

IMPERIALISM A HIGHER FORM OF COMMUNISM

KĘSTUTIS SKRUPSKELIS

Kęstutis Skrupskelis, born in 1938, is a student at Fordham University majoring in philosophy and political science. He is an active member of various student organisations and has written a number of articles.

The current bipolarity of political and military power is accompanied by a bipolarity of ideas: on the one hand the Western system of values, and on the other those values represented by the ruling class of the Soviet Union. In its ultimate meaning, the current conflict does not revolve around the existence of this country or that but is a clash of value systems, the issue being whether the Western traditions are capable of survival and further evolution or whether they will be replaced by a system of values that, in terms of human freedom, is inferior. The conflict raises the question of Western vitality and challenges the validity of Western traditions. In concrete terms, however, the issue will be resolved by the final submission of one of the two principal protagonists. On this level the question is one of imperialistic expansion on the part of the Soviet Union, for only through political and military force can the Soviet ruling class hope to impose its system upon the West.

Considered on these two levels, the Soviet threat appears to be twofold. On the one hand there is the attempt to destroy cultural, political and economic traditions and to impose a new system; on the other hand there exists the imperialistic pressure toward the acquisition of new territories. Disregarding for the moment the question of motives and sincerity, it must be noted that, in distinction to many of the conflicts of the past, the conquest of territories would in this case involve a radical change in the traditional mode of life of the conquered peoples and — for whatever purpose — dull their creative potential. It must also be remembered that, unlike the traditional Western imperialism — under which a more highly developed system is imposed on a relatively backward race, and may accidentally result in some progress — Soviet imperialism attempts to supplant a superior system by an essentially inferior one. The criterion for these value judgments is, as has been mentioned, the relative amount of creative freedom that each permits its adherents.

Each of these two faces of the Soviet threat has shown itself with particular distinctness in a definite historical period. What might be termed the revolutionary — ideological threat was emphasized in the immediate postrevolutionary period, up to Stalin's accession several years after Lenin's death in 1924. Although the idea of a world revolution was often fanatically advanced during this period, the Soviet Union was in the grip of serious economic and political crises and was diplomatically isolated from the Entente, and was thus in no position to aid national revolutions through the use of the Red Army.¹ The attempts to establish the revolution in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland — former provinces of the Russian empire — through the medium of armed force ended in complete failure. The wars took place immediately after these states declared their independence (about 1918). In the main, the Communist movement expressed itself through sporadic uprisings, especially in Germany and under Bela Kun in Hungary. But these uprisings ended disastrously for the Communists, and leaders of the Comintern gradually perceived "an ebb in the revolutionary tide." Thus the pristine Communist revolutionary era came to an end, though somewhat later it achieved a partial resurrection in China, Spain and Yugoslavia.

Although Russia's diplomatic isolation ended in 1924, with recognition of the regime by Britain, this period of conspiratorial activity was followed by a period of internal consolidation. The "socialism in one country" doctrine focused attention on the problem of reconstructing a state upon the new theoretical foundations, leaving little energy for instigating revolutions. This development gave rise to the second face of the Soviet threat, the current imperialistic one, which is motivated by Great Russian nationalism and employs many of the devices of the traditional Russian imperialism.

The most significant change, in all probability, was the change in the ruling personnel, for on the character of that personnel depended the policies followed by the regime. The old revolutionaries of the Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin type gradually passed from the scene, to be replaced by members of the Stalin apparatus. The Stalin-Trotsky feud, dating from

the revolution, now revolved primarily around the issue of a party bureaucracy — the consequences of whose growth were feared by Trotsky — and can be said to represent the last stand of the revolution. It is significant that Lenin, in his so-called "Testament," foresaw this conflict and was the first high-ranking person to perceive Stalin's potential as his successor, basing his conclusions on precisely this argument.² The new men, who played no significant role in the October coup d'etat or in the 20 years of struggle that preceded it but who had come to the fore in the struggle for power within the apparatus, had little interest in revolutionary idealism but fought to entrench their own positions within the party bureaucracy. Within a few years after Lenin's death, all disagreement among party leaders, those who were still in power, ceased to appear in the party press or to be reflected in the party congresses.

