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# Interview of George Kennan, June 1996

by Jeremy Isaacs Productions for CNN's ColdWar series.

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**INTERVIEWER: Professor Kennan, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for the Cold War documentary project. I'd like to begin by asking a question about the beginnings of Soviet-American relations in 1933, to which you were an eye-witness. What were the hopes that lay behind the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1933 and what were your own first impressions of the Soviet Union when you saw it... when you went to open up the American Embassy in Moscow?**

GEORGE KENNAN: Well, I was serving in Riga of course at the time that FDR took the decision to ask for talks with the Soviet government. Remember that one has to remember that we had been, I think for sixteen years, without any representation in Russia, no relations between the two governments and FDR was the one who decided to try to break that log-jam and get through and I didn't know him at that time. I'd never met him, I was not living at home and I wasn't very... I just had to guess at his motives, but one of the main ones was that he was worried about Japanese incursions into China and he hoped that by doing this, we could enlist the help of the Russians, against Japanese operations on the mainland. The Japanese, you remember, were very far advanced at that time into China, they had occupied a large part of it. And that's the one motive, which I think has not been brought out so much historically. There were a couple of other things to his buoyant disposition. He was not inclined to worry too much about things, but also the influence of Bill Bullitt, who had dealt with the Soviet government just after the Revolution and was convinced that you could do business with them if you only buttered them up properly.

**INT: Well, you had spent...**

**....First impressions of arriving in Moscow, late in 1933?**

GK: Yes, I accompanied our first ambassador to Moscow, went in on the train with him and served as his interpreter and his principal aide during all the ceremonies of

concluding relations with the Russians. I had had several years of training including two years at the university of Berlin but I had also served in the Baltic states for I think a couple of years, and all of this was preparatory to going into Russia. So I was enormously excited and was encouraged about the prospects of a positive and helpful relationship between the two governments. You must remember that this was a year before the Kirov murder, a year of relative liberalism in Russia, there were still people around from the very early period of the revolution who did take quite a fair view of the United States. So there were reasons to be hopeful at that time. To me it was simply enormously exciting to be in a country for which I had put in four or five years of preparation.

**INT: So you would see the Kirov murder as a turning point?**

GK: Yes it wasn't the murder alone, the murder was a response to something that happened I believe in the Party gathering that took place in the late summer, I believe of 1934, and in which Stalin was made to realise that there was a real chance of his being voted out of office by the Central Committee. And he being the brilliant tactician that he was, met this head on, when he realised what was going on and said in effect to them: 'Well you know of course there are people who think it's time that I left. And if that's the view of the body here why I'd be happy to consider that.' Well he threw terror into all these people because everyone of them realised that if he along got up and said I think we should take Stalin at his word and let him go, and the others didn't support him, it would mean his head. So Stalin rode out this, but he didn't get over the shock of it. And the Kirov murder had something to do with it.

**INT: Could you talk about how the new mood manifested itself? The new mood of chillier relations which followed the Kirov murder.**

GK: Well there was a tightening in every respect, a tightening for us in the diplomatic corps on our contacts with Russians, on our social life in Moscow but much more important than that was a whole great wave of consternation and uncertainty and fear that swept through the Russian public. Because they sensed that there was something very strange going on at the top.

**INT: Would you still argue as you did in the 1940s that all of this reflected a tendency on Stalin's part to need enemies? And would it be fair to say later on that the Cold War itself was a kind of extension into international relations of the same thing which was manifesting itself in the domestic realm?**

GK: Well as for the extent to which the Soviet government really needed something like the Cold War, this was a complicated problem but there's an element of truth in that suggestion. Stalin felt that in order to get public support of the things he was

doing which were very harsh policies, he had to convince a great many of the people, the common people and the Party members, Russia was confronted with a conspiracy on the part of the major capitalist powers especially England; but Germany too that they were confronted with efforts by these people to undermine the Soviet government by espionage, by trying to paralyze Russian industry, through sabotage, things of that sort. There wasn't any truth in this but he, he didn't care, he saw the safety of his own regime being endangered if he could not make people believe that Russia was a threatened country. And so the did conduct these various trials, The Shakhty trial, the trial of the German engineers, the one in which the British appeared as the danger spot. And there was at that... in doing this, he was deliberately sacrificing to some extent the possibility of good relations with these countries, because they were furious about this. This was not compatible with the idea of agreeable diplomatic relations.

