

Conversation between Alexander Yakovlev and George Frost Kennan
5 October 1990, Moscow

[Italics denote passages where Kennan speaks English, most of the conversation takes place in Russian]

[...]

Yakovlev: You know, the unpredictability of consequences is especially surprising.

Kennan: I understand, this is a historic moment. I remember Tyutchev's words, "Blessed is he who visited this world in its fateful minutes."

Yakovlev: Yes. Maybe these are sentimental words, but I said at the congress that I am happy that I was present during the period of history in which I have to live and work now. It is really so. I don't know what we will be able to accomplish in the end.

Kennan: This is the moment when everything is hanging in the air.

Yakovlev: This year is very important for us, the coming year. Literally, these several months and the first half of the next year, if we can make it through.

Kennan: Now is the most sensitive moment.

Yakovlev: If we survive, we will survive in the future.

Kennan: I hope my visit does not burden you.

Yakovlev: No, no.

Kennan: I can imagine how busy you are.

Yakovlev: You know, it's been five years, I am used to it now. Yesterday I spoke with Mikhail Sergeevich [Gorbachev] and told him that I was going to meet with you tomorrow. He asked to pass his greetings, very best wishes. I asked him to let me go to Canada. He did not let me go. In January, he said, in January. These three months-and-then-some are a very hard stretch. He told me to write. By the way, I should write a letter to the chargé d'affaires and to go in January. One university in Canada awarded me an honorary Doctor of Laws degree.

Kennan: It is a pity that you cannot go there.

Yakovlev: Yes, it is a pity. You, Mr. Kennan, are history personified, not just Mr. Kennan. Especially as far as Soviet-American relations are concerned. I also studied them, not all my life, but since graduate school, since the Academy of Social Sciences. However, to tell you the truth, I have not managed yet to understand the patterns, the causes of all these zigzags from both sides, which took place in these relations first in the period before 1933, then Roosevelt, the war.

Kennan: Several times.

Yakovlev: Yes, yes, the Cold War, then some signs of short-lived thaws. And then, right now, as snow on one's head, a new epoch. Of course I know your X Article very well, and I have to confess my sins, I criticized it, I criticized it.

Kennan: Ha-ha. I would not have written such an article today, but it was forty years ago.

Yakovlev: And I, if I was writing today, would not have written such books about the United States of America, I would simply throw some things out. If anybody proposes to me to re-publish them now, I will refuse. Although it seems like everything is in its place there, that the quotes are right, but something most important is missing in order for it to be true. That's what it is.

Kennan: It is the same with all of us. And it has to be this way. Because if we were writing the same things today as we were writing twenty years ago, it would mean that we have not learned anything.

Yakovlev: Yes, and that life has stopped. However, I have to tell you that although you are saying that you would not have written that article this way today, still, even if we look at it with today's eyes, a lot of it was true.

Kennan: In the end [of the article] there was a lot of truth. Of course it was about the most difficult period of Stalin's rule. And it was on our part. I was here during the purges of the 1930s, and then again during the war, and we felt a certain frustration and desperation regarding Soviet-American relations. You understand, we had very little hope. We could not have foreseen today's developments.

Yakovlev: You know, neither could we. Moreover, we failed to foresee it, as they say, doubly. First of all, that this time would come in principle, now, and second, that events would move so quickly.

Kennan: This is exactly what surprised me. I also thought, about ten years ago, that a time like today would come, but not so fast.

Yakovlev: But at the same time—and this is what makes it so complicated—there were historical preconditions, history confronted us [with the need to address these issues]. Many people already understood that some events were swelling, that some atmosphere was [emerging], some understanding that everything was going to change. Everything had to change. Especially after 1956, after the XX Party Congress. Overall, seriously speaking, our society has been living through a chain of cataclysms since the XX Congress. It is boiling over. Declines, takeoffs, defeats, victories. But through the thorns, it is advancing toward some kind of sane beginning, toward common sense. Although it is complicated. You see, at first,

Khrushchev started his political career very actively. It was a great contribution, what he did.

Kennan: I feel sorry for him. If he lived today, he would have understood everything that is going on now.

Yakovlev: He—yes. But at the same time, he got scared. And then he succumbed to the temptations of a personality cult. And again, “our Nikita Sergeich.” Applause went to his head.

Kennan: And we did not help him much.

Yakovlev: Yes. That is true. Probably true. This is a good comment. And how can we explain it, what do you think?

