Knowing the Soviet Union: The Ideological Dimension

By Professor Sidney Hook

Churchill's observation that Soviet policy was "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma," still holds true for some, even today. However, I believe that this was a mistake on Churchill's part, for it reflected the fact that he was unfamiliar with the nature of communism. I suggest that one way of unwrapping this "riddle" is by trying to understand its ideology, as well as the influence of this ideology on Soviet behavior. There is one consideration to bear in mind: All the current Soviet leaders grew up during a time when young persons were indoctrinated with this ideology from kindergarten to institutions of higher learning.

The term "ideology," of course, has various meanings. In speaking of a communist ideology, we refer to a set of beliefs about nature, society and man, which generally justifies the direction and goals of political activity. Given that definition, one can argue that the United States has no ideology; no one is required to subscribe to some theory about the nature of man or society in order to qualify for participation in the political process. We organize our political life on the basis of practical issues that arise from time to time. There is no doubt that individuals have different ideologies - some believe in God, some do not; some believe in free enterprise, some do not; some accept astrology, some do not - but we have discovered a set of institutions which makes it possible for us to live peacefully together and resolve our political differences despite our differences of outlook. However, in the Soviet Union, the ideology is prescribed in such a way that anyone denying it (or any of its central propositions), is deemed unfit for public office, or for any kind of public activity, or private activity involving public manifestations. At times, public expressions of disagreement with Communist ideology or signs of indifference to it, even official suspicion that this might be the case, sufficed to lead to arrest and punishment.
One might think that, where so much is said about ideology, it would not be too difficult to answer the question what Soviet ideology is. A common assertion states that the ideology of communism is Marxism and, therefore, Soviet leaders are Marxists. To be sure, that is what they themselves would say. However, the fact that they assert they are Marxists does not necessarily indicate what kind of Marxists they are (anymore than an assertion by seventeenth and eighteenth century rulers that they were Christians and that their realm was organized on the principles of Christianity, would constitute a clue to their specific Christian beliefs and behavior). The true ideology of communism is not Marxism as much as Leninism -- which in fact is a revision of Marxism. After Lenin died Soviet ideology was referred to as Bolshevik-Leninism. Only later did it become known as Marxism-Leninism.

Leninism as an ideology may be described briefly as the belief that global socialism can be achieved only through the dictatorship of the proletariat, exercised by means of the dictatorship of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which led the first successful effort to seize power. At this point, anyone who has had even a nodding acquaintance with Marx is sure to ask whether Marx himself did not believe in dictatorship, since, after all, the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" is derived from his writings. That is true but the concept of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" is used peripherally in Marx's works, not centrally, as in the writings of Lenin.

Moreover, in Marx, the dictatorship of the proletariat has a connotation that is primarily economic, rather than political. In speaking of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Marx contrasted it with the economic dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, whether in democratic or non-democratic forms, pointing out that economic preponderance furthered by political action in democratic societies favored the dominant capitalist class rather than any other stratum. Evidence for this aspect can be found in many places. After all, Marx always stressed the fact that he was a democrat and was developing a movement which would command the support of the overwhelming majority of the population (on the mistaken
assumption, derived from his mistaken economic views, that the majority of the population, in time, would be proletarianized as a result of the development of capitalism, and that, when socialism emerged in the West, it would come into power under political systems that would allow it to take over peacefully. He numbered England, the United States, and Holland as countries in which socialism could come peacefully. If anyone wishes to challenge this fact, one can point to the writings of Frederich Engels, who, in 1896, said, "yes, of course, we do believe in the dictatorship of the proletariat, but that can easily be brought about through ordinary bourgeois democracy" (meaning that, if socialists came to power politically, they would enact the economic laws and regulations that would decidedly favor the position of the working class over any other stratum).

A further illustration of the difference between Marxism and Leninism, is provided by the Paris Commune. Marx referred to the Paris Commune as an illustration of what he meant by the "dictatorship of the proletariat." However, it is very interesting that the Paris Commune was established at a moment viewed as premature by Marx, and that it was established in the absence of any of his followers; no representative of his political group participated in ruling the Paris Commune. There was actually a genuine multi-party political system in Paris. Lenin, would say later that this was incompatible with the "dictatorship of the proletariat," which had to be exercised by and through the dictatorship of the Communist Party.