**INT: You've often said, if I can move up to the period of World War Two, when you were back in Moscow, you've often said that you saw the Warsaw uprising of 1944 as the point at which the United States and Britain should have stopped making further concessions to Stalin. I wonder if you could elaborate on that, particularly with reference to the centrality of the whole Polish issue in the breakdown of wartime co-operation?**

GK: There was always a question at what point should American policy toward the Soviet Union during the War, at what point should our wartime policy have changed and I thought that the period of the Polish uprising, an uprising by the Polish Freedom Fighters, who fought from under the surface, through the sewers and everything else, against the continuing German occupation and were literally abandoned by the Russians, who were sitting with their forces across the river, and could easily have gone into help them, I thought for various reasons that that was the point at which American policy should have changed. But that's a long story and you have to remember what our policy had been during the wartime period when we had tried, as a matter of principle, to give the Russians everything they wanted and to support them in everything, no matter how great our doubts about what they were doing. And it's said, which I think should have changed with the Warsaw uprising, because by this time, the Russians had freed their own territory, there was no longer any question of our establishing a second front, they were already in Germany, so were we, and the whole wartime situation had changed. And that I thought was the moment at which we got... should have got into business with them.

**INT: You have said at one point that it was not so much a matter of the Russian presence in Europe, because that was inevitable as a consequence of the defeat of fascism, the defeat of Hitler, it was a matter of what the Russians did to the people whose territory they...**

GK: That is absolutely true and of course the great example there was Poland. And it's quite right that people should have seen that as sort of the kernel of the developing conflict between the Russians and the allies at that time in the War. What the Russians did with Poland was absolutely inexcusable. And when we tried to talk with them, and I was an interpreter at those talks, they were concluded simply with the British and American ambassadors and Molotov and I was present. When we tried to talk with them and to suggest a certain moderate... very moderate, liberal Poles that we thought ought to be included in a new Polish government, we discovered that within hours, those people had all been sought down in Warsaw and arrested and thrown into prison. Now this was really an insulting behaviour toward us, and we should have realised right there that we were up against something. What we didn't realise of course that the Russian policy from then on would be greatly influenced by the determination that the shooting of the sixteen thousand or twenty three thousand, I've forgotten which it was, Polish officers, one of the greatest atrocities of the War, their shooting by the Soviet government, that the Soviet government was determined that that should not become known, and be made an issue in any future Polish government and for this reason, they behaved the way they did. That's only one of the reasons, of course.

**INT: In the light of that then, how would you now assess Franklin Roosevelt's vision for the post-War world and do you see him on balance as having been realistic, do you see him as having been naive, do you see some combination of both and in particular I wonder if you could comment on the Yalta Conference, as a kind of reflection of FDR's methods of dealing with the Russians?**

GK: President Franklin Roosevelt rarely betrayed all of his reasons for doing anything to other people. I think that his hopes about Russia were largely unrealistic during the wartime period. I don't think FDR was capable of conceiving of a man of such profound iniquity, coupled with enormous strategic cleverness as Stalin. He had never met such a creature and Stalin was an excellent actor and when he did meet with leading people at these various conferences, he was magnificent, quiet, affable, reasonable. He sent them all away thinking this really is a great leader. And yes, but behind that there lay something entirely different. And Charles Bohlen, my colleague who succeeded me as ambassador there, was present at the Yalta and the Potsdam Conferences and he told me that he saw only on. one or two occasions when the assistants to Stalin had said or done something of which

he didn't approve, when he turned on them and then the yellow eyes lit up and you suddenly realised what sort of an animal you had by the tail there. Well...