Kennan: Partly because of our hardliners, who influenced the president. More than that—the military and our unfortunate enthusiasm for nuclear weapons. But also, it seems to me, it was a coincidence [of timing]. It was the concurrence of the crisis in Hungary and the Suez crisis.

All these events and situations interfered. And we did not understand him, on our part, when he said “I will bury you.” How did he say that?

Yakovlev: “*Закопаю*” [I will bury you].

Kennan: We understood it incorrectly. He wanted to say that “I will be dancing at your funeral, and not you at mine.” But this is very different. It was a sad period of our history.

Yakovlev: Of course, many factors played a role there. I am still surprised that immediately after the war—and we have documents about it—a special decision of the State Defense Committee [was prepared] to reduce the army by many millions.

A decision of the State Defense Committee and the Politburo to prevent any kind of imposition of the Soviet model of life in the countries of Eastern Europe. But everything turned out differently. 1948 came, 1949, and coups d'état were essentially happening everywhere.

Kennan: Yes, this [period] is awaiting its historian.

[...]

Kennan:

Before I proceed, I would like ... to say that I would be happy to conduct this conversation in Russian to the extent of my ability, as much as I can, but my language got a little rusty. I have not spoken Russian for forty years.

Yakovlev: You speak perfectly.

Kennan: I know the language. And still, sometimes it is hard for me to hear. This is from being old. When people speak fast, I notice it. They speak faster than in the old time.

Yakovlev: Now everyone speaks faster.

Kennan: I would like to propose to you that we make two protocols of our conversation, if this is recorded. One in Russian, and another one in English, and that afterward we can check both versions, and I hope you will forgive me if sometimes I switch to English.

Yakovlev: Of course. Let's do it this way. We will record it, our conversation, get it translated, and send to you.

Kennan: And if I sometimes speak English, the same, we need translation.

Yakovelev: Yes, yes. In two languages. You will look at it, make any corrections to your text that you consider necessary. I even think that any insertions would be useful. Sometimes good thoughts arrive at a desk where you write. And I will do the same. You will see it in the text, and then it will be our joint text.

Kennan: Then, if I don't understand something, I ask for help, and if I need to express myself in English, I will [do it] sometimes.

Yakovlev: You know I am interested in one question, which I consider my personal moral pain that will not heal. For several years I have been—and even now nobody has relieved me from those responsibilities—chairman of the rehabilitation commission, the commission for rehabilitation of those unjustly convicted in the 30s-40s-50s. In the years of its work, our commission removed, so to speak, a blight from one million victims. Recently a decree was passed to rehabilitate and reinstate full rights for all those convicted on political charges.

My question boils down to this. During these years I have read and skimmed through an enormous volume of materials on this subject: about people who were executed, their testimony, the testimony of witnesses ... how yesterday's friends betrayed each other and so on. In other words, I walked in the dirt up to my knees and even deeper. I still cannot understand what happened, I cannot understand the motives that dictated this kind of policy to Stalin. You observed it from outside. You were not under threat, relatively not under threat, of course, to be executed, or to be thrown in jail ... Still, why would Stalin ... why did he choose these methods in his dealings with the party, and with the country, and with the people, and with friends, and with the intelligentsia?

Kennan: I understand the question quite well. Soon we will have, in your country too, I think, a big book by my colleague Robert Tucker about Stalin's life from [19]28 to [19]39. A very interesting and serious book, a result of many years of study. He

certainly looks at this question. And even he was not able, as far as I remember, to answer this question fully, because, and it is obvious, Stalin harmed himself too with these measures, especially in the period [19]35-[19]39. Of course ... here I would like to switch to English with your permission.

A lot of it can be explained by Stalin's personality. He was a person with many strange features, because, on the one hand, he possessed exceptional sagacity and insight, he understood the people with whom he was dealing, and even made a strong impression on them. On the other hand, he was morbidly suspicious, especially toward people who believed in him ... and who professed their loyalty, openly expressed their admiration. As soon as it happened, he started suspecting them. It was almost impossible to keep his trust. And if somebody came and said that they had to keep an eye on somebody—that's it, it was impossible to save that person. His daughter told me about it. But we saw it ourselves. He acted much more normally with people who did not pledge their loyalty. With Roosevelt, with Churchill, who admired him. In my view he was a ... sane person. People, who did not belong to his world, did not provoke the abnormal aspects of his personality.

