Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
30.1 (2024): 180-202
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2024/30/1/9

George F. Kennan and Hungary: A Cold War Visionary and a "remarkable people with rich civilizational qualities"

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ABSTRACT

Although George F. Kennan hardly needs an introduction, this article revisits his career. He was the "father" of the containment doctrine, even if he did not accept that title because he believed the successive American governments debauched his murky idea about how to oppose the Soviet Union. Many things are known about Kennan—both his professional and private life—but some small additions are still missing. This essay investigates his relations with, and ideas about Hungary, which so far have earned passing mentions at best. This is not surprising because Hungary rarely became a central issue during the Cold War—with 1956 as an obvious exception—so scholars focused mainly on Kennan, the Russian expert and cold warrior. Still, occasionally Hungary received Kennan's attention throughout his long career: he made observations and took notes on Hungary, Hungarian foreign policy, and Hungarians as early as the eve of World War II, and he continued to do so as late as Hungary's joining NATO at the end of the 1990s. These were sometimes indirect assumptions, long-distance observations, or the results of on-site experience. It is interesting to see how the famously realist Kennan approached Hungary and the Hungarian questions throughout more than half a century. His relationship with either Hungary or Hungarians, however, has never been within the scope of an academic study, so this article serves as the basis for possible future endeavors into that direction. By introducing Kennan's episodic views and impressions regarding Hungary in the larger part of the twentieth century, the article fills a small but important gap in the growing field of the history of American–Hungarian relations and adds to the portrait of Kennan. (ZP)

KEYWORDS: Cold War, George F. Kennan, Hungary, Hungarian–US relations

Introduction: Kennan's short biography and career

George F. Kennan's name and personality are well known to people interested in twentieth-century history, since he was one of the best known American Soviet experts, and he played a crucial role in shaping American foreign policy at the beginning of the Cold War. What is more, even if he

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took issue with that questionable fame many times, his name is inextricably interwoven with the doctrine of containment, that is, with bolstering democratic countries in the face of possible communist encroachment, which formed the main pillar of American foreign policy from the late 1940s until the end of the Cold War. Kennan's general and foreign political views are well known since throughout his long life and prolific career, the graphomaniac Kennan produced an abundance of writings in the form of books, articles, presentations, and diary notes.[1] In addition, from the 1980s a long line of books has been published about Kennan, many of them written while he was still alive.[2]

During his time in the diplomatic service Kennan served through an unparalleled string of momentous times and events: in Moscow, in the second half of the 1930s; in Prague, in 1938 and after the Munich Pact, where he witnessed the disappearance of Czechoslovakia, and with it the Versailles peace order. He served in Berlin from the start of World War II until Germany declared war on the United States and America became a party to the European war; during World War II also in Lisbon, where he managed to obtain American forces use of the Azores—the Portuguese capital was a perfect place for intelligence gathering and secret talks between the western allies and Nazi satellite countries. In 1945–1946 he was again commissioned to the Soviet Union where he witnessed the very beginning of the Cold War; then he took an active role as leader of the Policy Planning Staff in Washington, DC, overseeing the formulation and implementation of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan in 1947. Kennan was appointed as US ambassador to Moscow in 1952 and to Belgrade in 1961–1963, respectively. During his active years in the diplomatic service, and even more so following it, Kennan was a lecturer, historian, and publicist.

Most historians agree that Kennan was a realist when it came to his approach to foreign policy. That is, Kennan believed that relations among states in general, and between the United States and other countries in particular, must be based upon interests and possible agreements in contrast to values and ideologies; he was led not by legal and moral principles, but by what would be beneficial for his country in order to achieve its goals. Furthermore, in order to have a reasonable goal, one must clearly be aware of the country's available resources. Kennan, who idealized eighteenth-century diplomacy, would have liked to see something similar in the twentieth: creating a balance-of-power system and guarding it by synchronizing great power interests, which can only be done through negotiations and mutual understanding. Despite the supposedly realistic

nature of his analyses, as Frank Costigliola claims, "Kennan's rhetorical strategies in the [Long Telegram] worked so effectively because the Truman administration was looking for a clarifying statement and because Kennan—with the authority of his expertise and his ostensible realism—was able to appeal to emotions in the name of reason" ("George Kennan's Formation of the Cold War" 1338). Throughout his long career Kennan focused on Europe; he did not deem the rest of the world as vital to the United States, and the other parts of the globe could only play a peripheral role in the contest between the two superpowers in the latter half of the twentieth century. Such views and convincing argumentative style guaranteed that Kennan would not only write but profess.

Following his retirement from active diplomatic service, Kennan immersed himself in academia. For Kennan, teaching was "an act of faith."[3] This was what he saw as his main job and passion, and he thought that educating the American public was his karma. His official biographer also labeled him as a teacher, but the eccentric Kennan went farther and also considered himself "a prophet." As he claimed: "It was for this that I was born" (qtd. in Costigliola, "Is This George F. Kennan?"). A prophet naturally teaches, but this type of teaching has its negative side—and this was true for Kennan as well—namely that the tremendous knowledge that such a person possesses through experience is sometimes used for self-assured guesswork and revelation-like declarations. Kennan was sensitive to change and in his political and general outlook was rather conservative; he believed in traditions and deep human traits. Exactly on account of this feature, his ideas were often misunderstood or outright rejected, and he could rarely boast of the anticipated effect that he wished to achieve. His deep thoughts on history that were often verging on the philosophical were just as often misunderstood and not appreciated, yet he never gave up.