**INT: Good. Your pessimism about the future of Soviet-American relations at the end of World War Two really contrasted very strikingly with the optimism that most people felt at the time, even Bohlen was more optimistic than you were. I wonder what there was particularly in your experience and what you had witnessed since the time that you had come back to Moscow in 1944 that contributed to this pessimism that was so much at odds with the prevailing optimism that was felt in Washington and elsewhere?**

GK: Of course, my view about the prospects for Soviet-American relations during the War was a view that was quite different from that of my government. I had been sent there in 1944, in the middle... in the last year of the War really, or a little more than that, and it was the first time I had been back there for seven years. I had served there twice before. And I was surprised on arriving there in 1944 to be made to realise as soon as I began to look at the situation that the people we were dealing with, Stalin and the men around him, were precisely the same people who had concluded the agreement with the Germans, in 1944, one of the most cynical and terrible, sinister agreements I had ever...

**INT: You mean the agreement with the Germans in 193...**

GK: 1939, I'm sorry.

(INTERRUPTION)

**INT: In 1939, when you had said that it was clear to you that the people that you met when you came back to Moscow in 1944 were the same people who had been involved in concluding the Nazi- Soviet pact...**

GK: The people in the Soviet regime, next to Stalin, this was exactly the same gang and they really betrayed their own hand when they demanded of the Western allies, as they did, they had already done at the time when I came back there , that we should entirely respect the advantages they gained from their deal with Hitler. I think that the Western powers made a great mistake and I thought so at the time, in accepting that. They could perfectly well have gone back. If Stalin said, what are you talking about? Why should we respect an agreement that was made at our expense with Hitler, we regard anything

of that sort as quite irrelevant today and we'll talk about this without any reference to that, if you don't mind.

**INT: I want to come back to your view of Stalin and particularly to the problem of dealing with Stalin in the immediate aftermath of World War Two. I'm curious as to whether you think there was ever a point at which we could have reached a viable modus vivendi with Stalin or was that simply not on the cards when you're dealing with that character?**

GK: Well, nobody can answer that question, because it could only be tested by negotiation with them and we never wanted to negotiate with them. But I will say this, that I think that there were good chances if it had been possible for us to approach him properly for agreement. In the first place, at the time of the ending of the Berlin blockade, at the Council of Foreign Ministers' Meeting which marked the ending of the blockade. I think he had been very much disturbed over our reaction to the blockade and was in a mood really to have talked again; later on, when he said that we were going to militarize our Western part of Germany to occupy it and in particular when he saw that we were even going to move nuclear weapons in there, I think - and I thought at the time and I've said so in the Reith Lectures, which I've delivered in London in 1957 - that you were under-rating what the Russians would pay to get the Americans out of Western Germany. So I think that, theoretically, there was a good possibility that something might have been worked and I thought at the time that we should try it, at least by negotiation, even if we didn't succeed, we didn't have to buy everything that they were demanding. But that was not done. There were, I may say, reasons for our side why it would have been very difficult for us to conduct any explorations of this kind and that's another question.

**INT: Just as a follow up: it's often said that Stalin ran one of the most authoritarian governments in history. In the light of the new materials that are available to us, are you really satisfied that Stalin was in charge at every level or were there other important actors in the Soviet system under Stalin? I'm thinking of the role of Molotov and Zhdanov and others. How should we understand that system?**

GK: Yes, I think that all of these other people knew, is not to be under-estimated, but they were people to whom felt he had... on whose conduct he felt he had power of control. He didn't have to supervise everything that they said or did, but he watched it very closely and he was a man of absolutely diseased suspiciousness and so he didn't fail to judge them. Well, still, his was the final voice on any question, and woe to him who tried to answer this

question before he had judged it and gave the wrong answer. They all learned that...