A somewhat later development, but one that began at this time and that is significant as one of the factors in the Soviet Union's transition from a revolutionary to an imperialist power, is the return of Great Russian nationalism. In Lenin's time the Communist movement possessed a supranational character, and such a phenomenon as Russian chauvinism, although it was a powerful force within the party, was severely condemned. In 1923, the Twelfth Party Congress in its seventh resolution called nationalistic chauvinism the greatest obstacle to revolutionary progress.³ In contrast, Stalin's first war speech, on July 3, 1941, declared the war (which was later referred to as the second Great Patriotic War, the first having been the Napoleonic War) to be a defense of "national culture and statehood."⁴ While non-Russians were still referred to in this speech, later speeches ignored them, greatly emphasizing the Russian role. After 1940 many Russian nationalistic heroes were rehabilitated, often, significantly enough, ones closely associated with the Russian empire, and the press abounds in Russian nationalistic symbols. Thus an editorial in "Uchitelskaya gazeta" ("Teachers' Newspaper") for April 7, 1954, states that "...all the great and small peoples of the U.S.S.R. study with love the language of their elder brother the Great Russian people, which marches in the vanguard of contemporary mankind."⁵ The Latvian "Kommunist" of November, 1953, extended Baltic-Russian friendship back to the fifth century A.D. and attributed all the achievements of the Baltic peoples to Russian influence.⁶ And finally, Khrushchev, the present Russian dictator, speaking in the same vein though in a somewhat milder tone, has declared that "The great and lofty deeds of the Russian people... earned them the warm gratitude and respect of all the peoples of our country."⁷ There is little need to multiply these examples, which besides illustrating our point also provide a certain amount of comic relief. Furthermore, such an empire builder as Peter the Great has also received his due and has been restored to Russian history.⁸

Besides these two changes — the change in the ruling personnel and the return of nationalism — certain points of doctrine have been found to be invalid in practice and have in fact been abandoned. The chief casualty here is probably the concept of the withering away of the state. Finally, the Soviet Union has become a great industrial power and since World War II has achieved dominant power status. This last, for all its great importance to the contemporary situation, needs little elaboration.

What has been said here is not meant to imply that the present Soviet rulers are not Communists in the ideological sense. A useful distinction may be drawn here between ideology as a goal to be achieved and ideology as a method and a rationalization for that goal. There is no contradiction in abandoning the first sense while continuing to behave according to the pattern provided by the second sense. In the case under discussion the goal has been found unachievable and has been abandoned, but this in no way prevents the use of the methods and reasoning furnished by Marxist-Leninist doctrine to achieve a modified goal. If one considers ideology as a method, the Soviet Union has developed a very close relationship between theory and practice.

Ideology in the methodological sense serves practical functions within the Soviet state. Internally, it serves as a foundation upon which the regime maintains itself. Of particular importance in this connection is the concept of a socialist system of ownership, with its corollary of state planning. Since socialist ownership means in fact state ownership, and not a form of cooperative ownership, the state, as the possessor of all the means of wealth, becomes the sole employer and the sole distributor of wealth. This serves to attract all the ambitious elements in the population, who are ready to serve the state loyally in return for special privileges. Ownership also becomes a weapon in eliminating budding opposition movements; their members are easily deprived of means of sustenance and the movements themselves of financial resources. It might be interesting to note that in such a situation, in contrast to the situation that has often obtained in revolutions in the past, the possessors of wealth are also those in power. This, coupled with complete police power, makes it extremely difficult for any anti-Communist movement to mature sufficiently for a successful coup d'etat, or for such a movement to acquire enough popular support for a successful revolution.

Furthermore, economic planning, especially after many years of experience, is capable of ensuring that at least in some vital areas of the economy resources can be concentrated sufficiently to produce spectacular results in these areas.