Kennan's thoughts on Hungary and Hungarians

Probably everybody who is interested in Kennan is aware of the fact that Kennan's father, Kossuth Kent Kennan (1851–1933), was named after Lajos Kossuth, the famous Hungarian patriot. This was a result of Kossuth's unprecedented popularity with Americans during his successful tour in the United States in 1851–52 in the hope of finding support for the failed Hungarian War of Independence. Also, the family had Scottish ancestors and their resistance to the English may have played a part in choosing a freedom fighter's name. In any case, Kennan, who was well versed in his own clan's history, respected this choice for his father's name, and had some notions

from early on about Hungarian history. There were four occasions in Kennan's life when he became more closely involved in either Hungarian foreign policy or Hungary itself. The first such occasion came in 1938, while he was stationed in Prague, while the last one happened half a century later, in 1986, when he went on a private trip to Budapest. The following analysis will deal with Kennan's ideas and opinion about Hungary, Hungarian foreign policy, and Hungarians during this long period of time to shed more light on his worldview.

Prague

Prior to the outbreak of World War II and during the conflagration, Kennan was relatively close to Hungary and Hungarian affairs. After he spent his first years as a secretary at the embassy in Moscow (1933–1937), the State Department sent him to the Legation at Prague.[4] Only a few days after his arrival, the Great Powers (Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy) signed the Munich Pact on 30 September 1938; as a result, Czechoslovakia gave up territories with overwhelming German minorities (the Sudetenland). This act can be seen as a continuation of the Anschluss (12 March 1938) in that the western powers could not resist German demands and insisted on the illusory belief that if Germany was satisfied, war could be avoided. Czechoslovakia hoped for western protection in vain: the following March the remaining independent Czech territory was occupied, and a German protectorate was established, while Slovakia created its own state but was in reality an obvious puppet of the Third Reich. Therefore, one of the successful pillars of the Versailles peace system crumbled and interwar Europe faced imminent changes.

Because of the changed circumstances in Prague and Czechoslovakia in the fall and spring, Kennan—in a somewhat indirect manner—followed Hungary's steps after the Munich Pact. As is well known, Hungary made the most of the aftermath of the Munich Pact and—by the decision of Germany and Italy—regained some of its lost territories in the north, in line with the First Vienna Award, which was signed on 2 November 1938. Hungary received about 4,600 square miles along a northern strip in Slovakia with about almost one million ethnic Hungarians.[5] Kennan as a secretary of the US Legation in Prague often wrote about the political, economic, and military situation in this corner of the world. Actually, the Munich Pact did not shake Kennan; what is more, initially he felt relief. This was partly due to the fact that he disagreed with the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in the wake of World War I. In contrast to many liberal Americans,

he was not a great fan of Beneš's foreign policy or the circumstances created in the Danubian region by the Paris peace conference. In his *Memoirs* he noted that "I deplored the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire" (98).[6] Other American diplomats in the neighborhood shared this sentiment. John Flourney Montgomery, for instance, who served in Hungary as minister from 1933, expressed his appreciation for the historic role the Monarchy had performed, and expressed this thought after World War II: "I am not of the opinion that the Austro-Hungarian Empire was a political monstrosity. Everything I have learned since I have been here convinces me to the contrary."[7]

Kennan's analysis of the Ruthenian issue provides helpful insights into his views on Hungarian foreign policy at the time. The First Vienna Award was mostly accepted in Western Europe and seen as a moderate and sober rectification of the inapt Trianon Treaty. The future of Ruthenia hung in the balance, though. Even before the Slovak state was declared in March 1939, Kennan held the view that neither the Slovaks nor the Ruthenians had "the prerequisites for an independent political existence."[8] A little later he expressed his belief that the Ruthenians were basically constituted of "half a million primitive Slav peasants in the foothills of the Carpathians."[9] In light of this it is hardly surprising that Kennan shared the general view of international observers that the territory would soon be incorporated into Hungary, which—in his opinion—was justified and natural both on political and economic grounds.[10] In a matter of days after Kennan wrote these lines, and when Czechoslovakia ceased to exist, Hungary lived up to such expectations and occupied Ruthenia on 15 March 1939. As for the Germans' foreign policy aims in the region, Kennan thought Berlin was trying to make Slovakia and Hungary as antagonistic toward each other as possible, thereby abetting the German agenda.[11] In July 1939, Kennan took a short trip by automobile in Slovakia. Based upon his fresh experience there, he reported to the State Department that it would not be startling to see Hungary gain further territory from Slovakia. But in exchange it would also have to help German military efforts against Romania by allowing the German troops to cross Hungarian territory.[12] Although the latter did take place, Hungary took no more territories in the north. All in all, Kennan saw the situation realistically, and the Hungarian move in March 1939 met his expectations.

World War II—Lisbon and Moscow

After his assignment in Prague, Kennan was sent to Berlin, where he stayed until the German war declaration on the United States was issued, but

he could actually return to the United States again only after six months of internment. Washington sent him back to Europe in 1943, this time to Portugal. There, although geographically farther, still in a more intimate way and only briefly, Kennan dealt with Hungary and Hungarian foreign policy.

By 1943 it was clear that it was only a matter of time before Nazi Germany would lose the war—the Battle of Stalingrad and the developments in North Africa made that inevitable. For this very reason the German satellite countries began to look for a way out of the war. Part of such a step was to establish secret contacts with the western powers, hoping to ensure better conditions for themselves at the end of the war. These efforts were concentrated in the neutral countries of Europe—Switzerland, Turkey, Sweden, and Portugal. Lisbon was definitely a center of such activities. That is how Kennan got into contact with Hungarian peace feelers in the fall of 1943. After Kenneth Bert Fish, the American minister to Portugal, died in July, Kennan assumed the leadership of the legation until the new minister arrived in November. In this post, his most important task was to secure the use of the Azores, which belonged to Portugal, as a base for the US Air Force. Following a somewhat unorthodox path, Kennan was successful in this.[13]