It is possible—if you let me continue on this subject—in part, it could be explained by his sense of inferiority. It all started with the feeling of inferiority that he felt when he interacted with the people in Lenin's circle, with Lenin's associates. Those were highly educated individuals, bright personalities—most of them. I remember, in those years, in the end of the 20s, beginning of the 30s, I often told my colleagues that the Moscow Politburo was the best educated government in Europe. Many of them had lived abroad, knew foreign languages. Stalin did not have any of that. And he perfectly understood his inferiority, and suffered acutely on that account. It exhibited itself in different ways. All these purges and atrocities, in essence, started with his attempts to destroy everybody from his circle whom he suspected of admiring Lenin. Stalin was an easily provoked person, and a person, who, as strange as it may seem, while possessing extraordinary talents, still suffered terribly from the sense of his inferiority.

[....]

Yakovlev: Tell me please, is it true that in America now public opinion is turning in a serious way toward our country – a favorable, so to speak, opinion about our country, in its assessment of what is happening; or do fears and apprehensions still remain?

Kennan: Some of them still remain. I would have to respond to this question in English, because it is so important.

I do not think that the American people ever ... it never turned away. Americans were under the influence of Cold War hysteria, an exorbitant exaggeration of Soviet might, and a full misunderstanding of Soviet intentions. It came together with the Cold War. There were exaggerations on your part as well. But an impression developed in the United States, especially after the war in Korea, that the Soviet Union was an aggressive country. Many confused the Soviet Union with Hitler. And they knew what Hitler was. I have to say that it affected a large part of our population. I think that it has changed now, but many people are still unsure. In part, it depends on where they live. I think that it is more prevalent in the Southwest of my country, but not in the East of Midwest. For example, in the Midwest, the place where I come from, in the very center of my country, people quite sincerely want to know the truth.

I don't think that American public opinion right now presents a serious problem for our relations. There are still certain circles that are deeply saturated with the psychology of the Cold War. They have not recovered from it yet, because the activities that emerged in that atmosphere—I am thinking of the Pentagon's plans, intelligence etc.—for many people those became not just their habits, but also their means for existence. It is their life.

[....]

Today it is absolutely obvious to me, as a historian as well, that when we allow the military to develop plans against some country, it leads to a situation where they create an enemy image. And that leads me to desperation, because I never, even at the time of the X Article and until today, believed that Moscow could attack the United States. And the same with Western Europe. I tried to argue with those people, but they were thinking not like politicians, but like the military.

For example, I asked them, why, by all the saints, do they think that the Soviet Union intends to invade Western Europe? Well, they replied, they need the all of Germany. I said—are you sure that they need all of Germany? What do they need it for? Who are they going to install in power there, in Germany? Do they want, in your view, to repeat the story with Eastern Europe? But they refused to think as politicians. Their arguments were as follows: why then all this [military] power, they must want to use it somehow.

And this is the tragedy, all this so penetrated the consciousness of Americans during the Cold War. It penetrated it also because of the following reasoning: if you have big military potential, you must have plans as well. About a year ago I was invited to Western Europe, to a meeting at NATO. We talked all evening long, sat around almost till the morning. And I proposed to put this question this way: could one possess adequate military power without naming a specific country as an adversary? They had never thought about that.

How can we work it out so that we possess reasonable military power and at the same time do not pose the question of an enemy—the issue that brings so much harm? And besides, when you have ingenious plans for conducting a war against somebody, then war starts looking inevitable. And as soon as you agree that war is inevitable, you make it inevitable, even if it is not so. Do you understand what I mean? Because you start acting out of the realization about the inevitability of war. And then what had been only a possibility turns into an inevitability.

I am saying all this in order to explain the moods of the “hardliners” from Cold War times who existed in the United States, and I do not doubt also existed in your country, in certain circles anyway. I do not know whether they ever existed among the people. I think you had them to a lesser degree than we did.

But all this represents a danger to international relations.

Yakovlev: Yes, we also have these attitudes against disarmament, against demilitarization that is happening in the our country. This is true, but I don't think that this is a strong group, it [exists] among certain elements , among the military, because their interests are affected, and among certain parts of the industrial complex, maybe of the propaganda apparatus, which also, so to speak, made money from this and lives on this. But even they do not believe seriously that there could be a war.

Recently, we discussed the issue of conversion, I had a conversation with the military, with weapon producers. They outlined how many tank factories could be cut and how to reduce the number of tanks they produce. I asked one chief tank designer: why do you need these tanks? You are just mechanically cutting production of tanks by a factor of two or three. But that means that the remaining tanks, which you will continue to produce, have some purpose. It means that you plan to attack some country, conquer it. Which country, tell us? Then maybe we need more tanks, not so few. No—he tells me—we do not intend to attack anybody, we do not have such plans. Then why do you need tanks? You know, he could not answer this question. However, over many years, the inertia of thinking acquires its own logic. And then that logic becomes self-perpetuating.

