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 1.
9. For a useful overview and critique of neorealism by several prominent historians, see Ernest R. May, Richard Rosecrance and Zara Steiner, eds., *History and Neorealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
10. ‘Kennan disliked theory’, notes Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, 696; for a succinct overview of Kennan’s ‘realism’, Richard Russell, ‘American Diplomatic Realism: A tradition practised and preached by George F. Kennan’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 11, no. 3 (2000): 159–82; also John Lukacs, *George Kennan: A Study of Character* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 174–75; cf. Paul Gottfried, ‘Kennan’s Realism’, *Soc* 47 (July 2020): 337–42, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-010-9334-2>; for the view that Kennan’s book *In the Cragged Hill* was a moralist rather than a realist treatise, Donald R. Brand, “Realists Make Strange Bedfellows: Kennan, Kissinger, and Aron”, *Polity* 28, no. 2 (1995): 277–83.
11. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 55, 94.
12. Frank Costigliola, *Kennan: A Life Between Worlds* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), xvi–xvii; Frank Costigliola, “I React Intensely to Everything”: Russia and the Frustrated Emotions of George F. Kennan, 1933–1958”, *The Journal of American History* 102, no. 4 (2016): 1075–101; Frank Costigliola, ‘Is this George Kennan’, *The New York Review of Books*, 8 December 2011; for an introduction to the role of emotions in international affairs, Christer Pursiainen and Tuomas Forsberg, *The Psychology of Foreign Policy* (Cham: Springer, 2021).
13. John Lamberton Harper, *American Visions of Europe: Franklin D. Roosevelt, George F. Kennan, and Dean G. Acheson* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 139, 151.
14. Merje Kuus, *Geopolitics and Expertise: Knowledge and authority in European diplomacy* (Malden, Massachusetts: John Wiley & Sons, 2014); Gearóid O’Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics. The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996); Sara Koopman et. al., “Critical Geopolitics/critical geopolitics 25 years on,” *Political Geography* 90 (2021) [no page numbers], <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102421>.
15. About mental maps, Alan K. Henrikson, “The Geographical “Mental Maps” of American Foreign Policy Makers,” *International Political Science Review* 1, no. 4 (1980): 495–530, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019251218000100405>; Norbert Götz and Janne Holmén, “Introduction to the Theme Issue: “Mental maps: geographical and historical perspectives”,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 35, no. 2 (2018): 157–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2018.1426953>; for problems of definition, Luis da Vinha, “Charting Geographic Mental Maps in Foreign Policy Analysis: A literature review,” *Human Geographies-Journal of Studies and Research in Human Geography* 6, no. 1: 5–17, <https://doi.org/10.5719/hgeo.2012.61.5> 2012; for an effort to use mental maps in foreign policy analysis, Benedikt Erforth, “Mental Maps and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Eurafrique and the French Military Intervention in Mali,” *European Review of International Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016): 38–57, <https://doi.org/10.3224/eris.v3i1.260062016>.
16. Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).
17. Wolff, *Wilson*, 137.