The concepts of the dictatorship of the proletariat and of the state as an instrument of class oppression are also useful for bolstering the regime. By occasional stretching of definitions, they can be made effective means of rationalizing terror and a general lack of freedom. Their use can make most of the promises of freedom meaningless. For example, the Soviet Constitution qualifies the guarantees of the basic freedoms of speech, press and assembly with the phrase "in conformity with the interests of the working people."⁹ Lenin's and Stalin's writings on the "national question," while maintaining the right of self-determination, are equivocal in the same sense. Furthermore, this closed system of thought provides the initiate with a ready method for rationalizing any action and serves to make intelligent discussion almost impossible. It can

be said, paradoxically, that Communism's brutal logic, which completely refuses to consider in its human equations the unknown and the irrational, is the very thing that makes Communism itself irrational.

The second function of ideology is to serve as the basis for appealing to non-Communist nations, especially those that are industrially backward. Among these the socialist system can be represented, with great justice, as the quickest way to industrial maturity and equality in level of industrialization with the former Western colonial powers. There is a compound danger here, since these states do not have political traditions adequate to temper the effects of industrialization. As their state power increases, they may become menaces to their less-powerful neighbors. Adequate traditions are lacking to preserve these states from totalitarian political forms, which may grow out of crises arising from overrapid industrialization. This is probably the most effective area in which ideology now operates, nor can it be forgotten that these doctrines were able to find adherents among the best American and European intellectuals and of playing a prominent role in many workers' movements. Thus ideology still has many uses in the propaganda war in attracting activists to the Soviet cause.

Finally, Communist ideology provides a theoretical guide to the foreign policies of the Soviet Union. Lenin's contributions are especially noteworthy here, for he particularly excelled as a theorist of revolutions. Of the many concepts applicable in this field, the idea of war as a function of politics, borrowed from the military doctrines of Von Clausewitz,¹⁰ is of especial importance. It permitted Stalin to formulate his policies during World War II so as not to overlook postwar gains. A complete oversight in this respect on the part of the Western statesmen resulted in the loss of Eastern Europe and of China. Another key concept is the attempt at a constant evaluation of the relationship of forces and the attempt to adjust to the objective situation. This constant reevaluation of the relative position of the U.S.S.R. has made possible extreme flexibility in matters of policy, although in certain instances ideological considerations have tended to obscure the situation and actions have been taken that results have later proved unwarranted. Good examples of this are the "October Uprisings" of 1923 in Germany and the general unpreparedness of the Red Army to meet the often-predicted German assault of June, 1941. On the whole, however, the constant policy shifts have had the desired effect in the confusion that reigns among Western statesmen regarding Soviet intentions and in the success of "common front" movements, coalition governments and peace petitions.

At present, ideological considerations have ceased to be the principal motivation for action. Everything «till proceeds according to a rigid doctrine, but the goal has been lost sight of in the midst of elements disregarded in its formulation. Considering that in Marxist-Leninist theory the ultimate goal — the only element that might begin to justify the history of the Communist Party and relate the party to the messianic movements of the past — is a classless society, one in which man will no longer exploit man, and that the state is theoretically defined as an instrument of oppression of one class by another, the withering away of the state is both a symptom of classless society and a prerequisite for it. It is difficult, in view of the ceaseless strengthening of the regime, to believe that this form of collective suicide is the goal of the present Soviet rulers. The usual process of comparing the ideal and the practicable has shown the state to be necessary for the performance of many useful functions; it has shown the goal to be impracticable and has forced its abandonment. In fact, in its 40 years of power the Communist regime has adopted many of the features of a right-reactionary regime, and its very existence has become an adequate motivation for its actions. In other words, the regime does not exist for the purpose of achieving certain desirable ends; rather, it achieves certain ends simply because it exists. In this case, industrialization, compulsory education, etc., though they are included in the party's program, are not there for altruistic reasons — as means for bringing about the millennium — but because they serve to strengthen the position of the regime internally and in its international dealings.