[...]

Yakovlev: Our people fell into a tragic stretch of development. And the people need to understand when they were lied to, and when they led a righteous struggle,

genuine and honest, when they were mistaken, and when they had some insights into the future, dreams and all that. And now all this became compressed in time, right now. This the source of all these passions—nationalist, separatist, arguments over economic issues (whether to keep the old model, or to adopt some new model, and if it's new, what kind).

Kennan: Yes, this is the main question, if it's new, then from where?

Yakovlev: What should it be? You cannot just perform a transplant—just take the American, or the Swedish, or the German model and transplant it to our soil. You cannot do it. And then—on what soil? On Russian, or Turkmen, or Tajik, or Uzbek, or Siberian? You know how different everything is in our country: different starting conditions, different conditions of development, different psychology, different religions, different cultural levels.

Besides, the crisis has gone so deep that the material base has been lost. It could be a completely different conversation, at a different level. Just imagine, let's say, if all the shelves in the stores were filled with goods, people would know no need, they would have clothes to wear, people would have apartments. And our people, at this historic turn, a truly historic turn—to freedom, democracy, to dignity, to common sense—they arrived without apartments, doing not too well in terms of nutrition, they have to stand in lines, public transportation is bad, other daily inconveniences, a hard ecological situation: take any city—smoke and shame. In agriculture—we got into a dead end with this system. People have forgotten” how to work. Where is this noise about privileges coming from? I think there is more noise than privilege. Why? It is from the psychology of distribution: let us all be paupers but equal. And as soon as somebody gets a thousand rubles more, he is different, he is an American ...

Kennan: You will have to overcome it, yes.

[....]

Kennan: The crisis of agriculture. This, one would think, will improve one way or another. But your long-term crisis is deeper. The consequences are very hard because the family structure has been destroyed to a certain degree [Inserted in text in English: (high degree)]. Losses among male population were terrible during the war. In the villages, as we can see, there are no young males. Women often have to bear the colossal burden of raising kids without fathers. And all this is deeply damaging for the population.

Because, in my personal opinion ... I have to say this in English ...

The sense of personal security should originate from the family first of all. One should protect family, guard the spirit of the family. A person learns to live precisely in the family, and people should be taught to show initiative, to be responsible, and not only for society, but for their own personal behavior.

The tragic events that have continued for many decades have done serious damage to all that. We are talking not only about what was going on in the sphere of the political regime, but about the terrible developments of World War II, which your people lived through, and which have practically no parallels in human history.

All these deep upheavals, which Soviet society had to live through, will have to be overcome gradually so that a new generation [grows up] in more normal conditions, more favorable conditions, so that children will have families—real families—fathers, mother, so that there will be love. I am looking at these problems from the outside and appreciating how enormous and difficult they are. Is it possible for this to happen?

The church could take care of some of the problems, perhaps of preservation of families, and not only the Christian church, but all the churches. The main thing—church should teach people self-respect. And all this should start from scratch because

of the damage done by all that you talked about—the war with Japan, the Great War, the chain of revolutions ... It is much harder to solve these problems today than it could have been under normal conditions.

You know, if I was asked, what do I consider the most serious wound that the Stalin regime and partly the Brezhnev regime inflicted on your people, I would respond that the problem is not any concrete damage, but that to some degree they robbed your people of the capacity to face real problems. Seven decades of suppression of any individual initiative and spontaneous expression of individuals, you understand what it means ...

Yakovlev: Yes, of course.

Kennan: *... this inflicted a deep wound on the society, and it is very hard to correct today.*

Among other things, you talked about people's skepticism, their cynicism. They believe that nothing good can be expected from the government, from the parties. This is terrible, and I do not know how to rebuild his, I don't know how it could be resurrected.

The church also cannot do everything. I think that party's capabilities are also limited. But the situation has to be improved. It will take a long time. I don't think this can be done quickly. You need to raise a new generation.

Yakovlev: Yes, this is so.

Kennan: *And it will be difficult ... I personally am convinced that it can be done and that it will be done. I think that in the Russian people—I am not speaking about others because I know nothing about the Kyrgyz, for example—but in the Russian people there are great resources, not only of natural intelligence but also of moral sense, which will develop if you find the right approach to people.*

You know, I am a great admirer of Anton Chekhov. His great grandfather was a serf, but in his generation there was hardly anybody who understood questions of morality as he did. He understood them better than Tolstoy, better than Dostoyevsky, because he looked at the world in a much more realistic way ...