18. Beside archives, there is also the useful selection of diary entries compiled and edited by Frank Costigliola, *The Kennan Diaries* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014).
19. Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six friends and the world they made: Acheson, Bohlen, Harriman, Kennan, Lovett, McCloy* (London: Faber, 1986).
20. JLG-PUL, Interview with Loy W. Henderson, September 25, 1982. Referring to Kennan's lack of stamina for diplomatic work, Henderson's conclusion was unflattering: 'If all the Foreign Service officers were like him, we couldn't have a Foreign Service'. See also Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, 402.
21. GFK-PUL, Permanent Correspondence, Kennan to Leslie Gelb, 25 August 1992; for the debate on Soviet collapse, Vladislav Zubok et. al., "A Cold War Endgame or an Opportunity Missed? Analysing the Soviet collapse thirty years later," *Cold War History* 21, no. 4 (2021): 541–99. Kennan claimed he had foreseen Soviet collapse already in 1946. He was confident that Communism collapsed for precisely the reasons he had expected it would and namely due to internal weaknesses. Kennan would probably be indifferent to the ongoing debate over which factors, internal or external, had greater influence on the Soviet collapse.
22. GFK-PUL, Diaries, April 16, 1989.
23. GFK-PUL, Diaries, January 2, 1994. Kennan expressed sympathy for the 'gentlemen' from CIA, NSC, etc. As to the role of the wise men, Kennan envisaged a Council of State to complement the legislative and executive branches of the US Government, see Lukacs, *George Kennan*, 180–81.
24. GFK-PUL, Diaries, April 16, 1989.
25. George F. Kennan, "Is the Cold War over?," *New York Times*, February 5, 1989; Kennan, "Just another Great Power," *New York Times*, April 9, 1989; Kennan, "This is no Time for Talk of German Reunification: Reunification? Not yet," *The Washington Post*, November 12, 1989.
26. The Clinton administration would later frame it as a 'crisis of opportunity', Walter B. Slocombe, 'A Crisis of Opportunity: The Clinton administration and Russia', in *Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy after the Berlin Wall and 9/11*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 78–95. For a kennanesque take on the European settlements, see Timothy Snyder, "Integration and disintegration: Europe, Ukraine, and the world," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (2015): 695–707, <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.74.4.695>.
27. George F. Kennan, "Talk before the Council on Foreign Relations," December 20, 1989, GFK-PUL, unpublished works.
28. GFK-PUL, Diaries, December 3, 1989. In the 1970s, Kennan had come to view Finlandisation as a model behaviour of a small country vis-a-vis a larger country, George F. Kennan, "Europe's Problems, Europe's Choices," *Foreign Policy*, no. 14 (Spring 1974): 3–16, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1147941>.
29. Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, 681.
30. GFK-PUL, Diaries, April 9, 1989. The meeting was part of preparations for the NATO summit held in December the same year in Brussels.
31. GFK-PUL, Diaries, April 16, 1989.
32. Richard Ullman Papers, Public Policy Papers, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library (hereafter RUP-PUL), Transcript, Remarks by Mr George Frost Kennan, SHAPEX [SHAPE], May 9, 1989, NATO unclassified.
33. Stephan Kiesinger, 'Opening NATO and Engaging Russia: NATO's two tracks and the establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council', in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, ed. Kristina Spohr and Daniel Hamilton (Washington, DC: Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns

- Hopkins University, 2019), 57–70; Daniel S. Hamilton, ‘New Members, New Missions: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Architecture in the Second Clinton Administration’, in *Open Door*, 339–85.
34. John Lewis Gaddis, ‘The Senate should halt NATO Expansion’, *New York Times*, April 27, 1998; Costigliola, *Kennan*, 513.
  35. GFK-PUL, Diaries, May 11, 1989.
  36. George F. Kennan, *In the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 223; GFK-PUL, Diaries, 28 December 1994. Kennan expressed regret that the book was ignored by the press and the government. It was also ignored by Gaddis, his chosen biographer.
  37. Kennan, *In the Cragged Hill*, 223.
  38. GFK-PUL, Diaries, November 25, 1996.
  39. GFK-PUL, Diaries, December 17, 1995. At other times, Kennan confessed that Russian politics was ‘beyond my comprehension’.
  40. Kennan to Jakobson, November 15, 1996, cited by Max Jakobson, *Finland in the New Europe* (Westport, Conn.; London: Praeger, 1998), 151–52. I thank Juha-Matti Ritvanen for drawing my attention to this source.
  41. Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974).
  42. GFK-PUL, Diaries, April 8, 1990.
  43. GFK-PUL, Diaries, March 12, 1990.
  44. GFK-PUL, Diaries, March 11, 1992; May 29, 1992; September 25, 1994. To Kennan’s regret Russian interest in him waned later in the 1990s. However, he turned down an invitation to a state dinner for Yeltsin because this did not include a private talk with the Russian president.
  45. John Lewis Gaddis Papers on George F. Kennan, Public Policy Papers, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library (hereafter: JLG-PUL), Interview with Elbridge Durbrow, September 24, 1982.
  46. Helen S. Hundley, *George Kennan and the Russian Empire: How America’s Conscience Became an Enemy of Tsarism* (Washington, D.C.: Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, 2000); Stephen Turner, ‘What is the Problem with Experts?’, *Social Studies of Science* 31, no. 1 (2001): 123–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030631201031001007>.
  47. Harper, *American Visions*, 159.
  48. GFK-PUL, Diaries, November 25, 1996.
  49. Studying Russia was also somewhat easier considering what archives were open and conveniently accessible, primarily in Moscow and Leningrad, to foreign researchers, Norman M. Naimark, ‘Imperial Russian History Then and Now,’ *Ab Imperio* 1 (2010): 89–97, <https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2010.0029>.
  50. GFK-PUL, Diaries, February 8, 1991 and March 25, 1992.
  51. Natalie Grant, ‘The Russian Section: A Window on the Soviet Union,’ *Diplomatic History* 2, no. 1 (1978): 107–15.
  52. George F. Kennan, *Sketches from a Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 275.
  53. Costigliola, ‘Is This George Kennan’.
  54. GFK-PUL, Diaries, a trip from Riga to Vilna, April 15, 1929.
  55. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1950–1963* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), 27, 31; Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929–1969* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 11.
  56. GFK-PUL, Correspondence, Letters to Daughter Joan Elizabeth, ‘My Dear Children’, December 1968.
  57. GFK-PUL, Diaries, 6 September 1929, Tallinn. About the notion of primitivist travelling, Elisabeth Oxfeldt, *Journeys from Scandinavia: Travelogues of Africa, Asia, and South America, 1840–2000* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 81.

