

September 19, 1989

Letter from George Kennan to John Foster Leich

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Summary:

Kennan asks Leich to add an appraisal of the efforts of the Free Europe Commission at the end of Leich's article on the Commission.

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THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540

Telephone: (609) 734-8000 Telex: 229734-IAS-UR Fax: 609-924-8399

SCHOOL OF HISTORICAL STUDIES

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Dear Mr. Leich:

Thank you for letting me see the draft of your proposed article on the origins of the Free Europe Committee. I have read it with much interest, and find it an interesting and well-written contribution to both the European and the American history of the years following the Second World War. I am glad that it is appearing; for I feel that much injustice has been done in sections of American opinion to those of you who took upon yourselves this difficult and often thankless task.

The only critical comment I would make is that there is a lack, at the end, of an analytical appraisal of this effort, placing it especially in the historical dimension. There might, I think, be a reference to earlier American efforts to bring aid, comfort and support to people in this country regarded as refugees from foreign despotism. I recall the membership of my own namesake (George Kennan, 1845-1924), together with a number of other American personalities of the time including (I seem to recall) Mark Twain, in a body called the Free Russia Society that functioned in the final decades before the abortive Russian revolution of 1905. There must have been others of that nature. The great reception given to Kossuth, when he came to this country after the repression of the 1848 Hungarian uprising, was another example of the insistent tendency to try to bring aid to victims of foreign misrule.

But I would also like to see, at the end of your article, a brief discussion of the conceivable alternatives to the effort put forward by the Free Europe Committee. Suppose the Committee had never been set up at all (as we must suppose many of its critics would have liked). What would have been the results? Would there not have been, on the part of these refugees, a general sense of coldness, indifference and abandonment at the hands of American society? And would that not have been exploited by the Stalinist forces then predominant in the Soviet Union and in other countries?

Obviously, those of you who addressed yourselves to the task of helping these people found yourselves up against the reflection of all the unsolved national and ethnic problems of eastern Europe. But did not your efforts teach many people to put these frictions into better perspective and to recognize the importance of trying to overcome them by the means of mutual

Mr. John Foster Leich

-2-

September 19, 1989

understanding and compromise? And did not some of this communicate itself, at least in some degree, back into the homelands?

If you could confront these questions, even briefly, it seems to me that it would add to the effectiveness of the article.

Very sincerely,

George Kennan
George Kennan

Mr. John Foster Leich
RR #1, Box 70-B
Cornwall Bridge, Connecticut 06754