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Benjamin Tromly. “‘To Win the Confidence of these Curiously Twisted and Disoriented People’: The Ford Foundation’s Free Russia Fund, George F. Kennan and Refugees from the Soviet Union.” *Cold War History* 22:3 (2022): 325-341. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2022.2036720>

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The tenuous relations between the United States and Soviet Union fluctuated throughout the Cold War. The two foes grappled with how to offset the other’s offensive geopolitical maneuvers via any means necessary. Yet amidst the contentious ideological conflict emerged efforts by citizens and government officials alike to foster more amicable—if not ambivalent—relations. Such is the focus of Benjamin Tromly’s article, which concentrates on the ambitious and often misguided attempts by the Free Russia Fund (FRF) to aid Russian exiles and émigrés during the early 1950s.

The Free Russia Fund’s aims mirrored the long-standing ambiguous relations between the two countries. Simultaneously philanthropic yet also decidedly political in its ulterior motives, the Free Russia Fund was established in 1951 under the leadership of Paul G. Hoffman—an administrator for the Marshall Plan (326). Hoffman asserted that assisting with Russian displaced persons (DPs) would serve a dual purpose—that is, the US would benefit from the importation of Soviet “talent and knowledge,” while providing refuge for exiles would also strengthen peaceful coexistence (326). Noted statesman and purported father of containment George F. Kennan—Free Russia Fund’s founder and director—and George Fischer initially strove to foster the democratic ideals of self-improvement and free expression (329). Tromly astutely observes that the FRF ideals in many ways stemmed from Kennan’s namesake (his great-uncle) and his American Society of the Friends of Russian Freedom, which was founded in the 1890s.<sup>1</sup> According to Tromly, the overriding ideological incentive for the FRF was liberationism, or what he calls the commitment of some intellectuals and high-ranking US officials to liberate Russians and other Soviets from Communism (326). Liberationism underscores the effects of Hoffman, the Marshall Plan, and the long-standing US foreign policy directive of promoting “American-style democracy.”<sup>2</sup>

At once desiring to remain apolitical while also promoting staunchly American ideology, the FRF struggled to provide effective assistance to Russian refugees precisely because the organization could not cohesively define itself or its own ideals. The Ford Foundation and those who funded the FRF asked what the organization’s

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<sup>1</sup> The American Society of the Friends of Russian Freedom eventually joined with the American-Russian Chamber of Commerce to form the American League to Aid and Cooperate with Russia in 1918. Peter G. Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment, 1917–1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> “American-style democracy” underscores American exceptionalism—that is, the belief that the United States has a responsibility as a morally and intellectually superior country to aid more purportedly infantile nations. This belief has long surfaced throughout US history, particularly during the Philippine-American War. The mentalities of American exceptionalism and paternalism evolved during World War II into the belief that the United States was the world’s policeman. See Telegram from Elihu Root to Robert Lansing, 17 June 1917, from *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1918, Russia vol. 1. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1931), 122. See also Jennifer M. Hudson, *Iron Curtain Twitchers: Russo-American Cold War Relations* (Lanham: Lexington, 2019).

goal was: “to gain better knowledge of the USSR and Soviet behavior” or to create “a belief in the favorable treatment among potential Soviet defectors?” (337). Fund officials continued to grapple with these questions as well, prompting a series of internal reviews in which they attempted to summarize their mission directives, albeit to ill-effect. Kennan wanted the organization to assimilate Russians into democratic ideology, while also fearing that such assimilation would result in the disappearance of Russian national culture, identity, and character (331). The FRF wanted Russians to maintain their unique Soviet culture while also admonishing them for not wrapping themselves in the American flag. Therein lies the crux of the Cold War: each country resolutely wanted to be left alone by the “Other,” yet also felt compelled to spread their ideals beyond their own borders. The FRF was no different in this regard, except in its case, the “Other” came to them.

Tromly does an excellent job of dissecting this dilemma and its impact on the success of the Free Russia Fund. He paints a vivid picture as to how the organization was fraught with divergent ideals. It was at once trying to accomplish too much and therefore paralyzed into being almost ineffective. Such is perhaps to be expected of an organization that was still grappling with the reverberations of World War II and the onset of the Cold War. Concerns about the implication of providing refuge to Russians who collaborated with Nazis plagued Fischer and Kennan, as did the dilemma of the Ukrainian diaspora occurring alongside the Russian one.