Above all, on strictly Marxist grounds, socialism was to be achieved only in those areas of the world that had been maximally developed under capitalism; socialism was to be constructed economically within the capitalist shell of the old economic system. The political integument would change when the workers constituted the overwhelming majority of the population. However, the October Revolution took place in one of the most backward areas of the world. Anyone who is acquainted with the theory of Historical and Dialectical Materialism knows that the development of economic forces of production is supposed to be antecedent to any kind of political change and that politics supposedly
follow and reflect the development of the economy. Yet, in the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks seized political power first, and then proceeded to build an economy in a country which, according to Marxist principles, was one of the last regions (at least in Europe) where one would expect socialism to develop.

Actually, in *The German Ideology*, which Marx wrote in 1847, the year he became a "Marxist" (in all of his writings before 1847 he had been a "Feuerbachian" or "left Hegelian"), he reformulated the theory of historical materialism. *The German Ideology*, states explicitly that an attempt to collectivize industry in an economy of scarcity would achieve little more than the socialization of poverty.

Therefore, we have a clear indication both in the theoretical and practical writings of Marx and Engels, that, in their view, socialism would come first in the highly industrialized countries of the West. That was a view that Lenin shared when he seized power. He assumed that, after the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, revolutions would develop in Western Europe and if they did not, that he would be overthrown by hostile forces from without and within. As a consequence, at one point, he actually boasted that his regime had lasted more days than the Paris Commune. However, unfortunately for him, these Western revolutions did not occur. There he was, without revolutions in the West and with Mensheviks warning him on Marxist grounds that he could never successfully introduce socialism in one country alone, especially not with Russia's relatively primitive (overwhelmingly agricultural) economy. Consequently, he decided that, "we have seized power, we are going to keep it, and, if there are no spontaneous revolutions in the West, we will try to induce them." He organized and developed the Communist International to encourage revolutions in other countries in the hope that other communists would correlate and coordinate their economies with that of the Soviet Union after they had seized power.

The ideology of Leninism may be summarized in three fundamental propositions, and a significant corollary. Only the first of these propositions can claim to be plausibly derived from the Marxist tradition the Communists shared with other Socialist groups. It
states that the welfare of humanity depends upon the victory of the proletariat in its international struggle for socialism. The underlying assumption is that the development of capitalism will end in a general economic breakdown and the only way out for humanity will be through socialism. Moreover, Lenin contended that socialism can be achieved only through the victory of the proletariat with the proletariat extended eventually to contain the majority of population. However, Marx assumed that most of the population in western Europe would become proletarianized as well as pauperized, a prediction that did not pan out. Marx failed to anticipate that there would be shifts of workers to other industries or other modes of making a living, that the proletariat would actually decline in numbers, and would not be impoverished either relatively or absolutely. In the early years of the Marxist movement, the assumptions arising from Lenin’s first propositions were accepted as axiomatic by all socialist groups, until they were made untenable by the vitality, and flexibility of the market economy of capitalism.

Lenin’s second proposition -- the key to Leninism -- was that the victory of the proletariat in the struggle for socialism depended upon leadership by the Communist Party. That Party would eliminate other political entities and would function as the vanguard of the proletariat. The Communist Party was defined as consisting of a group of dedicated professional revolutionaries who, to achieve their goal, were prepared to engage in full-time conspirational activity, as opposed to the spare-time political work of many European socialists. This proposition was the conclusion of a lengthy analysis, which was first formulated in Lenin’s book, Chto Delat’? (What Is To Be Done?). In this work Lenin pointed out that, left to its own devices, and despite its instinctive militancy, the proletariat could never achieve socialism. Rather, socialism was a goal that the proletariat could gain only with help from outside. Actually, all of the leaders of the socialist movement came from the middle classes rather than the proletariat. Workers, at most, could achieve short-run successes through spontaneous uprisings, but they would never be able to organize
themselves sufficiently to take power. For that, they had to subject themselves to the leadership of the Communist Party.