During the fall, Kennan gave the green light to the American attaché in Lisbon to make contact with Hungarian diplomat Sándor Hollán, who was at that time serving in Portugal. In order to keep to clandestine contact unbeknownst to the Germans, the American military attaché met with Hollán through a Portugese diplomat. Hollán was told that the American side wanted political and military information, but it was not willing to make any promises as to the future. Hollán, for his part, said to his counterpart that Hungary was ready to break with Germany at the first appropriate moment and cooperate with the Allied troops in case they approached the Carpathian Basin. The Americans replied that they could negotiate only on the basis of unconditional surrender, and Hungary had to offer this surrender to the three Allied powers at the same time (Borhi, *Dealing with Dictators* 23–24). The talks must have seemed promising because toward the end of September Andor Wodianer, the leader of the Hungarian legation, met with Kennan. Although the meeting did not produce much new development—Kennan kept repeating that Hungary should make some spectacular move soon to influence American public opinion in her favor—it is more revealing the notion Kennan expressed about democracy. Kennan had many reservations about democracy in general, and American democracy in particular. His sentences to Wodianer strengthen this view. As the Hungarian minister reported, Kennan articulated his belief that democracies had "many

advantages, but also the great drawback that considerable time was needed to formulate a common opinion. And when it comes to a common opinion shared by two democracies . . .!"[14]

The secret talks in Lisbon produced nothing in the end, and Kennan was soon sent to London to participate in the work of the nascent European Advisory Commission, an inter-allied body to plan the postwar world. In the next summer he was again back in Moscow, so Hungarian questions came to him indirectly. But since the Soviet Union was pressing westward keeping larger and larger territories under its control, including Hungary from the spring of 1945, issues pertaining to Hungary were constantly on his radar and he knew what was happening in the country.

Toward the end of the war, and again only indirectly, Kennan had to deal with Hungarian problems. For example, Kennan reported from Moscow that, according to a person arriving from the Hungarian capital that was under siege by Soviet troops, the situation was critical and all expectations were that by the end of the siege the city would lie in ruins, which would have a major effect on slowing down postwar reconstruction.[15] A year later Kennan again sent a report, this time about the Hungarian economy and a possible Soviet attitude regarding it. As he stated, the Soviets failed to share with their western allies the economic problems in Hungary and were not willing to find a solution on a common basis. The high reparation costs that the Soviets demanded and the occupying Soviet forces, together with the destruction of the war, created a dire situation for the Hungarian economy. Kennan believed the Soviets must be called upon to cease this behavior and allow Hungary to succeed on its own in the general European reconstruction.[16] He articulated this opinion just two days prior to the publication of the Long Telegram, but already here, as in many other reports, he used harsh language concerning Soviet foreign policy.

After World War II and with the onset of the Cold War, for the United States Eastern Europe in general, and Hungary in particular, were not crucial points of interests. Obviously, there was the desire to see democratic countries after the war in this region, but altogether they understood and accepted the strategic and defensive point of view of the Soviet Union, and thereby they reluctantly gave the upper hand to Moscow. Washington concentrated more on economic issues and wished to see the whole continent integrated along reconstruction and economic consolidation. In sharp contrast to this American view, for the Soviets the whole of the Central and Eastern European region, and Hungary especially, was important strategically, and they saw the defeated and occupied countries as economic

prey. In the case of Hungary, the Americans only managed to somewhat alleviate the amount of reparations that Hungary had to pay to the Soviet Union. The decrease from $400 to $300 million, however, was only symbolic, since in the next period the Soviets took from Hungary many times the equivalent of this amount. Moscow's aim was economic colonization, which the American side could not stop, nor did it put up a serious fight.[17]

The 1956 Revolution

The next occasion when Kennan—and practically everybody else in the world—paid close attention to Hungary was the 1956 revolution and freedom fight. By this time Kennan had left the main current of the decision-making process of American foreign policy and was spending his time at Princeton, somewhat in exile. This, however, did not prevent him from thinking and discussing American foreign policy, its history, the US relationship with Russia and the Soviet Union as well as Germany, and the diplomatic history of the long nineteenth century and World War I. The two major European problems—Germany and the Soviet Union—affected the other countries situated between them since neither in political nor in economic questions could these smaller countries be separated from their giant neighbors. At the same time, Kennan never gave up hope that with the right strategy the Soviet iron grip could be loosened around the socialist countries behind the Iron Curtain, which in a best-case scenario would go parallel with the inner decay of the Soviet Union. In light of all this, it might be illuminating to revisit Kennan's reaction and opinion concerning the events of 1956, when for an all too brief moment, it seemed that one of those countries—Hungary—might win independence from Moscow.

Naturally this is not the place to give a detailed analysis of the Hungarian revolution of 1956, which has been discussed in great detail in many works. Suffice it to say, the 1953 East German uprising clearly showed that one of the campaign slogans of the Eisenhower government inaugurated shortly before the events—liberation of the captive nations in Europe—was only pure rhetoric and became hollow when it came to implementation. And similarly to the 1953 scenario, Washington was totally unprepared for the events in Poland and Hungary in the fall of 1956, but especially in the case of the latter. It was beyond doubt that the United States was not going to intervene and risk a military showdown with the Soviet Union. Despite all the American rhetoric and political propaganda, Hungary was in the Soviet sphere of influence, and although detaching Hungary from the Soviet bloc would have been an enormous success, American national security interests

did not leave room for the Eisenhower government to seriously toy with the idea of military intervention, especially a few days prior to the presidential election. What is more, for a short time after the revolution started in Budapest on 23 October it seemed that Moscow might prove lenient toward Hungary.[18] A few days after the October revolution, the Suez crisis began, which was much more important for the United States; it somewhat diverted the international community's attention. In Egypt, Washington had to act against its own western European allies, and the Hungarian question was relegated to a less important category. When the Soviets in the end used military force to crush the revolution in early November, aside from diplomatic protests, there was no serious challenge to the Soviet step.[19]

Kennan naturally followed the events in Hungary that fall, especially so since at first it seemed that the situation might play out his earlier vision regarding the breakup of the Soviet system. His diary preserved his thoughts about the situation: there are two types of entries from these weeks dealing with the Hungarian Revolution. One documents two telephone conversations of his with John. M. Maury, on 1 November 1956, and on 19 February 1957, respectively.[20] These are typed texts, in all likelihood verbatim notes of the conversations. In addition, there are also typed and handwritten diary entries about the unfolding events in Hungary between 7 and 15 November 1956, presenting Kennan's thoughts about the events in Budapest and their consequences.