Yakovlev: Oh, yes, I agree with you.

Kennan: I think that this is a minimum, just one aspect, and there are many other qualities, abilities of the Russian people. Morality, to a greater degree than even some practical affairs, lets one hope for the better. I hope that help will come from this side, that it will happen.

I must say that I see your problem, but I have to admit that I don't know how to approach it. To a significant degree, it will depend on school teachers. In Russia, you have very good teachers. They impressed me greatly. One of my daughters went to school during the war, to a normal Russian school for girls—181st girls' school—here in Moscow. The teachers left a very strong impression on me. They treated teaching as a sacred cause. Like in church.

And maybe they will help, there is decisiveness in them. If the authorities, the party, whoever else, will help them. However, the road will be long, of course; this is just one of the tasks that will have to be accomplished, and many other things will have to be done, to carry out a reconstruction of the economy ...

It seems to me that a reconstruction of agriculture is probably the most difficult task, because you do not have a model from the past to which you can return.

The only thing that comes to mind is the Stolypin reforms, which generally were positive. It seems to me that it is important to accept that agriculture is different from other spheres, and one can only achieve success here with the help of small family farms and full responsibility on the part of the farmer for his work.

Family farms are no in danger of bureaucratization. I myself have a farm in the United States. A farmer works there all the time. He is a good farmer, he knows the work and treats everything attentively. He works a lot. If a cow gets sick in the middle of the night, he gets up and calls the vet because it is his business. It seems to me that this is the best way of organizing agriculture. But there is very little of this experience, little tradition, in Russia, especially in Central Russia. Everywhere where serfdom existed, you received a hard and tragic inheritance, because serfdom also robbed people of confidence and initiative. And where there was no serfdom, as in the places where Gorbachev came from, the relationship between the man and the land was healthier, as I understand this. There was no serfdom in Siberia either.

Yakovlev: Yes, and here there is great resistance too. For example the recently created Peasant Union.

It is categorically opposed to any changes in the agrarian sector, defending, as a matter of fact, two forms—the collective farms and state farms. They are doing everything possible so that there will be no [individual] farmers, no leasers no people who lease land from state, and so on and so forth. Even though this system that has developed is so obviously a total failure, it cannot feed people, it loses things already produced, it does not care about the product, not interested in what will grow, etc. But we will still carry out land reform. We will carry it out. And we will achieve in practice full equality of all forms of property, no matter what. Where a collective farm works well, let it continue working. But where there are open lands, where a state farm is unable to cultivate the land that it has, let renters work there, let farmers work there, let any groups of people work there. Let them work to their heart's content for their own interest.

But there is great resistance to that. And not only on the part of collective farm chairmen, who generally turned into small feudal landlords in our country, but also on the part of regular people. Three days ago I had a visitor—the chairman of a

collective farm from the Tula region—Kazachenko. He has a good collective farm—400 hundred working people. A big collective farm. Good income, and yet, he being a progressive person—he is a Candidate of Economic Sciences, an educated person—he found three people with higher agricultural education and gave them 60 hectares each. Here, he says, work as renters. He gave them credits, they each bought a tractor, started to work, and work not like they worked in the collective farm, but more intensively. And so one night two tractors were broken.

Kennan: By others?

Yakovlev: Yes, by others. Why? Those people, not leasers, they got scared that it would lead to a situation where they would have to work like those three. This is what the problem is. They have already unlearned how to work, they only know how to receive money.

Kennan: This must be overcome. Of course, you should not allow harsh exploitation of people. Everybody should work.

Yakovlev: Well, yes.

Kennan: But you should allow them ... you should allow them to make money. They should have enough money to know that they can do something useful for themselves, for their family and kids.

Yakovlev: As far as the question that you touched upon—the moral renaissance—I agree that it would take a whole new generation. Now, for example, we are being accused of ... They accuse us of losing and killing the ideas of socialism.

Kennan: Killing?

Yakovlev: Killing.

Translator: That we have killed the ideals of socialism. This is what we are blamed for.

Yakovlev: But when you say—how could we have killed the ideals when we, to the contrary, are proposing the ideals of freedom, democracy, human dignity, creative initiative, and the freedom to create; nobody appreciates it except for the intelligentsia. Maybe other kinds of ideals are needed, maybe based on a stick, or on submission, or on something else. Those are kind of like ideals, but maybe not, and maybe they don't fit, and maybe they are not organic for a human being, and so you need some other ideals of socialism. What kind? Nobody can say.