The second Leninist proposition represents the essence of Communist ideology, but is not widely understood. One of our senators, for example, is wont to say, "Oh, don't worry about communism; communism is a consequence of poverty. Once measures are taken to abolish or remove poverty, you remove the cause of communism." However, if communism were a consequence of poverty, the world would long since have been communist, for poverty, even raw hunger, have been endemic for centuries. Lenin would have scoffed at the naïveté of views like those of the senator quoted. In effect, he declared: "Poverty by itself may produce indignation, or even revolt, but it can never produce revolution. For that, you need a party, and that has to be the Communist Party, since it is the Communist Party alone which, as result of what it knows about economics and other subjects, understands the interests of the workers better than they do themselves."

Very consistently, communists state that they will call for "All power to the workers" only when the workers take a position which communists believe to be correct. If the workers adopt an "incorrect" position, communists will oppose it. At one time, the Bolsheviks opposed granting power to the Soviets, because the Soviets did not support the Bolsheviks. It was only when the Soviets adopted the position of the Bolsheviks, that Lenin and his entourage raised the slogan, "All power to the Soviets." Communists draw a distinction between the "workers' will" and the "workers' interests." (Similarly, Rousseau distinguished between the "will of all" and the "general will"). According to the communist view, workers express their will in ways that may have consequences which are incompatible with their own best interests. Who is the judge of those best interests? The Communist Party alone. Why?

This brings us to the third key proposition of Leninism, which states that the rule of the Communist Party is possible only through the development of an ordered hierarchical organization, bound by paramilitary discipline controlled from the top. This is the so-called
"doctrine of democratic centralism," and the emphasis here is mostly on centralism because that is the source of control. Lenin very explicitly contrasted this proposition with the socialist principle. Socialists want to organize a party which is controlled democratically from the bottom. Lenin rejects this on the grounds that, in such cases, differences below are reproduced at the highest level. What is really required is an organization that is centrally organized, in which the parts are subordinate to the whole, and the direction comes not from grass roots, but from a self selected leadership on top. They give that self-selection the appearance of some democratic authority from below by manipulating the mechanisms of election and control.

Now, let us put these three propositions together. The welfare of humanity depends upon the victory or the dictatorship of the proletariat; the dictatorship of the proletariat depends upon the dictatorship of the Communist Party; and, in turn, the dictatorship of the Communist Party in effect can function only through the dictatorship of its leading organs of the Communist Party, the Politburo and the Secretariat of the Central Committee. The conclusion follows: Anyone who opposes the program or policies of the Politburo and Secretariat of the Central Committee is against the welfare of humanity. He is, to use a favorite phrase in communist literature, an "enemy of mankind."

Let us add to these three propositions a corollary which reflects the Hegelian heritage of Leninism, namely that all matters are dialectically interrelated. If that is the case, then the Politburo has the authority to judge what is right and what is wrong in all fields, from astronomy to zoology. From the point of view of pure logic, of course, one might argue that, if this is true, then the astronomers as well as the zoologists might claim in turn that they are authorities on politics. However, Soviet leaders believe that all matters are dialectically interrelated and that, therefore, everything has political implications, even astronomy and zoology. Therefore, they establish themselves as authorities to determine what is and is not correct in all such fields. It is a spectacle unequaled even in medieval times when the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union seeks to determine
what is correct or incorrect in art, music, and astronomy. At one point, Soviet astronomers were actually accused of smuggling counter-revolutionary Trotskyism into their speculations, since Trotskyism followed Einstein with regard to the concept of the space-time continuum. Such cultural dictatorship was asserted by the Communist Party for decades in many fields. It was used, together with other methods, to test the discipline and loyalty of Communists in the USSR and abroad.