From his telephone call with Maury on November 1, it is clear that in Kennan's mind the initial Soviet troop withdrawal stemmed from Soviet domestic political problems. He suspected that the Red Army's chiefs had had enough of being used for police actions in satellite countries if discontent rose too high. Kennan believed that a Tito-type regime was acceptable for Moscow if such a government was firm about becoming more independent of the Soviet Union, but what happened in Hungary was humiliating and could only take place because there were serious debates within the highest Soviet leadership. "I cannot believe," he said, "that this withdrawal under the threat of the Hungarian air force would be the result of deliberate policy, it is the result of some confusion."[21] At the same time, Kennan did not give much significance to the Suez crisis regarding the solution of the Hungarian situation. This demonstrates how confused Kennan himself was about the visible and hypothetical Soviet steps; he even admitted: "What has happened in Budapest doesn't fit at all with anything I have believed or said. If that is bona fide as an act of policy, I don't know a damn thing about those things."[22] Still, the situation gave Kennan some hope: if the Soviets did withdraw from

Hungary, this might be the forerunner of a general withdrawal from the other satellites, and if that took place in East Germany, the communist regime there would collapse in a matter of days. This scenario, however, went so much against the Soviet policy up to that point that for Kennan the whole thing was "bewildering"; as he put it, "there is something in this that does not meet the eye."[23]

On 4 November 1956, the Soviet troops attacked Budapest and some bigger cities in the countryside, and ruthlessly eliminated resistance. Starting on 7 November, throughout a whole week, Kennan reflected on the situation in his diary entries. This is fortunate since in the year 1956 there were longer hiatuses in his diary. For example, prior to 7 November, for three weeks he did not make a single entry. The 7 November entry was provoked by Eisenhower's reelection victory the day before. The Republican victory meant that there was no possibility for a new approach to American foreign policy, which disturbed Kennan since, as the events in Hungary proved without a doubt, "my own fears and warnings, both with regard to 'Liberation' and with regard to the appeal to UN majorities and the effort to cultivate popularity with the new nations, are being vindicated beyond my wildest dreams."[24] Kennan was afraid that there might be war, but he also felt self-pity at being neglected by Washington. As usual, he felt that his expertise on the Soviet Union ought to be indispensable for the administration. This is somewhat surprising since in the phone call with Maury a week earlier he admitted that he was not sure what was really happening on the Soviet side.

As on cue, the very next day his friends in the government called him to ask for his opinion. In Kennan's view the Russians did not want war, but they would use the situation in Egypt both to deflect attention from Hungary and strengthen their position in Egypt while the Western powers were bickering. If this came to pass—and Kennan was convinced that Washington did not understand the country's true interests—then the Soviet Union, with its partial dominance over the Near East oil, might be able to blackmail the United States and its allies. But Kennan added, "the situation was partly out of hand, from their standpoint as well as ours."[25]

The United States used the United Nations to keep the Hungarian question alive, thereby putting pressure on Moscow. When the UN wanted to send observers to Hungary, the Soviet-backed Kádár regime refused them entry to the country, although this was the only act on part of the organization that Kennan deemed positive. The obstinate Hungarian obstruction proved, however, what Kennan had always believed: the United Nations was a paper tiger and had no real constructive role in world politics. Its superficial

symbolism was distasteful to Kennan, mainly because he was sure that the majority of Americans was of the opinion that the government had done well. This meant in turn that "our real interests in the world may be sacrificed to the final point of utter and complete isolation and that we will find this entirely in order provided it all occurs legally and that we vote virtuously and high-mindedly in the case of all United Nations resolutions."[26] Kennan, as always, thought that the great powers should solve their problems among themselves. The United Nations was a fine idea, but as to practical decisions, it was basically useless. Realpolitik worked differently, and the Hungarian events only deepened his conviction on this.

A few months after the October–November events in Budapest, there was another telephone call between Kennan and Maury. The confusing mist of the fall had somewhat disappeared, so with admittedly little time after the events Kennan tried to evaluate what had taken place on the Soviet side and what consequences it would have. He concluded that despite the Soviet effort to "show self-assuredness and smile a lot," in fact they were very nervous since their policy in Eastern Europe had gone bankrupt to a large degree. The Soviets did not and could not give up the region, and Kennan observed that "behind this policy of friendliness there [was] also a mailed fist."[27]

For Kennan the Hungarian Revolution meant the hope that a mortal wound might be afflicted on the Soviet Union, which might also bring about the breakup of that country as he had also hoped for and anticipated. Therefore, it is understandable why he felt so disappointed that this came to naught. It must be seen as well that Kennan—as a realist would—always considered American interests, at least what he saw as such, to be of the highest importance. That is the reason why he accepted the division of Europe with a Soviet dominance over Eastern Europe, as well as the incapability of the United States to initiate any fundamental changes in that status quo. He strongly believed that the pressure must not cease on Moscow, but he was also convinced that real changes would only start inside the Soviet sphere. The events thirty years later did prove this view correct. As for his analysis regarding Hungarian foreign policy, there is little to say. The Revolution was a mass-based national movement, and no independent Hungarian foreign policy existed during the late 1940s and 1950s, and even beyond.