Expansionist pressure has become a necessity for such a regime, for any totalitarian bureaucracy constantly consolidates the privileges it enjoys and searches for new sources of power as long as it is in a position to do so. The Soviet Union is in a very advantageous position in this respect. The necessity of justifying to the masses the regime's privileged status calls for spectacular achievements, for which the field of foreign policy is the most promising. Examples of this correlation between spectacular achievements and market value of a non-elective regime are many; the case of Germany and the decline in the opposition to Hitler is a good example. Obviously, this is true only if other factors do not interfere. "If there is any central goal behind the policy of the Soviet leaders, it is the preservation and extension of their own power ... rather than ... the realization of a doctrinal blueprint."¹¹

Imperialism is a traditional Russian policy, forced upon the country by geography and history. Russia's lack of natural boundaries, of physical obstacles capable of blocking invaders or of limiting Russian expansion, has turned the Russians into an imperial power. Traditionally the expansion has taken place in three directions: toward the Black Sea, toward the Baltic area, and eastward toward the Pacific. The choice of directions has been determined by a need of warm-water ports and of outlets to the oceans. The Russians were the only great people who were not situated on an easily accessible seacoast; all the world's prominent civilizations have developed among sea-bordering nations. This has given rise to what might be called a national inferiority complex and to the drive to establish the Russian nation among the great nations of the globe (witness the founding of St. Petersburg in the 18th century). Of course, if a nation does border the sea, the resulting development of sea communications offers many directions for expansion and may result in essentially the same policy. But the need of access to the sea was a specifically Russian problem and is probably the dominant cause of Russian national expansion. The fact that they are a large nation has given them a larger operating base, and thus many areas became political vacuums in relation to Russia. The return of nationalism and the change in ruling personnel have restored empire-building as the basis of Soviet policy.

In this respect, the Soviet Union has more than made up for the territories lost at the breakup of the Russian empire during World War I. It has succeeded in establishing a ring of buffer states reaching far into Europe and Asia. The success of policy may be measured by the fact that Russia is the first power since the division of Europe into nation-states to have achieved a seemingly permanent dominating position over the European continent. In achieving this position, the Soviet Union has been operating with advantages not available to its opponents or to the old Russia. Technological changes have brought about superior communications, making possible the welding of the vast land mass into one whole; these changes have also resulted in greatly improved weapons. None of the captive states has been in a position to compete, especially in the latter respect. A more basic factor was the fact that the area was divided into a number of states among whom no kind of cooperation could be achieved, while no one of the states was capable of deterring aggression in any way. The ultimate responsibility must rest with the great powers, whose lack of a clear policy regarding Eastern Europe must be considered the one most important cause. The failure at Yalta to consider several centuries of European diplomacy, and the surrender to one power that which they had just prevented another power from acquiring — i.e., domination over the continent — was a grave policy error.

From the above it may be said that the current Soviet policy is a mixture of traditional Russian imperialism and Marxist-Leninist doctrine. To put it another way, the goal has been the traditional Russian dream of empire, but the methods of building that empire have been greatly augmented by ideological additions. The great progress in communications and technology has magnified this conflict to a worldwide scale and has made it impossible for any nation to remain unengaged or indifferent. This same development has also enlarged the stakes, which now consist of nothing less than the whole surface of the globe.

If the above analysis is correct, several practical conclusions may be drawn from it. Primary among these is the need for unity and strength on the part of the Western states. An imperialistic power tends, almost by definition, to expand into any accessible area where there is a power vacuum. Since it is only the most powerful states that are not such vacuums in relation to the Soviet Union, it is only the most powerful states that can begin to guarantee their own security. In this sense, all the Western allies must comprise a single powerful state, and achieve the maximum amount of unity in policy that is possible among a group of sovereign states. Any policy that endangers Western unity is harmful to Western security. The ideas of a summit conference and of a neutral zone are prominent examples of such a policy. The feeling of relaxation that might result from either of these measures can promise little more than the creation of relative vacuums, thus extending an invitation to aggression.

Such a unity requires that the Western states have a precise policy concerning every area on the globe. The lack of such a clear policy in 1945 resulted in permitting the U.S.S.R. substantial conquests, and there is a danger that this pattern will be repeated. This is not a demand for a rigid policy. The strategy of the Western powers must be clearly determined and inflexible until a decisive turn is reached in international relations, but in tactics and in the methodology of implementing the general plan they must be responsive to changing power relations.