At this point, one might ask what bearing the ideology of Leninism, as set forth here, has on international affairs. Abstractly, could communist leaders not develop a peaceful modus vivendi with the rest of the world, while following the doctrines of Leninism at home, in the shape of domestic terror? The answer to that question follows from another aspect of Leninist ideology, its economic dimension. This is based upon certain views of Marx that have not stood up in the light of history. Communists claim that such an international modus vivendi is impossible because the nature of capitalism itself compels it to resort to war. If left in peace, they imply, the Soviet Union might be able to build socialism, even in the absence of Western revolutions. According to Marx, socialism was believed to be international and Trotsky always attacked Stalin for speaking of socialism in one country, but Stalin asserted that Lenin himself believed that socialism could be built in one country. Communists maintain that they could achieve socialism in one country, or one bloc of countries, if left in peace. However, they argue, this will not be the case because capitalism in its final, imperialist stage must expand or perish, in order to survive. Rather than perish, capitalists must seek to expand by war.

This very dubious conclusion follows from a very labored analysis of surplus value. Based on this analysis, it is predicted that there will be a decline in the rate of interest to a point where markets will cease to exist and capitalism, therefore, will collapse. The only way it can avoid collapse is by expanding. If it cannot expand in any other way, it will expand by war. Therefore, the Soviet Union must be prepared for an "inevitable war." The view that war between capitalists and socialists is inevitable may sound
extreme, but here is Lenin as quoted by Stalin in his Problems of Leninism: "We are living not only in a state, but in a system of states, and the existence of the Soviet Republic side by side with imperialist states for a long time is impossible. One or the other must triumph in the end, and before the end comes, a series of frightful clashes between the Soviet Republic and the imperialist states is inevitable. Sooner or later, a funeral dirge will be sung over one of them."

Stalin adds to this: "It is a Leninist principle that the final victory of socialism is possible only on an international scale" - since an isolated communist state is always in danger of being overrun by its capitalist neighbors. Stalin then goes on to assert that Soviet Russia is "the base of a world revolution." The difference between Trotsky and Stalin actually is one of personality and party control. Trotskyism really represents Stalinism manqué. It is not true that Stalin was for socialism in one country only. Trotsky thought he could bring about the world revolution more rapidly than Stalin. The issue between Stalin and Trotsky was basically one of tactics, but there was no strategic difference between the two in this regard.

From the ideological assumptions outlined here, it follows obviously that the Soviet Union must have a war economy since it is "threatened" from the outside. Therefore, this theory continues, the Soviet state is justified in adopting all sorts of measures, overt and covert, diplomacy or deception, etc., which would strengthen and prepare it for what it regards as the inevitable war. This accounts for a great part of Soviet international policy. Those who dismiss the significance of ideology in shaping communist behavior often assume that communism is merely a continuation of Tsarism. They claim that Soviet foreign policy can be explained not by its ideology, but merely as an extension of traditional Tsarist foreign policy. The concepts cited above belie this and the facts of history seem decisively to disprove it. Tsarist armies entered Central Europe seven or eight times during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On several crucial occasions, they
suppressed revolutions, but always they returned home. However, the Soviet Army has
not retreated after occupying key parts of Central Europe during and after World War II.

One might ask when Tsarism ever showed interest in North Africa, Central Africa,
Ethiopia, Angola, Cuba and the West Indies or Central America. One might ask why the
Soviet Union, despite its dire economic problems at home, economically and militarily
subsidizes countries like Cuba, Vietnam and Nicaragua to the tune of many billions of
dollars. There was no comparable effort in Tsarist days.

However, I do not intend to explain Soviet behavior exclusively in terms of
ideology. I do maintain that ideology is a central source of influence on Soviet behavior,
but not necessarily the sole influence. But to acknowledge that ideology is not the sole
influence does not justify the tendency to rule it out altogether. One cannot say that because
ideology does not account for all aspects of Soviet international behavior, it is irrelevant to
some of its central features. Of course, one can go even further and state that not only do
other factors influence Soviet policy, in addition to ideology, but that the ideology itself has
changed.