After the Hungarian Revolution, Kennan did not closely deal with Hungarian questions for three decades. It is interesting that his most personal

and lasting experience about Hungary came in his old age when he visited Hungary in the spring of 1986.

Kennan's 1986 visit to Hungary

By the middle of the 1980s, American–Hungarian relations had significantly improved compared to the early phase of the Cold War, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. At the beginning of the 1980s, Soviet–American relations, however, took a turn for the worse one more time, and the Reagan administration gently encouraged the satellite countries in Eastern Europe to try and work for some degree of democratization. In addition, at the beginning of the decade the Hungarian economy was on the brink of collapse and could only survive with the help of western loans. In order to ensure such a lifeline, Hungary became a member of the World Bank in 1982. At that time Hungary had a relatively good reputation in Washington, and throughout the decade the American cultural influence further grew in Hungary (through the distribution of American books, movies, and TV series), the first joint venture companies were created, and Hungary was seen as a kind of mediator between the United States and the Soviet Union. During these years, Hungary enjoyed a more independent foreign policy than in the previous decades. Vice President George Bush's official visit to Budapest in September 1985 was constructive and successful, just like that of Secretary of State George Schultz toward the end of the year. The George Soros Foundation started its beneficial work around this time as well, which also helped to soften the prevailing system.[28] It was in this political-diplomatic-cultural milieu that the former diplomat and number one Soviet expert paid a visit to Hungary.

The main reason for George Kennan's 1986 visit to Hungary was health related: he had suffered from his rheumatic knees for a long time, and he arrived in Budapest looking for a treatment. The Hungarian doctors had a good reputation in this field, and it was "far cheaper than what one would receive at any first rate spa in western Europe."[29] He spent three weeks at Hotel Thermal on Margaret Island. At the same time, naturally, Kennan wanted to see close up "a bit of one of the two most interesting countries in Eastern Europe," and instead of spending "the dismal month of March" at Princeton, he looked forward to this "strange excursion."[30] Through Vencel Házi, the Hungarian ambassador to the United States, Kennan informed the Hungarian government about his impending visit in order not to create any discomfort by his appearance in Budapest; Házi, on his part, gave a book on Budapest to Kennan before the latter's departure.[31] Kennan's presence made

waves on either side of the Iron Curtain. The Cold War was still going on, antagonism between the Soviet Bloc and the West was as strong as ever, and aside from a very narrow intellectual circle in Hungary, the name of Kennan did not mean anything. All these notwithstanding, his visit—at least to those affected by it—was an event in itself.

Naturally, the Hungarian newspapers did not tout Kennan's visit to Budapest. Only a short news item by the Hungarian Telegraph Agency appeared in some dailies:

> Mátyás Szűrös, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Party, met with George F. Kennan, the well-known American public figure, in the Parliament building Thursday afternoon. During their warm-hearted talk, they exchanged ideas about the main currents of international as well as some of the present theoretical and practical questions of East-West relations. Also present was András Balogh, the president of the political department of Hungarian Political Science Association.[32]

The reason for the lack of official interest on part of newspapers was that although for some people his name meant a lot, Kennan came strictly on a private visit. Also, when he was American ambassador to Moscow, he was expelled from the Soviet Union, and after all he was the father of containment, the official Cold War policy of the United States to that day, therefore the Hungarians did not wish to make a spectacle out of his visit. Although in 1986 the thaw had begun thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev's reform politics in the Soviet Union, on the surface, and especially in the official state propaganda, Hungary was very cautious. At the same time, those who were well-informed about the situation and his position recognized Kennan as a long-time critic of his country's foreign policy. No wonder that important people, for example, Mátyás Szűrös, were willing to meet him while he was in Hungary. Kennan had a long list of people he wanted to meet and exchange ideas with, but from the surviving documents it is not clear how many of those people he managed to talk to, but in all probability just a handful. On his list that was put together on the advice of the Hungarian ambassador, the State Department, Kennan's daughter, and his close friend, the Hungarian-born John Lukacs, among others, the following names appeared: János Berecz, member of the Central Committee; Péter Várkonyi, the incumbent foreign minister of Hungary; U.S. Ambassador to Hungary Nicholas Salgo; György Baló and János Hajdú of the Hungarian State Television; Ágnes

Sárvári, Director of the Archives of the City of Budapest; literary historian Mihály Szegedy-Maszák; and historian András Balogh.[33]

During Kennan's stay in Hungary, Balogh was the official contact person. The two men took long walks on Margaret Island, where they sometimes switched from English to Russian. Balogh told of his experiences in the Soviet Union, which Kennan enjoyed, and Balogh thought this might have played a part in Kennan becoming more open to him. According to Balogh, Kennan was friendly, collegial, and in full command of his acute mind at the age of 82. He always read *Pravda*, the main Soviet daily newspaper, while in Budapest. Kennan praised Gorbachev and his endeavors at reforms, but he was doubtful whether this would be enough, and whether it was not going to cause more problems than solutions. The breakup of the Soviet Union was also something Kennan did not anticipate at this point. When Balogh posed the question of what Kennan thought about the possibility of the breakup of Yugoslavia, Kennan replied that such an event would signify the end of the current international order and would bring in unforeseeable and tragic consequences.[34] This would indicate that Kennan believed in a bipolar world, accepted it as the norm, and was afraid of seismic changes in it.