58. GFK-PUL, Diaries, March 29, 1929, trip to Dorpat [Tartu]; Riga, April 14, 1929.
59. GFK-PUL, Diaries, June 28, 1944.
60. Gostigliola, *Kennan*, 77–78. Note that Costigliola seems to think that Baltic nations are Slavic.
61. Trip to Helsingfors, September 22, 1929.
62. Ibid.
63. GFK-PUL, Diaries, April 15, 1930.
64. Cited by Harper, *American Visions*, 81.
65. JLG-PUL, Interview with Henderson.
66. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925–1950*, 133–34.
67. NSC 20/1, Report to the National Security Council by the Department of State: US Objectives with Respect to Russia, August 18, 1948, in *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945–1950*, ed. Thomas H. Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 178. I am grateful to Una Bergmane for drawing my attention to this.
68. GFK-PUL, Diaries, July 27, and August 1, 1944.
69. US National Archives (College Park), RG 59, Records of Charles Bohlen, box 5, Kennan to Bohlen, January 26, 1945; Frank Roberts, *Dealing with Dictators: The Destruction and Revival of Europe: 1930–1970* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991), 76.
70. GFK-PUL, Diaries, June 20, 1987.
71. GFK-PUL, Diaries, April 5, 1990.
72. A girl hit by a car lying on the ground with her skirt revealing naked legs; a young, well-dressed, very demure Lettish woman who ‘would do very well for the movies’, accompanied by her middle-aged but ‘well-preserved’ mother, etc. GFK-PUL, Diaries, June 10, 1929 (written in German); Riga to Vilna, April 15, 1929.
73. ‘Too much in it of scenes, places, and landscapes; too little about people’, GFK-PUL, Diaries, March 1, 1988.
74. GFK-PUL, Diaries, June 26, 1996.
75. George F. Kennan, “Remarks for Milwaukee Forum,” May 22, 1990, GFK-PUL, unpublished works; also George F. Kennan, ‘Communism in Russian History’, *Foreign Affairs* 69, no. 4 (1990): 169–86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20044607>; GFK-PUL, Diaries, September 25, 1990, April 8, 1990, February 3, 1991. Kennan was also ironic about the idea of an independent Ukraine, referring to its undefined borders.
76. Kennan, *In the Cragged Hill*, 89.
77. GFK-PUL, Diaries, 16 November 1993, and 6 January 1994.
78. RUP-PUL, George F. Kennan, ‘A Hundred Years ago . . .’, Undated and without heading, but sent to Ullman on January 11, 1994.
79. Ibid., 4.
80. Ibid., 16.
81. GFK-PUL, Ullman to Kennan, May 19, 1994; see also Adam Watson to Kennan, 18 December 1993. Kennan wrote to the British former diplomat and political scientist Watson that smaller countries with fewer ‘natural and intellectual resources’ should become part of regional associations rather than seek a fully independent status.
82. GFK-PUL, Ullman to Kennan, May 19, 1994.
83. Ibid.
84. GFK-PUL, Diaries, January 6, 1994.
85. GFK-PUL, Diaries, January 2, 1994.
86. E.g. Charles L. Glaser, “Why NATO is Still Best: Future security arrangements for Europe”, *International Security* 18, no. 1 (Summer 1993): 5–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539031>.