We used to have faith, enthusiasm. Good, but why can you not have faith in freedom, in a person's creative nature? This is how confused we are by this—I would call it mass-sclerotic phenomenon—which has affected the public conscience.

And so, we have to get rid of all this, because you know well that this theory of the October revolution, of the permanent revolution, it certainly did great damage to my country, and not only to my country. It was a forceful imposition, a desire to impose some regime on somebody ... The way it happened in Eastern Europe. How many years? Forty-five? Forty-five years.

Kennan: Yes, forty-five years. It is very important, because in my country many people do not understand it either—that there is no pure freedom without responsibility. I don't remember who said this: *that freedom can be defined only in terms of the restraints we take.*

This is necessary for you and for us. Because many people in my country do not understand this. This is important, and this, of course, will take a long time. This problem cannot be solved in one year or in one decade. In my view, this should be started in school. Family, parents should be engaged in order to do it. You have

given me enough [material] for my thoughts for several months. Perhaps I see and understand your problems quite well; they are not easy. And it is very important that in America they understand them too. Understand all the depth of these problems. And I will try to do all I can to help with this.

Yakovlev: Tell me please, do you personally believe in our current experiment?

Kennan: I think that in terms of ideas it is absolutely correct. But the depth of the problems and the possibility of implementing these ideas, are, perhaps, more serious than you and I perceive them today.

Yakovlev: Absolutely right.

Kennan: And it will probably take more time. And it is very hard to gain this time. Maybe this is the main question.

Yakovlev: You are right.

Kennan: I think that in the nearest future you should, of course, improve your economic situation. It is very important. You should start from this.

Yakovlev: We should calm down the working people, bring them into some normalcy, take them out of this stretch of anger, bitterness, intolerance; bring them into a calmer setting. And on the other hand, we need to take people out of the state of euphoria, of the nationalist, separatist kind. Everybody is talking about sovereignty now, without much understanding of what it is and what it could lead to. All this should be calculated, everything should be assessed realistically, and now we are just calculating on the basis of emotions, on the computer of emotions. This is what is working here today. And we need a computer of numbers, calculations, strict, sober calculations. This is what we are lacking so far. And we are lacking skills.

And yet, if I was to react to your comment regarding the United States of America, it would be much better if we could start to understand each other better and faster, and trust each other. It is already very clear that nobody wants to deceive the other, nobody wants to trick the other, to set up traps. There are two countries like this now, there will be more countries like this in the XXI century. West Germany, Japan, Brazil, Australia, Canada, Indonesia are catching up. There are many countries that will be right on our heels, but so far, on this little ball, the United States and the Soviet Union are the guarantors of stability.

Kennan: If I may ask—for the Soviet people who visit us, are these exchanges and contacts useful?

Yakovlev: Very useful.

Kennan: Yes, but you should remember ... that we also have serious problems in our country. Not everything is right there. We have serious problems, including those with young people as well. The standards of education have been going down. You should not think that you can take all young Americans as models.

When visiting our country, one should remember that we have our own problems, different from yours, but also very serious. They are much more serious than is admitted, more serious than your problems. We have great problems with poverty in inner cities, with drugs, with dropping educational standards, the financial system. So when your young people come to visit us, they should not just imitate what young Americans do. They should be taught to look at our young people critically, and to decide for themselves what to borrow and what to reject from our civilization. Maybe some day, they will be able to help us, too. A lot depends on who accompanies them, both here and in our country. And it is very important that they be able to see the weaknesses of our civilization.

Yakovlev: To think together what to do with this civilization.

Kennan: I always tell our people in America regarding international students: do not show them only those things that you consider to be the positive side of American life; take them to city ghettos, show them the deficiencies, tell them about the difficulties that emerge when one tries to correct the situation. Tell them about the efforts that are being made. Only then they will be able to form a real opinion. And it used to be the same in the Soviet Union. The Americans who listened to the dubious explanations by the Intourist guides that everything was “wonderful,” came back full of suspicions and negative impressions. Whereas those who was able to see the real problems, hidden behind the façade, came back full of sympathy and deep interest ...

Let me say that I really enjoyed our conversation, even though we spoke about sad things. I would like to thank you for your patience and to wish you all the best.

Yakovlev: Thank you very much. I am very glad that you found time to visit.

[Source: State Archive of the Russian Federation, Fond 10063, opis 2, delo 39

Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya for the National Security Archive]