Kennan took short trips in Budapest, and based upon these he gained certain impressions. He paid a visit to the Opera, where naturally he watched Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, even though it was in Hungarian. He took two excursions outside the capital city to touristic destinations: to the trio of Szentendre–Visegrád–Esztergom, north of Budapest, and to Eger. Regarding these trips he noted that it was almost impossible to glean information about the historical buildings.[35] On his way to Eger, the good quality of the highway and its facilities, plus the well-tended vineyards made Kennan formulate a surprising and false conclusion: "The general impression was that the Hungarians, in their unostentatious manner, had found ways to make a nominally socialist system work just about as well as a 'capitalist one or those of the welfare-state' systems of the West."[36] This is a good reminder of how superficial features can trick even the most experienced and sharp-eyed observers.

Thanks to Kennan's diary entries and his correspondence with Lukacs, one can get a glimpse of his impressions about Hungary and the people living there. Kennan prepared well for the visit, especially regarding the country's history. Due to his earlier career and work, he was well versed in twentieth-century Hungarian affairs, but the earlier times were obscure to him. He had read some books available on the subject and these, combined with his experience, made him note that Hungarian history was "heart-

breaking" as it was "punctuated with dreadful set-backs." Kennan could "think of no city that [was] so often and so terribly destroyed as Budapest. The wonder is that people have had the impulse, and the stubborn faith, to re-build it"[37]—this features as an often-recurring theme in his diary entries while in Budapest.

In the first two weeks neither Kennan nor his wife, Annelise, felt too well physically—mainly due to the different time zone and Kennan's lumbago—and hardly went out. Instead, they enjoyed the spa hotel's services, took long walks on the island, and Kennan read intensively as was his wont. The busier part of his stay was the last week when he met with Szűrös or Várkonyi. These two meetings in particular worried him, because he believed these men were "presumably too deeply involved with their political movement and with its relations with the Soviet Union to be able to talk freely about Hungary's international position and its complexities."[38] Still, during his talk with Várkonyi the two men "laughed over the fact" that they were both expelled from their respective host countries, the Soviet Union and the United States, almost at the same time.[39]

Kennan's impressions gained in Hungary were favorable. As he put it in his diary: Hungarians were a "remarkable people with rich civilizational qualities: gifted in almost every way: intellectually, technologically, musically, with the ability, when given the chance, to do a great many things very well indeed."[40] The level of civilization was always a crucial aspect for Kennan, and the Hungarians gave him a positive impression in this regard. As a concluding remark on the people, he wrote to his friend Lukacs that the Hungarians were "a people which, despite all the schmaltz of the gypsy music and the beauty of Budapest, does not wear its heart on its sleeve, and which has an inner pride, or self respect, which saves it from being either obsequious or arrogant—although in its heart, it is aware of its many unusual talents."[41] He attributed it to the country's history and geography that he found "the more thoughtful of the Hungarians somewhat subdued, bewildered and depressed."[42] Kennan had the feeling that the impressive Parliament building was yet another reminder and symbol of the discord between Hungarian aspirations and dreams and the stark historical reality. Because of these ambivalent observations Kennan was somewhat confused concerning the nature of Hungarians. He considered the unique Hungarian tongue to be both an advantage and disadvantage: a plus in national unity in a small country, but a distinct drawback in establishing relations with the West, and what it meant for Hungarian nationalism. He held the opinion that the talent of this people would have required a larger territory, and it was "a pity that

their connections with Croatia and with the greater part of Transylvania were so brutally and abruptly terminated as was the case after these two world wars."[43]

He happily took part in an event organized by the Hungarian Political Science Association, where about three dozen selected audience were present, who expressed their opinions with perhaps surprising openness and posed questions without feeling inhibited. This meeting meant a physical and mental challenge for Kennan:

> These meetings, instructive as they have been for me personally, have served one sad purpose: namely, to persuade me that I must never again visit, so long as the present political situation endures, another country of the Soviet bloc. It puts us all, myself and the local American representatives, into an ambiguous position, but myself in particular. I am looked to by people in the host country for things I cannot deliver—for words of hope in which I do not, myself, believe. Yet to tell what I know to be the truth: that they have nothing to hope from the United States, is to cross up the local American diplomats, who are only doing their duty and being personally kind to me in the bargain, and to put myself in the position of seeming to be working against my own government in a foreign country—a position in which I never hope to find myself.[44]

The seven-hour effort drained his energy, and this sort of duality always troubled him while in Hungary. This episode harkens back to the period after World War I when Hungarians—together with basically every country in the region—looked to the United States as their possible savior.

Margaret Island offered beautiful surroundings, and the hotel was fine, although impersonal. The musicians entertaining the guests were superb, but Kennan thought they did not play real Hungarian folk music but rather what the mostly elderly German guests wanted to hear. Although sixty years earlier he found a similar experience in Germany pleasant, "now I get no pleasure from having my table surrounded and myself serenaded, by these soulful fiddlers, as though I meant anything to them, or the music meant anything to them."[45] Since at the hotel nothing signaled that they were in a communist country, Kennan made the conclusion that he had discovered "one extreme bit of evidence of some thing has been obvious now for some years: namely, that as an object of belief, enthusiasm, or even interest, the Marxist-Leninist ideology was embarrassingly dead throughout all of Central and Northern Europe."[46]

Two weeks later, back in his home environment in the United States, after he had some time to process what had happened to him, Kennan once more wrote to Lukacs, this time a longer letter, about his experiences in Hungary. Hungarian talent—as he saw it—was not utilized. That meeting with the participants' unrestrained opinions and questions led Kennan—who always had his extra sensors on when observing the world around him, especially people—to the conclusion that he saw "in them a great restlessness and unhappiness—primarily over their restricted position under the shadow of the Russian tree, but also for a deeper reason, I thought: namely, brought with their recent relative prosperity, which had brought them closer to the West, they had also begun to experience something of the empty dissatisfactions of a boring materialist affluent society, and did not know what to do about it."[47]