It is quite clear that, the philosophy of historical materialism notwithstanding,
personality has played a tremendous role in history. This is confirmed even by the Soviet
experience. Why is Lenin regarded as such a great hero? Because if it had not been for
Lenin there would have been no October Revolution. In The History of the Russian
Revolution, Trotsky seemed to imply that, if Lenin had not been on the scene, he,
Trotsky, would have been able himself to pull off the October Revolution. However,
before he died Trotsky admitted that this was not true. According to Marxist-Leninist
theory, the October Revolution is supposed to have been one of the most significant events
in human history. However, Marxist-Leninists themselves now acknowledge that if it had
not been for the presence of Lenin in St. Petersburg, the revolution would not have
occurred when and where it did. Yet, if it had not occurred when and where it did, who
knows if the Bolshevik revolution would have taken place at all? This happens to be one of
the weaknesses of Marx's theory: he did not account at all for the significance and influence of his own personality on the course of history. At any rate, personalities do make a difference even in ideologically motivated states. When to apply the ideology, where to apply it, and to what degree -- all of this depends on the leader's personality. Lenin was a remarkable man; not so much intellectually, but because of his almost infallible sense of timing. He was skillful in adapting his point of view to specific circumstances.

Stalin was of an entirely different temperament. He was cautious and, while he believed that a major war was inevitable, he did everything he could to avoid it. Whenever there was danger, he retreated. At the time of the airlift in Berlin after World War II, if any Western plane had been shot down, it would have meant war. But Stalin knew it and therefore no U.S. planes were shot down. He never took chances. He relied on the internal revolutionary developments in capitalist countries and on the colonial revolutions. Stalin's greatest hope was that the capitalist powers would fall out, go to war against each other, and he would pick up the spoils. Pretending to be unimpressed by the atomic bomb or the hydrogen bomb, Stalin played variations on the theme of peaceful coexistence on the international arena.

Khrushchev was more daring, more willing to take risks than Stalin. He was convinced that nuclear weapons would have profound impact on the balance of power. He modified the Leninist ideology by asserting that, while communism was inevitable it would not necessarily have to be brought about by war, since war might mean an end to all civilization. This eventuality is not taken into account by the orthodox theory of historical materialism, despite the reference in The Communist Manifesto to the possibility that all classes could go down in a lapse into barbarism.

Khrushchev took chances, despite the existence of nuclear weapons. But he lost in Cuba. He thought the United States would back down. It didn't. He humiliated the Soviet Union, thus giving his opponents a chance eventually to get rid of him. Unlike Stalin, who pulled in his horns internationally while building up the army and every other
sector in the Soviet Union, Khrushchev conducted a militant foreign policy while easing up on domestic repression -- slightly. His colleagues thought that his domestic reforms went too far and that he had humiliated and weakened the Soviet Union internationally. Therefore, they deposed him and began a process of restalinization.

Brezhnev, his successor, played for time. Nevertheless, he did achieve a relative victory for the Soviet Union during the period of detente. Of course, it is comical that, today, Henry Kissinger and even Nixon warn us about falling into the trap of another detente, overlooking the fact that both of them were the architects and managers of detente while in office. I remember debating with one of Kissinger's emissaries on the Stanford campus concerning this problem. He said, 'We will tie them [the Soviet leaders] to us with cords of silk and steel and money so that, if they get out of hand, they will be acting against their own interests."

Now we have the phenomenon of Gorbachev's "revolution within the revolution" and the concepts of perestroika and glasnost'. No one asks the question, 'Why now?" The Soviet Union has been in a chronic state of crisis for a long time. Why could not Gorbachev simply make the population tighten its belts as other Soviet leaders had done in the past? The general consensus as to the reasons why Gorbachev initiated his reforms now seems to be that the economy has finally reached the point at which it can no longer sustain the Soviet military machine. Despite the fact that the Soviet Union has been able to buy, borrow or steal a great deal of Western technology, it does not have sufficient resources to keep up its military strength without a large-scale change in its economy. So far, efforts to modify that economy have failed. In the Soviet case, as in the case of every other socialist country, the economy turned out to be the Achilles' heel of socialism.

Socialist economic systems have failed to solve the problem of incentives. All of the great socialist leaders were intellectuals: teachers, preachers, or idealists. They were individuals who never needed incentives in order to work. An intellectual usually feels that ideas will sustain him. But is that true for persons working on assembly lines? Is it true
for individuals working in agricultural collectives? The problem of incentives has also presented difficulties for the welfare socialist states of Western Europe, but it is an acute problem in all communist countries. They do not seem to be able to develop incentives for persons in manual labor.