While Tromly attempts to decipher the latter issue for his readership, greater contextual information and examination is necessary. He discusses the Russian and Ukrainian national identity constructs, yet largely glosses over the umbrella term ‘Soviet.’ The Ford Foundation proclaimed that it used the term ‘Russia’ to encompass all regions of the USSR, thereby implying that Ukrainians were merely regarded as “people of Russia” (335-336). Tromly’s discussion of this compelling identity assimilation would have benefited from a more comprehensive examination of how this sweeping resolution effectively absorbed a plethora of different Soviet societies and cultures into one: Russian. Published just days after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Tromly’s article would have been strengthened considerably had he added at least a footnote in this section that further extrapolated the divergent, rich cultures embodied within the former Soviet Union. Doing so would have better highlighted the atrocity of the FRF’s assumption that ‘Ukrainian,’ ‘Russian,’ and ‘Soviet’ are interchangeable terms and, therefore, also interchangeable identities. Many Ukrainians would beg to differ.<sup>3</sup>

Tromly mentions that the FRF strove to reimagine itself as more inclusive by becoming the East European Fund (EEF)—a reconstruction that was made within months of the Free Russia Fund’s establishment (336). Yet its efforts to revamp itself did not translate into a more focused, cohesive mission. Kennan’s disillusionment grew; the initial premise of the FRF “as a welfare and cultural Santa Claus” had proven untenable (338). The organization survived only until 1955 (340).

Although Tromly’s article does an admirable job of providing an overview as to the FRF/EEF’s divergent directives, greater incorporation of Kennan’s works would have better explained how his personal perspectives impacted that of the organization. Indeed, Tromly mostly references the FRF/EEF’s archives. Expanding the breadth of his source materials would have provided a more comprehensive—and accurate—portrayal as to how Kennan imbued the organization with his own seasoned view of Russia. For instance, why did Kennan not follow his own advice to Washington in his 1944 memorandum “Russia—Seven Years Later” in which he cautioned officials of the pitfalls of not properly educating themselves about Russia?<sup>4</sup> The misguided identity constructs of conflating ‘Russia’ with ‘Ukrainian’ and ‘Soviet’ highlights the need for just that—more informed directives. Tromly does not discuss the fact that Kennan’s infamous containment policy provides an applicable term to describe the FRF/EEF. The organization’s efforts to at once encourage Russians to maintain their unique culture, while also misconstruing who these Russians were, and seeking to

<sup>3</sup> See Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> George F. Kennan, “Memorandum by the Counselor of Embassy in the Soviet Union, ‘Russia—Seven Years Later,’” from *FRUS*, 1944, *Europe* vol. 4. (Washington, D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1966), 902-914.

assimilate them into Western ideology are apt appropriations of the containment policy. The FRF/EEF was an attempt to contain Russia's displaced persons through purportedly philanthropic means.

This tacit directive was in direct contradiction to what Kennan himself had implored Americans to do in his *Foreign Affairs* article "America and the Russian Future": "It behooves us Americans . . . to repress, and if possible to extinguish once and for all, our inveterate tendency to judge others by the extent to which they contrive to be like ourselves."<sup>5</sup> Kennan's article was published the same year in which the FRF was founded. Tromly alludes to Kennan's *Foreign Affairs* article, yet only to indicate that it influenced Fischer's view that the Soviet regime might change due to "evolution rather than revolution" (339). A more comprehensive inclusion of such source materials would have provided greater contextual information for those who attempt to reconcile Kennan the statesman with Kennan the FRF founder. By relying so concertedly on just FRF/EEF archives, Tromly's article provides a somewhat myopic representation of Kennan, the Free Russia Fund, and its impact on Cold War relations. Broadening the scope of research to be more inclusive of Kennan (and Fischer's) earlier works would have better situated the FRF/EEF within its necessary context.

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The article would also have been strengthened with more of an examination of the work the FRF/EEF did. Tromly provides a good analysis of the ways in which its efforts were stymied, how its directives lacked cohesion, and the ways in which a more organized, unified front would have resulted in a more successful initiative. However, there is little analysis of the accomplishments of the Free Russia Fund, and almost no discussion of the displaced persons on the receiving end of Kennan and Fischer's efforts. Tromly briefly mentions in the conclusion that the FRF spent \$4 million to support communities of former Soviet DPs between 1951 and 1955 (340). This comment is not substantive enough to ascertain the viability of the FRF/EEF's success. An examination as to how those impressive funds were utilized, how the exiles and refugees were impacted by the support, and how many of the DPs either migrated back to the Soviet Union or remained in the West would have allowed the reader to make a more informed decision as to how the FRF should be regarded in the annals of Cold War history.

Overall, Tromly's article is a welcome addition to a frequently overlooked portion of the Cold War. It highlights the Free Russia Fund's dichotomous and ill-defined initiatives with a fresh perspective enhanced by Tromly's extensive use of the organization's archival holdings. Greater examination on the aforementioned components would have further underscored the assertions made, provided pertinent contextual information with which to examine Kennan's ideologies as manifested in the Free Russia Fund, and given a more nuanced and balanced analysis to the topic at hand. If this article represents a small portion of Tromly's larger research project, historians such as myself will eagerly await the next installment.

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<sup>5</sup> Kennan, "America and the Russian Future," *Foreign Affairs* 29, no. 3 (April 1951): 351-370.