The last occasion when Hungary drew Kennan's attention was at the time of Hungary's accession to the NATO. When in 1997 Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland joined NATO, Kennan was appalled. All throughout his life he had been sensitive to and considerate of the Russian/Soviet point of view and did not endorse his home country's hegemonic efforts in the world, its enlarged demands for defense, and therefore he was very much against the three Central-Eastern European countries becoming members of the military organization. In his views, geography also contradicted the logic of enlargement. Already back in 1949, when NATO was founded, Kennan resented the fact that Greece and Turkey could soon become members, since "North Atlantic" did not apply to these countries. He was convinced that "the only sound standard for membership in the Atlantic pact was indeed the geographic one. This was the only one that was without ambiguity and could clearly be shown to have only defensive connotations" (Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925–1950* 434). And fifty years later he still held this opinion. The enlargement was accepted of course at the NATO summit in Madrid, Spain, in July 1997. This, however, also contradicted what President Bill Clinton had promised Boris Yeltsin, the Russian president. He had given guarantees that only political enlargement would take place, but one could regularly hear about modernizing the weapon system in the former socialist countries. Kennan on principle could not accept the American move and held the view that Russia was unnecessarily humiliated. He had an opinion piece published on account of this NATO enlargement in which he criticized the Clinton administration's foreign policy. In this writing he mainly evoked the "Lippmann gap," according to which in foreign policy there must be a balance of resources, power, and the nation's commitment. Kennan also

thought that neither Congress, nor public opinion supported Clinton's enlargement agenda.[48] Kennan, the realist was in full force again.

Conclusion

George F. Kennan had a long and productive life, which ran along the whole of the twentieth century. He was often at the right place at the right time, and, thanks to his talent, he managed to get close to the center of American foreign policy decision making. He could boast of shaping and practicing American diplomacy, but he mostly watched it as an astute observer and a sharp critic. Some of his most intelligent views were formed when he was outside the government service. It was unavoidable that the diplomat-historian, who concentrated on and venerated Europe all his life, would be engaged, however remotely, with Hungary.

The occasional run-ins with Hungary, Hungarian foreign policy, and Hungarians reflected the very nature of Kennan and his views. When it came to Hungary as a state and its foreign policy in the last year of peace, and then during World War II, he analyzed and evaluated Hungary's position in the realistic mold: Hungary's interest and the reality of the surrounding conditions made both the First Vienna Award and the occupation of Ruthenia a necessary and acceptable step. When it came to Hungary's almost desperate effort to leave the war in 1943, he followed the realistic American policy view in demanding unconditional surrender in exchange for possible favors later on. The events in 1956 well proved that even a sharp-eyed analyst can be perplexed when cut off from reliable information: Kennan could not read the Soviet cards well enough in order to predict their next move although he well understood the underlying motives of the Russian political and military leadership. His three weeks in Hungary toward the end of the Cold War brought him the closest to the fabric of (Socialist) Hungary. The then elderly, but still very acute observer Kennan sensed and experienced certain features mainly about the Hungarian people, their outlook, and opinion, rather than official Hungarian foreign policy. His observations and opinions formulated thereupon were mainly spot on, which aligns well with so many other comments about other places and people in Europe that Kennan made during his long life. The small episodes and Kennan's thoughts concerning Hungarian foreign policy and Hungarians presented in this study give a unique addition to the ever-growing literature of the history of American-Hungarian relations.

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Notes

The research and writing of this article were done within the framework of the "Great Britain, the United States, and Hungary: Society, Politics" research group created by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, and were supported by a KRE BTTK project awarded in 2022.

1 George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1951); George F. Kennan, "America and the Russian Future," *Foreign Affairs* 29. 3 (Apr. 1951): 351–70; George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925–1950* (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1967); George F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1950–1963, An Atlantic Monthly Press Book* (Boston, Toronto: Little Brown and Company, 1972); George Frost Kennan, *From Prague After Munich. Diplomatic Papers, 1938–1939* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1968); George F. Kennan, *The Kennan Diaries*. Ed. Frank Costigliola (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014).

2 The most important and useful books on Kennan include Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986); David Mayers, *George Kennan and the Dilemmas of US Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988); John Lamberton Harper, *American Visions of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994); *George F. Kennan and the Origins of Containment, 1944–1946: The Kennan-Lukacs Correspondence*, Introd. John Lukacs (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri P, 1997); John Lukacs, *George Kennan: A Study of Character* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007); Lee Congdon, *George Kennan: A Writing Life* (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 2008); Nicholas Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove: Paul Nitze, George Kennan, and the History of the Cold War* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009); John Lukacs, ed. *Through the History of the Cold War: The Correspondence of George F. Kennan and John Lukacs* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2010); John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011); and Frank Costigliola, *Kennan: A Life between Worlds* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2023).

3 George Kennan to John Lukacs, 23 Feb. 1984, in John Lukacs, ed., *Through the History of the Cold War. The Correspondence of George F. Kennan and John Lukacs* (91).

4 On his Prague days see, Kennan, *From Prague After Munich*; Gaddis, *George F. Kennan* (120–31).

5 For a comprehensive study on the First Vienna Award, see Gergely Sallai, *Az első bécsi döntés* [The First Vienna Award]. Budapest: Osiris, 2002.

6 See also the same opinion from 1938 in Kennan, *From Prague After Munich* (5).

7 John Flournoy Montgomery to Homer M. Byington, 14 Sept. 1939, Folder 1, Box 3, John Flournoy Montgomery Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, USA.