87. GFK-PUL, Diaries, January 8, 1994.
88. GFK-PUL, Diaries, January 15, 1994.
89. Ibid.
90. GFK-PUL, Diaries, 28 January 1997. True, Poland bordered the Kaliningrad enclave but what Kennan had in mind was probably the Polish border with Ukraine, as on his mental map the borders of Ukraine and Russia were conflated.
91. GFK-PUL, Kennan to Talbott, April 22, 1997; cf. Kenneth N. Waltz, 'NATO Expansion: A realist's view', *Contemporary Security Policy* 21, no. 2 (2000): 23–38 (30), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260008404253>.
92. Andrew Kydd, "Trust Building, Trust Breaking: The dilemma of NATO enlargement," *International Organization* 55, no. 4 (2001): 801–28, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511512209.004>.
93. GFK-PUL, Talbott to Kennan, April 27, 1997.
94. GFK-PUL, Diaries, February 18, 1997.
95. GFK-PUL, Diaries, July 31, 1997.
96. Ibid.
97. John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 5–56; Waltz, 'NATO Expansion'.
98. Cf. Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future*, which refers to Kennan as one of the great authorities of classical realism beside Carr, Morgenthau, Aron and Gilpin. See also David A. Mayers, 'George F. Kennan: Kennan agonistes', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Political Realism*, ed. Robert Schuett and Miles Hollingworth (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 328–341 (330).
99. GFK-PUL, Diaries, November 25, 1996.
100. Compare this to a more benign assessment by Mayers, 'Kennan', 336.
101. The crisis over Kuwait gave Kennan reason to mull over the history of decolonisation, which he thought had laid the basis for contemporary troubles and the widespread notion – mistaken from his point of view – that the West had responsibilities in that region. Much better if the Dutch and the British had never conceded the oil refineries to the Arab countries and that the West had never recognised those peoples as independent states, Kennan thought, GFK-PUL, Diaries, 14 August 1990, and 15 January 1991. Kennan had expressed those views as far back as 1977, George F. Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger: Current realities of American foreign policy* (Boston; Toronto: Little Brown, 1977).
102. The phrase is used in GFK-PUL, Diaries, January 28, 1997.
103. Costigliola, *Kennan*, 526.
104. Kennan has also spoken against imperialism. 'There is nothing more contrary to nature than the attempt to hold in obedience distant provinces', he wrote in his *Memoirs, 1925–1950*, 130. I am grateful for anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
105. See the critical remarks by Elie Kedourie, Sidney Hook, Hugh Trevor-Roper and Milovan Djilas about the rise of nationalism among small nations in Eastern Europe, G. R. Urban, *The End of Empire: The demise of the Soviet Union, G.R. Urban in conversation with leading thinkers of our time* (Washington, D.C.: American University Press, 1993), 113, 36, 86, 193–94.
106. Kennan, *In the Cragged Hill*, 257.
107. GFK-PUL, Diaries, August 4, 1990; August 14, 1990; GFK-PUL, Diaries, 1978 boat trip on the Baltic, Box 239, Folder 4.
108. Kennan, *In the Cragged Hill*, 257; also GFK-PUL, Diaries, December 26, 1991, following Gorbachev's resignation; also diary entries on August 14, 1990, and January 15, 1991.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank John L. Gaddis, Juhana Aunesluoma, Bradley Reynolds, Tapio Juntunen, Una Bergmane, Kari Möttölä, Marjo Uutela, Eva Piirimäe, Pärtel Piirimäe, Hent Kalmo, Juhan Saharov, David Ilmar Lepasaar Beecher and Eerik Marmeï for commenting on earlier drafts of the article. The two anonymous reviewers were extremely encouraging and most helpful. Research for the article would not have been possible without the generous support of the Fulbright Program, the MacMillan Centre and particularly Bradley Woodworth of the Baltic Studies Program at Yale, and the U.S. Embassy in Tallinn, most importantly Jane Susi.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland [BALTRANS]; Estonian Research Council [PRG942].

## Notes on contributor

*Kaarel Piirimäe* is Associate Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Tartu and Research Fellow at the University of Helsinki. In 2009, he received his Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge with a thesis on the Big Three Allies and the Baltic states during the Second World War (published as *Roosevelt, Churchill and the Baltic Question: Allied Relations during the Second World War*). Piirimäe has edited several volumes and special journal issues on the history of the Baltic states in the twentieth century. His recent articles include: 'Liberals and nationalism: EH Carr, Walter Lippmann and the Baltic States from 1918 to 1944', 'Gorbachev's new thinking and how its interaction with perestroika in the republics catalysed the Soviet collapse' and 'Estonia "has not time": Existential Politics at the End of Empire'. Currently he is researching security policies in the Baltic Sea Region in the 1990s.

## ORCID

Kaarel Piirimäe  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6523-1967>