**INT: Cut it right here for just a moment.**

**INT: I'd like to take you back to the 1937 purge trials for just a minute, which you witnessed and I know that you reported on. And I wonder if you could simply convey for us some sense of what the atmosphere of that remarkable occasion was, just what it was like to sit in on those trials awhat was going through your head as you witnessed those trials?**

GK: I attended only one of the three trials. I realised after attending this one and looking over the record which they put out of the three trials, that in these three trials Stalin tried to avoid with the people within his own movement, he tried to avoid, or rather to try to get rid of the people within his own movement who he felt were secretly opposing him. First of all there were the... The first trial I think was really the Trotskyites. He felt that there was a strong strain of Trotskyite feeling against him within the higher reaches of the party, and he was determined to get rid of these people. The second trial was aimed, I think, at the first... actually the first was against so-called Communists. You know, Stalin never liked St. Petersburg, he never trusted it. It was a Leninist city and he had to overcome the legacy of Lenin before he could do what he wanted in Russia. The capital had been moved to Moscow and in many ways he literally tried to set upon the city of Leningrad to deprive it of its glamour, of its importance in the scheme of things and this went for the Leningrad Party organisation too. He felt people had been corrupted, somehow or other by the atmosphere of that city, they're not going to gain... be good servants of Stalin, so that the first trial was against them, the second was against the Trotskyites and the third was against what was called the Right opposition, the Conservative opposition within the party, particularly Bukharin and other party members who felt that he was going much too far, who tried to restrain him and tried to get support for restraining him, which particularly infuriated him.

**INT: The trial that you sat in on as a personal witness, were you surprised, were you astonished, were you horrified? Was it what you expected? I'm thinking about personal reactions here to this event.**

GK: Well, I had had enough experience in Russia to know what must have been happening to these men who were placed on the dock. I could see them there, and their pale faces, their twitching lips, their evasive eyes. These were the faces of men who had been, if not tortured, then terrified in many ways and often by threats to take it out on their families if they didn't confess. But

they had been through hell, and they knew that these were likely to be their last hours. They were indeed, the same men that we saw standing up there by the time the darkness fell, they were no longer in this world. I don't know what their feelings were. Like most of those Russian Communists of that time, and like the partisans of a great dictatorship anywhere, they had found it a matter of convenience to believe in their own cause and so did these people. So I think they were quite bewildered in a way why this should have happened to them. They regarded themselves as faithful followers and here they were, having all this happen to them. Their reactions were varied, Radek was arrogant few of them were, some were eloquent, some tried to, in their testimony, to get it through to the audience that they were confessing in order to save their families. But it was a terrible spectacle. To any of us who knew Russia, we knew that this was a whole contrived event. This was not the trial. The trial had gone on in behind the scenes, in party circles and in police circles long before these people appeared on the docket. It is regrettable that the other foreign advisers there, foreign visitors who were invited to that trial, that not all of them even understood this.

**INT: Good, that's fine. Can I get you to do about a once sentence physical description of Stalin which we could use with the earlier part of the answer, but just start out by saying, Stalin looked... or just use the words so that we can use that as a reference for that earlier clip.**

GK: I saw many photographs of Stalin, saw him from a distance on other occasions. Only on the two or three occasions that I take people up to see him and therefore sat at the table with him, he was a smaller man than he liked to appear. He did have, strangely enough, as did the old German Kaiser, a somewhat withered, I think, left arm, I'm not sure I'm right about this, but I think he did. He was very controlled, very polite. He got up from the table and shook hands with his guests, invited them to sit down, listened very patiently to what they had said and often responded outwardly quite reasonably to it. These were cautious responses, the others shouldn't notice this, because when the event was over, a new problem would begin to get them to behave in the way that they hoped people thought they would behave. But he... I saw him very impressive... You must remember one thing, that Stalin was distrustful, in a pathological way, of anyone who professed friendship or fidelity to him. Those abnormal reactions did not affect the foreign statesmen who came to see him. They had never said that they were partisans of his and then he couldn't punish them, anyway. So he treated them in quite a different way than he did his own people and some of them fell for this and they were really influenced by it, and I think a number of people came out saying, well,

this is quite a reasonable man. And if he had only been exposed more to my particular personality and my arguments, we might have been able to deal with him. Well, all I can say is what Bohlen once said, those are famous last words, like drinking doesn't affect me!