One might ask how profound are the revelations that have emanated from *glasnost* and the changes that are being made in the structure of the Soviet Communist Party. What does the future hold? We have to bear in mind that, despite all the changes, the Communist Party still maintains a monopoly of political power. No one knows how permanent these changes are going to be, and whether, coming from the top, they will not be reversed in the future. In the past, after all, reformers had their heads cut off, and the Khrushchevian revolution ended with a restalinization of several aspects of Soviet life. One cannot rely on the long-term survival of Gorbachev's reforms unless they are institutionalized. In order for them to be institutionalized, an independent judiciary, some freedom of political choice, a free press, free radio and television, and a decentralized economy are required as well as the grant of the rights of self-determination to Soviet non-Russian nationalities. In 1973, when Solzhenitsyn was still in the Soviet Union, he sent an open letter to the leaders of the Soviet Communist Party in which he suggested a series of reforms similar to those which Gorbachev has attempted to carry out. The only recommendation which has not been attempted was a retreat to mother Russia and the freing of all the conquered or colonized nations and states.

We must recognize that social process is not as static as a Platonic essence. Hannah Arendt used to claim that totalitarianism cannot change. I tend to be more empirical; we have to wait and see. There are changes within changes and it is not impossible that the Soviet Union is in transition to a society with a modified mode of production. So far, nobody has made a comparison between Gorbachev's initiatives and the New Deal. The New Deal took place in a capitalist country which was in the depths of depression and which still remained capitalist. Perhaps, Gorbachev's initiatives can be implemented
while the Soviet Union will remain a communist country in which the Communist Party will preserve its monopoly on political power. For a truly significant change to take place in the Soviet Union, however, the Soviet peoples would have to be granted the right to make political choices.

I do not mean merely that they should have the opportunity to criticize Gorbachev. At the time of his kitchen debate with Nixon, after the Vice President had said that the Soviet people were not free but slaves, Khrushchev turned to people around him and said, "People, why don't you criticize me? I command you to criticize me!" Similarly, Gorbachev might say "Criticize me, not merely Yeltsin!" But, even if the Soviet peoples could criticize Gorbachev, unless they had the right to determine whether they should live under the communist regime or not, there will have been no fundamental political change. In fact, I have thought of writing an open letter to my Soviet friends recommending that they should appeal to the peoples of the Soviet Union to reconvoke the Constituent Assembly that was formally dissolved by Lenin in 1918. One of the reasons the Bolsheviks gave for seizing power was that the provisional government of Kerensky refused to hold elections for the Constituent Assembly. Well, the elections were held, just after the Bolsheviks had seized power. They counted the votes and discovered that they obtained only twenty-five percent, whereupon Lenin sent in his Lettish sharp-shooters to dissolve the Assembly. The elections to the Constituent Assembly constituted the only time in which the Russian people had the right to determine their political destiny.

Therefore, we should applaud Gorbachev's actions as long as he introduces greater freedom. We should even encourage the economic reform measures on the sole condition that we do not subsidize them. Many seem to think that we should help the Soviet Union because, without our help, Gorbachev might fall. Let us help the Soviet Union only by moral encouragement. I do not think that the American taxpayers should tax themselves in order to help Gorbachev to prod the Soviet economy to the point at which it could once
again strengthen Soviet military might. Even if Gorbachev's intentions are peaceful, we do not know what the intentions will be of the persons who will follow him.

I am prepared to make one prediction: whether Gorbachev survives or not, we are going to see in the near future a revival of the international "peace campaign" for universal disarmament, directed against the West in general and the United States in particular. The fear of war has been one of the reasons that the world has given as much credit as it has to the Soviet Union, despite all the monstrous abuses that have occurred there. In fact, Lenin's Bolsheviks got a hearing after the First World War primarily because they were against that war. And now, with nuclear weapons, it is easy to arouse passions due to fear of war. If the Soviet Union can again make the world so fearful of war that the West will be willing no longer to invest in measures designed for its protection then the future can be riddled with danger. But predictions are always tricky, especially regarding the Soviet Union. Consequently, we must keep our minds open. We must remain intellectually sophisticated. That can be based only on solid understanding of the theory and practice of Leninism.