8 Excerpts from a personal letter of 8 Dec. 1938, in Kennan, *From Prague After Munich* (9).

9 Report on conditions in Ruthenia, Mar. 1939, in Kennan, *From Prague After Munich* (58).

10 Report on conditions in Ruthenia, Mar. 1939, in Kennan, *From Prague After Munich* (74).

11 Report on conditions in Slovakia, 1 May 1939, in Kennan, *From Prague After Munich* (137).

12 Report of 13 July 1939, on conditions in Slovakia, in Kennan, *From Prague After Munich* (206). Although Gaddis in his monograph *George F. Kennan* claims that Kennan reached Budapest during this trip (130), Kennan does not mention this. If he did visit Budapest, it is not known what he saw there, because he made no mention of it in his report or in his usually long diary entries.

13 On Kennan's service in Portugal, see Gaddis, *George F. Kennan* (158–66).

14 Wodianer's report from Lisbon, 1 Oct. 1943, Folder 19, Roll 1, MF 53671, P 2066, Bakach-Bessenyey György Papers, Hungarian National Archives.

15 George Kennan to Edward Stettinius, Jr., 8 Feb. 1945. 864.5017/2-845, Roll 20, Hungary 1945–1949, Internal Affairs of Hungary 1945–1949, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter cited as NARA).

16 George Kennan to James F. Byrnes, 20 Feb. 1946, 864.60/2-2046, Roll 20, Hungary 1945–1949, Internal Affairs of Hungary 1945–1949, NARA.

17 About the immediate postwar Americans steps in the economic and political field and their unsuccessful nature in the region and Hungary, see Borhi, *Dealing with Dictators* (58–83).

18 On the Soviet Presidium's secret talks concerning the Hungarian revolution, see Szereda, Vjacseszlav, and János Rainer M., eds. *Döntés a Kremlben* (26–99); János Rainer M. "Döntés a Kremlben—Kísérlet a feljegyzések értelmezésére" [Decision in the Kremlin—An Attempt to Interpret the Notes]. *Döntés a Kremlben*. Eds. Szereda and Rainer (111–54).

19 On the Hungarian Revolution in the international arena, see Csaba Békés, *Az 1956-os forradalom a világpolitikában* [The 1956 Revolution in International Diplomacy] (60–115).

20 John M. Maury (1912–1983) was an American diplomat, who also served in Moscow before World War II. Between 1954 and 1962, he led the CIA's Soviet-Russian department. Kennan referred to him in his diary as "a friend in Washington."

21 Notes from a telephone conversation between Mr. Kennan and John Maury, 1 Nov. 1956, Folder 4, 1956, Box 233, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *George F. Kennan Papers*, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, United States (hereafter cited as *Kennan Papers*).

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Diary entry, 7 Nov. 1956, Folder 4, Box 233, *Kennan Papers*.

25 Diary entry, 8 Nov. 1956, Box 233, *Kennan Papers*.

26 Diary entry, 13 Nov. 1956, Box 233, *Kennan Papers*.

27 Notes of the telephone conversation between George F. Kennan and John Maury, 19 Feb. 1957, *Kennan Papers*.

28 In more detail, see Borhi, *Dealing with Dictators* (327–57).

29 George Kennan to William Leurs, 28 Feb. 1986, Folder 2, Box 96, Subseries 1C: Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1939–2004, *Kennan Papers*.

30 Diary entry, 9 March 1986, Folder 2, Box 326, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *Kennan Papers*.

31 George Kennan to Vencel Házi, 15 Jan. and 3 Feb. 1986, Folder 2, Box 96, Subseries 1C: Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1939–2004, *Kennan Papers*.

32 *Magyar Hírlap*, vol. 19, no. 74, 28 Mar. 1986; *Magyar Nemzet*, vol. 49, no. 74, 28 March 1986; *Népszabadság*, vol. 44, no. 74, 28 Mar. 1986.

33 "List of Names of Various People to See while in Hungary," Folder 2, Hungary Trip, Box 96, Subseries 1C: Miscellaneous Correspondence, *Kennan Papers*.

34 Author's interview with András Balogh, 14 Feb. 2017.

35 Diary entry, 18 Mar. 1986, Folder 2, Box 326, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *Kennan Papers*.

36 Diary entry, 29 Mar. 1986, Folder 2, Box 326, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *Kennan Papers*.

37 Diary entry, 9 Mar. 1986, Folder 2, Box 326, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *Kennan Papers*.

38 Diary entry, 23 Mar. 1986, Folder 2, Box 326, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *Kennan Papers*.

39 Diary entry, 28 Mar. 1986, Folder 2, Box 326, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *Kennan Papers*. Kennan was named persona non grata by Moscow in September 1952, while Várkonyi was expelled from the US in the summer of 1951 only after a two months' stay. It is perhaps of interest to note that from August 1989 Várkonyi served one more time as ambassador to Washington for ten months. It is not known whether he met with Kennan during that time.

40 Diary entry, 23 Mar. 1986, Folder 2, Box 326, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *Kennan Papers*.

41 George Kennan to John Lukacs, 27 Mar. 1986, in Lukacs, *Through the History of the Cold War* (119).

42 Ibid.

43 Diary entry, 23 Mar. 1986, Folder 2, Box 326, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *Kennan Papers*.

44 Diary entry, 28 Mar. 1986, Folder 2, Box 326, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *Kennan Papers*.

45 Diary entry, 11 Mar. 1986, Folder 2, Box 326, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *Kennan Papers*.

46 Diary entry, 13 Mar. 1986, Folder 2, Box 326, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *Kennan Papers*.

47 George Kennan to John Lukacs, 16 Apr. 1986, in Lukacs, *Through the History of the Cold War* (123).

48 George Kennan, "U.S. Ambitions Outstrip Its Domestic Appetite." *International Herald Tribune* 10 July 1997: 8; Diary entry, 11 July 1997, Folder 5, Box 326, Subseries 4C: Diaries, 1924–2004, *Kennan Papers*. On the Lippmann gap, see, Walter Lippmann: *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of Republic* (9).

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