**INT: I'd like to take you now to the circumstances of the drafting of the long telegram and particularly what were the events that caused you to unload on Washington this telegram of unprecedented length in February of 1946, which really in many ways is repeating the substance of what you had said in dispatches that had gone by pouch of course earlier. But of course this is the one that had the great impact, so if you could tell us about the circumstances that led up to that outburst, if I can call it that, on your part.**

GK: You know the time when the War came to an end, particularly the beginning of the year 1946, I had been there now another two years and these years had been a strain for me nearly all the way through, because I watched our government making concession after concession to the Soviet government, for wartime reasons, largely because the military said, 'Well we don't care, promise them anything, do anything you can to please them so that they don't...' but they were... the military were fearful that Stalin would make a separate agreement with Hitler. I don't think that was a very realistic fear and I didn't have this at all. But in any case, in obedience to that injunction, we did behave in what I thought was an undignified ingratiating way toward Stalin and toward the whole Soviet bureaucracy. I saw instance after instance where we should have called them on something - it would have been even an act of friendship in wartime to say, look, this was something we can't agree to. But we were never permitted to do that. My goodness, we sent lend lease to them in great quantities, they were the only people who were not asked to justify any of their requests. And as the war approached its end, I once tried to question the general who was handling the lend lease things and said: 'Look, here is this really necessary for their wartime needs?' He was furious about it, said, you had no right to question this: 'That's a matter for the... for us, for the War Department, not for you in the State Department.' Well, actually this was something that they were not going to use during the War at all, but we saw endless examples of this. We saw magnificently expensive American machinery sent over there and laughingly wrecked by the Soviet engineers. They said if you... they were criticised, they would say, oh, you know, let's get another of these, all we have to do is ask the Americans for it. I had witnessed all of this. I'd seen so many humiliations of our own government during the War, but I had tried the best I could, I could only act through my boss, who

was Averell Harriman and I think I did influence Averell. And Averell, by this time, was coming to understand this, but in the Treasury Department at home, they didn't understand this and when they finally sent me a telegram expressing their astonishment and concern, because the Russians were dragging their feet about joining the International Bank. I thought, well, for goodness sake, I can't answer that in one question. They're going to have to give me space and I sat down and tried to give a picture of this government as it emerged from the War. I'm sorry it went to such length, perhaps I could have done it more briefly, but I can't complain, the document as you know, made the rounds in Washington, was very widely read and did influence American policy quite materially.

**INT: Your secretary, Dorothy Hessman, told me that you actually dictated this document in bed with the flu, in a really foul mood.**

GK: Yes.

**INT: And that perhaps the temperament of the document (unclear)...**

GK: (Interrupts) I think that's true! I had a very painful attack also of sinus, which you get after a bad cold and was laid up with that too. Well, there we were. I thought this is not only my chance, but this is the provocation that has been asked... Washington asked, how do you explain the motivation of the Soviet government here. Well, then I had to go right back to page one and to try to tell them things that I felt they'd forgotten during the War. This all hangs together with this whole question that this was the same group of people who had dealt with Hitler, had tried to deal with Hitler at our expense and never had changed their views about us.

**INT: Can I ask one question about the reception of the long telegram in Washington. It's well-known that the reception was extraordinarily favourable, it was circulated very widely, but I wonder about your own reactions to suddenly having your voice carry in Washington after all of these years of not letting it do so.**

GK: Yes, I was sometimes surprised and shocked at the enthusiasm with which this telegram was received and the things that I had to say generally, not just in the telegram were received in Washington and .... I realise there was a real danger there. I'm sorry that in the telegram I did not more emphasize that this did not mean that we would have to have a war with Russia, but we would have to find a way of dealing with them which was quite different from that which had been going on. I realised this first when I came

home and was asked to give a speaking tour round the country and where this all surprised me was when I got out to Los Angeles and a group... I spoke there to a very large but largely business group and I got such rousing cheers out of anything I said critical of the Soviet government that I should have realised that, watch out my boy, this will be distorted, as indeed it was.

**INT: Good. I think we can stop...**

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