There is a danger that ideology will obscure the concrete issues involved and the ideological myth misguide the Western statesmen into leading a universal crusade, in the sense of attempting to guarantee complete security in one final conference. The ultimate issues of the conflict must obviously be kept in mind, and the rights and principles involved cannot be forgotten. But these are not weapons, and the conflict must be pursued, in a broad sense, according to the traditional modes of warfare. In other words, if the practical tactic of Western policy is to convince the U.S.S.R. of the virtues of coexistence, then action will not be taken in certain directions in which the West has the opportunity to achieve a limited victory, for fear of disturbing the possibility of coexistence. In this respect, it is well to remember that coexistence is the end result of long-term historical developments and cannot be achieved overnight at peace conference. It may be argued, with some justice, that the U.S.S.R. may at some point cease its imperialistic policies, thus resolving the conflict as similar conflicts have been resolved in the past. This is a long-term possibility, provided that neither side is able over a long period of time to achieve a decisive victory, and some of the changes discussed earlier may even prove to be the first signs of such a development. But in the past coexistence has resulted from a long series of skirmishes in which neither side has achieved a decisive victory. A prerequisite for this is that both sides remain equally strong, and that neither side reveal any weaknesses that might be an invitation to pursue the conflict to a point of decision. In this case, agreement to a European neutral zone could only be interpreted as such an admission of weakness, a breakdown of Western morale. As has been said, the decisive point is the final submission of one of the two principal protagonists. The liberation of Eastern Europe will not constitute such a turning point; rather, it can be one of the means by which the West achieves coexistence, by demonstrating that it is capable of regaining the lost territories and that no decisive victory can be achieved against it.

Furthermore, there is a strong tendency in the West to regard this conflict as a war for universal peace. The conflict is discussed now not in terms of territorial expansion but in terms of universal peace, which will be heralded by atomic disarmament amicably achieved at a summit meeting. It may be noted that many wars, their horrors notwithstanding, have performed a socially useful function in that they have brought about a change in international power relations which have been instrumental in human progress. Thus this will remain true of any solution achievable now that does not provide for peaceful transition. The best that can be done is an effort to alleviate the wreckage and suffering of war. In this respect, atomic disarmament would be most desirable, so long as it does not result in Western disunity and a general relaxation. Such disarmament would not lead to a swift settlement but would only guarantee that the decisive crisis, if it comes, will be less bloody. It must be remembered that, at least in the early stages of atomic demobilization, the West would be at a serious disadvantage in terms of conventional weapons. Any settlement that might be achieved which did not permanently

reunite Germany and define the status of Eastern Europa by restoring its sovereignty would leave the specific causes of this conflict untouched and would thus in no way contribute to peace but would rather obscure the situation.

NOTES

1. E. H. Carr, *The Interregnum 1923—1921*, Mac-millan & Co., Ltd., London, 1954, p. 216.
2. Bertram Wolfe, *Krushchev and Stalin's Ghost*, Praeger, New York, 1957, p. 262.
3. Frederick C. Barghoom, *Soviet Russian Nationalism*, Oxford U. Press, New York, 1956, p. 30.
4. Ibid, p. 39.
5. Ibid, p. 27.
6. Ibid, p. 51.
7. *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, Oct. 9, 1957, Vol. IX, No. 35, p. 5.
8. Raymond L. Garthoff, *Soviet Military Doctrine*, The Press, Glencoe, 111., 1953, p. 49.
9. *Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*, Article 125, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1956, p. 102.
10. Garthoff, op. cit., p. 10.
11. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Soviet Politics—The Dilemma of Power: The Role of Ideas in Social Change*, Harvard U. Press, Cambridge 150, p. 394.

There are many great problems confronting our country, domestic and foreign, but to me the greatest issue of the day is human freedom. Under either Republican or Democratic administrations our foreign policy should be based on it. What advances freedom we should support and what retards or endangers it we should oppose.

WILLIAM F. KNOWLAND